

## Mary in the Year of Faith - Part 3 of 8 - The Immaculate Conception

### The Problem

This is a feast that made its first appearance towards the end of the seventh century, again influenced by popular apocryphal accounts of Mary's own miraculous birth. A vision seen by the abbot of a monastery in Kent during a life-threatening storm, led to the choice of December 8<sup>th</sup> and promotion of devotion to the conception of the Virgin. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century theological opinion was quite divided; even that devoted champion of Mary, St Bernard, opposed her liturgical commemoration on the ground that only holy events can be so celebrated. And, he said, since Mary was conceived with original sin like everyone else, one cannot say her conception was holy. As mentioned before, the influence of Augustine's belief that original sin is transmitted by sexual desire plays its unfortunate part.

The Middle Ages never reached a consensus on the question of Mary's conception or the legitimacy of a liturgical feast in its honour. At issue was the question of how the Virgin could have been conceived without sin when the redemption had not yet taken place? St Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas both supported Bernard. It was the Franciscan, John Duns Scotus that came up with the accepted way out, that if the Virgin was sanctified in the womb, this must have been through an anticipated application of the merits of her Son. This could effectively have applied from the first moment of her conception, preventing her from contracting original sin.

### Defined

It was Pius IX, acting outside of a council, but with extensive consultation with bishops and theologians, who on 9 December 1854 promulgated the definition. His action marked a turning point that made possible the formal definition of the two final dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption. It was the 19<sup>th</sup> century that created the ecclesiastical climate that became dominant in the church we live in. Both these latter dogmas were defined within the context of papal infallibility defined at Vatican I; both reflect personal papal devotion within a wider context of a believing Catholic Christianity.

### Problematic

The proclamation of the dogma was through a bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, prepared by a consultation of bishops but marked by the pope's desire to define the doctrine. Four considerations are made. First, "the doctrine of Mary's all-holiness is an ancient one" (but the Immaculate Conception was not part of the thinking of the Church Fathers for whom the belief that Mary was all-holy did not extend to exemption from original sin). Second, the testimony of history is appealed to, "the Catholic Church...has ever held as divinely revealed and contained in the deposit of heavenly revelation this doctrine concerning the original innocence of the august Virgin..." Again a problem is evident in 'ever held'.

Third "this doctrine always existed in the Church as a doctrine that has been received from our ancestors, and that has been stamped with the character of revealed doctrine". While the appeal might be made that "because Mary was Mother of God the Immaculate Conception flows from this", the development of doctrine is a question on which there is no unanimity. Fourth, there is an argument from hope for the church's welfare: 'All our hope do we repose in the most blessed Virgin – in the all fair and immaculate one who...has

brought salvation to the world...in her who, with her only-begotten Son, is the most powerful Mediatrix and Conciliatrix in the whole world..."

The hope is that Mary will use her power to ensure that "Our Holy Mother the Catholic Church may flourish daily more and more throughout all the nations and countries." While this is a comforting and pious hope and expresses trust in Mary's aid, the theological virtue of hope has God alone as its basis, as does faith and love.

### **Relevance**

*We declare and pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the BVM, in the first instant of her conception, has been, by a special grace and privilege of almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, preserved and exempted from every stain of original sin, is revealed by God, and consequently is to be believed firmly and inviolably by all the faithful. (Ineffabilis Deus).*

In proclaiming the Immaculate Conception as a 'revealed truth' on 8 December 1854, Pius IX left the 'how' revealed open. It was left to theologians to show the harmony with Scripture on Mary. It is impossible to link this proclamation to a particular text; it is Mary's exceptional holiness that the dogma shows as the case from her first moment of conception. She always enjoyed God's favour and was the most blessed of women.

### **What it Means**

The term is not about the virginal conception of Jesus, still a popular misunderstanding among many Catholics. Nor is it teaching the manner of Mary's own physical conception. What the teaching upholds is that Mary, from the first moment of her conception, was preserved from original sin. Her holiness, which is clear from the Gospel portraits of her, is the basis for such a dogma, a holiness unimpaired by original sin.

As a term 'immaculate conception' is quite alien to the thought patterns and world view of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism for whom any conception and birth was a cause for rejoicing; it was a sign of God's favour. Unlike the motherhood and virginity of Mary, there is no scriptural basis for the Immaculate Conception. It reflects a very strong Christian belief and devotion, held to against opposing theologians and bishops.

Interest in the doctrine waned until early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Catherine Laboure claimed to have had a vision of the Immaculate Conception, standing on a globe, with rays of light shining from her hands spread outward to the earth. The vision was surrounded by an oval frame on which appeared the words: *O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee*. This became the miraculous medal and stimulated renewed interest in the doctrine as well as demands for its definition.

Gregory XVI (d.1846) would not accede to these demands, but Pius IX immediately began proceedings leading to the definition, consulting 603 bishops, of whom 56, including the bishop of Paris, opposed the definition. On Dec 8<sup>th</sup> 1854, the definition was given. This was followed by other Marian apparitions; in 1858 there was a series of appearances near Lourdes, in France, to the 14 year old peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, who was given the name *I am the Immaculate Conception*. Another apparition occurred at Fatima in Portugal in

1917; Pius XII was particularly devoted to Our Lady of Fatima, and consecrated the whole world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1942, and went on to define her bodily assumption in 1950, perhaps the logical conclusion to a life begun free from original sin and lived free from its effects.

### **Where are we at?**

My concern in these articles is to do justice to the fullness of the tradition regarding Mary. What is this doctrine trying to say to people of our day? The bull of definition itself stands in serious need of rewriting. It came in an era of rationalism and secularism, as well as expressing the concerns of the pontificate of Pius IX. My intuition would be that its unintended effect was to make Mary so unique as to be unapproachable rather than one of us and one with us, Mother of the Church and Mother within the Church. Add to that a dogma that removes her from us in the Assumption, our next topic, and we are faced with the crisis that Vatican II attempted to address: bring Mary back to the Church in a manner that speaks to people today.

### **Reference**

Tavard, G. H. (1996). *The Thousand Faces of Mary*. Michael Glazier: Collegeville, MN.

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