

disposition and wrote of her sinlessness. A feast day in honor of the Immaculate Conception has been celebrated in the feast day in honor of the Immaculate Conception and has been celebrated in the Eastern part of the Church at least since the sixth century.

As time passed, further discussion arose about this belief. In 1849, Pius IX asked the bishops throughout the Church what they themselves, their clergy, and the people felt about this belief and whether they would want it defined solemnly. Of 603 bishops, 546 responded favorably without hesitation. Of those opposing, only 5 said the doctrine could not be solemnly defined, 24 did not know whether this was the opportune time, and 10 simply wanted a condemnation of any rejection of the doctrine. Pope Pius also saw the spiritual malaise of the world where the rationalist school of philosophy had denied truth and anything of the supernatural, where revolutions were causing social upheaval, and the industrial revolution had threatened the dignity of the worker and family life; therefore, Pope Pius wanted to spiritually recharge the faithful and saw no better way than presenting again the beautiful example of our Blessed Mother and her role in salvation history. On December 8, 1854, Pius IX solemnly defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in his bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (quoted in the opening paragraph).

Finally, it is also interesting that in several apparitions of our Blessed Mother, she herself has attested to her Immaculate Conception: On Dec. 9 (the date for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in the Spanish Empire) in 1531 at Guadalupe, Mary said to Juan Diego, "I am the perfect and perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God, through

whom everything lives...." In 1830, Mary told St. Catherine Laboure to have the Miraculous Medal struck with the inscription, "Mary conceived free from sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee." Lastly, when she appeared to St. Bernadette at Lourdes in 1858, Mary said, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

In a homily on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception delivered in 1982, Pope John Paul II wrote, "Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who filled you, Virgin of Nazareth, with every spiritual blessing in Christ. In Him, you were conceived Immaculate! Preselected to be His Mother, you were redeemed in Him and through Him more than any other human being! Preserved from the inheritance of original sin, you were conceived and came into the world in a state of sanctifying grace. Full of grace! We venerate this mystery of the faith in today's solemnity. Today, together with all the Church, we venerate the Redemption which was actuated in you. That most singular participation in the Redemption of the world and of man was reserved only for you, solely for you. Hail O Mary, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, dear Mother of the Redeemer."

May we invoke the prayers of our Blessed Mother, Mary Immaculate to draw us ever closer to our Lord, her Son.

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The Immaculate Conception

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Many people, especially non-Catholics, think that the term "Immaculate Conception" refers to Mary conceiving Jesus. My Protestant friend was surprised when I told her that it is about Mary being free of original sin. She then said, "Where is that in the Bible?" What is a good explanation for her?

Actually, the confusion over the "Immaculate Conception" is not uncommon. Some people mistakenly think the term is related to Mary's conception of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, the Immaculate Conception is the belief that "the most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin..." (Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*).

Keep in mind that in our liturgical calendar, the Solemnity of the Annunciation on March 25 marks the time when Mary conceived our Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit. Nine months later, on Dec. 25, we celebrate the Solemnity of Christmas, the birth of our Savior. To have Mary conceive our Lord on Dec. 8, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and then have Him born on Dec. 25, does not make sense. Rather, Dec. 8 marks when Mary was conceived without original sin and then Sept. 8 celebrates her birth.

In examining the history surrounding the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, we see the beauty of a Church founded by Christ, whose faithful followers struggle to grasp ever more clearly the mystery of salvation. This struggle is guided by the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus identified as "The Spirit of Truth," Who "will instruct you in everything and remind you of all that I told you" and "will guide you to all truth" (cf. John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13).

Part of the "struggle" with the Immaculate Conception is that there is no specific, crystal-clear scriptural citation for it. Nevertheless, the references in the Gospels to the Blessed Mother and her role in the mystery of salvation intimate this belief. In the Gospel of St. Luke, we find the beautiful passage of the Annunciation where Archangel Gabriel said to Mary (in our familiar wording as translated from St. Jerome's Latin *Vulgate* edition of the Bible), "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you." While some scripture scholars haggle over "how full is full," the testimony of St. Gabriel definitely indicates the exceptional holiness of the Blessed Mother. When one considers the role Mary was to play in the life of our Lord — whether His incarnation, His childhood, or His crucifixion — she must have

been outstanding in holiness, truly "full of grace" in accepting and in fulfilling her role as the Mother of the Savior, in the fullest sense of *Mother*.

Going further to the original Greek text of the Gospel, we find the wording *chaire kecharitomene*. *Chaire* means "grace." The verb *kecharitomene* means "having been favored." The form of the verb is also important: here the verb does not simply imply "fullness," but rather instrumentality. The late Scripture scholar, Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller noted, "Luke's word puts the emphasis upon the source of goodness rather than upon its effects. In regard to Mary, therefore, he points out that she is the object of God's grace and favor. Because the verb is also a participle, Mary is shown to have been chosen for a long time past; God's full flow of favor has already been concentrating upon her.... In her, more than in anyone else, God's messianic fulfillment is achieved. As such, she has received more from and through God's anticipation of Jesus' redemptive work than anyone else in the Old Testament or New Testament" (*The Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

Moreover, Archangel Gabriel announces, "the Lord is with you." Such a proclamation coming from God Himself implies a particular office or a special prerogative. Again, Fr. Stuhlmueller noted, "The Redeemer-God professes to find an eminent fulfillment of His promises in the recipient of the greeting." Given this scholarly examination of Scripture, we rightly believe, therefore, that an exceptional, grace-filled holiness extended to the very beginning of Mary's life, her conception, and that God had prepared her to play an integral role in the plan of salvation.

On the practical side, if original sin is inherited through our parents and Jesus took on our human nature in all things except sin, then Mary had to be free of original sin.

The question then arises, "How is Christ the Savior of Mary?" Actually, much of the debate concerning the Immaculate Conception during the Middle Ages focused on this problem. Duns Scotus (d. 1308) posited one solution saying, "Mary more than anyone else would have needed Christ as her Redeemer, since she would have contracted original sin... if the grace of the Mediator had not prevented this." Quoting the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the *Catechism* adds, "The 'splendor of an entirely unique holiness' by which Mary is 'enriched from the first instant of her conception' comes wholly from Christ: she is 'redeemed, in a more exalted fashion by reason of the merits of her Son'" (#492). In essence, since Mary was chosen to share intimately in the life of Jesus from her conception, He was indeed her Savior from her conception.

Perhaps one reason why the discussion over the Immaculate Conception was prolonged is because the early Church was outlawed and under persecution until the year 313 and then had to address various problems surrounding Jesus Himself. More reflection about Mary and her role occurred after the Council of Ephesus (431) solemnly affirmed Mary's divine motherhood and gave her the title, "Mother of God" in that she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and bore Jesus who is second person of the Holy Trinity, one in being with the Father. Several of the early Church Fathers including St. Ambrose (d. 397), St. Ephraem (d. 373), St. Andrew of Crete (d. 740), and St. John Damascene (d.749) meditated on Mary's role as Mother, including her own grace-filled