



Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF MARY

Behold The Truth

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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The Immaculate Conception of Mary

- ❖ Contrary to a popular misunderstanding, the Immaculate Conception does not refer to the conception of Jesus Christ, but of Mary in the womb of her mother, Saint Ann.
- ❖ This means Mary, by a special grace from God, was preserved from the stain of original sin from the first instant of her conception.



Proclamation of the Dogma

- ❖ This sacred belief was declared a *dogma* of the Catholic Church by Pope Pius IX in 1854 in the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*.
- ❖ A dogma is a teaching of the highest level of authority which all Catholics must accept as divinely revealed truth.



Proclamation of the Dogma

- ❖ What are we to make of the fact that the Immaculate Conception was not dogmatically defined by the Church until the 19th century?
- ❖ We might consider, by way of comparison, that the doctrine of the Divinity of Christ was not dogmatically defined until 325 (Council of Nicaea); the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, 381 (Constantinople); Two Natures in Christ, 451 (Chalcedon); Two Wills in Christ, 681 (Third Constantinople); Transubstantiation, 1215 (Fourth Lateran), and the Canon of the Bible, 1546 (Trent).



Proclamation of the Dogma

- ❖ The essence of this teaching, Mary's sinlessness, had always been believed by Christians.
- ❖ And yet some of the details surrounding the teaching had to be clarified over time through prayer, reason, and discernment.
- ❖ The great medieval theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, believed Mary was sanctified in her mother's womb, but doubted this took place at the moment of conception.
- ❖ This was due to the widely held belief at the time that the soul entered the body *after* conception.



Proclamation of the Dogma

- ❖ It was also mistakenly thought that original sin was passed on through concupiscence in intercourse, which, if true, would seem to have made Mary's sanctification at conception an impossibility.
- ❖ These difficulties were almost single-handedly overcome by Blessed John Duns Scotus in the 14th century.
- ❖ Duns Scotus argued that original sin results not from generation, but from a privation of divine grace at conception; and that God chose not to withhold His grace from Mary.



Proclamation of the Dogma

- ❖ “God,” he reasoned, “could infuse into the soul of such a person in the first instant as great a grace as into another soul in circumcision or baptism.” *Ordinatio*



Proclamation of the Dogma

- ❖ Consequently, the Immaculate Conception has helped to affirm the Church's belief in the dignity of human life and the truth that life begins at conception.
- ❖ It was providential, indeed, that this truth would be proclaimed on the threshold of an era in which society would come to deny the humanity of the child in the womb.



A Scriptural Teaching

- ❖ Mary’s sinlessness is indicated in Scripture in God’s reproach of the serpent in *Genesis 3:15*: “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.”



The New Eve

- ❖ Who is the *woman* mentioned in this verse?
- ❖ Even though Eve, the first woman, was present at the time, God was referring to one of her descendants since He speaks of the woman being *the Mother of the Redeemer*, the one who would crush the serpent's head.



The New Eve

- ❖ Jesus is the Redeemer and Mary is His Mother.
- ❖ The *enmity* or *hatred* which God promises to place between Mary and the serpent indicates her freedom from sin.



“Full of Grace”

- ❖ When the Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary at the *Annunciation* in the *Gospel of Luke* 1:28, he greets her with the words: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!”
- ❖ The Church uses this same greeting as the opening line to the *Hail, Mary* prayer.



“Full of Grace”

- ❖ Notice, however, that Gabriel does not address Mary by her proper name, but rather calls her “full of grace.”
- ❖ Luke’s *Gospel* was originally written in the Greek language; and the Greek word used for Mary’s name in *Luke* 1:28 is *kecharitomene*.
- ❖ This word indicates an *ongoing, permanent* or *full* state of grace.



In the Patristic Writings

- ❖ We also find references to Mary's sinlessness in the writings of the Early Church Fathers, who learned the faith either from one of the Apostles directly or from those who had known them.
- ❖ Saint Hippolytus of Rome, for example, was taught by Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, who was taught by Saint Polycarp, who was taught by the Apostle John, the one whom Jesus personally asked to care for Mary.
- ❖ Around the year 215 A.D., Hippolytus refers to Mary as “the spotless and God-bearing Mary.”
Discourse on the End of the World



An Ancient Prayer

- ❖ Similarly, the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, the oldest recorded prayer to Mary, dating from around the same time, calls her “alone pure and alone blessed.”



Mary's Salvation

- ❖ Some Christians, who are confused about the Immaculate Conception, falsely assume it means Mary did not need to be saved.
- ❖ But she did need to be saved.
- ❖ In fact, in *Luke* 1:47 she calls God “my savior.”



Mary's Salvation

- ❖ Because Jesus is truly God, He is sinless by *nature*, meaning He did not need to be made sinless, but simply always was by virtue of who He is.
- ❖ Mary, however, had to be *made* sinless by God's special intervention.
- ❖ To do this, God looked ahead to the merits of His Son Jesus' saving death on the Cross and applied those merits to Mary's soul ahead of time.



Mary's Salvation

- ❖ To put it in a different way, God saved the rest of the human race by raising us up *after* we had fallen.
- ❖ But He saved Mary by *preventing her from falling in the first place.*
- ❖ Therefore, not only was Mary saved, but she was saved in an extraordinary way that actually makes her more dependent upon God than the rest of us.



It All Points to Jesus!

- ❖ The question, then, is not *if* God could do this (for nothing is impossible for Him), but rather *why* He would do it.
- ❖ The answer is because of *Who His Son is*.

Ark of the New Covenant



- ❖ In the Old Testament, God ordained that a special Ark made of incorruptible wood, lined inside and out with pure gold, be constructed to transport the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.
- ❖ Because these tablets had been touched by God, it would have been inappropriate for them to have been carried in an ordinary container made of imperfect materials.



Ark of the New Covenant

- ❖ It would have been far less appropriate for Jesus, who is God in the flesh, to be formed and carried in a womb corrupted by sin.
- ❖ Thus, the Immaculate Conception ultimately points not to Mary but to Jesus, whom Scripture calls “*a spotless and unblemished lamb.*”
1 Pet. 1:19
- ❖ So holy is Our Lord that it simply would not have been fitting for Him to have been born of a sinner.
- ❖ The Immaculate Conception confirms this truth.



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