

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Mary's prophecy, given in her Magnificat, "Behold all generations will call me blessed," was fulfilled when the Catholic Church declared four dogmas of Faith about her: 1) Her Immaculate Conception, 2) Her Perpetual Virginity, 3) Her Divine Maternity, and 4) Her Assumption into Heaven after her death. The Immaculate Conception is a dogma based mainly on Christian tradition and theological reasoning. While other human beings were born without grace because we inherit original sin, Mary was conceived full of grace, completely free from original sin. The tradition was defined as Church dogma in 1854 by Pope Pius IX through *Ineffabilis Deus*: "From the first moment of her conception, Mary was preserved immune from original sin by the singular grace of God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, savior of the human race." (CCC #491). This declaration means that original sanctity, innocence and justice were conferred upon her, and that she was exempted from the evil effects of original sin, excluding sorrow, pain, disease and death, the temporal penalties given to Adam (Catholic Encyclopedia). "God freely chose Mary from all eternity to be the Mother of his Son. In order to carry out her mission, she herself was conceived Immaculate. This means that thanks to the grace of God and in anticipation of the merits of Jesus Christ, Mary was preserved from original sin from the first instant of her conception." (Compendium of the CCC). The Fathers of the Church from the fourth century believed and taught that the Blessed Virgin Mary had been kept free of all traces of sin by the grace of God because she was to become the Mother of the Lord Jesus. This belief kept company with the other beliefs about Mary: her perpetual virginity, her sinlessness, and her Divine motherhood. Church history makes it known to us that, as early as the seventh century, there was a liturgical observance that proclaimed the Blessed Virgin Mary to be free from sin. In the year 1846, the Bishops of the United States unanimously chose Our Lady as the patroness of the United States under the title of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. This was done eight years before the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was infallibly defined.

We need to be pure and holy like our Heavenly Mother. Every mother wants her children to inherit or acquire all her good qualities. Hence, our Immaculate and Holy Mother wants us to be holy and pure children. The original sin from which Mary was preserved is the original sin from which we have been freed by Baptism. The grace of Christ that was hers is the same grace of Christ that is ours. Mary is significant for us because the central factors in her life are the central factors in our own. Perhaps the lesson is that no matter in which direction we may be facing, we need Mary Immaculate in our lives to remember Who Christ IS and who we are.

We need to be thankful and humble. Mary's sinlessness was a gift from God, given to her right from the very moment of her conception. Equally, it is by the grace of God that we have received a new heart, a new spirit and the indwelling Holy Spirit to raise us to the level of holiness that the Blessed Virgin Mary enjoyed during her earthly life. Through Faith in Jesus and through the Sacrament of Baptism, having been born again of water and Spirit, we have been

adopted into the Body of Christ in the living Hope of receiving our salvation. Through our living Faith, including the reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God restores the righteousness of our souls. Through the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, we abide in Jesus and Jesus in us, leading us towards our salvation. [Jn 6:56]. Hence, those of us who happen to be holy, who sin less than the average sinner, should regard their holiness as basically a gift of God and not something they have achieved by themselves. Our lives, then, should be characterized by two basic attitudes, thankfulness to God, and humility before those who are naturally and spiritually less gifted, or more gifted, than we are.

Like Mary, we need to say “Yes” to God: God invites each one of us to continue Mary’s “Yes” by welcoming Jesus and making room for him in our lives. Let us ask her to obtain for us the grace to respond as generously to God’s call as she did, and to be as faithful in discipleship to her Son as she was. On this feast day, let us ask our Mother Mary to be with us, to guide us, to protect us through her prayers of intercession with her Son, and to share her privilege with us, making our bodies worthy resting places for her Son. Let us respond to God’s grace as Mary did, by using it to do good for others and to avoid evil. On this Feast of the Immaculate Conception, it is fitting that we remember the words of the intercessory prayer that is inscribed on the Miraculous Medal of Our Lady: “O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”