



# Relationship with GOD

## More than Just SUNDAY

### What does the Church teach about Mary as the Immaculate Conception?

The Catholic Church celebrates the Immaculate Conception of Mary with gratitude. This teaching, which was defined infallibly by Pope Pius IX in 1854, states:

The Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God, and in view of the foreseen merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.

We need to realize that, although this dogma was solemnly proclaimed in 1854, its truth existed from the very moment of the conception of Mary, and its understanding was growing in the heart of the Church from her beginning. There are references dating from as early as the third century to Mary as *Immaculata* – “she who is without sin”.

The first and most important question we need to ask, because it is pivotal to our understanding and grasp of this truth, as well as our ability to explain its reality to “unbelievers” is this: “Was Mary the first human person ever created without sin?” No, she was not! We know from Scripture that Adam and Eve were created by God and were created without sin. It is important to remember that this was God’s original intention. God wanted all of His human children to be members of His family from the first moment of their existence, from their conception. The point, for our purpose here, is that Mary, like Eve, was created by God and was created without sin. This statement in no way attributes to her an equality with God as many who are not Catholic have claimed. No one would ever assert that Adam and Eve must have shared an equality with God because they were originally sinless.

We know that our first human parents “fell” from the relationship of union they enjoyed with God. They sinned and were “separated” from that intimacy by their own free will, their free choice; herein lies the great difference in these two women. St. Ephraem says: “Those two innocent women, Mary and Eve, had been created utterly equal, but afterwards one became the cause of our death, the other the cause of our life.”

Eve’s response to God’s will was “no.” Mary’s response to God was “yes” – “let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Mary gives her complete “yes” to cooperate with God. It will allow the unfolding of God’s saving plan for the redemption unto Himself of the human race, reversing the “no” of Adam and Eve. This is why, just as St. Paul refers to Christ

in Scripture as the “New Adam,” the early Church Fathers continuously referred to Mary as the “New Eve”, even as the Church does today.

Was Mary free to say “no” to God, just as Eve was free to choose for or against God’s expressed will? Yes! It was her very personal, freely-chosen response to God that brought the Savior into the world, thus opening the opportunity for every human being since to give his/her personal response to God’s offer of salvation, the gift of Himself in the Person of Jesus. We must remember that God had been rejected by humankind. He was coming to us again in the person of Mary. God will not violate the free will of anyone. He will not force Himself or His plan upon us. He required our consent, “submitted” Himself, if you will, to our permission as to whether or not we would receive Him and participate in His plan. **Mary, on our behalf**, gives her “yes” to God! **She represents the whole human race here in giving her “yes.”** Did she realize the eternal, universal ramifications of what was being asked of her? Perhaps, perhaps not; of one thing we can be sure: she knew that God was asking, and from a pure heart, she consented to “want what He wanted.” For this we must be forever grateful!

The Church directs us to two key passages in the Bible to help us understand Scripture’s evidence regarding the Immaculate Conception. One can be found in the Old Testament, one in the New.

We read in the very beginnings of Scripture the passage below, in which God is speaking directly to the serpent Satan. Genesis 3:15 comes immediately following the sin of Adam and Eve. And yet, it contains the first Gospel – “Good News” – of God’s mercy. This is the first “glimpse,” the first revelation in Scripture of God’s plan of redemption for the human race: God’s promise of **deliverance** to us from Satan who had just deceived, and the **restoration** of our relationship and reconciliation with Him.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your seed and her seed;  
He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.

*Genesis 3:15*

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Looking carefully at the words of Genesis 3:15:

❑ The seed or “offspring” of the woman is Jesus Christ Who, through His passion, death (described here by the words: “*you – Satan – shall bruise his heel*”) and resurrection, will strike at the head of the serpent (Satan), and ultimately defeat him.

❑ The word “enmity” in the passage, which means complete, total, irreversible opposition, exists between the “woman” and Satan. The “woman” of Genesis 3:15 is Mary. If there were any semblance in her of a nature “tainted” by sin, the word “enmity” could not have been used. Thus we have, in the very beginnings of Scripture, a strong foreshadowing of the great gift of Mary’s Immaculate Conception (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church 410, 411*).

In the New Testament, the principal Scriptural reference for the Immaculate Conception is revealed in the words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary:

And he came to her and said, “Hail, **full of grace**, the Lord is with you! — Luke 1:29

The title ‘full of grace’ is used as a substitute for Mary’s name by the angelic messenger of God. These angelic words refer to a *fullness* of grace, a *plentitude* of grace that is part of Mary’s very nature. Where there is a plentitude, there cannot be a privation. Thus, we can appreciate this strong Scriptural implication which is in perfect harmony with the Apostolic Tradition existent from the early Church.

From all that has been said, an important question surfaces: Did Mary need a Savior? Since Mary was created without sin, it might seem like she did not, and yet she says herself in Scripture, “my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:47). She clearly does not claim exemption from the necessity of Christ’s redemption. As a matter of fact, she is the first to acknowledge Jesus as her “personal Lord and Savior,” as we hear her speak in this Scriptural passage

How do we reconcile this seeming contradiction? The Church teaches, as the dogma states, that Mary was “preserved” from all stain of original sin. She was preserved by a singular grace-gift in anticipation of the merits of Jesus Christ. Mary could not have been conceived immaculate without Christ’s redemptive work.

We can begin to understand this “preservative redemption” by examining our own life experience. Most of us have been “preserved” from ever committing the sin of murder. Because of our Christian upbringing, this particular sin would never enter our consciousness as an option in any given situation. “Freedom” or “preservation” from this sin was really a gift from the godly lives of those who guided and formed us during childhood. A spiritual heritage was handed on through the domestic Church, the family, but ultimately comes from the grace purchased and made available by the cross of Christ. We can begin to see that there are two ways to be redeemed: *we can be redeemed from sins we have committed* or, as in the example just mentioned, *we can be redeemed from committing sin*. Mary, from the first moment of her conception was *redeemed from committing sin*, not in a limited sense, but comprehensively, totally.

We might ask “how is this possible?” since Christ’s Redemptive Act takes place after Mary’s Immaculate Conception. God’s redemption of humankind is not limited to chronological time since God is outside of time. He has the power to apply the graces of

redemption “backward” in time if He wishes. He chose to apply a “fullness of grace” to Mary at the first moment of her existence. The Church teaches that the purpose of this favor was given in order that Mary might give to Jesus a human nature free from the effect of sin.

The Church also teaches that Mary was conceived free from sin and that she remained free from sin throughout her life. Her “yes,” given at the Annunciation, became a continual yes to the will of God, and therefore, her Heart will forever be rightly referred to as “Immaculate”! Now, Mary comes to the shepherd children at Fatima proclaiming that God wishes to establish devotion in the world to this—to *her*—Immaculate Heart. **By God’s design**, for us who daily bear the effects of original and personal sin, **her mission is to help us “by her manifold intercession...to procure...the gifts of eternal salvation.”**<sup>1</sup>

May we become devoted in prayer, especially the Rosary, and open to receiving all the help that God wishes to give us through her, which is always grace that will lead and guide us most assuredly to Jesus Christ Himself!

*This bulletin insert was written by Carol Lankford, consecrated virgin and spiritual director, and is a shortened version of one of a series of six pamphlets. For access to all six pamphlets—which contain additional exposition, more detailed referencing—contact Ann Lankford, Director, Office for Catechesis and Evangelization, (608) 791-2658.*

1. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, no. 62, italics added

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