

# Immaculate Conception and Assumption

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The Marian doctrines are, for Fundamentalists, among the most bothersome of the Catholic Church's teachings. In this tract we'll examine briefly two Marian doctrines that Fundamentalist writers frequently object to—the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

## The Immaculate Conception

It's important to understand what the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is and what it is not. Some people think the term refers to Christ's conception in Mary's womb without the intervention of a human father; but that is the Virgin Birth. Others think the Immaculate Conception means Mary was conceived "by the power of the Holy Spirit," in the way Jesus was, but that, too, is incorrect. The Immaculate Conception means that Mary, whose conception was brought about the normal way, was conceived without original sin or its stain—that's what "immaculate" means: without stain. The essence of original sin consists in the deprivation of sanctifying grace, and its stain is a corrupt nature. Mary was preserved from these defects by God's grace; from the first instant of her existence she was in the state of sanctifying grace and was free from the corrupt nature original sin brings.

When discussing the Immaculate Conception, an implicit reference may be found in the angel's greeting to Mary. The angel Gabriel said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). The phrase "full of grace" is a translation of the Greek word *kecharitomene*. It therefore expresses a characteristic quality of Mary.

The traditional translation, "full of grace," is better than the one found in many recent versions of the New Testament, which give something along the lines of "highly favored daughter." Mary was indeed a highly favored daughter of God, but the Greek implies more than that (and it never mentions the word for "daughter"). The grace given to Mary is at once permanent and of a unique kind. *Kecharitomene* is a perfect passive participle of *charitoo*, meaning "to fill or endow with grace." Since this term is in the perfect tense, it indicates that

Mary was graced in the past but with continuing effects in the present. So, the grace Mary enjoyed was not a result of the angel's visit. In fact, Catholics hold, it extended over the whole of her life, from conception onward. She was in a state of sanctifying grace from the first moment of her existence.

### Fundamentalists' Objections

Fundamentalists' chief reason for objecting to the Immaculate Conception and Mary's consequent sinlessness is that we are told that "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23). Besides, they say, Mary said her "spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47), and only a sinner needs a Savior.

Let's take the second citation first. Mary, too, required a Savior. Like all other descendants of Adam, she was subject to the necessity of contracting original sin. But by a special intervention of God, undertaken at the instant she was conceived, she was preserved from the stain of original sin and its consequences. She was therefore redeemed by the grace of Christ, but in a special way—by anticipation.

Consider an analogy: Suppose a man falls into a deep pit, and someone reaches down to pull him out. The man has been "saved" from the pit. Now imagine a woman walking along, and she too is about to topple into the pit, but at the very moment that she is to fall in, someone holds her back and prevents her. She too has been saved from the pit, but in an even better way: She was not simply taken out of the pit, she was prevented from getting stained by the mud in the first place. This is the illustration Christians have used for a thousand years to explain how Mary was saved by Christ. By receiving Christ's grace at her conception, she had his grace applied to her before she was able to become mired in original sin and its stain.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that she was "redeemed in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son" (CCC 492). She has more reason to call God her Savior than we do, because he saved her in an even more glorious manner!

But what about Romans 3:23, "all have sinned"? Have all people committed actual sins? Consider a child below the age of reason. By definition he can't sin, since sinning requires the ability to reason and the ability to intend to sin. This is indicated by Paul later in the letter to the Romans when he speaks of

the time when Jacob and Esau were unborn babies as a time when they "had done nothing either good or bad" (Rom. 9:11).

We also know of another very prominent exception to the rule: Jesus (Heb. 4:15). So if Paul's statement in Romans 3 includes an exception for the New Adam (Jesus), one may argue that an exception for the New Eve (Mary) can also be made.

Paul's comment seems to have one of two meanings. It might be that it refers not to absolutely everyone, but just to the mass of mankind (which means young children and other special cases, like Jesus and Mary, would be excluded without having to be singled out). If not that, then it would mean that everyone, without exception, is subject to original sin, which is true for a young child, for the unborn, even for Mary—but she, though due to be subject to it, was preserved by God from it and its stain.

The objection is also raised that if Mary were without sin, she would be equal to God. In the beginning, God created Adam, Eve, and the angels without sin, but none were equal to God. Most of the angels never sinned, and all souls in heaven are without sin. This does not detract from the glory of God, but manifests it by the work he has done in sanctifying his creation. Sinning does not make one human. On the contrary, it is when man is without sin that he is most fully what God intends him to be.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was officially defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854. When Fundamentalists claim that the doctrine was "invented" at this time, they misunderstand both the history of dogmas and what prompts the Church to issue, from time to time, definitive pronouncements regarding faith or morals. They are under the impression that no doctrine is believed until the pope or an ecumenical council issues a formal statement about it.

Actually, doctrines are defined formally only when there is a controversy that needs to be cleared up or when the magisterium (the Church in its office as teacher; cf. Matt. 28:18–20; 1 Tim. 3:15, 4:11) thinks the faithful can be helped by particular emphasis being drawn to some already-existing belief. The definition of the Immaculate Conception was prompted by the latter motive; it did not come about because there were widespread doubts about the doctrine. In fact, the Vatican was deluged with requests from people desiring the doctrine to be officially proclaimed. Pope Pius IX, who was highly devoted to the Blessed Virgin, hoped the definition would inspire others in their devotion to her.

## The Assumption

The doctrine of the Assumption says that at the end of her life on earth Mary was assumed, body and soul, into heaven, just as Enoch, Elijah, and perhaps others had been before her. It's also necessary to keep in mind what the Assumption is not. Some people think Catholics believe Mary "ascended" into heaven. That's not correct. Christ, by his own power, ascended into heaven. Mary was assumed or taken up into heaven by God. She didn't do it under her own power.

The Church has never formally defined whether she died or not, and the integrity of the doctrine of the Assumption would not be impaired if she did not in fact die, but the almost universal consensus is that she did die. Pope Pius XII, in *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), defined that Mary, "after the completion of her earthly life" (note the silence regarding her death), "was assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven."

The possibility of a bodily assumption before the Second Coming is suggested by Matthew 27:52–53: "[T]he tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many." Did all these Old Testament saints die and have to be buried all over again? There is no record of that, but it is recorded by early Church writers that they were assumed into heaven, or at least into that temporary state of rest and happiness often called "paradise," where the righteous people from the Old Testament era waited until Christ's resurrection (cf. Luke 16:22, 23:43; Heb. 11:1–40; 1 Pet. 4:6), after which they were brought into the eternal bliss of heaven.

## No Remains

There is also what might be called the negative historical proof for Mary's Assumption. It is easy to document that, from the first, Christians gave homage to saints, including many about whom we now know little or nothing. Cities vied for the title of the last resting place of the most famous saints. Rome, for example, houses the tombs of Peter and Paul, Peter's tomb being

under the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. In the early Christian centuries relics of saints were zealously guarded and highly prized. The bones of those martyred in the Coliseum, for instance, were quickly gathered up and preserved—there are many accounts of this in the biographies of those who gave their lives for the faith.

It is agreed upon that Mary ended her life in Jerusalem, or perhaps in Ephesus. However, neither those cities nor any other claimed her remains, though there are claims about possessing her (temporary) tomb. And why did no city claim the bones of Mary? Apparently because there weren't any bones to claim, and people knew it. Here was Mary, certainly the most privileged of all the saints, certainly the most saintly, but we have no record of her bodily remains being venerated anywhere.

#### **Complement to the Immaculate Conception**

Over the centuries, the Fathers and the Doctors of the Church spoke often about the fittingness of the privilege of Mary's Assumption. The speculative grounds considered include Mary's freedom from sin, her Motherhood of God, her perpetual virginity, and—the key—her union with the salvific work of Christ.

The dogma is especially fitting when one examines the honor that was given to the ark of the covenant. It contained the manna (bread from heaven), stone tablets of the ten commandments (the word of God), and the staff of Aaron (a symbol of Israel's high priesthood). Because of its contents, it was made of incorruptible wood, and Psalm 132:8 said, "Arise, O Lord, and go to thy resting place, thou and the ark of thy might." If this vessel was given such honor, how much more should Mary be kept from corruption, since she is the new ark—who carried the real bread from heaven, the Word of God, and the high priest of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ.

Some argue that the new ark is not Mary, but the body of Jesus. Even if this were the case, it is worth noting that 1 Chronicles 15:14 records that the persons who bore the ark were to be sanctified. There would be no sense in sanctifying men who carried a box, and not sanctifying the womb who carried God himself! After all, wisdom will not dwell "in a body under debt of sin" (Wis. 1:4 NAB).

But there is more than just fittingness. After all, if Mary is immaculately conceived, then it would follow that she would not suffer the corruption in the grave, which is a consequence of sin [Gen. 3:17, 19].

### Mary's Cooperation

Mary freely and actively cooperated in a unique way with God's plan of salvation (Luke 1:38; Gal. 4:4). Like any mother, she was never separated from the suffering of her Son (Luke 2:35), and Scripture promises that those who share in the sufferings of Christ will share in his glory (Rom. 8:17). Since she suffered a unique interior martyrdom, it is appropriate that Jesus would honor her with a unique glory.

All Christians believe that one day we will all be raised in a glorious form and then caught up and rendered immaculate to be with Jesus forever (1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 21:27). As the first person to say "yes" to the good news of Jesus (Luke 1:38), Mary is in a sense the prototypical Christian, and received early the blessings we will all one day be given.

### The Bible Only?

Since the Immaculate Conception and Assumption are not explicit in Scripture, Fundamentalists conclude that the doctrines are false. Here, of course, we get into an entirely separate matter, the question of *sola scriptura*, or the Protestant "Bible only" theory. There is no room in this tract to consider that idea. Let it just be said that if the position of the Catholic Church is true, then the notion of *sola scriptura* is false. There is then no problem with the Church officially defining a doctrine which is not explicitly in Scripture, so long as it is not in contradiction to Scripture.

The Catholic Church was commissioned by Christ to teach all nations and to teach them infallibly—guided, as he promised, by the Holy Spirit until the end of the world (John 14:26, 16:13). The mere fact that the Church teaches that something is definitely true is a guarantee that it is true (cf. Matt. 28:18-20, Luke 10:16, 1 Tim. 3:15).

*NIHIL OBSTAT*: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.  
*Bernadeane Carr, STL, Censor Librorum, August 10, 2004*

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