

# THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF MARY

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*Read the below text, then complete the following quiz to learn more about this essential Church teaching*



**On December 8**, we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin 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. This belief was pronounced a **dogma** of the Catholic Church by Pope Pius IX in 1854. A dogma is a teaching of the highest level of authority which all Catholics must accept as divinely revealed truth.

This teaching on Mary's sinlessness has always been believed by Christians and 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." 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. In fact, He speaks of the woman being *the Mother of the Redeemer*, the one who would crush the serpent's head. 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.

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. 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** (KAY-CARE-IH-TOE-MEEN-AY). This word indicates an *ongoing, permanent* or *full* state of grace.

We also find references to Mary's sinlessness in **the writings of the Early Church Fathers**. The Early Church Fathers were leaders in the ancient Church, who learned the faith either from one of the Apostles directly or from those who had known them. **Saint Hippolytus**, 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 referred to Mary as "the spotless and God-bearing Mary" (*Discourse on the End of the World*). Similarly, the **Sub Tuum Praesidium**, the oldest recorded prayer to Mary, dating from around the same time, calls her "alone pure and alone blessed."

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. For instance, *in Luke 1:47 she calls God “my savior.”* It is important to understand that Mary is not sinless in the same way that Jesus is sinless. 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 forward to the merits of His Son *Jesus’ saving death on the Cross* and applied those merits to Mary’s soul ahead of time. 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.

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*. 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 actually been touched by God, it would have been inappropriate for them to have been carried in an ordinary container made of imperfect materials. 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, who 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.

*Now complete The Immaculate Conception Quiz on the following page*

# THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION QUIZ

Circle the correct answer

- The Immaculate Conception refers to the conception of Mary, not of Jesus.  
True or False
- Because He is God, Jesus did not need to be made sinless for He is sinless by nature. This is indicated in *First Peter* 1:19, in which Jesus is called \_\_\_\_\_.
  - God Almighty
  - a spotless and unblemished lamb
  - the Alpha and the Omega
  - all of the above
- The Immaculate Conception has always been believed by Christians and is affirmed in *Genesis* 3:15, where God promises to place *enmity* or *hatred* between \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Adam and Eve
  - Mary and Eve
  - The woman and the serpent
  - God and man
- God asked for the tablets of the Ten Commandments to be carried in an Ark made of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - stone
  - precious, incorruptible materials
  - regular, everyday materials
  - none of the above
- The oldest recorded prayer to Mary is the \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Hail, Mary
  - Sub Tuum Praesidium
  - Memorare
  - Hail Holy Queen
- In making Mary sinless, God looked ahead to \_\_\_\_\_.
  - her faithfulness
  - the good she would do through her prayers
  - how much Christians would love her
  - His Son Jesus' death on the Cross
- The Immaculate Conception means Mary did not need to be saved.  
True or False
- Dogma means \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a divinely revealed truth
  - a teaching of the highest level of authority
  - something Catholics must accept as true
  - all of the above
- When appearing to Mary at the Annunciation, the Archangel Gabriel greeted her saying, \_\_\_\_\_.
  - "Hail, full of grace."
  - "Hail, mother of our Savior."
  - "Hail, blessed one."
  - none of the above
- The Greek word *kecharitomene* means a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ state of grace.
  - ongoing
  - permanent
  - full
  - all of the above
- Mary's sinlessness is stated in the writings of the Early Church Fathers, Christian leaders who \_\_\_\_\_.
  - learned the faith only from the best available books
  - were generally regarded as the most intelligent men in the community
  - were taught by the Apostles directly or by those who had known them
  - came up with their own ideas on what is right to believe.
- Saint Hippolytus' learning of the faith can ultimately be traced back to the Apostle John.  
True or False