

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

→ DECEMBER 8

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. ~ Genesis 3:15

IN HIS PLAN FOR THE SALVATION of humanity, God desired the cooperation of a creature. From all eternity, he had chosen Mary of Nazareth to be the mother of his Son. In order to be a pure and unstained vessel, from the first moment of her conception, Mary was preserved from all sin. This is known as the Immaculate Conception. Immaculate simply means without sin.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Lk 1:26-28).

The angel did not use Mary's name, but instead gave her a title indicating that she was without any stain of sin (see "The Five Doctrines on Mary" for the reason why "full of grace" has been the traditional Catholic translation over such modern renditions as "O favored one"). It would not be possible for her to have the fullness of grace if even the slightest amount of sin were present.

Mary's preservation from sin was necessary because, as the Mother of God, she would give Jesus, the Son of God, a human nature identical to her own. Jesus could not be united to a fallen nature, so God preserved his mother from sin. He gave her an immaculate human nature, which she would give to the eternal Son when he became incarnate. Mary's Immaculate Conception does not mean that she had no need of redemption. On the contrary, she could be preserved from sin from the first moment of her conception only by the redemption of Christ on the cross. God applied the graces won by Christ to redeem Mary at the moment of her concep-



The Blessed Virgin Mary and her mother, Anne, late 19th century lithograph

tion. Chronologically, Mary's conception happened before salvation had come into the world. But God could redeem Mary in this way because he is outside of time.

Every human being needs to be redeemed by Jesus Christ. We begin life in a state of original sin and then receive redemption by Baptism and the act of faith. Mary, on the other hand, was created and redeemed in the same moment. Since she was free from the inclination to sin (which is the result of original sin), Mary remained free from sin throughout her life. Her Immaculate Conception allowed her to be completely open to God's grace, and so, she

could freely assent to the will of God and become the Mother of God. When God manifested his will to her through the words of the angel Gabriel, she responded, "*I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word*" (Lk 1:38). Through her obedience, she cooperated with God in his plan for our salvation in Christ Jesus.

In 1854, Pope Pius IX declared this truth about Mary an official dogma of the Church. He proclaimed that "[t]he 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"¹ (CCC 491).

December 8 has been set aside by the Church as the day to celebrate Mary's Immaculate Conception. On this day we celebrate the preparation God made to accomplish our salvation. He allowed her to share beforehand in the merits won by Jesus on the cross so that Christ could be like us in all things but sin (see Heb 4:15).

(CCC 490-493)

¹ Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854 from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 2803 (1965)