

## **Mary's Immaculate Conception**

by Father William G. Most

In teaching that Mary was conceived immaculate, the Catholic Church teaches that from the very moment of her conception, the Blessed Virgin Mary was free from all stain of original sin. This simply means that from the beginning, she was in a state of grace, sharing in God's own life, and that she was free from the sinful inclinations which have beset human nature after the fall.

### **History of the Doctrine**

There are two passages in Scripture which point us to this truth. We look first at Genesis 3.15, in which we see the parallel between Mary and Eve of which the early Church Fathers already spoke: "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 Jews saw this passage as referring to the struggle between Christ and Satan, and so the Church sees in "the woman" a prophetic foreshadowing of the Virgin Mary (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, # 55).

If there is to be complete enmity between the woman and the serpent, then she never should have been in any way subject to him even briefly. This implies an Immaculate conception.

We can also reason from the text of Lk 1:28, in which the angel calls her "full of grace". If we can validate the translation--we can, and will do so, shortly--then in this verse we can see even more strongly the complete enmity with the serpent--for God's grace is complete opposed to Satan's reign. But if Mary was "full of grace," it seems that she must have been conceived immaculate.

We turn to the early Fathers of the Church. First, many, not all of them, make sweeping statements about her holiness. That could imply an Immaculate Conception. Secondly, very many of them speak of her as the New Eve. They could have reasoned: the first Eve had an immaculate start in life--no sin was yet committed. So the New Eve, who was to share in undoing the harm of original sin, should have also an immaculate start. However, none of the Fathers actually followed this line of reasoning. (A few Fathers even tried to find sins she had committed, e.g. St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John* 21. PG 59. 130ff).

During the middle ages, authors such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Thomas Aquinas denied the doctrine. At this time, the data from Scripture and the Fathers was still not clear. In addition, the understanding of original sin was not as clear as it should have been--it was often thought of as having a positive element, instead of merely being an original lack of the grace to which God calls us. This positive element was thought to be transmitted from parents to children through the marital act (which was itself thought to be somehow sinful, though pardoned by God), and so it was hard to see how there could be an immaculate conception. This conception had been found in some, though by no means all, of the Fathers. Now of course we know it to be false. Finally, it was not generally seen at this time how an Immaculate conception of Mary would not take away from the universality of redemption through Christ.

After a while, however, the theological tide began to turn, and the objections which had long obscured the content of divine revelation began to be overcome. This was due especially to the work of the Franciscan, Venerable John Duns Scotus. He showed that for God to preserve Mary from original sin was

a greater redemption than to allow her to fall into it and then rescue her. Scotus wrote (cited from J. B. Carol, Mariology I, 368): "Either God was able to do this, and did not will to do it, or He willed to preserve her, and was unable to do so. If able to and yet unwilling to perform this for her, God was miserly towards her. And if He willed to do it but was unable to accomplish it, He was weak, for no one who is able to honor his mother would fail to do so."

We also note again that behind most of the objections was the rather positive notion of original sin. If we jump ahead several centuries to the clearer understanding of original sin we have now, we can remove this objection. Pope John Paul II expressed this understanding in a General Audience on Oct 1, 1986: "In context it is evident that original sin in Adam's descendants has not the character of personal guilt. It is the privation of sanctifying grace in a nature which, through the fall of the first parents, has been diverted from its supernatural end. It is a 'sin of nature' only analogically comparable to 'personal sin'". In other words: It is only the lack, or privation, of that which God wanted us to have, which we should have inherited from our first parents."

Now back to our history. After that this change in theological tide had gone far towards removing objections, the Popes began to make statements of varying clarity. Sixtus IV in 1477 (DS 1400) praised the liturgical celebration of the Immaculate Conception. The same Pope added further support in 1483 (DS 1425-26), condemning those who said it was sinful to preach and believe the Immaculate Conception. The Council of Trent explicitly declared in its decree on original sin (DS 1516): "... it is not its intention to include in this decree ... the blessed and Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Rather, the Constitutions of Sixtus [IV] of happy memory are to be observed."

After Trent, the attacks on the Immaculate Conception were greatly moderated. Then Pope St. Pius V, in 1567 (DS 1973) condemned the error of Baius who said Our Lady was subject to original sin. And in 1568 the same Pope put the feast of the Immaculate Conception on the calendar of the Roman breviary. Alexander VII in 1661 explained the doctrine much as Pius IX did later: DB 1100. Pope Clement XI in 1708 made December 8 a holyday of obligation. Further, the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore in the U. S. in 1846 declared Mary Immaculate to be Patroness of the United States, and Pius IX on Feb. 7, 1847 confirmed this dedication.

The result was that about a century and a half before the definition of 1854, the whole Church believed the Immaculate Conception. Finally, in *Ineffabilis Deus*, in 1854, Pius IX defined this doctrine and added that Mary was conceived immaculate by anticipation of the merits of Christ. This is not strange, for to the eye of God, all time is present.

Now the Church continues to elucidate the scriptural basis of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Pius XII, in *Fulgens corona*, 1953 wrote: "... the foundation of this doctrine is seen in the very Sacred Scripture itself, in which God ... after the wretched fall of Adam, addressed the ... serpent in these words... 'I will put enmity....' But if at any time, the Blessed Virgin Mary, defiled in her conception with the hereditary stain of sin, had been devoid of divine grace, then at least, even though for a very brief moment of time, there would not have been that eternal enmity between her and the serpent ... but instead there would have been a certain subjection."

## **Preventive redemption**

We have said that Mary needed redemption, although she was never subject to original sin. Nor did she have an "obligation" to contract it, as some have foolishly said: there can be no obligation to any sin. We can merely say she would have been in original sin in the sense just explained, i.e. , she would have been born without grace, were it not for the preventive redemption. The word "preventive" means anticipatory: the grace she received at her conception was given in anticipation (Latin *praevenire*) of Christ's merits, which earned that grace.

## **The nature of Mary's grace at the Immaculate Conception**

In Lk 1:28 the archangel hails her as, "full of grace". Most versions today do not use that rendering, but greatly weaken it. Yet it is the correct translation as we can see from the Magisterium (Pius XII, *Fulgens Corona*, AAS 45, 579, and constant use of the Church) and also from philology.

For the Greek word in the Gospel is *kecharitomene*. It is a perfect passive participle of the verb *charitoo*. A perfect passive participle is very strong. In addition, *charitoo* belongs to a group of verbs ending in omicron omega. They have in common that they mean to put a person or thing into the state indicated by the root. Thus *leukos* means white, so *leukoo* means to make white. Then *charitoo* should mean to put into *charis*. That word *charis* can mean either favor or grace. But if we translate by favor, we must keep firmly in mind that favor must not mean merely that God, as it were, sits there and smiles at someone, without giving anything. That would be Pelagian: salvation possible without grace. So for certain, God does give something, and that something is grace, are share in His own life. So *charitoo* means to put into grace. But then too, *kecharitomene* is used in place of the name "Mary". This is like our English usage in which we say, for example, someone is Mr. Tennis. That means he is the ultimate in tennis. So then *kecharitomene* should mean "Miss Grace", the ultimate in grace. Hence we could reason that fullness of grace implies an Immaculate Conception.

Overflowing grace: Pius IX, in the document, *Ineffabilis Deus*, defining the Immaculate Conception in 1854 wrote: "He [God] attended her with such great love, more than all other creatures, that in her alone He took singular pleasure. Wherefore He so wonderfully filled her, more than all angelic spirits and all the Saints, with an abundance of all heavenly gifts taken from the treasury of the divinity, that she, always free from absolutely every stain of sin, and completely beautiful and perfect, presented such a fullness of innocence and holiness that none greater under God can be thought of, and no one but God can comprehend it."

What about the words of Jesus in Lk 11:27-28 (cf. Mt. 12:46-50 and Mk 3:35)? A woman in the crowd exclaimed: "Blessed is the womb that bore you...." He replied: "Rather blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it."

The dignity of being Mother of God is a quasi infinite dignity, as we just saw from the words of Pius XI. Yet here, our Lord is teaching us that the holiness coming from hearing the word of God and keeping it is something greater still. Her holiness must indeed be great--so great that "none greater under God can be thought of, and no one but God can comprehend it."

Even though Mary was full of grace at the start of her life, yet she could still grow, for, as it were, her capacity for grace could increase.

In general, a soul will grow in proportion to these things: (1) The greater the dignity of the person, the greater the merit. In her case, the dignity of Mother of God is the highest possible for a creature. (2) The greater the work, the greater the merit: her cooperation in the redemption was the greatest work possible to a creature. (3) The greater the love, the greater the merit. Love of God means the attachment of our will to His. Her will adhered supremely, with no obstacle at all, so that even ordinary household duties, which she saw as the will of the Father for her, were supremely valuable.

Excerpted and adapted from *Theology 523: Our Lady in Doctrine and Devotion*, by Father William G. Most.

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