

**Advent,
the Immaculate
Conception,
the Miraculous
Medal
and Christmas**

As you walk around the college, look around you. Take note of the ways in which the college, that is teachers, staff and you yourselves, the students at St Vincent's Castleknock College, honour each other for achievement and generally pay each other respect. It's in the photos, the notices and in every name etched on trophies displayed around the place.

It's also, and maybe more importantly, expressed in the ordinary ways we relate with each other, the kindness in simple gestures, the encouragement and the pride we give and take in each other.

None of this can be taken for granted, not in the context where people can be regarded so degradingly that they are trafficked, for example, in ways well organised societies would not think acceptable for animals. Not when people are being treated as commodities and moved about for profit without any regard for their rights or their dignity.

When Christians in the Catholic tradition celebrate occasions or feast days such as Advent or Christmas, when we refer to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as the Immaculate Conception or when we bless and wear the Miraculous Medal, we are bearing witness to the innate and inalienable dignity of the human person. The Christian appreciation of this is rooted in the Jewish tradition from which Jesus emerges, which proclaimed its belief that humanity is formed in the image of God. Christmas is the celebration of God's very own self-expression in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word, through, with and by whom we see who we are.

We hold Mary in such respect because, in much the same way, perhaps, that we pay tribute to each other in our photographs and on our notice boards, we say she reflects the best that is in all of us, of who we are and what we can be. We call her the Immaculate Conception because we believe she does this from the very beginning of her own life. And we wear the medal because the medal asks her to remember us before God.

The days and weeks of Advent and Christmas, the lives of Mary and Jesus, and the devotional patterns in our religious practice, reveal who we are in this breathtakingly beautiful but fragile and sometimes dangerous world. All of these elements speak of the grace and mercy of God who encourages us not to be afraid and to be aware how close the kingdom of God is to us. And if we believe in the grace and mercy of God then we are called to be instruments of that same grace and mercy, to ourselves and others, holding everyone in the esteem that is consistent with being made in the image of God.