

Immaculate CONCEPTION

The Sinless Mother of God

The most important theological truth about Mary is that she is the Mother of Jesus, whom she conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit and who was at once both human and divine. This singular relationship is the basis for all the reverence and dignity which Christians have for her. Therefore all other teachings about her are in one way or another related to this central fact. Of course, although no one in the earliest Church disputed that she was Jesus' mother, and because Jesus was called God, it was common in devotions and in the liturgy to refer to Mary as Mother of God. Nevertheless theologians argued about whether she could properly be called Mother of God (Greek: *Theotokos*, "birth-giver to God") or should just be called Mother of Christ (*Christotokos*). Finally the bishops gathered at the ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431AD agreed that she was indeed Mother of God since divinity and humanity are joined together in her son Jesus.

And it took the Church many more centuries to define the doctrine of Mary's own Immaculate Conception, that is, the recognition that by God's grace from the first moment of her conception she was free from all sin because she had been chosen by God to be the Mother of Jesus Christ. We must not confuse Mary's Immaculate Conception in the womb of her mother with the Virgin Birth of Jesus—his miraculous conception in Mary's womb at the time of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38) through the power of the Holy Spirit without any human father.

The Immaculate Conception celebrates Mary's unique holiness as a result of God's gift of God's own divine life (sanctifying grace) to prepare her for bringing forth the Son of God into the world. Thus we rightly hail Mary in faith and prayer because she is "full of grace" and because "the Lord is with her." Like her, we are also called upon to accept the sanctifying power of God's life within us and in our own way bring forth Jesus into our world today.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH'S TEACHING

The dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception is just one of only two solemn definitions—the other being Mary's Assumption into heaven—that are considered “ex cathedra” or “from the chair of Peter,” that is, declared by a pope speaking in the name of the whole Church rather than by an ecumenical Council of all the Church's bishops.

It affirms that through God's grace she was never separated from God by sin. Over the centuries Mary's freedom from original sin—the teaching that every human is born in a distorted relationship with God (this is what sin is and does) and so must be freed from this condition through God's grace (this is what salvation is and does)—was disputed by theologians who could not agree.

Theologians in the Western Latin Church, following St. Augustine of Hippo, agreed that Mary could be free from all personal or actual sin, but found it more difficult to exempt her theologically from original sin if, as St. Paul says, all persons (which would include Mary who was not miraculously conceived as Jesus was) have sinned through their relation to Adam (Romans 5:12) and thus need God's saving power through Christ to free them from the power of Sin.

Theologians in the Eastern Greek Church emphasized that as a necessary presupposition to her role as Mother of God, God must have granted Mary some special immunity from all sin. But how this exemption happened and when it occurred in Mary's life were subject to debate.

In the 19th century, the theological debate was officially resolved when in 1854 Pope Pius IX solemnly defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of faith. But even before this definition, the US Bishops in 1846 had chosen Mary, conceived without sin, as the patroness of the Catholic Church of the United States.

A Prayer for the Immaculate Conception

We thank you, O Mother, because in showing yourself to us
You free us of all stain of sin;
You remind us that what comes first is the grace of God,
The love of Jesus Christ who gave his life for us,
The strength of the Holy Spirit which renews all things.
Let us not give in to discouragement,
But, trusting in your constant help,
Let us engage ourselves fully in renewal of self,
Of this city and of the entire world.
Pray for us, Holy Mother of God!

—Pope Francis

UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH'S TEACHING

In the Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in this way:

“We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance 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, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.”

This doctrine assumes that Mary was formed in the womb of her parents in the normal way through sexual intercourse, thus the “first instance of her conception” does not refer to the procreative activity of her parents. Rather it refers to Mary being exempted from original sin at the first moment of her existence. Sanctifying grace was given to her by God before original sin could have taken effect in her soul.

Mary's unique holiness was granted by God in view of the salvation that Jesus Christ would bring to all humanity. God the Father granted Mary this “singular grace and privilege” revealing that the salvation that would come for all humanity through Christ had now occurred in her.

Original sin was not removed from Mary's soul in the usual way that it is cleansed from persons by baptism. It was simply excluded; it never existed in her soul. The essence of original sin consists in the deprivation of sanctifying grace, thus wounding our human nature, weakening our natural powers and breaking down our relationships with God and others. Since from the first instant of her existence Mary was gifted with sanctifying grace, she was preserved from these corrupting effects (the “stain”) of original sin.