

## Why do Catholics believe the Blessed Mother was immaculately conceived?

By Graham Osborne

This teaching is close to the hearts of many Catholics, as it reflects so beautifully on Jesus' mother. And it is not just some fanciful Catholic wish, but a teaching firmly rooted in Scripture. But at the same time, it is misunderstood by many, so it bears clarification.

This teaching is misunderstood by many, so it bears clarification. The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception [and recall that a dogma is a doctrine – a teaching of Jesus and the Apostles – that the Church officially, infallibly defines] does not refer to the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb, nor does it mean that Mary was "conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit". It means that "from the first moment of her conception... she was preserved free from every stain of original sin" [Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*].

This in turn also implies that from that moment on, she was both filled with sanctifying grace and the indwelling of the Trinity, and was exempt from the concupiscence – a tendency towards sin that came with our fallen human nature – that has plagued us ever since Adam and Eve. What a profound gift of grace!

But this gift should not surprise us. It is not some new revelation. It is the way our first parents, Adam and Eve, were created – in perfect harmony with God. And of course Jesus was conceived without the stain of original sin as well. And Baptism works a similar change in us – washing away original sin and restoring sanctifying grace and the indwelling of the Trinity [though concupiscence, that tendency of our fallen human nature towards sin, still remains].

But where do we see this doctrine in Sacred Scripture? Our first consideration centers on the Ten Commandments, and it is perhaps the most powerful: Honor your Father and Mother. Jesus keeps the Commandments perfectly, honoring his mother perfectly. If you could create your own Mother, how would you do it? It is fitting that Jesus honors her perfectly by creating her perfectly! It is not *essential* – God could have created Mary however he wanted. But it is *fitting* that he honors her this way, and also prepares a worthy vessel to hold the Word Made Flesh.

Building on this, the Early Church Fathers [St. Ephrem, St Hippolytus, St Athanasius, St Ambrose, St Jerome – just to name a few!] saw Mary as the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant. The Word of God engraved in the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments is now replaced by the Word of God made Flesh – and correspondingly, there is a new Ark of flesh as well!

When we examine the honor that was given to the Old Testament Ark – for example, Numbers 4:15 attests that all who carried the Ark must be "sanctified", or Wisdom 1:4 that testifies that "wisdom does not... dwell in a body under debt of sin", or the death of Uzza for simply touching the Ark in 2 Samuel 6:7 – it shouldn't surprise us that this new Ark, filled so gloriously, should be all the more gloriously prepared. It is fitting that Mary's body, the new Ark, not be tainted by the stain of original sin, just as it is fitting that such purity be reserved for the person from whom the Son of God would take his human nature.

Our next Scriptural testimony comes from the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis 3:15. Arguably one of the most important passages in all the Old Testament, it is the first announcement of God's great plan to save a now fallen humanity [Scripture scholars call it the Protoevangelium, or first proclamation of the Gospel]. It is of critical importance, because with the fall of Adam and Eve, their intimate friendship with God is mortally damaged, and the sanctifying grace that they enjoyed, has now been lost for *all* humanity to come. God had infused this special grace into our souls to allow us to enter into his presence – to enter Heaven – and intended it to be handed on as part of our human nature, from parent to child. But now this gift had been discarded, and consequently, lost for all.

Things looked very dark for humanity, but God did not leave us in this darkness for long. He immediately announced his response: "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel" [Gen 3:15].

There will be enmity [complete opposition] between Satan and "the woman", and a battle between his seed and hers. And as you read on, in the context of all of Scripture, the seed can only be Jesus, and the woman can only be Mary.

Some suggest that the woman is Eve, but this cannot be the meaning, because rather than full opposition to Satan, she would in fact yield to him. And her seed, for the most part, would turn away from God, to the point of being destroyed in the Flood, and later, to fall into idolatry over and over again.

No, the final great battle against the devil will be fought by Mary and Jesus. Even the Hebrew word used for "she" in, "*she* shall crush your head" [as translated by St Jerome in the Latin Vulgate, the official translation of the Church] could be rendered as either, "he" [Jesus] or, "she" [Mary]. Both will be involved!

And as you look through the pages of Scripture, you will see numerous instances of just that: women crushing the heads of the enemies of God's people, David cutting off Goliath's head, and finally, Jesus crushing Satan's head on the cross at Golgotha, the Place of the *Skull*. This is also why you so often see statues of Mary with her foot on the head of a snake – crushing the head of Satan!

But this text reveals some foundational things about Mary. She is in total opposition to Satan – she will not submit to him in any way, particularly sin. And she is *NOT* of the devil's seed! This is profound! It means that she *must* have been born into God's friendship and family. She could not have been born with the stain of original sin, but instead, must have been born with sanctifying grace in her soul.

Additionally, if she was to be a fitting vessel, to both carry and form the human nature of the Word Made Flesh – a new Ark – then to avoid her human nature being tainted in *any way* by original sin, as all others are, this infusion of sanctifying grace would had to have happened at the moment of her conception, exactly as the Catholic Church teaches!

This is critical! In fact, *her* seed [which is Jesus, but with a reference to the virgin birth here as well, because normally, the “seed” comes from the man] will crush Satan’s head. All people born before the victory of Jesus on the cross will be, as St Paul calls them, “by nature, children of wrath” [Ephesians 2:1-3]. They will be of “the seed” of the devil because they have been born outside of God’s family with fallen human natures. And they will remain that way until Baptism restores this once lost Sanctifying Grace [though God is not bound by the Sacraments, and can work outside them if he chooses].

In 1 John 3:7-11, St John further emphasizes this difference between the seed of the devil and of God: “Whoever sins belongs to the devil... No one who is begotten by God commits sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot sin because he is begotten by God. In this way, the children of God and the children of the devil are made plain; no one who fails to act in righteousness belongs to God... Whoever does not love remains in death.” It is clear that if Jesus is from Mary’s seed, Mary must be begotten by God – she is his child, his seed. We also see a Scriptural reference to the sinlessness of Mary here as well, but that will be the topic of my next column!

Our next testimony comes from the Angel Gabriel where he greets Mary with a revealing title: “Hail, full of grace” [Luke 1:28]. The greeting, “hail” was usually reserved for someone of significance, often royalty, and then typically would be followed by a title that would tell us something more about the person’s standing – like Hail Ceasar, or Hail King of the Jews. In this case, the angel uses “perfected in” or “full of grace” –“Kecharitomene”, in the original inspired Greek of St Luke’s Gospel.

Greek, like English, can use tenses of words to convey more information through that word. Kecharitomene is in the perfect tense, revealing that this filling of grace has been completed in the past, resulting in a present and ongoing, perpetual state of grace. So this grace was not a result of the angel’s visit, but a state that Mary was already in. Elizabeth would then twice exclaim, “most blessed are you” [Luke 1:42, 45], and Mary herself, in truthful humility, would proclaim that “All generations shall call me blessed” [Luke 1:48].

Additional fascinating insight comes to us from the writings of the early Church as well. Both the Ascension of Isaiah (70 AD), and the Odes of Solomon (80 AD) testify that Mary gave birth without pain. While these writings lack the inspiration of Sacred Scripture, they certainly give us historical insight into the early Church’s beliefs about Mary.

Along with a loss of sanctifying grace, pain at childbirth was one of the consequences of Eve’s disobedience to God. That Mary did not experience pain at childbirth implies that she had not suffered this consequence precisely because she had been preserved from original sin. These writings further testify that Christians both understood and believed very early on that Mary had been preserved in this stunning way. Such testimony is further evidence, though extra-Biblical, of the Immaculate Conception.

But some Protestants object to this dogma, claiming it was invented in 1854 when Pope Pius IX proclaimed it. But these claims misunderstand such pronouncements by the Church. The date a doctrine is dogmatically defined has absolutely nothing to do with when that teaching was first believed. Such definitions usually come about when a particular teaching is

challenged, or when the Church discerns a need to emphasize some particular teaching for the good of the faithful.

For example, in the 300's and 400's, the Church made several dogmatic pronouncements regarding Jesus, the Trinity and the personhood of the Holy Spirit. These pronouncements are all foundational beliefs still held by most Christians today. They were certainly not new teachings, but responses by the Church to various serious heresies of the day [like Arianism and Gnosticism], intended to clarify the constant Christian teaching on these subjects that had existed right from the time of Jesus and the Apostles.

Some further object that the title itself, the Immaculate Conception is nowhere to be found in Scripture, but this is a weak argument at best. Neither the words, "Trinity" or "Bible" are found in the Bible, but you would find few Christians who would deny either. The Scriptural foundations for this teaching are clear. The title was chosen simply because it describes the doctrine well.

But some significant objections still need to be answered. The Church teaches that a consequence of the Immaculate Conception was a human nature free from concupiscence. This resulted in a nature perfectly ordered towards God's will and cooperating with his grace, ultimately resulting in Mary's perpetual sinlessness. But "all have sinned", Romans 3:23 says! Not "all"... better read my next column!

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#### **Addendum: Did Mary Suffer pain in Childbirth?**

Though this teaching has never been officially/dogmatically defined, there are some interesting things to consider here:

**The Council of Trent:** *But as the Conception itself transcends the order of nature, so also the birth of our Lord . . . just as the rays of the sun penetrate without breaking or injuring in the least the solid substance of glass, so after a like but more exalted manner did Jesus Christ come forth from his mother's womb without injury to her maternal virginity.*

*From Eve we are born children of wrath; from Mary we have received Jesus Christ. . . . To Eve it was said: In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children. Mary was exempt from this law, for preserving her virginal integrity inviolate she brought forth Jesus . . . without experiencing, as we have already said, any sense of pain.*

**Tim Staples, Catholic Answers:** *"It seems fitting: Eve's sin is causally linked to labor pain. The New Eve was uniquely free from the sin of Eve and did not experience that pain. Indeed, I argue it would seem contrary to our sense of Jesus and Mary as the "New Adam" and the "New Eve." And, as I said above, it would not seem right to inaugurate this great and glorious New Covenant by experiencing pains that were the result of failure in the Old."*