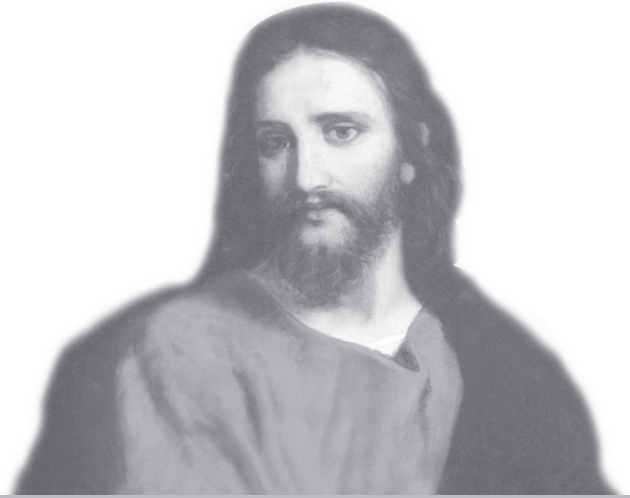


DISCOVER

the Joy of Christ



What does it mean that Mary is the Immaculate Conception?

During the month of May when we honor Mary, it is helpful to examine her title as the Immaculate Conception. This name means that the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.

Two key passages in the Bible help us understand Scripture's evidence regarding the Immaculate Conception. We read in Genesis 3:15:

*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.*

This passage (God is speaking in the first person to the serpent, Satan) appears immediately following the sin of Adam and Eve. Mercifully, it contains the first glimpse in Scripture of God's plan of redemption for the human race: the deliverance from Satan who had just deceived, and the restoration of our relationship with God. The seed or "offspring" of the woman is Jesus Christ Who, through His passion, death ("you shall bruise his heel") and resurrection, will strike at the head of the serpent (Satan, and his seed, as well as all who choose evil), and ultimately defeat him. The "enmity" (complete, total, irreversible opposition) described here exists between not only "her seed," but the "woman" herself and Satan. The "woman" of Genesis 3:15 is Mary, and if there were any semblance of a "tainted" (by sin) nature in her, the word "enmity" could not have been used. We have from the beginning 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 Angel Gabriel does not use Mary's name but calls her "full of grace." Unlike each of us who has a fallen nature, God created Mary with a fullness of grace that is part of her very nature. Where there is a plenitude, there cannot be a privation. This fullness of grace is appropriate only for the

woman who was to give God's Son an immaculate human nature. (For a fuller understanding of this mystery, see the bulletin insert "Why Do We Honor Mary?")

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). As we hear her speak in this Scripture, she acknowledges Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior.

How do we reconcile this seeming contradiction? Mary was "preserved" from all stain of original sin by a singular grace-gift in anticipation of the merits of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. 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. "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. Mary, from the first moment of her conception was redeemed from ever committing sin, not in a limited sense, but comprehensively, totally.

We might ask "how," 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. He chose to apply a "fullness of grace" to Mary at the first moment of her existence. The purpose of this favor was given in order that Mary might give to Jesus a human nature free from the effect of sin.

In conclusion, it is important to highlight that Mary was conceived free from sin and she remained free from sin throughout her life by all her choices in cooperation with the grace obtained by Jesus at the cross. This is why we honor her with our love.