

The Immaculate Conception: Its History, Mystery and Majesty



I had a vision of the creation of Mary's most holy soul and of its being united to her most pure body. In the glory by which the Most Holy Trinity is usually represented in my visions I saw a movement like a great shining mountain, and yet also like a human figure; and I saw something rise out of the midst of this figure towards its mouth and go forth from it like a shining brightness. Then I saw this brightness standing separate before the Face of God, turning and shaping itself—or rather being shaped, for I saw that while this brightness took human form, yet it was by the Will of God that it received a form so unspeakably beautiful. I saw, too, that God showed the beauty of this soul to the angels, and that they had unspeakable joy in its beauty. I am unable to describe in words all that I saw and understood.

(Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, *THE LIFE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY*, Templegate, Springfield, IL, 1954, pg. 73.)

In the moment when the new-born child lay in the arms of her holy mother Anna, I saw that at the same time the child was presented in heaven in the sight of the Most Holy Trinity, and greeted with unspeakable joy by all the heavenly host. Then I understood, that there was made known to her in a supernatural manner her whole future with all her joys and sorrows. Mary was taught infinite mysteries, and yet was and remained a child. This knowledge of hers we cannot understand, because our knowledge grows on the tree of good and evil. She knew everything in the same way as a child knows its mother's breast and that it is to drink from it. As the vision faded in which I saw the child Mary being thus taught in heaven through grace, I heard her weep for the first time. (Emmerich, Pg. 77.)

Blessed Anne Catherine is speaking of the awesome mystery and majesty associated with the historical and spiritual truth of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in the womb of her Mother. Although this doctrine is not explicitly contained in Scripture, it is implied. In Genesis 3:15 the Lord says: **He will put enmity between the serpent and the woman; between his seed and her seed; She shall bruise your head and you shall strike at His heel.** Her seed is Jesus, the promised and only Savior of the world, but the Woman is Mary who bears the seed. The heel refers to those who follow Christ, His Church. Mary is Mother of the Church, the Mystical Christ, even as she is Mother of the Sacred Humanity. The noted Scripture begins to unfold Mary's role as co-redeemer in Christ's work of redemption, for she was intimately connected to Christ from the moment He was conceived in her womb until the moment He died on Calvary and was laid in her arms. Her role, although always subordinate to that of the Redeemer, is significant indeed, as it was Christ Himself Who chose her to be the channel for His grace to us. When Christ gave Mary to John and John to Mary and poured out His Spirit, as life drained from the wound in His side, the Church was born, conceived by the Holy Spirit and confirmed that first Pentecost Sunday. Mary was called to mother

this Mystical Christ to maturity. The Genesis passage implies Mary's Immaculate Conception was necessary and befitting to her Divine Maternity, for nothing impure can come into the Presence of God. Her holiness, most like that of her Son, consecrated her in Perpetual Virginity as belonging solely to God for His divine purpose and will. Mary is the enemy of the serpent precisely because, by a singular privilege bestowed on her by her Redeemer-Son, she was never touched by sin, which subjects all sinners to the venom of the serpent. Mary is Mother of the Lord both by blood and by faith. She is the first fruits of Redemption and the first disciple of the Redeemer.

It was Duns Scotus (d.1308) who defended the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, not against heretics but often against saints and theologians who had no problem accepting Mary's sinlessness in terms of personal sin, but were uncertain how to explain original sin in reference to her. Duns Scotus was on his way to the University of Paris to defend his thesis when he paused before a statue of Our Lady to pray. As he did so the statue came alive and Mary smiled at him and bowed her head in assent. St. Ephrem, who supported his thesis, wrote: **"There is in thee, Lord, no stain nor any spot in Thy Mother."** St. Augustine added: **"...the maternal relationship would have been of no profit to Mary, if she had not more happily borne Christ in her heart than in her womb."** St. Bernard of Clairvaux referred to Jesus as the fountain of life and Mary as the aqueduct by which He came down to us from heaven. He concluded that all grace comes to us through her hands, even as Christ came to us through her, indicating her role as Mediatrix of Grace, a doctrine long held in the Church but not defined as a dogma. It was in the 8th century that the feast of the Immaculate Conception was first celebrated by Palestinian monks. (Fr. Patrick Greenough, OFM Conv., **THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**, Marytown Press, Libertyville, IL, 2005, Pgs. 23-29.)

Advent is the beginning of the Church's liturgical year, and the key figure in this season of waiting, watching and expecting is the pregnant Virgin-Mother, the Theotokos. There are three phases to Advent. The first is the longing of God's chosen people in the Old Testament for the Messiah promised to Adam and Eve, an intense longing expressed by the Essenes who lived very austere lives in the desert, crying to heaven for the root of Jesse to bloom forth a Savior. Mary's ancestors were of this community. Accepting that God revealed great mysteries to Mary at the time of her creation and knowing that she was extremely well versed in the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures, which she studied while a temple virgin, we can only imagine how Mary's spirit languished with expectation after the Archangel Gabriel declared that it was she who was chosen to give birth to the Messiah, Jeshua. In the fullness of her time the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us in a humble cave in Bethlehem. God came to earth that night as a tiny baby wrapped in layers of mystery and majesty, for He is the King of kings and Lord of lords Who seeks to bring us into His kingdom, from glory to glory. "Hosanna!" the angels sing wherever He comes.

This sacred historical event continues in the Church of Christ in the mystery of His timeless Presence in its sacramental life-- each time a person is baptized into the Body of Christ, each time a sacrament is received and sanctifying grace is bestowed, each time one receives Christ in Holy Communion. In sacrament we encounter the living God Who comes to dwell within us to speak to our hearts of things that transcend our world. In Baptism the Most Holy Trinity comes to dwell within us. At every Eucharist, Jesus is literally born again in the stable of our hearts that so often have no room for Him. With every grace we grow in His life and its wonder and majesty. This past historical event is an ever-present spiritual reality, for He is Emmanuel, God with us, yesterday, today and tomorrow. One might call these sacred encounters His second coming, His coming into the human heart. His third and final coming will be on the Day of Judgment when, as the Good Shepherd, He

will sweep into His almighty arms all the sheep He has called by name and who have followed Him. He will give them eternal rest in the shelter of His glory. Amen and Alleluia to that great day!

It is fitting to note that the Marian dogmas that say so much about Mary say even more about Jesus. They give honor and glory to Christ and clarify Who He really is.

The Theotokos, while declaring that Mary is the Mother of God, clarifies the Incarnation by stating that Jesus is one person, the Son of God made flesh who has two natures, human and divine.

The Immaculate Conception, while declaring that Mary was conceived without sin, states that Jesus is the perfect Redeemer who preserved her from sin.

The virginity of Mary, while stating that Mary conceived Jesus without sexual relations, states that the origins of Jesus were both human and divine.

The Assumption states that Mary's entrance into heaven body and soul is the fulfillment of the words of Jesus, that whoever believes in Him will never die, but will have eternal life. (Greenough, Pg. 90.)

We are further blessed with Our Lady's very clear message to Sister Mildred Neuzil in her Diary, **OUR LADY OF AMERICA**®, confirming Mary's unique privileges. Mary first appeared to Sister as Our Lady of Lourdes where she had confirmed the dogma of her Immaculate Conception by identifying herself as **"I am the Immaculate Conception."** She acknowledged her pleasure in the honor we give her as our Patroness under the title of the Immaculate Conception. She said she wishes to be honored in our National Shrine as **"Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin,"** and again refers to herself as **"I am the Immaculate One, Patroness of your land."** On October 5, 1956, she inspired Sister to write The Prayer to the Immaculate Conception. On October 13, 1956 she appeared holding a replica of the finished shrine of the Immaculate Conception, even though it was not yet finished. On November 11, 1956, Our Lady taught Sister the little prayer, **"By thy Holy and Immaculate Conception, O Mary, deliver us from evil."** Our Lady then asked Sister to draw a picture of her first appearance and requested that a statue made in this image be placed, after being carried in solemn procession, in a place of honor in the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. She asked Sister to tell the bishops of the United States of the longing of her Immaculate Heart to establish the reign of Jesus in the world. On August 22, 1957, feast of the Immaculate Heart, she said: **"My heart, my Immaculate Heart, is the channel through which the graces of the Sacred Heart are given to men."** On November 22-23, 1957, Our Lady appeared under a new image, as she really and truly is, the Immaculate Tabernacle of the Indwelling God: **"I am Our Lady of the Divine Indwelling, handmaid of Him Who dwells within."** On the eve of February 11, 1958, feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, she pledged anew: **"My Immaculate Heart will win in the end, and the Spirit of Christ will dwell in the hearts of men."** That same day she confirmed what our Church Fathers proclaimed: **"I am the Mother of the sacred humanity, and it is my special work as co-redemptrix of the human race to help souls reach the sanctity of the Father in eternal union by showing them how to put on Christ, to imbibe His Spirit, and thus become one with Him."** She is Co-Redemptrix and Mediatrix of grace! The guardian angel of the United States of America also appeared to Sister acknowledging the honor and love the people of the United States give to the Immaculate Virgin to whom they have dedicated their land. Let us, then, give our Immaculate Patroness the further honor she deserves and pray the prayer she herself dictated for us.

The Prayer to the Immaculate Conception

O Immaculate Mother, Queen of our Country, open our hearts, our homes, and our Land to the coming of Jesus, your Divine Son. With Him, reign over us, O heavenly Lady, so pure and so bright with the radiance of God's light shining in and about you. Be our Leader against the powers of evil set upon wresting the world of souls, redeemed at such a great cost by the suffering of your Son and of yourself, in union with Him, from that same Savior, Who loves us with infinite charity.

We gather about you, O chaste and holy Mother, Virgin Immaculate, patroness of our beloved land, determined to fight under your banner of holy purity against the wickedness that would make all the world an abyss of evil, without God and without your loving maternal care.

We consecrate our hearts, our homes, our Land to your Most Pure Heart, O great Queen, that the kingdom of your Son, our Redeemer and our God, may be firmly established in us.

We ask no special sign of you, sweet Mother, for we believe in your great love for us, and we place in you our entire confidence. We promise to honor you by faith, love, and the purity of our lives according to your desire.

Reign over us, then, O Virgin Immaculate, with your Son Jesus Christ. May His Divine Heart and your most chaste Heart be ever enthroned and glorified among us. Use us, your children of America, as your instruments in bringing peace among men and nations. Work your miracles of grace in us, so that we may be a glory to the Blessed Trinity, Who created, redeemed, and sanctifies us. May your valiant Spouse, St. Joseph, with the holy Angels and Saints, assist you and us in "renewing the face of the earth." Then when our work is over, come, Holy Immaculate Mother, and as our Victorious Queen, lead us to the eternal kingdom, where your Son reigns forever as King. Amen.

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