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On the Immaculate Conception, 2023

Today's readings offer us particularly rich material for meditation. We can think of the three readings as a play in three Acts which take us through the drama of Salvation. It is like a Greek tragedy. Since we know the wider details of the story, each act can focus in on a few key moments in the narrative without giving exhaustive details. So let us unpack the play.

The first reading from Genesis is Act 1. We know the scene: a beautiful garden, everything is harmonious, Adam and Eve are living in paradise, literally. In the reading today we come in right as the whole thing is falling apart. What is the conflict? The serpent has sown his discord through lies and deception, alluring Adam and Eve into disobeying God. In the text that we heard we have the aftermath of that sin. God catches Adam and Eve and punishes them, as well as the serpent. They are expelled from the garden. We are in a tragedy. This is terrible. We can say that the whole rest of the Bible, and indeed the rest of human history, is a playing out of the consequences of that fatal decision. Some human decisions, it seems, have enormous consequences, as is still the case today. A man named Columbus decided to sail West, for example, or a man named Booth shot a president. We end Act 1 with an obscure hint of a potential restoration, with the words of God, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel."* All of this sets up Act 2 quite nicely. What will happen?

The Gospel from Luke is Act 2: Now a different angel appears to a different woman, but one no less pure and innocent, asking her to be obedient to the will of God, in order to undo the disobedience of the first woman. The symmetry of the story is masterful. Both women were virgins. Both were innocent. Both were afraid, but one hid away while the other faced the truth. Both were faced with a momentous decision. From here we see a response to the tragedy of Act 1. With the awe-filled words of the woman, "May it be done to me according to your word," a new theme appears in the drama, the theme of the 'Yes' to God, which counteracts the 'No' of Act 1. Mary's surrender to God overshadows Eve's sin, and changes the course of the drama. The great Doctors of the Church teach us that Mary becomes the New Eve, the mother of the New Humanity. How? Because she was of the same state as the first Eve, sinless, immaculate,

completely free and unhindered by evil tendencies, in order to give the yes to God that Eve failed to give, a yes on behalf of the whole of humanity.

And in that yes, in that surrender of her life in service to God, she gives birth to the New Adam, the savior of the world. Thus, there is a New Creation. From the New Eve comes the New Adam, in counter-point to how the First Eve came from the First Adam. Again, the symmetry of the story is magisterial.

Then we move to Act 3, which is the second reading, from the letter to the Ephesians. As in any good drama, after the turning point of the story, the climax, we have the effects played out in the descending action. As it turns out, we are part of Act 3, which is still playing out the effects of the actions of Acts 1 and 2 even down to our time. St. Paul writes, *"In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved."* (Eph. 1:5-6) What is this about? Well, we are children of the first Eve, born into sin. But, by the grace of God, we have been adopted as brothers and sisters in Christ, and thus have become children of the Second Eve. We are the fruit of Act 2. Yet, our Act is not over yet. We see the playing out and conflict of the two themes, disobedience and obedience, sin and love, punishment and blessing, death and life, in our lives and the life of the world every day.

All of this means that now is our hour upon the stage. What will be our struts and frets? What lines will we voice? What role will we play? What actions will we take? Will we be on the side of Eve or Mary? Children of perdition or adopted children of God? We must look to Mary as our model. She was afraid, and did not understand the full meaning of the message of the angel, but she believed it. We may be afraid of God, but we should listen and obey as she did. We may not understand fully, but we should believe. Finally, Mary made a complete and total act of surrender to God, and from that came an abundant fruitfulness, first in her womb with the birth of Jesus, then in her heart with suffering love. We must imitate Mary in this total act of surrender to God. Give our lives to Him. It is not easy, but it is worth it, as you see in the life of Mary. I must say, on a personal note, that my continual surrender to God's will has been the most difficult struggle of my spiritual life, because, like Eve, I want the pleasure of the apple, I know better than God, and I want my own power. But I must also say, that my various surrenders to God, like Mary's, have brought about the most fruitful abundance for me and for others. So do not be afraid, surrender your lives to God, and live as God's adopted sons and daughters in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.