

Mary, Conceived Without Sin

The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception

ISSUE: What is the Immaculate Conception? Is the Church's teaching on the Immaculate Conception biblical?

DISCUSSION: The dogma of the Immaculate Conception, as solemnly defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854, teaches that

the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.¹

This means that Mary, through the merits of her Son and Savior, Jesus Christ, received a special grace so that she might become the spiritual mother of all who come to believe in her divine Son (cf. Gen. 3:20; Jn. 19:26-27; Rev. 12:17).

Mary's Immaculate Conception should be seen as the way God wanted all of us to come into the world: in the state of sanctifying grace and free from original sin, just like Adam and Eve.

God's original plan was for all humans to begin their existence in the family of God in the state of sanctifying grace. It was only as a result of Original Sin that we are now conceived in a state deprived of sanctifying grace. Mary, rather than being the exception, fulfills in a real sense the original intention of what God wanted for all His human children: to be members of His family from the first moment of their existence.²

Scriptural Evidence

Scripture, not coincidentally, first teaches the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception in the Book of Genesis. Just after the sin of our first parents, God promised to send a Savior. Speaking to the serpent, God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

The serpent is Satan (cf. Jn. 8:44; Rev. 12:9), and the "seed of the woman" who would be sent to crush the devil is Jesus Christ. Therefore, the "woman" is Mary, His mother. It is significant that Jesus addresses His mother in the Gospels as "woman" (e.g., Jn. 2:4; 19:26-27). Mary shares in the victory of her Son over Satan, which includes His victory over sin and death. Because she is sinless and pure, there is indeed "enmity" (Gen. 3:15) or "complete opposition" between Mary and Satan.

At the Annunciation, Saint Gabriel the Archangel greets Mary with the words, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk. 1:28). The phrase "full of grace" is a translation of the Greek word *kecharitoméne*. This word conveys a sense of completion and perfection that was already present at the time of the Annunciation. Mary's holiness was not only as complete as possible, but it extended over the whole of her life, from conception onward.

From this it follows that

the Immaculate Conception means that Mary, whose conception was brought about the normal way, was conceived in the womb of her mother without the stain of original sin. The essence of original sin consists in the lack of sanctifying grace. Mary was preserved from this defect; from the first instant of her existence she was in the state of sanctifying grace.³

Mother of the Redeemer

In his 1986 encyclical on Mary as Mother of the Redeemer, Pope John Paul II teaches that "the messenger greets Mary as 'full of grace'; he calls her thus as if it were her real name. He does not call her by her proper earthly name: Miryam (= Mary), but by *this new name: 'full of grace'*" (*Redemptoris Mater* 8). "According to the belief formulated in solemn documents of the Church," the Pope adds,

this “glory of grace” is manifested in the Mother of God through the fact that she has been “redeemed in a more sublime manner.” By virtue of the richness of the grace of the beloved Son, by reason of the redemptive merits of him who willed to become her Son, Mary was *preserved from the inheritance of original sin*. In this way, from the first moment of her conception—which is to say of her existence—she belonged to Christ, sharing in the salvific and sanctifying grace and in that love which has its beginning in the “Beloved,” the Son of the Eternal Father, who through the Incarnation became her own Son (*Redemptoris Mater* 10, footnotes omitted).

Church Fathers

In the fourth century, Saint Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), a doctor of the Church, composed this beautiful hymn:

You alone and your Mother
are more beautiful than any others;
For there is no blemish in you,
nor any stains upon your Mother.
Who of my children
can compare in beauty to these?⁴

On the issue of Mary’s sinlessness and fullness of grace, Saint Augustine (d. 430) wrote:

With the exception of the holy Virgin Mary, in whose case, out of respect for the Lord, I do not wish there to be any further question as far as sin is concerned, since how can we know what great abundance of grace was conferred on her to conquer sin in every way, seeing that she merited to conceive and bear him who certainly had no sin at all?⁵

Many other early Christians bore witness to Mary’s freedom from sin, a freedom that allowed her to embrace wholeheartedly the Father’s unique mission for her with complete openness. For example, Saint Gregory of Nazianzen (d. 390), Saint Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395), Saint Sophronius (d. 638), and Saint John Damascene (d. c. 749) among others taught that Mary was preserved from all stain of sin.

Saint Severus (d. 538), Bishop of Antioch in the sixth century, reflected on Mary in light of Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture: “She [Mary] ... formed part of the human race, and was of the same essence as we, although she was pure from all taint and immaculate.”⁶ Saint Ambrose (d. 379), another early Church Father, referred to Mary as “free of every stain of sin.”⁷ Saint Andrew of Crete (d. 740) explained that the Redeemer chose “in all nature this pure and entirely Immaculate Virgin.”⁸ Thus, from the early centuries of the Church, Mary was seen as unique in her sinlessness.

The New Eve

Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, all of their descendants fell from grace and are held in the bondage of sin. One of the effects of this original sin is our weakened freedom (cf. Rom. 7:14). Because of the special grace bestowed on her by God “in the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4), Mary was preserved from enslavement to sin. Therefore, she was able to exercise her freedom completely in choosing to say “yes” to God. Her *fiat*—“Let it be to me according to your word” (Lk. 1:38)—is complete and wholehearted. Her “yes,” given with full integrity, completely reverses Eve’s “no.”

Saint Irenaeus (d. 202) summed this up, writing that “the knot of Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience; what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith” (as quoted in *Lumen Gentium* 56).

Given to all of Jesus’ disciples on the Cross (cf. Jn. 19:26; Rev. 12:17), Mary from the earliest times has been called the New Eve, the new “mother of all the living” (Gen. 3:20), who cooperated with Jesus, the New Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12-21), in saving the human family. As Saint Jerome wrote in the fifth century, “[D]eath through Eve, life through Mary” (as quoted in *Lumen Gentium* 56).

To prepare her for her role as the mother of the Savior, Mary “was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role” (*Lumen Gentium* 56). More than anyone else, Mary was blessed “in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). The Father chose her in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him in love (cf. Eph. 1:4; Catechism, no. 492).

Mary's Immaculate Conception helped fulfill God's plan that He had from the beginning for all human beings. He was preparing her to be the most worthy cooperater with her divine Son in His mission to the world, as the New Eve with the New Adam, Jesus Christ.

Saved by Christ

Some might object that the Bible says that "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23), and thus are in need of redemption by Christ. But "all" can mean "the great many" as opposed to each and every person. Indeed, babies who die before the age of reason necessarily could not have committed personal sins; they only could have suffered from the stain of original sin. Meanwhile, Mary, the New Eve, was saved by Christ from the instant of her conception and thus was preserved from the effects of original sin:

It took a positive act of God to keep her from coming under [original sin's] effects the way we have. We had the stain of original sin removed through baptism, which brings sanctifying grace to the soul, thus making the soul spiritually alive and capable of enjoying heaven, and makes the recipient a member of the Church. We might say that Mary received a very special kind of "baptism" at her conception, but, because since she never contracted original sin, she enjoyed certain privileges we never can, such as entire avoidance of sin.⁹

My Son, the Doctor

As Blessed Duns Scotus (d. 1308), known as the "Marian Doctor," explained, "Mary would greatly have needed Christ as a Redeemer, for she would have contracted original sin by reason of human propagation unless she had been preserved through the grace of the Mediator."¹⁰ In other words, what we receive as a "remedy" through the Sacrament of Baptism, Mary by a special grace received by way of "inoculation" through the merits of the Divine Physician.

Mary's Immaculate Conception, then, is a biblical teaching that shows forth the wonders of the salvation offered to us in Christ. This most beautiful handiwork of God—Mary—at the very moment of her conception, was preserved from sin by the Cross of her beloved Son. If the saving events of Calvary can be applied to someone 2,000 years after the event, then the eternal God can apply those same merits to Mary to preserve her from the ravages of original sin, and thus prepare her as a more fitting tabernacle for the Son of God.

¹ Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854) (Boston, MA: St. Paul Books & Media), 21.

² Mark Miravalle, *Introduction to Mary* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing Co., 1993), 42.

³ Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 270.

⁴ Saint Ephrem the Syrian, *The Nisibine Hymns*, 27, 8, as quoted in William A. Jurgens, ed., *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 721.

⁵ Saint Augustine, *De Natura et Gratia*, 36, 42; PL 44, 267, as quoted in Luigi Gambero, S.M., *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 226.

⁶ Saint Severus, Hom. *cathedralis*, 67, *Patrologia Orientalis* 8, 350, as quoted in Miravalle, 40.

⁷ Saint Ambrose of Milan, *Commentary on Psalm 118*, 22, 30, as quoted in Jurgens, vol. 2, 166.

⁸ Saint Andrew of Crete, *Hom. 1 in Nativ. Deiparae*, PG 97, 913-14, as quoted in Miravalle, 40.

⁹ Keating, 271.

¹⁰ Blessed Duns Scotus, *In 3 sent.*, 18.13, as quoted in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1967), 1105.

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. Have I ever confused the Immaculate Conception with Jesus' conception? What is the Church's teaching on the Immaculate Conception? (See Catechism, nos. 490-93.) The Church's calendar helps in this regard:

December 8 - Immaculate Conception (Mary conceived)
9 months later ... September 8 - Birth of Mary

March 25 - Annunciation (Jesus conceived)
9 months later ... December 25 - Birth of Jesus

2. Explain how Mary was "saved" by Jesus. How would I respond to the charge that the Immaculate Conception detracts from the glory of God?
3. Mary used her freedom to say "yes" wholeheartedly to God's plan for her life. What can I do to submit more completely to God's will for me?

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