

Pope Pius IX's Definition of the Immaculate Conception

Editor's note: This easy-to-read pronouncement from Blessed Pope Pius IX is rich in doctrinal content and provides much instruction and food for meditation regarding Our Lady's Immaculate Conception.

*From the Apostolic Constitution Ineffabilis Deus,
Pope Pius IX, December 8, 1854.*

From the Testimonies of Tradition

Indeed, illustrious documents of venerable antiquity, of both the Eastern and the Western Church, very forcibly testify that this doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin, which was daily more and more splendidly explained, stated and confirmed by the highest authority, teaching, zeal, knowledge, and wisdom of the Church, and which was disseminated among all peoples and nations of the Catholic world in a marvelous manner — 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.

For the Church of Christ, watchful guardian that she is, and defender of the dogmas deposited with her, never changes anything, never diminishes anything, never adds anything to them; but with all diligence she treats the ancient documents faithfully and wisely; if they really are of ancient origin and if the faith of the Fathers has transmitted them, she strives to investigate and explain them in such a way that the ancient dogmas of heavenly doctrine will be made evident and clear, but will retain their full, integral, and proper nature, and will be grown only within their own genus — that is, within the same dogma, in the same sense and the same meaning.

Interpreters of the Sacred Scripture

The Fathers and writers of the Church, well-versed in the heavenly Scriptures, had nothing more at heart than to vie with one another in preaching and teaching in many wonderful ways the Virgin's supreme sanctity, dignity, and immunity from all stain of sin, and Her renowned victory over the most foul enemy of the human race. This they did in the books they wrote to explain the Scriptures, to vindicate the dogmas, and to instruct the faithful.

These ecclesiastical writers, in quoting the words by which at the beginning of the world God announced His merciful remedies, prepared for the regeneration of mankind – words by which He crushed the audacity of the deceitful serpent and wondrously raised up the hope of our race, saying, "I will put enmities between you and the Woman, between your seed and Her seed,"¹ – taught that by this divine prophecy the merciful Redeemer of mankind, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, was clearly foretold: That

His Most Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary, was prophetically indicated; and, at the same time, the very enmity of both against the evil one was significantly expressed. "Hence, just as Christ, the Mediator between God and man, assumed human nature, blotted the handwriting of the decree that stood against us, and fastened it triumphantly to the cross, so the Most Holy Virgin, united with Him by a most intimate and indissoluble bond, was, with Him and through Him, eternally at enmity with the evil serpent, and most completely triumphed over him, and thus crushed his head with Her Immaculate foot."²

This sublime and singular privilege of the Blessed Virgin, together with Her most excellent innocence, purity, holiness and freedom from every stain of sin, as well as the unspeakable abundance and greatness of all heavenly graces, virtues and privileges – these the Fathers beheld;

- in that ark of Noah, which was built by divine command and escaped entirely safe and sound from the common shipwreck of the whole world;³

- in the ladder which Jacob saw reaching from the earth to Heaven, by whose rungs the angels of God ascended and descended, and on whose top the Lord Himself leaned;⁴
- in that bush which Moses saw in the holy place burning on all sides, which was not consumed or injured in any way but grew green and blossomed beautifully;⁵
- in that impregnable tower before the enemy, from which hung a thousand bucklers and all the armor of the strong;⁶
- in that garden enclosed on all sides, which cannot be violated or corrupted by any deceitful plots;⁷
- as in that resplendent city of God, which has its foundations on the holy mountains;⁸
- in that most august temple of God, which, radiant with divine splendors, is full of the glory of God;⁹
- and in very many other biblical types of this kind. In such allusions the Fathers taught that the exalted dignity of the Mother of God, Her spotless innocence and

Her sanctity unstained by any fault, had been prophesied in a wonderful manner.

In like manner did they use the words of the prophets to describe this wondrous abundance of divine gifts and the original innocence of the Virgin of whom Jesus was born. They celebrated the august Virgin as the spotless dove, as the holy Jerusalem, as the exalted throne of God, as the ark and house of holiness which Eternal Wisdom built, and as that Queen who, abounding in delights and leaning on Her Beloved, came forth from the mouth of the Most High, entirely perfect, beautiful, most dear to God and never stained with the least blemish.

The Annunciation

When the Fathers and writers of the Church meditated on the fact that the Most Blessed Virgin was, in the name and by order of God Himself, proclaimed "full of grace"¹⁰ by the Angel Gabriel when he announced Her most sublime dignity of Mother of God, they thought that this singular and solemn salutation, never heard before, showed that the Mother

of God is the seat of all divine graces and is adorned with all gifts of the Holy Spirit.

To them Mary is an almost infinite treasury, an inexhaustible abyss of these gifts, to such an extent that She was never subject to the curse and was, together with Her Son, the only partaker of perpetual benediction. Hence She was worthy to hear Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit, exclaim: "Blessed art Thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of Thy womb."¹¹

Mary Compared with Eve

Hence, it is the clear and unanimous opinion of the Fathers that the most glorious Virgin, for whom "He who is mighty has done great things," was resplendent with such an abundance of heavenly gifts, with such a fullness of grace and with such innocence, that She is an unspeakable miracle of God – indeed, the crown of all miracles and truly the Mother of God; that She approaches as near to God Himself as is possible for a created being; and that She is above all men and angels in glory.

Hence, to demonstrate the original innocence and sanctity of the Mother of God,

not only did they frequently compare Her to Eve while yet a virgin, while yet innocent, while yet incorrupt, while not yet deceived by the deadly snares of the most treacherous serpent; but they have also exalted Her above Eve with a wonderful variety of expressions.

Eve listened to the serpent with lamentable consequences; she fell from original innocence and became his slave.

The Most Blessed Virgin, on the contrary, ever increased Her original gift, and not only never lent an ear to the serpent, but by divinely given power She utterly destroyed the force and dominion of the evil one.

Biblical Figures

Accordingly, the Fathers have never ceased to call the Mother of God the lily among thorns, the land entirely intact, the Virgin undefiled, immaculate, ever blessed, and free from all contagion of sin, She from whom was formed the new Adam, the flawless, brightest, and most beautiful paradise of innocence, immortality and delights planted by God Himself and protected against all the snares of the poisonous serpent, the

On November 27, 1830, Our Lady appeared to St. Catherine Labouré as “the Immaculate Conception.” In an oval around Her Image were the words, “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee.” Our Lady asked that a medal be struck from this vision which we know today as the Miraculous Medal.



incorruptible wood that the worm of sin had never corrupted, the fountain ever clear and sealed with the power of the Holy Spirit, the most holy temple, the treasure of immortality, the one and only daughter of life – not of death – the plant not of anger but of grace, through the

singular providence of God growing ever green contrary to the common law, coming as it does from a corrupted and tainted root.

Explicit Affirmation ...

As if these splendid eulogies and tributes were not sufficient, the Fathers pro-

claimed with particular and definite statements that when one treats of sin, the Holy Virgin Mary is not even to be mentioned; for to Her more grace was given than was necessary to conquer sin completely.¹²

They also declared that the most glorious Virgin was Reparatrix of the first parents, the giver of life to posterity; that She was chosen before the ages, prepared for Himself by the Most High, foretold by God when He said to the serpent, "I will put enmities between you and the Woman,"¹³ unmistakable evidence that She has crushed the poisonous head of the serpent.

And hence they affirmed that the Blessed Virgin was, through grace, entirely free from every stain of sin, and from all corruption of body, soul and mind; that She was always united with God and joined to Him by an eternal covenant; that She was never in darkness but always in

light; and that, therefore, She was entirely a fit habitation for Christ, not because of the state of Her body, but because of Her original grace.

... Of a Super Eminent Sanctity

To these praises they have added very noble words. Speaking of the conception of the Virgin, they testified that nature yielded to grace and, unable to go on, stood trembling. The Virgin Mother of God would not be conceived by Anna before grace would bear its fruits; it was proper that She be conceived as the first-born, by whom "the first-born of every creature" would be conceived.

They testified, too, that the flesh of the Virgin, although derived from Adam, did not contract the stains of Adam, and that on this account the Most Blessed Virgin was the tabernacle created by God Himself and formed by the Holy Spirit, truly a work in royal purple, adorned and

"When I asked Her the third time what Her name was, She joined Her hands and looked up at the sky ... then slowly separating Her hands, She leaned down towards me and said in a trembling voice:

I am the Immaculate Conception."

— St. Bernadette of Lourdes

woven with gold, which that new Beseleel¹⁴ made.

They affirmed that the same Virgin is, and is deservedly, the first and especial work of God, escaping the fiery arrows, the evil one; that She is beautiful by nature and entirely free from all stain; that at Her Immaculate Conception She came into the world all radiant like the dawn.

For it was certainly not fitting that this vessel of election should be wounded by the common injuries, since She, differing so much from the others, had only nature in common with them, not sin. In fact, it was quite fitting that, as the Only-Begotten has a Father in Heaven, whom the Seraphim extol as thrice holy, so He should have a Mother on earth who would never be without the splendor of holiness.

This doctrine so filled the minds and souls of our ancestors in the faith that a singular and truly marvelous style of speech came into vogue among them.

They have frequently addressed the Mother of God as Immaculate, as Immaculate in every respect; innocent, and verily most innocent; spot-

less, and entirely spotless; holy and removed from every stain of sin; all pure, all stainless, the very model of purity and innocence; more beautiful than beauty, more lovely than loveliness; more holy than holiness, singularly holy and most pure in soul and body; the one who surpassed all integrity and virginity; the only one who has become the dwelling place of all the graces of the most Holy Spirit.

God alone excepted, Mary is more excellent than all, and by nature fair and beautiful, and more holy than the Cherubim and Seraphim. To praise Her all the tongues of Heaven and earth do not suffice.

Everyone is cognizant that this style of speech has passed almost spontaneously into the books of the most holy liturgy and the Offices of the Church, in which they occur so often and abundantly. In them, the Mother of God is invoked and praised as the one spotless and most beautiful dove, as a rose ever blooming, as perfectly pure, ever immaculate, and ever blessed.

She is celebrated as innocence never sullied and as the second Eve who brought forth the Emmanuel ...

The Definition

Wherefore, in humility and fasting, we unceasingly offered our private prayers as well as the public prayers of the Church to God the Father through His Son, that He would deign to direct and strengthen our mind by the power of the Holy Spirit. In like manner did we implore the help of the entire heavenly host as we ardently invoked the Paraclete.

Accordingly, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for the honor of the Most Holy and undivided Trinity, for the glory and adornment of the Virgin Mother of God, for the exaltation of the Catholic Faith, and for the furtherance of the Catholic religion, by the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own:

“We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most

Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of Her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.”

Hence, if anyone shall dare – which God forbid! – to think otherwise than as has been defined by us, let him know and understand that he is condemned by his own judgment; that he has suffered shipwreck in the faith; that he has separated from the unity of the Church; and that, furthermore, by his own action he incurs the penalties established by law if he should dare to express in words or writing or by any other outward means the errors he think in his heart. (Dz. 1641)

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Notes: (1) Gen. 3:15. (2) *Quo circa sicut Christus Dei hominumque mediator, humana assumpta natura, delens quod adversus nos erat chirographum decretia, illud cruci triumphator affixit; sic Sanctissima Virgo, Arcissimo et indissolubili vinculo cum eo conjuncta, una cum illo et per illum, sempiternas contra venenosum serpentem inimicitias exercens, ac de ipso plenissime triumphans, illud caput immaculato pede contrivit.* (3) Cf. Gen. 6:9. (4) Cf. Gen. 28:12. (5) Cf. Ex. 3:2. (6) Cf. Cant. 4:4. (7) Cf. Cant. 4:12. (8) Cf. Ps. 87:1. (9) Cf. Is. 6:1-4. (10) Cf. Lk. 1:28. (11) *Ibid.*, 42. (12) Cf. St. Augustine: *De Natura et Gratia*, c. 36. (13) Gen. 3:15. (14) Cf. Ex. 31:2.