

**December 8, 2004 ~ Evening Prayer II**  
**SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**  
**OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY**  
**by Sister Kathleen Marie Raya, OP**

*A Reading from the Gospel of Luke:*

God sent his angel Gabriel to Mary and said to her, 'Rejoice highly favored one! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean? But the angel said, 'Mary, do not be afraid. You are to give birth to God's Son for nothing is impossible to God.' Mary answered, 'Let what you said be done to me.'

Often times we come to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception with experiences and apprehensions of how to explain this feast to those we minister to and with. So many believe that this feast celebrates the conception of Jesus – the Gospel does lead one to that conclusion. In the depths of our own faith, we know that this feast celebrates Mary's coming into this world "full of grace." This evening, I would like to share the parallel lives of five extraordinary women: Mary, Bernadette of Lourde, Mother Pia, Mother Amanda, and Mother Salesia.

These five women were open to the fullness of God's grace and God's Mystery in their lives at very challenging moments. Luke depicts the young woman, Mary, as deeply disturbed and uncertain of every word Gabriel said in their conversation. Bernadette of Lourde, too, was perplexed by her experience of seeing a Woman dressed in white. She persistently asked her name without any success. In "Her Days Unfolded", Mother Pia, Mother Amanda, and Mother Salesia expressed how extremely hard it was to answer the call from Archbishop Alemany to go West.

Another thread these five women had in common was the response of those around them. Mary was questioned by Joseph and the villagers where she lived. Bernadette was interrogated by her pastor and the prosecutors of her town. When our founding Mothers began our Mission here in San Francisco, their decisions were surrounded by reprimands from the Motherhouse back East.

In spite of the uncertainties, confusion, questions, difficulties, and reprimands these five women found a deep grace within themselves to say YES: to being Mother of our Saviour; for Bernadette to speak the words of the Woman in white: 'I am the Immaculate Conception' and our founding Mothers expressing YES to our Mission here. And so on the beautiful Feast of Immaculate Conception which faith-filled woman do you most identify with tonight ... tomorrow?

I had the opportunity to go to Lourde which was a time “full of grace”, so for myself, I most identify with Bernadette. Her body held the illnesses of tuberculosis and severe asthma. Her heart and soul held an incredible experience of being lead to Jesus through Mary. Bernadette knew she was living the Paschal Mystery each day of her life while at the same time being held in the holy presence of Mary.

And really isn't this the celebration today – that Mary came into this world “full of grace” to lead us to live as God wills? Isn't this, too, the message of Bernadette, Mother Pia, Mother Amanda and Mother Salesia? Can we say YES to being open to the sister next to us and to other persons in our lives that lead us to moments of inexpressible new grace found in God's will for each of us?

I believe the meaning of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception holds the answers to all of these questions. The only question left is: Will we choose to live filled with grace at whatever cost it may hold for us?