

St. Francis of Assisi is well loved and remembered for many things. But he was also well known for something that might come as somewhat of a surprise to us—and that was that on at least 3 occasions, St. Francis took off all of his clothes in public! In fact, we could say that Francis was sort of the ‘original stalker,’ minus the Reebok running shoes. Francis removed all of his clothes in front of the Bishop and the people of Assisi when he publicly renounced his father and his family. He stripped naked when he faced sexual temptation and threw himself into a rose bush, and for the same reason, on another occasion, he threw himself into the snow. Now we can only speculate as to exactly what was behind Francis’ action – but it seems to have to do with his view of the innocence and goodness of all creation – and the fact that all women and men are equal in God’s sight. You see, dress was very much a thing of structure in the Middle Ages – and you could tell the social status and financial position of a man or woman just by observing their manner of dress. A knight was always dressed in a certain way, a noble woman, and so on. But when they were without clothes – the false casts made by humankind were stripped away – and they stood before God just as they had been created. We had a wonderful old priest who gave us a retreat when we were in seminary. He looked like an unmade bed, disheveled hair, shirt untucked, and permanently puffing on a cigarette. He began his first conference and definitely caught our attention. He said: “When God sees you, He sees you bare naked.” Poor God! Because Francis was so deeply in love with God – he knew no shame in his nakedness – he was in a state of innocence.

This was the original state of man and woman in the garden – NAKED – a biblical symbol for the innocence of Adam and Eve. This all was changed, however, due to their sin. In our first reading from Genesis God asks: “Who told you that you were naked? You have eaten from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat!” (Gen 3:10) SIN changed all of that. Paradise was lost. Innocence was gone. The familiarity with God that was part of the original plan was thwarted – the naked Adam and Eve had walked with God ‘in the breezy time of day.’ But now for the first time in their lives, Adam and Eve were afraid of God. “I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, and so I hid myself.” And all of us have suffered from this loss of innocence ever since. We have been afraid of ourselves – and of God – and of ever getting too close to Him. And we have spent lifetimes covering ourselves – hiding our true self from ourselves, from others, and from God.

But today we celebrate a feast of INNOCENCE – a feast that overcomes our fears, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception – Mary being born into the world in that original state of innocence – where there was no sin or shame or fear. “DO NOT BE AFRAID, Mary. You have found favor with God...” And she – the new Eve – became the mother of the new creation of innocence. She became the mother of the innocent new flesh of the Christ, the Sinless Son of God, the one who casts out all of our fears.

And ultimately that means a new beginning for all of us, a new beginning for all of creation. The Church rejoices this day in the New Eve who stands before God in perfect innocence. We rejoice in a call to a new beginning for us and for our world, freedom from our fears. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Ephesians, our 2nd reading: “God CHOSE US in Him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in His sight, to be full of love...” The Church rejoices because we are reminded of how we all can stand innocent before God if we allow His life to enter us fully and completely as Mary did – “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say.”

Today’s feast is a sign of the magnificent work of God in restoring His creation, what the whole Advent-Christmas season is all about. He began His creation in sinless and perfect innocence when He created Adam

and Eve – and His recreation in His Son Jesus began again in the sinless and perfect innocence of the Virgin Mary.

But like all of the Church’s celebrations, this is not just a remembrance of an event that happened 2000 years ago. Rather, it is a call to US to RETURN to innocence – to recognize the possibility of new creation – in our own lives and in our world – to recognize and accept ourselves before God – the naked truth about ourselves and our sin. If we are to ever grasp the deep significance of Advent worthy of the newness and freshness of a Child born that first Christmas, then we will stand ready, with Mary, to begin again today – to begin the road to a new creation of innocence in our own lives. Advent is full of hope, and the dream that we CAN return to innocence, that we CAN begin again at the beginning. Its promise is that God is in charge and no sin of ours can block His marvelous plan of salvation for our lives. We pray then, freed from fear, from our church tradition at Lourdes: “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”

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