

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION: A HEART PREPARED TO RECEIVE THE CHRIST CHILD

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INTRODUCTION

Who is the cause of our joy? The Conception of Mary! This season of Advent really does bring so much joy. Why? Because we know the birth of our Savior is near--He is coming and with Him he brings our salvation. But there is also a note of sobriety during Advent. Why? Because we know our Savior is near. Such a great gift of receiving our Savior requires responsibility, it requires preparation. If you notice, during Advent the liturgical color is purple--a penitential color of the Church. This is to show us that we are to prepare our hearts through purification and conversion for the coming of the Christ Child. The Church, in her maternal wisdom, sets before us during the season of Advent, a model of the purity with which we are to prepare our hearts. The only solemnity during Advent is the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady.



What a privilege to be speaking about the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady during this Advent. Her Immaculate Conception was a gift she received in preparation for her mission as Mother of God--in preparation to one day receive the Word Incarnate. How fitting that we should look more deeply into this Marian dogma in Advent, when we too are preparing to receive anew the Christ Child in our own hearts. As we will come to see, this dogma, in a particular way, has so much to speak to the human heart of our time.

This dogma, as do the Perpetual Virginity and the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven, flows from the dogma of Mary's Divine Maternity that was defined at the Council of Ephesus. In response to the glorification of the virginity of Mary had as a consequence the exaltation of her personal holiness and purity of soul. The purity of Our Lady includes both body and soul and so exalting her bodily virginity dogmatically, the Holy Spirit has brought the Church to penetrate the deep mysteries of the purity of her soul. When Our Lady appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, just 4 years after the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, she told Bernadette that she was "the Immaculate Conception." Not that she was Immaculately conceived...but that she WAS the Immaculate Conception. This shows us how close this grace is to the Heart of Our Lady--she identifies herself with it. That is why it is so important to have a good understanding of what it is, so we can in a very real sense, come to know HER better and allow her to have greater authority over our hearts and lives.

Tonight I would like to briefly speak about the development of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and the teachings it contains about Our Lady. In looking at what it teaches about Our Lady, we can discover a lot about ourselves--about our need for the graces of Redemption and purification to take root in our hearts. After our venture into the history and contents of the dogma, we will look more deeply at the impact of this dogma on our lives, particularly during this Advent, but really throughout our lives. For it is through the Immaculate Conception that Our Lady was prepared to receive the Word Incarnate in her womb, and so it is through our own purification from sin and sinful inclinations that we are prepared to receive Christ in our hearts. What a powerful understanding to have as we enter into Advent. May tonight's reflection on Mary's Immaculate purity help us to understand more fully the need to prepare our own hearts for the Christ child. May we submit ourselves under her maternal authority, under the authority of her singular purity, so that we may learn from her and allow the grace with which she is filled to grow in us as well.

It's important to note from the beginning that the Immaculate Conception does not refer to the moment that the Blessed Virgin Mary conceived Jesus, but the moment in which she was conceived in the womb of St. Anne.

SCRIPTURAL ROOTS

Genesis 3:15 " I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed; she shall crush your head, and you shall lie in wait for her heel."

God reveals in this Genesis passage that the woman who will give birth to the seed of victory in the future will be in total separation from Satan and sin. Since original sin and its effects constitute a form of union with Satan and his seed, this passage prophesies the future woman free from sin and "immaculate" (sine macula, without stain).

"Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). In the angelic greeting, Mary's name is nowhere used. Rather, the title "full of grace" is used as a substitute for Mary's name by the angelic messenger of God. These words refer to a fullness of grace, a plenitude of grace that is part of Mary's very nature. So much is Mary's very being full of grace that this title serves to identify Mary in the place of her own name. It is also true that no person with a fallen nature could possess a fullness of grace, a perfection of grace appropriate only for the woman who was to give God the Son an identical, immaculate human nature.

BRIEF HISTORY

Many people believe that the idea of the Immaculate Conception is fairly recent, having been proclaimed dogma in 1854. The belief in the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, however, can be traced back to the early Church, already being spoken of by the Fathers of the Church.

It's a devotion that began through popular piety as a natural devotion. The first Christians simply accepted Our Lady as Mother of God, always virgin, *most holy*, the Eve of the new law. "The piety of the people imposed the recognition of Mary without sin." (St. Augustine) which is evidence of what Blessed John Paul II said in an Audience in 1995. He said, "In the development of Mariology, the Christian people play a particular role, with the affirmation and the testimony of their faith, they contribute to the progress of Marian doctrine, which normally is not only the work of theologians, even though their task keeps being indispensable for the deepening and the clear exposition of the facts of the faith and of Christian experience itself." (JPII, Observatorio Romano, November 10, 1995)

Origen, Tertullian, and Basil: "By her vocation as Mother of God, it was suitable to be prepared by God without sin."

Origen- (+254) - Called Mary "the Holy Virgin"

As the devotion became more popular, the Fathers of the Church began to respond and write about it. St. Augustine realized that the condition of Mary, Mother of a Son completely holy demanded a total purity and an extraordinary holiness. "In relation to her and in respect to the Lord" - said St. Augustine - "one cannot even suppose the existence of sin." Yet, he could not comprehend how the total absence of sin at the moment of conception could be reconciled with the doctrine of the universality of original sin and the necessity of redemption for all the descendants of Adam. This is a theme that would be come up repeatedly as the doctrine developed through the centuries.

St. Ambrose, at the same time as St. Augustine, and other Fathers began to call her "most pure"...a few centuries later St. Ephrem with other Fathers of the Church began to call her "without stain, immaculate, innocent, and integral."

Proclus of Constantinople (+446), Theoteknos of Livia (600s) and Andrew of Crete (+740) extended the immaculate condition to the moment of her existence. "Mary is the sanctuary of impeccability, the temple sanctified by God, the exuberant and incorruptible paradise, She is all beautiful, pure, without stain. She is born like the cherubim for she is made from pure and immaculate clay."

This doctrine finds its expression in the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary which arose in the east between the 7th-8th centuries, and extended to Italy in the 9th century.

The idea of the Immaculate Conception found a great opposition in the West because this idea clashed with the universality of redemption and with the conviction that original sin. This is the same issue that St. Augustine had struggled with. This position was held by great saints like Albert the Great (1280), Thomas Aquinas (1274), Bonaventure (1274) and before them Anselm of Canterbury (1109) and Bernard of Clairveaux (1153).

One of the greatest defenders of the Immaculate Conception arose in the 14th century. Blessed John Duns Scotus was a Franciscan friar teaching at the University of Paris. He showed that Mary's preservation from original sin as an anticipation of the merits of Christ, implied an even more perfect redemption if the Virgin had been redeemed from a sin contracted after her conception. Duns Scotus made clear that the Immaculate Conception is not an exception to the redemption of Christ, but a case of perfect and more efficacious salvific action of the only mediator. In this way, he was able to reconcile the 'universal need for redemption' and the Immaculate Conception. For this reason he was later called the "doctor of the Immaculate."

Already by the 15th century, the greater part of theologians were convinced of the reality of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the liturgical feasts had been extended to the whole Church. Nevertheless, the Magisterium had not solemnly proclaimed it.

The Development of Magisterium on the Immaculate Conception

In the midst of the public debate among theologians, the Church spoke rarely on the topic of the Immaculate Conception. However there were a few moments in which the Magisterium reflected the belief and desire of the people for a dogma on the Immaculate Conception. The first instance of this was when the Lateran Council (649) calls the Virgin Mary Immaculate (DZ 256)

Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484), a Franciscan, was the first to officially accept the doctrine. He approved and granted indulgences to the feast of the Immaculate Conception. During his pontificate, there arose again the old controversy between the Dominicans and the Franciscans. The Dominicans (St. Thomas) denied the Immaculate Conception and the Franciscans (Duns Scotus) were in favor of it. The pope denied it saying that the feast is for the conception and not the sanctification, with the proclamation of two bulls, the other was directed to the Universal Church. In it he prohibited both sides to call their opponents heretics and warned that those who opposed the mystery of the Immaculate Conception that if they followed the same path, they would fall into mortal sin or heresy.

Pius IX gave the definitive step in the dogmatic process. One year after having been crowned Supreme Pontiff, in 1847 he signed the decree authorizing the use of the New mass and office of the Feast. On February 2 1849 he extended both to the universal Church. The Mass and office are due to Pius IX and date back to 1863. In 1848 he created a commission of theologians to resolve two problems: Could the doctrine be defined as dogma? Is it the moment to do it? On February 2, 1849, he sent the encyclical *Ubi Primum* to all the bishops of the world, asking their opinion on the possible definition of the dogma. The response was favorable from more than 95% (of 603 bishops, 546 favored the proclamation.) In 1854, he issued the Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* in which he proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

What the dogma contains...

The dogma teaches that from the first moment that she was constituted as a person--when her soul was infused into her body, she was without any stain of sin. This is contrary to what some theologians had affirmed in the past who claimed, to save the universality of original sin, that having contracted sin she was subjected to it for an instant to be immediately afterwards sanctified by God in the womb of her mother.

It is a dogma of the faith that original sin is transmitted to all men by natural generation, in this way everyone is conceived in sin. (Council of Trent DZ 791). So the Virgin Mary was immune from guilt by being conceived without sin, she did not have this fault, and as such neither did she have the consequences of this fault.

This supposes three things:

- The absence of all sin
- The presence of sanctifying grace (with the infused virtues and gifts of the Spirit). (In Her is the fullness of the Trinitarian Presence)
- The absence of inclination to evil (concupiscence)

The "Purest Conception" is a privilege and free gift, granted ONLY to Mary and to no other creature, due to the fact that she had been predestined to be the Mother of God.

This privilege was granted to Our Lady by the merits of Christ" given that the redemption of Our Lady had as its meritorious cause the Passion of the Lord. Christ is the only Mediator and Universal Redeemer of mankind, Our Lady as descendent of Adam, received, like all men, the salvation of Christ, the only Savior. In her was effected the universal Redemptive action. However, in being *preserved from sin*, the Blessed Virgin Mary was ransomed in the most sublime way. "Christ was the redeemer of his Mother and worked in her his redeeming act in the most perfect way." (Fulgens Corona, Pius XII 1953)

This doctrine proclaimed in this solemn way is expressly qualified as "doctrine revealed by God." It must be firmly and constantly believed by all. As a consequence, those who don't make it their own, or who hold an opinion contrary to it, "fail in the faith" and "are separated from Catholic unity."

Not only was Our Lady preserved from Original Sin and its effects by the Immaculate Conception, but she was also free from actual sin--through her perfect cooperation with grace and the will of God. By calling her full of grace, the angel recognized in her as the woman blessed with a permanent perfection and a fullness of holiness, without shadow of guilt nor moral or spiritual imperfection" (JP II, June 19, 1996)

- In Her there never existed any disordered movement of concupiscence
- Her judgments were always right and her will was always set on the true good
- St. Thomas Aquinas: "To those who God chooses for a determined mission, he fittingly prepares and shows them...if Mary was chosen to be Mother of the Word Incarnate, it would not be suitable if she had sinned at any time, even if only lightly." (ST III)

WHAT DOES THIS DOGMA MEAN FOR US TODAY?

Both Pius XII in Fulgens Corona in 1953 and the Second Vatican Council only a decade later tell us that the Church "admires and exalts in Mary, the most splendid fruit of Redemption." The most splendid fruit of Redemption--a soul preserved from any stain of sin and who then actively participated in this grace by choosing not to sin at any moment during her life. The purity that Our Lady received through the singular grace of the Immaculate Conception and preserved throughout her life is the same grace that we are all working toward. The free graces of Her Son's redemptive act--His Passion, Death, and Resurrection--are what preserved Our Lady from sin. Our Lord desires that His Passion, Death, and Resurrection have a similar effect in our own lives. If we are not yet free from sin, it is because we haven't let the full power of Redemption take root deep in our hearts.

During this privileged time of Advent that the Church gives us to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child, what better way can we prepare than to purify our hearts--to let the effects of his sacrifice to work more deeply in us so He can see the fruit of Redemption in our souls. How, practically, can we do this? What does this preparation of our hearts LOOK like?The church teaches that grace can increase in three ways (CCC 2010, 2025-7):

- Through good works (ex opere operantis). The good disposition with which one receives a sacrament or do a good work.
- Through the reception of the sacraments (ex opere operanto). The sacrament brings about the grace that it signifies, always and when it does not find obstacles in the recipient.
- Through prayer. The efficacy of prayer depends on three things: humility, trust, and perseverance in what is asked.

These are three excellent ways to begin this journey through Advent with our Immaculate Mother. We can also begin by doing an examination of conscience on our purity...which extends much beyond what we typically think of purity...so that we can concretely discover which areas we struggle in and therefore which areas Our Lord wants to pour more grace into.

Our Mother Foundress has outlined a few key areas to examine:

Purity of intention: without duplicity in our reason, in our motivation and purpose for our actions...not to use distorted means for a supposed personal gain.

- Not to manipulate, calculate or have an agenda in our actions, words, conversations,

questions, etc.

- This purity is forged with the decision to do everything with honesty, with integrity and without deception.

Purity of Heart: To desire with the whole heart to live your vocation with the totality of your affections, desires and feelings...without divisions, nor seeking any other treasures or satisfaction outside what pertains to your state in life

- Everything done for love and for the triumph of love. Not to seek personal interests, but rather the common good. Not to keep anything stained or impure in the interior of the heart.
- This purity is forged in suffering, in meekness before difficulties, in the negation of the will even in the smallest things

Purity of mind: our thoughts in full coherence with the radical call of the Gospel and with the discipline required for our thoughts to be transformed into God's.

- Renounce our way of thinking and seeing things that are not in accord with the Gospel. Our mentality is disordered and stained by our sins, whims and superficialities
- This purity is forged in the assiduous reflection of the Word of God, in the serious attention to all the teachings of the Church

Purity of affections and feelings: Love to the extreme, but love freely and in *detached* [EXPLAIN] way

- This purity is forged with our renouncements and detachments, with a love that is not self-seeking

Purity of Action: Everything done according to your vocation, way of life, the demands of love and holiness

- In includes excellence in our duties and the perfection of our responsibilities
- This purity is forged with mortification

Purity of word: everything spoken in truth, in just measure, governed by the demands of charity, prudence and moderation.

- Every word to edify and never to destroy
- This purity is forged in silence

Corporal purity: The reservation of the body and all of its faculties in a way proper to your vocation.

- This purity is forged with penance and with the sober and prudent exercise of the natural appetites

As you can see, there is enough here to work on for a lifetime--at least for a whole Advent! Yet by recognizing the areas we fall in, we open our hearts to receive the grace of Redemption. The Lord cannot save us if we do not recognize that we need saving! Our Lady is evidence of the power of Redemption--that this purity is possible! The grace to attain it is being freely extended to us--but are we willing to cooperate with it so they can be fully efficacious in our souls? We must properly dispose our souls to receive and respond to these graces. In fact, this is precisely the path we are to walk--allowing the grace of Redemption to purify us, to teach us and form us so that our disordered passions and thoughts become ordered by love, that our choices are measured by God's will. By submitting and practicing the means that the Church gives us to grow in grace (in good works--growing in virtue, prayer, and sacraments), we can dispose our souls to receive more fully the transforming grace of God.

As we seek to allow the Redemptive grace of Christ to enter more deeply into our hearts and purify us from within, we have to remember that we have an incomparable model and helper in Our Lady. The grace of the

Immaculate Conception, this purity, is part of her very essence, of who she is...and we are her children. She wants to teach us, to show us.... Even by just drawing close to her, by coming into her Immaculate presence, we receive graces of purification. Look at all the miracles reported at Lourdes--conversions, physical healings, etc. One of the characteristics of major Marian shrines is the abundance of confessions--a sacramental purification. By being in the presence of one so pure, we become more aware of our own impurity and desire to cleanse it.

The grace of purity emanates from her and has the capacity to touch and transform all those who draw near to her. As such, the Immaculate Conception has become the school of holiness for many saints as they have placed themselves under her authority and the model of her purity and openness to the working of grace.

Perhaps one of the best known saints who placed himself under the tutelage of this great teacher is St. Maximilian Kolbe. He lived his life consecrated to the "immaculata" as he affectionately called Our Lady, giving and doing everything for her glory and triumph in hearts--for he knew that where she conquered, Her Son would soon enter. He spent his life reflecting on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, and allowing her to form him. Having come to an intimate knowledge of Her, he said, "True knowledge of the Immaculate One can only be acquired in prayer. The purer a soul is, the greater efforts it makes to avoid sin; and if it does happen to sin, it tries its best to rise from sin and to make up for its fault by love. The more humble it is, and the more spirit of penance it shows, the more and better it will get to know the Immaculate. (Conference 26.VII.39)" His words clearly indicate that through our own encounter with her purity, we begin to be purified and thus begin to live in the dignity we are called to--as children of God and of the Immaculate.

Padre Pio, too, was a saint who truly acknowledged the importance of the purity of the Immaculate Conception in his own life, as well as in our own. He says, "She will be the sure guide who will direct our steps toward the Divine Sun which is Jesus Christ. He makes her radiant with divine splendor and points to her as our model of purity and sanctity." (Padre Pio)and prayed "Even though I be clothed in misery, I revere the mystery of your Immaculate Conception, and I ardently wish that through it you may purify my heart so that I may love your God and my God." (Padre Pio), seeking her intercession so that he might be purified to love God as purely and authentically as she does.

We can see in these saints of our day how a relationship with the Pure One, with Mary Immaculate, can impact our own lives if we allow her purity to touch us, to purify us. The Immaculate Conception is not only a formalized dogma of the Church, but it has proclaimed so that it may be recognized as a powerful tool to aid us in our own path and walk of holiness. I encourage you during this time of Advent...and particularly in this novena to the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (which providentially begins today), to seek out the Immaculate Conception and allow her purity to touch your heart, to transform you, to prepare you to receive her Son this Christmas. For it was to receive Her Son that she herself was granted the grace of the Immaculate Conception.

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