

A Mission Church

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD

The Catholic Church's teaching of Mary's Immaculate Conception, that is, Mary free from sin from the moment of her conception, has always been a bone of contention causing friction between Catholics and non-Catholics, despite our commonality in our profession as Christians, believers in Jesus Christ.

The same is true concerning Mary as the Mother of God, and of the humanity of Jesus. Both of these also cause division for certain Christian faith expressions. The humanity of Jesus will be discussed at a later time.

The Catholic Church's dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854:

The most Blessed virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin."

Pius, IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854: DS 2803

How do we come to this belief? No, we will not find the term "Immaculate Conception" anywhere in the bible. Nor will we find any accounts of Mary's life prior to the annunciation by the angel Gabriel that she would become the mother of God. It is then that the plan of God, enacted from the beginning of time, is made known.

"'Hail favored one (Mary)! the Lord us with you.' But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.'...But Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be since I have no relations with a man?' And the angel said to her in reply, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.'" (See Luke 1:28-38)

We realize the necessity of one person being made perfect for the sake of Jesus Christ (and the fulfillment of his purpose of our salvation), for the sake of bringing perfect life to mankind?

What we see in the New Testament is fulfillment of what was in the Old Testament. What was foreshadowed in the Old Testament is more perfect in the New testament, beginning with what was obvious, Jesus Christ, the Second Adam who will bring new life to mankind.



In our understanding of God's plan, the foreshadowing of Mary can be found in Eve, the mother of all mankind. Adam and Eve were to be fertile and multiply, having dominion over all of creation.

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he create them."
(Gen. 2:26-27)

It was of their own choosing that the life given them would not satisfy them, thereby entering into sin. Where, on the other had, Mary is found to rejoice in what God has provided.

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed." (see Luke 1:46-48)

Not Eve, nor the many holy women of Old Testament prefigurements of Mary — Hannah, the mother of Samuel, Deborah, Ruth, Rebekah, Judith, Susanna, Esther, and many other women — are found possessing such perfection. Yet, Mary's consent — the use of her free will — determines salvation for mankind *"Be it done unto me as you will."*

Reflection Point: What do we need in order to give our own "Yes" to God in our lives? Is it grace? If so, how much is needed to accept God's plan? What will it take for us to truly seek perfected oneness with God? Will we need to become "...full of grace" as well?

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Once Mary gives the angel Gabriel her ascent to God's plan, salvation is set into action. Eve had been created in a perfect, still sinless world. Mary was created in the sinless nature of God for the purpose of God's will being fulfilled. The prefigurements of the Old Testament, of "God with us" will be found in the life brought to our human reality through Mary — all in fulfillment of the very one who would come to give his divine life to us.

- Wasn't Noah's ark given its dimensions by God (see Gen. 6:14). And wasn't it the hope of all who were faithful to God? It is also God's plan that Mary is to hold the hope for the faithful remnant.
- Wasn't the Ark of the Covenant built specific to God's directives, made known to Moses on the mountain? Wasn't this to carry the Law? This was to be God's dwelling with his people. Mary is the one who is to carry to the world "God with us" — to bring love (the fulfillment of the law) to our human reality, as prescribed by the one whose very plan we learn of in the Infancy Narratives, beginning with the Annunciation.
- And wasn't Solomon's Temple perfectly made according to God's design, for the sake of an earthly kingdom desired by the people? Is it not a foreshadowing of Mary's purpose to bring to the world the one who would announce a heavenly kingdom — in the temple that is Jesus Christ?

All is accomplished so that everything from the Old Testament may be fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ. Our redemption comes in and through Jesus who died and rose for our salvation. For Mary, she is redeemed, as it were, by the will of Jesus who chose to become man for our sake. In her Immaculate Conception, she was enriched with the splendor of an entirely unique holiness solely for the sake of her becoming *Theotokos*, Greek meaning the Mother of God. God's plan for our coming to perfection must be brought to the world by the one perfected by grace — by the one designed by God.

Reflection Point: Even with the same power of the Holy Spirit given us, how difficult is it to see the holiness shared with us through Jesus Christ? Does it stop once we've confessed sins? Or do we accept the grace that moves us to see the fullness of God's plan and God's kingdom already taking shape within us?

If you wish to study archetypes between the Old and New Testaments, see the following: Matt 2:10-11; Jn 2:1; 1 Cor. 15:45-48; Gen. 3:15; Ex. 40:33-35; 2 Sam. 6:2-16; and Mary as the archetype for what we are called to be, see 1 Cor. 6:19.

MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD *Theotokos*

Let us address our belief, and the teaching of the Catholic Church, that Mary is the Mother of God. This is not a universal belief among all Christians, those who profess Jesus Christ as God. We know the infancy narratives, particularly those from the Gospel of Luke.

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting the infant leapt in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, 'Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'" (See Luke 1:39-45)

"They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother."

(Matthew 2:10-11)



We'll hear most of this narrative during the Church's celebration of Christmas this year. But for now, we must admit that Mary gave birth to a human being, a person. Some will contest that the two natures of Jesus remained separated from one another, and in some cases, present a teaching that Jesus did not really take on the reality of a human person, but rather the appearance of human nature. This would indeed contradict what St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatian Church:

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law..." Galatians 4:4

The same is true when Paul quotes the early Christian hymn in his letter to the Philippian Church, which speaks of Jesus' preexistence that he was willing to give up to serve mankind as a man. Many see this also as the contradiction of what occurred in the Genesis story where Adam is seen grasping to become God, an action Jesus, the "New Adam" did not do. So from the earliest times, the Church believed Jesus was fully human and divine, thereby, capable of calling Mary, "the Mother of God." Mary did not give birth to human nature, but to a human person who happened to be God.

Reflection Point: How does my calling Mary, the Mother of God, move me in recognizing that she is also my mother and the mother of the Church?