

## THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX, in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, proclaimed:

We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful.<sup>1</sup>

The title *Ineffabilis Deus*, or “Ineffable God,” emphasizes that the preservation of Mary from sin, including Original Sin, is a gift, given by the “Omnipotent God.” This extraordinary grace is given, as is all grace, through the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all, although, in Mary’s case, grace was given in view of the future death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Each of us has experienced the different ways that God has acted to preserve us from sin. We experience our flaws and weakness. As our self-awareness grows, we recognize deep wells of resistance to God as well as our own deeply-entrenched self-centeredness. In different circumstances and deprived of the supports we have had and the graces that we have received, these deep-rooted tendencies could cut us off from God.

God’s love has not only brought healing to our sins in the past but has protected us from our own capacity for sin, pulling us out of our sins and turning us from other sins. This has been the grace of the Holy Spirit, given us by the Father through the merits of Jesus.

Such grace was given to Mary from the first moment of her conception. The Second Vatican Council speaks of Mary as “all holy and free from every stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul VI speaks of the “sanctifying intervention of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Virgin...”<sup>3</sup> He recalls that the Fathers spoke of the Holy Spirit as a spring that flowed upon Mary giving her the fullness of grace and abundant spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, quoted by Rene Laurentin, "The Role of the Papal Magisterium in the Development of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception," trans by Charles Sheedy, C.S.C. and Edward Shea, C.S.C., in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 312.

<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Paul VI, *Marialis Cultis*, 26.

gifts, so that she is a “temple of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> John Paul II also attributes her holiness to the Spirit, “...together with the Father, the Son has chosen her, entrusting her eternally to the Spirit of holiness.”<sup>5</sup> For us, as well, being open to the Spirit enables us to be fashioned by the Spirit of holiness in order to receive the graces that God wants to pour upon us.

### **Radically redeemed that she would be a worthy mother:**

The understanding of the grace given to Mary developed slowly in the Church. While the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James*, composed in the mid-second century, is replete with imaginative ideas, yet it witnesses for us the belief present in parts of the church of Mary’s purity and holiness.

St. Augustine (d. 431) is a witness to the fact that at least in parts of the Church, there was an instinct that the mother of God’s Son received unique graces. Pelagius (d. after 418), a Welsh monk, taught that human beings had the power to keep the commandments and to avoid sin. In reply, Augustine insisted that every person is a sinner and needs the grace of God. Yet he made an exception of Mary:

We must except the holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I wish to raise no question when it touches the subject of sin, out of honor to the Lord; for from Him we know what abundance of grace for overcoming sin in every particular was conferred upon her who had the merit to conceive and bear Him who undoubtedly had no sin.<sup>6</sup>

We can recognize gift elements in Augustine’s words. Mary has overcome sin. This was a gift, given to her. She was given an “abundance of grace” from Christ. This gift was given to her by God in view of her special vocation, “who had the merit to conceive and bear Him who undoubtedly had no sin.” Although Augustine does not refer to original sin, his opinion on its universality makes it seem likely that Augustine is only speaking about personal sin here.<sup>7</sup>

### **The meaning of original sin:**

Underlying the discussion of the Immaculate Conception there has been a lack of clarity about the meaning of original sin. The key text of the Council of

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<sup>4</sup> Paul VI, *Marialis Cultis*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, (*De Natura et Gratia*), 42 (36), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, V, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co, 1980), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 226.

Trent affirmed that, by his sin, Adam, “lost that holiness and justice in which he had been created...”<sup>8</sup> The Council states that Adam was “stained by the sin of disobedience...”<sup>9</sup> and bears the “guilt of original sin.”<sup>10</sup> Is the stain or the guilt to be understood as a thing? For Augustine and Thomas, sin and evil are not things but the lack of something that should be present in a thing.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of original sin, as Trent did, as a loss, “It is a deprivation of original holiness and justice.”<sup>11</sup> The *Catechism* affirms that this sin is “transmitted by propagation...the transmission of human nature deprived of original holiness and justice.”<sup>12</sup>

The *Catechism* describes the holiness as “grace,” “the grace of original holiness.”<sup>13</sup> The loss of original justice results in the lack of harmony of the soul over the body, a lack of harmony between men and women, and a lack of harmony with creation

Karl Rahner maintains that original sin is not the presence of some thing but an absence: “[original sin] consists precisely in the lack of grace.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, Mary had “sanctifying grace from the first instant of her existence.”<sup>15</sup>

John Macquarrie, an Anglican theologian, argues that describing Mary as “without sin” is one aspect and a negative one. A more affirmative expression would be to say that “she was always the recipient of grace,” being always surrounded by grace even in her conception in the love of her parents.<sup>16</sup>

In a similar way, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, the statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (Feb 2, 2005) , points out

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<sup>8</sup> Council of Trent, Session 5, 1, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. II, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (London:Sheed & Ward, 1990) 666

<sup>9</sup> Council of Trent, Session 5, 2, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. II, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (London:Sheed & Ward, 1990) 666.

<sup>10</sup> Council of Trent, Session 5, 5, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. II, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (London:Sheed & Ward, 1990) 667.

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Second Edition), 405, (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), 102.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Second Edition), 404, (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), 102.

<sup>13</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Second Edition), 399, (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), 100.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (London: Catholic Book Club, 1963), 43-44.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (London: Catholic Book Club, 1963), 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> John Macquarrie, *Mary for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 71-72.

that rather than focusing only on “sinlessness,” we should also acknowledge that “the glorious grace of God filled Mary’s life from the beginning.”<sup>17</sup> Mary gives us hope that this unmerited grace may be ours.

Rahner asserts that Mary was “enveloped from the beginning of her life in the redemptive and saving love of God.”<sup>18</sup> Not only was she redeemed, but, Rahner insists, she was “redeemed radically.”<sup>19</sup> Mary is not different from us because of these great gifts since we also will be wrapped in the “redeeming and saving love of God.” The difference is, as Rahner states, that she possessed these gifts, “from the beginning, and incomparably.”<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., asserts that, rather than not needing Jesus’ saving death, Mary’s experience of God’s mercy and redemption is “greater and more profound and far-reaching than ours.”<sup>21</sup> Such grace allowed Mary to cooperate in her own redemption, with a holiness that was, “a pure receptivity and openness towards God’s potential gifts.”<sup>22</sup> Being exempt from original sin did not include exemption from the normal course of growth and mistakes not of a moral nature. She also was subject to spiritual progress.<sup>23</sup>

### **Dogma based on Tradition:**

Unlike the other dogmas of the Church, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are not found in the Scriptures. Yet, when the dogmas are looked at carefully, we can see that they fit into the category of what the Anglican-Roman Catholic document, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, spoke of as being “in conformity with the Scriptures.”<sup>24</sup>

*Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* locates the dogma in relation to Christ’s work of redemption:

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<sup>17</sup> *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 58, Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (Feb 2, 2005) in *Origins*, vol. 35, p.45

<sup>18</sup> Karl Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (London: Catholic Book Club, 1963), 43-44.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Rahner, S.J., *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (London, 1978), 387.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord*, Trans. W. J. O’Hara (London: Catholic Book Club, 1963), 48-49.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 50.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 54.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 53.

<sup>24</sup> *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, 61, (February 4, 2004) in *Origins*, vol. 35, p. 45.

In view of her vocation to be mother of the Holy One (Lk. 1:35), we can affirm together that Christ's redeeming work reached 'back' in Mary to the depths of her being and to her earliest beginnings. This is not contrary to Scripture and can only be understood in the light of Scripture.<sup>25</sup>

This conformity is not concerned with a few passages but rather with the whole scope of the Scriptures. This is in keeping with the mandate of *Dei Verbum* to consider particular elements of Scripture in the light of "the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith [the comparison of one truth with another]."<sup>26</sup>

*Ineffabilis Deus*, the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception by Blessed Pius IX, draws upon certain Scriptural texts which have been seen in the tradition as reflections upon Mary's holiness: the curious fact that the devil's enmity is with the "woman," in Genesis 3:15; Gabriel's greeting of Mary "Full of Grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28); and Elizabeth's welcoming words "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Lk 1:28). These passages, in themselves, are not the specific foundation for belief in the Immaculate Conception. Rather, the Christian community over the centuries, has seen in these passages a witness to Mary's unique holiness.

In addition to Mary's own holiness, the Immaculate Conception needs to be seen in the light of the total message of the Scriptures, of God's plan to restore humanity to His intimacy and grace. Mary has a very particular role in this plan, being the mother of the Redeemer. She, herself, illustrates the process of the Redemption as it takes place in her. As Paul VI has said, the Spirit's sanctification of Mary was "a culminating moment of the Spirit's action in salvation history."<sup>27</sup>

### **The dogma seen in the communion of the Church and in relation to other mysteries:**

A dogma, such as the Immaculate Conception is understood not in isolation but by the "analogy of faith," that is, in the coherence of a doctrine in relationship to the totality of what the Church believes. As the First Vatican

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<sup>25</sup> *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 58, Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (Feb 2, 2005) in *Origins*, vol. 35, p.45

<sup>26</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 12, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1975), 758.

<sup>27</sup> Paul VI, *Marialis Cultis*, 26.

Council asserted, the meaning of a dogma should be probed “from the connection of these mysteries with one another.”<sup>28</sup>

Donal Flanagan explains that the Marian dogmas are related to the central truths of the faith, “All truths about Mary are expressions of aspects of the mystery of Christ and his Church, of the mystery of God’s saving presence in and with man...They are not pieces of Christian information, which have no relevance to our salvation.”<sup>29</sup>

Mary’s Immaculate Conception receives its meaning from the redemption given us in Christ. This gift was given to Mary in view of her role as Mother of the Redeemer. At the same time, the Immaculate Conception casts light on the redemption, in making clear the power of God’s grace in this process.

As Christians, we are commissioned not only to hand on this truth but also to explain its meaning as it applies to our fellow believers. Karl Rahner has written: “A dogma is not only true but it is also addressed *to us*. It is addressed to us, however, not merely because it is true but also because this truth is for our salvation...We can – indeed we must – ask ourselves, therefore, what a revealed truth means *for us* and above the fact directly proclaimed by it”<sup>30</sup>

### **Scripture of the Liturgy of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception:**

A key to the way the Church understands the Immaculate Conception can be found in the Scriptures and the prayers of the liturgical celebration of this feast. The Immaculate Conception is given context within the story of the goodness of God’s creation of the first human beings, the human choice for sin and the plan of salvation that culminates in the death and Resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit.

#### **Genesis 3:9-15, 20: “the Woman”**

The texts chosen by the Church for liturgy for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception span the whole scope of salvation history. The first reading is from Genesis 3:9-15, 20, which recounts the unfortunate repercussions of Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience, along with God’s promise that the serpent

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<sup>28</sup> “Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, On the Catholic Faith,” First Vatican Council, DS 3016, in J. Neurer, S.J. and Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001), 48.

<sup>29</sup> Donal Flanagan, in *Mary’s Place in Christian Dialogue*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole, O.S.B. (Middlegreen, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1982), 10.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Rahner, S. J., “The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in our Spiritual Life,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. III, trans. Karl-H and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1967), 129.

(representing the devil) would ultimately be conquered. In the meantime, the serpent will be at enmity with the woman and her offspring: "I shall put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; it will bruise your head and you will strike its heel" (Gen 3:15).

The interpretation of this text has a curious history. The Hebrew identifies the one who will crush the serpent's head with the neuter "it," which seems to imply the offspring in general. The Greek LXX uses the masculine pronoun, indicating an individual offspring of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. The Fathers interpreted this as a Messianic promise. St Jerome, in his Latin Vulgate, also uses the masculine pronoun, *ipse*, for the one who will bruise the head of the serpent.

At some point in the textual history of the Vulgate, the masculine pronoun became a feminine pronoun, *ipsa*, indicating that the woman would bruise the serpent's head as it strikes at her heel. This female figure was identified with the Church, by such writers as Bede and Ambrose Autpertus, however, Medieval authors generally interpreted the victorious woman to be Mary.<sup>31</sup>

In the Church's present understanding, the Hebrew version has priority in providing us the literal meaning of the passage. That this offspring in a general sense is narrowed down to an individual, namely Christ, is the interpretation in a fuller sense, in the light of Christian revelation. The most recent edition of the Vulgate, published in 1986, deliberately chose the masculine form, thus identifying Christ as the one who overcomes the devil.

While the one crushing the serpent's head is not the woman, the question rises why the woman is singled out as being at enmity with the serpent and not the man nor the couple together by the Hebrew text. The text suggests that just as a woman cooperated with the serpent, so, in time, a woman will oppose it. A Jewish Targum interprets the woman as Israel, whose children crush the serpent's head when they keep the precepts of the Torah.<sup>32</sup> Following along this same line, the Christian interpretation which saw the woman as the Church may be appropriate.

However, a Marian suggestion may also be possible. The figure of the woman clothed with the sun (Revelation 12) has been seen in the Tradition as both the Church and Mary, since it seems that the author used the figure of the mother of the Messiah to speak of the Church. The Second Vatican Council

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<sup>31</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 91-92).

<sup>32</sup> *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, quoted by Bertard Buby, S.M., in *Woman of Israel – Daughter of Zion*, vol.II of *Mary of Galilee* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1995), 32.

suggests that seeing the woman of Genesis as Mary is appropriate: “the light of a further and full revelation, bring[s] the figure of a woman, Mother of the Redeemer, into a gradually clearer light.” *Lumen Gentium* proposes a Marian perspective for this passage: “She is already prophetically foreshadowed in the promise of victory over the serpent which was given to our first parents after their fall from sin.”<sup>33</sup>

Mary does not conquer Satan but she is first one who experiences, in a full way the victory over Satan, achieved by her Son. The early Fathers recognized Mary’s graced response to God in faith and obedience which contrasts with the lack of faith and obedience of Eve, “the woman.”

According to Genesis, sin is not intrinsic to God’s idea of human nature. Mary is the example of what the human person is destined to become, as a redeemed person. The Church’s choice of this passage for this feast demonstrates that the Immaculate Conception is to be understood within the context of God’s promise of redemption.

### **Psalm 98: The great deeds of God**

God’s gift to Mary is part of God’s wider salvific plan for His people. The responsorial Psalm, Psalm 98, emphasizes the great deeds of God: “Sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous deeds...The Lord has made His salvation known...All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God” (Ps 98:1-3). When the Old Testament spoke of the “great deeds” of God, it had in mind the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, especially through the Red Sea, and the return of the Jewish people from their captivity in Babylon. Mary’s Immaculate Conception is seen in the light of these great interventions of God.

### **Ephesians 1:3-6, 11, 12: Chosen to be holy, blameless and full of love**

The second reading for the Solemnity is from Ephesians 1:3-6, 11, 12. This passage draws attention to God’s desire for our salvation:

God chose us in Him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in His sight, to be full of love; likewise He predestined us through Christ Jesus to be His adopted sons – such was His will and pleasure....In Him we were chosen; for the decree of God, who administers everything according to His will and counsel, we were predestined to praise His glory by being the first to hope in Christ.

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<sup>33</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 55, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1975), 415.



God's will is that we be holy and blameless and full of love. In choosing this passage, the Liturgy identifies Mary as one who is "chosen" and "predestined" to be "the first to hope in Christ." This passage isn't only about Mary but all those who have been chosen by God but in a unique way this passage describes what God has done for Mary. The Immaculate Conception is God's doing.

The Fall, presented in the first reading, is paralleled by the Gospel of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-28), the breaking in of redemption. In the Church's choice of this Gospel, Mary's sinless condition is related to her role as the mother of the Savior, with which she cooperates by faith and obedience.

### **The Prayers of the Liturgy of the Immaculate Conception:**

Examining the prayers for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception further allows us to understand the meaning the Church derives from this dogma. The Collect explicitly ties Mary's Immaculate Conception to the Redemption in specifying that Mary shared in the salvation brought by Jesus:

O God, who by the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin prepared a worthy dwelling for Your Son, grant we pray, that, as You preserved her from every stain by virtue of the Death of Your Son, which You foresaw, so through her intercession, we, too, may be cleansed and admitted to Your presence...<sup>34</sup>

Mary is within the redeeming work of her Son. The idea of being saved by something that will happen in the future might seem unusual to us but passages in the New Testament express this very link between events and the future. Jesus says, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day; he saw it and was glad" (Jn 8:56). Paul considers Christ to be active at the time of the Israelites in the desert, "They drank from a spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was the Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4).

Mary was not the only person who experienced the grace which comes from the death of Christ, in advance. *Lumen Gentium* connects those who preceded the time of Christ with the salvation that He brought: "He did not abandon them, but at all times held out to them the means of salvation, **bestowed in consideration of Christ, the Redeemer...**"<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> "The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary," *The Roman Missal*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 865.

<sup>35</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 2, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1975), 350.

The Collect provides us the reason why God has given this grace: that Mary would be “a worthy mother of Your Son.” In other words, this gift was given to Mary with a view toward her important role in God’s saving plan, just as others, such as Abraham, Moses and John the Baptist were given special graces.

The direction of the prayer is that that we may receive what was given to Mary, “living without sin” The Prayer Over the Offerings also asks that we may be free from our sins by her prayers:

Graciously accept the saving sacrifice which we offer You, O Lord, on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and grant that, as we profess her, on account of Your prevenient grace, to be untouched by any stain of sin, so, through her intercession, we may be delivered from all our faults.<sup>36</sup>

The Prayer After Communion requests that we experience this freedom through the Eucharist:

May the Sacrament we have received, O Lord our God, heal in us the wounds of that fault from which in a singular way You preserved Blessed Mary in the Immaculate Conception.<sup>37</sup>

In the prayers, we ask God to free us from our sins in answer to the prayers of Mary. One of the principle ways by which our deliverance from our sins takes place is in the Eucharist. As Christians, we are in the process of being freed from our sins, despite the hold they seem to have on us. Mary is a prototype of the holiness to which we are being drawn: “We do know that when it is revealed **we shall be like Him**, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope based on Him makes himself pure, as He is pure” ( 1 Jn 3:2-3).

The Preface emphasizes Mary's relationship to the Church. Mary's Immaculate Conception is seen as a assurance of what God is doing with His Church, saving and sanctifying us.

For You preserved the most Blessed Virgin Mary from all satin of original sin, so that in her, endowed with the rich fullness of You grace, You might prepare a worthy Mother for Your Son, and signify the beginning of the

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<sup>36</sup> “The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” *The Roman Missal*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 865.

<sup>37</sup> “The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” *The Roman Missal*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 868.

Church, His beautiful Bride without spot or wrinkle. She, the most pure Virgin, was to bring forth a Son, the innocent Lamb who would wipe away our offences; You placed her above all others to be for Your people an advocate of grace and a model of holiness...<sup>38</sup>

In addition to being our advocate, Mary is **“the promise of its [the Church’s] perfection as the bride of Christ”** and **“our pattern of holiness.”** Mary’s experience of being delivered from sin is a promise to us.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Liturgy of the Hours for the Solemnity:**

The reading for Evening Prayer I brings out both that Mary was predestined and also was conformed to the image of her Son “All those who from the first were known to God, He has destined from the first to be moulded to the image of His Son. So predestined, He called them; so called, He justified them” (Rom 8:29-30).

The Scripture Reading for Morning Prayer applies to Mary the words of Isaiah 43:1, “Now, thus says the Lord, who created you, Jacob, who formed you, Israel: Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine.” Mary is a model to us of one who is redeemed and called.

The Reading for Evening Prayer II is “As our fault was amplified, grace has been more amply bestowed than ever; that so, where guilt held its reign of death, justifying grace should reign instead, to bring us eternal life through Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:20-21). Mary’s Immaculate Conception is the overflowing of God’s grace, justifying Mary and likewise bringing us to eternal life by the abundant grace of Christ.

The First Reading for the Office of Readings is from Romans 5:12-21, speaking about the abundance of grace that comes through Jesus Christ as a free gift. The Second Reading is from St. Anselm emphasizing Mary’s great contribution to all creation in giving birth to its redeemer.

### **The origin of the feast of the Conception of Mary:**

Belief in the Immaculate Conception has been present in the Church for centuries. However, antiquity, while important, is not the sole requirement for a doctrine to be associated with Tradition. More important, as the International

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<sup>38</sup> “The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” *The Roman Missal*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2011), 867.

<sup>39</sup> “Preface of the Immaculate Conception,” *The Sacramentary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1974), 489.

Theological Commission, in their document, *On the Interpretation of Dogmas* (October 1989), points out, as the essential criterion for doctrine, is "catholicity," that is "agreement within the communion of the church" and an indication of this agreement is that the belief is "long-standing and unchallenged"<sup>40</sup> As we will see in considering the history of the dogma, by 1854, the Immaculate Conception was almost universally believed in the Church.

The understanding of Mary's sinlessness in her conception in the West began, in a curious way, through the celebration of the feast of Mary's conception in the East. While the Eastern Church used expressions for Mary such as "all holy," the title was never given any exact definition.

In the late sixth century, a feast of Mary's nativity, was celebrated in the East. In the seventh century a feast of Mary's conception began to be celebrated on December 9. St. Andrew of Crete (d. 740) wrote a canon for the morning office of the feast in the late seventh century, probably when he was the deacon at Santa Sophia in Constantinople. During the Iconoclastic difficulties (725-843), the feast may have been restricted to monasteries but by 850 it was generally celebrated in the East. The feast was celebrated as the "Conception of Saint Anne, the Mother of the *Theotokos*," which places emphasis on the active sense of conception. Presently, the feast is a minor one in the Eastern Church.

The feast of Mary's Conception spread from the East into Western Europe in two directions. One was by way of Southern Italy. The feast may have been celebrated in Naples as early as 850. At that time, the liturgy of Southern Italy was influenced by the Byzantine liturgy. The second approach was by way of England. Liturgical documents from around 1030 indicate that the feast of the Conception was celebrated in England at the Benedictine abbeys of Old Minster and Newminster, both in Winchester, on December 8. Since the feast was celebrated on December 9 in the East, the December date argues for an Eastern influence.

In England, the celebration spread under the influence of the monasteries. Helsin, abbot of Ramsay, was reported to have been saved from shipwreck by promising to promote the feast. Leofric, the bishop of Exeter from 1050 to 1075, left a missal which contains three liturgical prayers for the feast. The celebration seems less apparent after the Norman invasion in 1066 but it revived in the next century.

St. Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109), while maintaining the universality of original sin, asserted the absolute purity of Mary in a way that was conducive

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<sup>40</sup> International Theological Commission, *On the Interpretation of Dogmas*, October 1989, in *Origins*, vol. 20, n. 1, p. 11.

towards understanding the Immaculate Conception.<sup>41</sup> Certain English theologians became proponents for the celebration of the feast, including Anselm the Younger of Bury (nephew of St. Anselm), Osbert of Stoke Clare of Westminster (d. 1170), St. Anselm's former secretary, Eadmer of Canterbury (d. 1124), and Warin of Worcester. Others, such as Lanfranc of Canterbury (1089) and Alexander Neckam, abbot of Cirencester, (1217) are known to have disapproved of the feast.<sup>42</sup>

### **Difficulties with the Feast of the Conception:**

The question raised by the celebration of the feast was whether a conception should be celebrated liturgically, if every human person was conceived with original sin. Romans 5:12 states: "Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and through sin death, so death passed to all men, inasmuch as all sinned."

An idea of Augustine, regarding the transmission of original sin through the parents' concupiscence in the act of begetting made original sin seem to be universal:

We do not deny, that of whatever kind of parents they are born, they are still under the devil's dominion, unless they be born again in Christ, and by His grace be removed from the power of darkness and translated into His kingdom, Who willed not to be born from the same union of the two sexes...Our purpose...is to distinguish between the evil of carnal concupiscence from which sin man who is born therefrom contracts original sin, and the good of marriage.<sup>43</sup>

If the concupiscence of conjugal relations caused the transmission of original sin then every child had original sin, except for Jesus who was born of a virginal conception.

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<sup>41</sup> "It is right that that Virgin should shine with a purity greater than which one is not able to imagine, to whom God the Father was disposed to give His only Son, whom He loved as Himself, begotten equal from His heart, that He would naturally be the Son of God the Father and of the Virgin at the same time." Anselm, *Liber de Conceptu Virginali et Originali Peccato*, XVIII, PL 158, 451.

<sup>42</sup> George Tavard, A.A., "Duns Scotus and the Immaculate Conception," in *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 209 - 211.

<sup>43</sup> Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence, (De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia)*, I, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, V*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co, 1980), 263-264.

The Church struggled with the tension between the growing liturgical celebration of the feast of the Conception and the misgivings of theologians. Edward O'Connor describes this process as "perhaps the most prolonged and passionate debate that has ever been carried on in Catholic theology."<sup>44</sup>

Even those who were otherwise very devoted to Mary did not necessarily accept that she could have been spared original sin.<sup>45</sup> When the Chapter of Canons at the Cathedral of Lyons introduced the celebration of the feast around 1140, Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) expressed his displeasure, arguing that there was not a liturgical tradition nor was this belief known by the Fathers and doctors.<sup>46</sup>

Bernard maintains that Mary was sanctified in the womb, as was John the Baptist. Thus, Mary was born without sin, for which reason the church celebrates her birthday.<sup>47</sup> Having been sanctified, Mary never committed sin during her life.<sup>48</sup>

Bernard bolsters his argument that Mary had original sin with Augustine's teaching that original sin is transmitted through concupiscence in the act of begetting. He affirms that only Jesus was conceived without sin.<sup>49</sup> He admonishes the canons that, "The virgin queen does not need any false honor."<sup>50</sup>

Although the feast was being celebrated, there was some confusion among those who celebrated the feast regarding the meaning of original sin, whether it was sin itself, concupiscence, guilt, or a punishment. It was not clear what

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<sup>44</sup> Edward O'Connor, C.S.C., *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), vi.

<sup>45</sup> Rupert, the abbot of the Benedictines at Deutz (d. c. 1125), states: "And you truly were able to say, 'Behold in iniquity was I conceived and in sin my mother conceived me' (Ps. 51). Since you were of the mass which was corrupted in Adam, you were not free from the hereditary sin." Rupert of Deutz, *In Cantica Canticorum*, 1; PL 168, 841.

<sup>46</sup> Bernard "Ad Canonicos Lugdunenses, De Conceptione S. Mariae," *Epistolo CLXXIV*, 1; PL 182, 333.

<sup>47</sup> Bernard "Ad Canonicos Lugdunenses, De Conceptione S. Mariae," *Epistolo CLXXIV*, 5; PL 182, 334.

<sup>48</sup> Bernard "Ad Canonicos Lugdunenses, De Conceptione S. Mariae," *Epistolo CLXXIV*, 5; PL 182, 334.

<sup>49</sup> Bernard notes Psalm 51:7, "In iniquity I was conceived and in sin did my mother conceive me." Bernard, "Ad Canonicos Lugdunenses, De Conceptione S. Mariae," *Epistolo CLXXIV*, 7; PL 182, 335.

<sup>50</sup> Bernard "Ad Canonicos Lugdunenses, De Conceptione S. Mariae," *Epistolo CLXXIV*, 2; PL 182, 333.

theologians meant when they maintained that Mary had or did not have original sin.<sup>51</sup>

Those who did not accept the feast, were convinced that Mary was either purified in the womb and/or was (further) purified at the time of the Annunciation. Because of the lack of clarity regarding the nature of original sin, it was not clear at this time whether Mary's purification at the time of the Incarnation meant that she was purified of the effects of original sin or of the sin itself.<sup>52</sup> Nor was the question of Mary's relationship to the universal redemption sufficiently explained by those who held that Mary was free from original sin.

For those who were influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, a difficulty with the Immaculate Conception arose because of the Aristotelian understanding of the process following conception. Animation was the name which described the point in time at which the rational soul is placed in the body. Following Aristotle, both Albert and Thomas taught that each human person upon conception receives first a nutritive soul followed by a sensitive soul after which the rational soul is given.<sup>53</sup>

Albert the Great (d. 1280), in his commentary on the third book of the *Sentences*, argued against the celebration of the feast: "We say that the Blessed Virgin was not sanctified before animation: and saying otherwise is a heresy condemned by Blessed Bernard in his letter to [the canons of] Lyons, and by all the masters of Paris."<sup>54</sup> St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) raises the concern that every person must be saved by the merits of Christ.<sup>55</sup>

Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) asserts that Mary, as the one who brought forth the Son of God, full of grace and truth, "received greater privileges of grace than

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<sup>51</sup> Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus" in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 166.

<sup>52</sup> Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus," in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 167.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, S. Th. Ia, 118, 2 ad2.

<sup>54</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Commentarii in III Sententiarum*, vol. xxiii, B. *Alberti Magni, Opera Omnia* (Paris: Ludovicum Vives, 1894), d.3, a.4 sol., 47.

<sup>55</sup> "And as it pertains to the excellent dignity of Christ, that He is the Redeemer and Savior of all, and that He opens the door to all, and that He alone died for all, the Virgin Mary is not excluded from this generality, lest while increasing the Mother's excellence, the glory of the Son be lessened: and so the mother attests, who wishes the Son to be more extolled and honored than she herself, the Creator than the creature." Bonaventure, *Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Magistri Librum Sententiarum*, III, *In Tertium Librum Sententiarum*, d.3, p.1, q. 2 (Ad Claras Aquas: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1887), 68.

all others,"<sup>56</sup> being sanctified in her mother's womb before birth, as John the Baptist was. Because she was conceived through sexual intercourse she would have received original sin, following the position of Augustine.<sup>57</sup> Her sanctification would necessarily be after the animation of the rational soul since grace can only exist in a rational soul.<sup>58</sup>

Thomas argues that even after being freed from original sin, Mary shared in the guilt of all human nature that required Jesus' sacrifice.<sup>59</sup> If Mary did not have original sin, then Jesus would not be the universal savior. However, "the purity of the Blessed Virgin holds the highest place"<sup>60</sup> and "more grace was given to Mary than any other saint."<sup>61</sup>

Thomas asserts that Mary did not commit mortal or venial sins and that her closeness to Jesus especially filled her with grace: "The Blessed Virgin Mary received such a fullness of grace that she was nearest of all to the Author of grace; so that she received within her Him Who is full of all grace; and by bringing Him forth, she, in a manner, dispensed grace to all."<sup>62</sup>

### **Theological Development regarding Mary's conception:**

A development which brought some resolution to the theological difficulties comes with the Franciscan William of Ware (d. ca. 1305), who drew upon an argument, derived from Eadmer, based on God's power as well as the fittingness of the Immaculate Conception. William argues that God could create a sinless being: "What He could do, it was fitting that He should do so and from this it follows that He did do it; for the Son should honor the Mother"<sup>63</sup> These three verbs, "He could," *potuit*, "it was fitting," *deuit*, "He did do," *fecit* were the basis of the line of thought arguing from fittingness.

William of Ware resolves the question of the universal redemption in Jesus by asserting that Mary

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 27, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 27, 2, ad 4.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 27, 1, ad 4.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 27, 1, ad 3.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 27, 2, ad 2

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 27, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 27, 5, ad 1.

<sup>63</sup> William of Ware, *Sent. III*, quaestio *De conceptione beatae Virginis*, quoted by Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus," in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 203.



... needed the Passion of Christ, not on account of any sin that was in her, but on account of that which would have been in her, had her Son not preserved her through faith. Augustine, in his sermon on Magdalene, says that there are two kinds of debts - those that are contracted and paid, and those that are not contracted, but could have been."<sup>64</sup>

William of Ware was convinced that it was better to make a mistake by attributing too much to Mary than not enough: "If I must err - seeing that I am not certain about the opposite position - I would rather err by excess in giving a privilege to Mary, than by defect, diminishing or taking from her a privilege which she had."<sup>65</sup>

Blessed John Duns Scotus (d. 1308) was a student of William of Ware. He also was a Franciscan and taught at Oxford and Paris. He argues that the most perfect form of mediation would be to preserve another from sin. According to Scotus, this is what Christ did with regard to His mother: "But for no one did He exercise a more excellent form of mediation than for Mary....But this would not be so if He had not merited to preserve her from original sin."<sup>66</sup>

Scotus affirms: "It is a more excellent benefit to preserve a person from evil than to permit him to fall into it and then deliver him from it."<sup>67</sup> He maintains that Mary has received a greater redemption from Christ rather than less redemption. Being conceived by natural procreation, she would have received original sin but "the grace of the Mediator" she was delivered from this. Scotus argues: "Mary would have had the greatest need of Christ as Redeemer....so Mary would have been in still greater need of a Mediator preventing her from contracting sin."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> William of Ware, *Sent. III, quaestio De conceptione beatae Virginis*, quoted by Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus," in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 203.

<sup>65</sup> William of Ware, *Sent. III, quaestio De conceptione beatae Virginis*, quoted by Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus," in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 203.

<sup>66</sup> Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, III d.3 q.1, quoted by Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus," in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 207.

<sup>67</sup> Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, III d.3 q.1, quoted by Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus" in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 208.

<sup>68</sup> Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, III d.3 q.1, quoted by Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus" in Edward O'Connor,

Scotus' affirms that grace preserved Mary from original sin: "Original sin does not reside in a soul that has grace. God could have conferred as much grace on her in the first moment of her soul's existence as He does on another soul at circumcision or baptism..."<sup>69</sup>

At times, Scotus considers the Immaculate Conception to be a possibility. In certain writings, he affirms the Immaculate Conception: "The Blessed Mother of God...was never at enmity [with God] whether actually on account of actual sins or originally - because of original sin. She would have been had she not been preserved."<sup>70</sup>

The Augustinian Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358) challenged Duns Scotus' position arguing that God could have more perfectly redeemed the human race by preserving it all from sin. The Nominalists, following William of Ockham, promoted Scotus' teaching.

### **Spread of the feast and resistance:**

The Franciscans became the defenders of the Immaculate Conception while the Dominicans continued to assert Thomas' reservations. In 1387, a Dominican, John Montson, was asked by a board of more than thirty theologians at the University of Paris to retract four propositions of his master's thesis which denied the Immaculate Conception. When he concluded that Clement VII (the Avignon Pope at time of Schism), to whom he had appealed his case, was likely to decide against him, Montson left the areas that adhered to the Avignon Pope for those of the Roman Pope. His actions were condemned in Avignon and in Paris. This was perceived as victory for those promoting the Immaculate Conception.

The Council of Basel (1431-1449), which sought to resolve the Western schism, addressed the issue of the Immaculate Conception. On September 17, 1438, at the thirty-sixth session, the Council declared that by a special act of prevention, Mary was never stained with original sin. However, the

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C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 207.

<sup>69</sup> Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, III d.3 q.1, quoted by Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus," in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 205.

<sup>70</sup> Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, III d.3 q.1, quoted by Carlo Balic, O.F.M., "The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus," in Edward O'Connor, C.S.C. *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 208-209.

representatives of the Roman Pope had already departed from the Council. After the conclusion of the Schism, the Church accepted only the first twenty-two sessions when the representatives of the Roman Pope were present. Thus, the declaration was not adopted by the universal Church.

Half way through this centuries-long debate, in 1482 and 1483, the Conventual Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484), in his bulls *Gravis nimis* ("So Very Serious") forbade either side to call each other heretics. Pope Sixtus allowed the feast to be celebrated in the curia but this privilege was not extended to the universal Church. The feast was still referred to as "Mary's Conception." At the Lateran Council V (1512-17), Leo X proposed raising the question of the Immaculate Conception but was dissuaded by the reluctance of the Dominican Cardinal Cajetan. The Council of Trent chose not to define the Immaculate Conception but stated:

This holy Council declares that it does not intend to include in this decree on original sin, the blessed and Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God; but that the constitutions of Pope Sixtus IV... are to be observed, under the penalties contained in those constitutions, which [the present council] renews.<sup>71</sup>

Belief in the Immaculate Conception traveled to the Americas with Columbus, who named his first island, "El Salvador" and his second "Concepción." Those who promoted the teaching of the Immaculate Conception, in Spanish speaking countries, came to be known as "immaculists" and those who were opposed as the "maculists." Differences over this belief entered into the unfortunate rivalry between the Jesuits and the Dominicans even in the foreign missions, despite the fact that the Jesuits staunchly promoted Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* as the standard of Catholic theology. St. Robert Bellarmine gratuitously explained that Thomas would have accepted the Immaculate Conception if he had the information available to the sixteenth century. In 1593, the Immaculate Conception was affirmed as a tenet of the official Jesuit teaching. Some Dominicans defended the Immaculate Conception, such as Ambrose Catharinus (d. 1553) and Thomas Campanella (d. 1639).

The Protestant reaction to this debate was that it was a "controversy about a few moments," since the question was whether Mary was conceived without sin or sanctified a few moments later.

The Dominican Pope, St. Pius V, in his bull reforming the liturgy, *Quod a nobis postulat*, on July 5, 1568, lessened the solemnity of the feast but also allowed a wider celebration. The popes, including Pius V, referred to it as the feast of her

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<sup>71</sup> Council of Trent, Session V, *Decretum de peccato originali*, No. 6, Denzinger 833.

conception. The Dominicans referred to the feast as that of Mary's "sanctification," by which they signified that they were celebrating Mary's sanctification in the womb. Pius allowed those who had used the title "sanctification" for the feast for over two hundred years to retain it, though this exemption was revoked by Gregory XV on May 24, 1622. Innocent XII on May 15, 1693, extended the feast to the whole Church with an office and octave. It was made a holiday of obligation by Clement XI on December 6, 1708.<sup>72</sup>

Only on May 17, 1806, did Pius VII allow the Franciscans to add the words "Immaculata" to the preface of the feast, and Gregory XVI, in 1838, extended the privilege to any dioceses and orders who requested it. In 1843, the Dominicans petitioned Pope Gregory for this permission as well. One factor which may have delayed the Dominicans from accepting the Immaculate Conception was a traditional oath which they took to uphold the "solid doctrine of St. Thomas."

In 1830, St. Catherine Labouré, a postulant Daughter of Charity, received a series of apparitions from Our Lady during which she was instructed to have a medal formed. Because of the miraculous effects on those devoted to Mary, by means of this medal, it came to be known as the "Miraculous Medal." Engraved on the medal were the words, "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee." The spread of the medal also influenced belief in the Immaculate Conception.

After consulting theologians, Blessed Pius IX, questioned the bishops of the universal church as to whether he should define the Immaculate Conception. 546 of the 603 bishops consulted responded affirmatively, four or five did not think it could be defined, twenty-four questioned whether the time was opportune, and ten preferred an indirect definition. Pope Pius defined the dogma on December 8, 1854.

A nineteenth-century window in the cathedral in Covington, Kentucky depicts Pius IX proclaiming the Immaculate Conception. Beside him stands a happy barefoot Franciscan and at the Pope's knees is a humble Dominican receiving the proclamation from the Pope.

### **Mary's sinlessness and the Eastern understanding of original sin:**

Although Mary's conception was celebrated in the East, the Eastern Church views Mary's relationship with original sin in a different way than the

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<sup>72</sup> Frederick M. Jelly, O.P. "The Roman Catholic Dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception," *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 266-270.

West. Kallistos Ware comments on the significance of the Eastern title, *Panagia*, “all-holy”:

Orthodoxy understands this title to mean that Mary is free from actual sin, although she was born subject to the effects of original sin, in common with the other holy men and women of the old Covenant. Thus the Orthodox church sees in her the supreme fulfillment of sanctity in a human person – the model and paradigm of what it means by God’s grace, to be authentically human – but it does not accept the Roman Catholic teaching about the Immaculate Conception.<sup>73</sup>

There is a difference between the Eastern and Western idea of original sin. The Eastern Church places its attention on the concept of *deification*, the process by which God shares His divine nature with human beings. In choosing disobedience, Adam broke his union with God, making it impossible to fulfill his nature. After the Fall, Adam’s descendants inherited this unfulfilled state, although holy people before the time of Christ were acted upon externally by grace. It was only with Christ that humanity could enter into this internal transformation by the grace of deification.<sup>74</sup> Original sin in the Eastern Church, is interpreted as a condition of human nature in as much as the nature does not share in deification and is thus unfulfilled.

The Eastern Church perceives Mary as being sinless yet in some sense she participates in the fallen condition of the children of Adam. Eastern emphasis is placed on the Annunciation. At that point, the Spirit prepared her for her role by grace. Vladimir Lossky explains that Mary was holy and pure from all sin from her mother’s womb, but she was not outside the rest of humanity that needed salvation in Christ. While bound to the rest of humanity, she is also one with the righteous ancestors, the holy people of the Old Testament.<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, within the heritage of the Eastern Church are concepts which brought about the understanding of the Immaculate Conception in the West, by calling attention to Mary's sinlessness. Thus, Andrew of Crete (d. 740) writes:

Today, from us and for us, Adam offers Mary to God as firstfruits, and, with the unpoisoned parts of the muddy dough, is formed a bread for the

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<sup>73</sup> Kallistos Ware, “Mary Theotokos in the Orthodox Tradition,” *Marianum*, LII (1990), 211.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 130-134.

<sup>75</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 203-204.

rebuilding of the human race....Today pure human nature receives from God the gift of the original creation and reverts to its original purity. By giving our inherited splendor, which had been hidden by the deformity of vice, to the Mother of Him who is beautiful, human nature receives a magnificent and most divine renovation, which becomes a complete restoration. The restoration, in turn, becomes deification, and this becomes a new formation, like its pristine state.<sup>76</sup>

### Mary and Us:

Writing on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception, Karl Rahner raised the question what this revealed truth means for us. His answer was "that we might love her more": "One must grasp or, more precisely, realize the fact that Mary exists, that she must be loved - in God, for His sake and for the sake of our salvation....Thus, at the beginning and end of all praise of Mary and of all Marian theology, all one can really do is ask one's hearer very quietly and simply to pray for the grace to be able to love Mary."<sup>77</sup>

Rahner is affirming that, in our recognition of what God has done for Mary, we can expand our appreciation for God's wonderful workings of grace, even as Mary proclaimed in the Magnificat. To love Mary, and to love God's work in our sisters and brothers, is to appreciate God.

The Brazilian theologians, Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, also identify the particular message of this dogma for the poor: "More than ever Mary - the *tapeinē* of Nazareth - on whom the gaze of the Most High rests with favor, is a model for the church, stimulating it to become more and more the church of the poor."<sup>78</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI shows us that the Immaculate Conception gives light to the way we also say "fiat" to God's will:

To reflect upon the Immaculate Conception of Mary is thus to allow oneself to be attracted by the 'Yes' which joined her wonderfully to the mission of Christ, the redeemer of humanity; it is to allow oneself to be

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<sup>76</sup> Andrew of Crete, *Homily 1 on the Nativity*, in Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1999), 394-395; PG 87, 809 D-812 A.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Rahner, S. J., "The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in our Spiritual Life," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. III, trans. Karl-H and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1967), 129-131.

<sup>78</sup> Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, trans. Philip Berryman (New York: Orbis, 1989), 113.

taken and led by her hand to pronounce in one's turn 'fiat' to the will of God, with all one's existence interwoven with joys and sadness, hopes and disappointments, in the awareness that tribulations, pain and suffering make rich the meaning of our pilgrimage on the earth.

Denis Vincent Wiseman, O.P.,