



Lesson 5: The All Holy Mother of God

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past couple of sessions, we've seen a portrait of Mary painted in words by the authors of the New Testament.

That portrait depicts Mary as

- the New Eve;
- the Ark of the New Covenant;
- and the new Queen Mother.

We've also seen how that biblical portrait gave rise to official Catholic teachings about Mary – the Marian dogmas.

So far, we've looked at the scriptural basis for two of those Marian dogmas: Mary's Perpetual Virginity and Mary's title: "Mother of God."

Now, we're going to examine the biblical basis for Mary's Immaculate Conception, which just happens to be one of the most misunderstood and most contested of the Marian dogmas.

II. THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

To start with, we need to be clear about just what exactly the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is.

- It's not, as many people think, the same thing as the Virgin Birth.



The Immaculate Conception has nothing to do with how Mary conceived Jesus.

Rather, it's about how Mary herself was conceived.

- The dogma of the Immaculate Conception states that Jesus' mother, alone among the billions of human persons born since the beginning of the world, was conceived without inheriting the curse of Adam and Eve's fall.
- In God's plan and by his grace, Mary was kept free from sin from the moment of her conception until the end of her earthly life.
- Not only was she free from sin, but she was also free from concupiscence, the disordered desires which lead to sin.

Through the Immaculate Conception, God ensured that Mary's feelings and desires were always rightly ordered.

III. THE CHURCH FATHERS

Catholics have believed all of that since the earliest days of the Church.

Among others, St. Ephrem of Syria and St. Ambrose of Milan wrote about it in the fourth century. St. Augustine wrote about it in the fifth, saying that it would be an offense against Jesus to say his mother was a sinner.

St. Augustine went on to say:



- “[All have sinned] except the Holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom, for the honor of the Lord, I wish no question to be raised at all, when we are treating of sins...
- After all, how do we know what greater degree of grace for a complete victory over sin was conferred on her who merited to conceive and bring forth him who all admit was without sin.”

IV. INEFFABILIS DEUS

Although the Church’s saints and doctors had written about Mary’s **Immaculate Conception** for centuries, the teaching didn’t become an official dogma until 1854.

- On December 8 of that year, Pope Pius IX declared the teaching in a document entitled *Ineffabilis Deus*, which means “The Ineffable God.”

In that document, the Pope noted the long history of the Church’s belief that Mary was unstained by original sin.

That belief, he pointed out, had been expressed in the writings of the popes and saints, as well as in the Church’s prayer and worship.

- He also pointed out that this belief was founded on three passages from the Bible, passages with which we’ve already become familiar:
 - The “first gospel” in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:15);
 - The Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38);



- and the vision of the “woman” in Revelation 12.

Each of those passages gives us greater insight into Mary’s Immaculate Conception.

And when they’re looked at through the prism of the Church’s teaching about the Immaculate Conception, we can see even more deeply into the mystery of God’s plan.

V. THE FIRST GOSPEL

Let’s first use that prism to look at the passage from Genesis.

Remember how when God punished Adam and Eve he also proclaimed what the Church Fathers called the protoevangelium or “first gospel”?

W Read Genesis 3:15

- Essentially, that “first gospel” was an inaugural announcement of the salvation that would come from a woman and her offspring.
- In that “first gospel” God promised that there would be perpetual enmity between this woman and the serpent.
- He also promised that enmity would culminate in the crushing of the serpent’s head by the woman’s offspring.



VI. ORIGINAL SIN, ORIGINAL ENMITY

Here, it's important to understand what "enmity" means.

- Enmity doesn't mean mutual dislike.
- It doesn't mean mutual distrust.
- Enmity means mutual hatred.

It means the total and complete opposition of two parties.

- Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated as "enmity" implies a mortal rivalry, which causes each party to desire (and usually seek) the death of the other.

We see the word used that way, for example, in Numbers 35:21, Ezekiel 25:15, and Ezekiel 35:5.

Now as we saw in lesson two, if the seed of the woman is Jesus that makes Mary the woman. And in Genesis 3:15 the enmity between the woman and the serpent is identical to that between their offspring.

- God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed." In other words, Mary and Jesus share the same complete opposition, the same enmity with the serpent.



This is why we saw previously the woman and her offspring, Mary and Jesus, both at war with the serpent in Revelation 12.

VII. OFFSPRING AND DEATH

In order to clearly see the connection between Genesis 3:15 and the Church's dogma of the Immaculate Conception, there are two more pieces of the puzzle we need to note.

- First, it's important to recognize that it is God who establishes the enmity: "I will put enmity..."

What that tells us is that this enmity is no natural aversion. It is a divinely created opposition, one that God has established for all time.

- Again, it's important to remember that this enmity is **two-fold**:
 - It's between the serpent and the woman and,
 - Between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring.

- **In Hebrew, the word "offspring" literally means "seed."**
 - Elsewhere, the Hebrew word is used to refer to the seed of plants. (Gen 1:11, 47:19; Lev 26:16)
 - It also refers to the children of individuals. (Gen 4:25, 15:3, 2 Sam 7:12)
 - And to a person's descendants or a race of people. (Gen 12:7, 13:15; Is 14:20, 57:3)



- Occasionally, the word is used in a moral sense, as when the psalmist speaks of “the children of the wicked” ...
Or, for example, when the prophet Isaiah speaks of the “offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly!” (Ps 37:28; Is 1:4)

The seed talked about in Genesis 3:15 is, of course, no ordinary seed. It has a very specific task: To crush the head of the serpent – i.e. kill it.

VIII. FROM SCRIPTURE TO DOGMA

Now after God promises a Redeemer who will crush the serpent, he tells Adam and Eve what their punishment will be.

W Read Genesis 3:16-19

- That punishment doesn’t just apply to Adam and Eve. It applies to all men and women.
- Remember, Eve is described in Genesis 3:20 as the “mother of all the living.” As the human race’s first mother, she passed on her sin and Adam’s sin to all her offspring.
 - It’s an inherited part of human nature.
 - So what the psalmist said of himself in Psalm 51:5, can be said of you, me, and the entire human race: “Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”



Again, we don't just share in Adam and Eve's sin. We also share in the consequences.

- That means all humans are under the power of death.

W Read Romans 5:12

IX. MARY, CONCEIVED WITHOUT SIN

- But the proto-evangelium also seems to envision at least two people—the woman and her offspring—to whom those words from Romans will not apply.

Those two people will not be conceived under the rule of the serpent and the consequences of the serpent's deceit.

Recall what the text says: The enmity between the woman and the serpent will be put there by God.

- And it's enmity that he puts there—not dislike, not distrust, but enmity. The woman and the serpent will be engaged in a mortal rivalry. Between the two there will be absolute hostility, a hatred that implies a struggle to the death.

How could Mary live in absolute opposition to the serpent—the devil—and still be under his power?

- She couldn't.

If Mary was conceived with original sin, there couldn't be the perpetual enmity promised by God between the woman and the serpent.



To the contrary, if Mary were conceived with original sin, the serpent would already be victorious. She would have been subject to his power, and God's promise would have been false.

- Now, we know God doesn't make false promises. And, as Mary is clearly the mother of the one who crushes Satan, the woman promised to the world when man fell, she must have been born outside of Satan's power, just as her son was.

As Paul noted, for the sake of our salvation, God caused grace to overflow. He also caused Jesus, "who knew no sin," to reign over the power of sin and death. (Rom 5:20; 2 Cor 5:21). If the woman's seed, Jesus, was not to know sin, how could his mother?

The answer is that she couldn't. She had to have been conceived free from sin. That's the only way God's promise of enmity between the woman of Genesis 3:15 and the serpent can be consistently understood.

X. MARY'S ENMITY TOWARDS SATAN WAS ABSOLUTE

That is the way the Church, both yesterday and today, has interpreted that passage.

In his Wednesday Catechesis from May 29, 1996 ("Mary's Enmity Towards Satan was Absolute"), Pope John Paul II explained:



- “The absolute hostility put between the woman and the devil thus demands in Mary the Immaculate Conception, that is, a total absence of sin, from the very beginning of her life.
- The Son of Mary won the definitive victory over Satan and enabled his Mother to receive its benefits in advance by preserving her from sin.
- As a result, the Son granted her the power to resist the devil, thus achieving in the mystery of the Immaculate Conception the most notable effect of his redeeming work.”

XI. FULL OF GRACE

Together, Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12 give good evidence that supports the Church’s teaching of Mary’s Immaculate Conception.

So too does the Annunciation scene in Luke’s Gospel. In fact, evidence of Mary’s sinless state exists in the very first sentence of that account.

- **W** Read Luke 1:28

That is a greeting found nowhere else in Scripture.

- The word that’s translated as “favored one” or “full of grace” is kecharitomene, a form of the verb charitoo (khar-ee-to'-o).



That verb is an extremely rare word, used only in the Annunciation scene and in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

- In each case, the verb indicates an action that causes some effect in the object of the verb. And in Luke, the term is used in the perfect tense.
 - This means that the angel is saying he finds Mary in an already graced state. She is “full of grace.”

XII. FULL OF SANCTIFYING GRACE

- In the other place we see this verb, Ephesians 1:6-7, Paul speaks of how God granted or bestowed his grace upon us in Jesus.

And the character of this grace (charitoo) is that of sanctifying grace.

- It's the kind of grace we receive through the sacraments:
- the kind of grace that leads to holiness.

In Ephesians, Paul uses the word to describe how God's grace causes a transformation in us. It brings about the forgiveness of sins and makes us his adopted sons and daughters.

- But in Luke, the tense of this verb in the angel's address implies that Mary has already been favored by the bestowal of God's grace.

She has already been graced, and continues to be “full of grace.”



XIII. 15. “HAIL, FULL OF GRACE”

- Another thing to note about the greeting is that Gabriel doesn't hail Jesus' mother as Mary. He doesn't call her by her name. He hails her instead as “full of grace.”

No other person in all of Scripture is addressed this way by an angel.

When an angel calls out to Abraham, he calls him Abraham. When an angel talks to Tobias, he calls him Tobias. But when an angel talks to Mary, he calls her “full of grace.”

- It's almost as if “Full of Grace” were Mary's name.

XIV. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

- Throughout Scripture, whenever God gives a person a new name, it indicates that person's place in God's plan of salvation.
 - Abram's name is changed to Abraham to signal his role as the “father of a multitude of nations.” (Gen 17:5)
 - Jacob's name is changed to Israel after he wrestled with an angel for the right to be the one through whom God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. (Gen 32:28, 35:10-11)
 - And Simon is called Peter because he will be the rock upon which God founds his Church. (Mt 16:18)



Likewise, when we hear Mary called “full of grace” that tells us something about her role in Salvation History. In her name, her destiny is revealed.

- From before the foundation of the world, she was preserved from sin.
 - She was transformed by grace, in order to be the all holy mother of God’s only begotten Son.

And that’s exactly how John Paul II interpreted this Scripture in the homily he preached on the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

- “Full of Grace,” he said, “is the name that God, through his messenger, chose to use to describe the Virgin. This is how he had always thought of her, ab aeterno (from all eternity).”

XV. TO WHAT END?

As we see there is clear evidence in Scripture for Mary’s Immaculate Conception, but we still have one big question to answer: Why?

Why did God preserve Mary from the lot of other men? Why did he preserve her from the stain and consequences of original sin?

Perhaps the best answer to that question comes from Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, who was perhaps the most famous convert to Catholicism of the last 200 years:



- “Mary,” he wrote, “was no mere instrument in God’s dispensation. The Word of God...did not merely pass through her, as he may pass through us in Holy Communion. It was no heavenly body which the Eternal Son assumed...”
- No, he imbibed, He sucked up her blood and her substance into his Divine Person. He became man from her and received her lineaments and her features as the appearance and character under which he should manifest Himself to the world. He was known, doubtless, by his likeness to her, to be her Son...
- Was it not fitting that the Eternal Father should prepare her for this ministration by some preeminent sanctification?”

XVI. IT WAS FITTING

The key to that whole paragraph is in the last sentence: The word “fitting.”

- It was fitting that Mary be preserved from all sin.

God could have done it a different way had he so chosen, but he didn’t.

- He thought it fitting, appropriate for Jesus to inherit a sinless human nature from his mother, just as he inherited her eyes and her nose and skin color.



Another analogy that sheds some light on why Mary was immaculately conceived is this:

- Just as the priest or deacon takes the greatest care to purify the sacred vessels used in the Mass, the vessels which contain the Eucharistic Body and Blood of Jesus, so too did God take great care to purify the vessel which would carry the flesh and blood of Jesus in her womb and care for him all his life.

There is nothing more precious that either could hold. To keep the vessels pure is a sign of respect and honor to what, to Whom, they contain.

Again, truths about Mary always and ultimately point to greater truths about Christ. His sanctity is made all the more evident by her purity.

XVII. COMMON OBJECTIONS

As we mentioned at the outset of this study, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception has long been one of the most contested of the Church's teachings about Mary. Many Christians, and even some saints, have voiced their concerns about the dogma.

Those concerns usually run along two lines.

- The most common concern is that in saying Mary is sinless or all-holy, we somehow make her more than human or make Christ's saving work less important.

But that's simply not the case.



- The Catholic Church doesn't deny that Mary, like the rest of us, needed to be saved from sin.
- It also doesn't claim that Mary's sinless state was somehow her own doing.
- It doesn't teach that she either merited it or accomplished it by her own efforts.

Just the opposite, in fact!

XVIII. POPE PIUS IX – MARY PRESERVED FROM ORIGINAL SIN

In the very document that declared the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, “The Ineffable God,” Pope Pius IX addressed those concerns completely, writing:

- “...that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by the 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.”

Let's unpack that sentence.

- First, the pope makes it clear that the Immaculate Conception is a “singular grace” of God.
- Next, he states that that grace was won for her by Jesus Christ. Jesus was her savior, just as he was the savior for the rest of the human race.



- Finally, he says that Mary's Immaculate Conception was a divine act of preservation. It was a work of God, not a work of Mary.

XIX. MARY NEEDED A SAVIOUR

- The Immaculate Conception, then, was a fruit of the redemption applied to Mary by way of anticipation.

You see, God is not bound by time like us.

- Which is how Christ's death on Calvary could obtain the fruit of salvation for those who had died hundreds of years before him and those who would not be born until almost 2,000 years after his death.
- Just as we have been redeemed by a God who died on a cross long before we were born, so too was Mary saved, at the moment of her conception, by a God who had not yet been born in time, a God whose saving death was still years away.
- Mary needed a savior. Just like the rest of us, she needed to be redeemed. But her redemption was an act of preservation, just as others' redemption was an act of deliverance.

In an analogous way, God does a similar thing today, rescuing some people by preservation and others by deliverance. Some people are born with a natural inclination to virtue and reject sin habitually from an early age. Others turn to God and reject sin only after having committed terrible sins.



Either way, by prevention or deliverance, redemption is a work of God, a gift of his grace.

XX. ALL HAVE SINNED

Another common objection, frequently voiced by non-Catholics, is this:

- How can the Church claim that Mary was sinless, when Scripture itself states that, “all have sinned”?

The passage to which those people generally refer is Romans 3:23.

W Read Romans 3:20-23.

If you just pick up that passage and read it, it certainly does seem to contradict the Church’s teaching.

But to read it that way, is to read it out of context.

- In that section of Romans, Paul is talking about the sinfulness of Jews and Gentiles alike.

He makes the argument that simply being Jewish does not make a person holier or more virtuous. He also argues that strict adherence to the ceremonial law of the Old Covenant cannot give life.

He’s telling the Jews that sin has crept into the covenant people just like it has in the rest of the world.



- What Paul does there is compare groups, not individuals. And when he talks about “all men” he’s talking about all races of men.
- If by “all men” Paul really meant every single individual person ever conceived, he would be accusing Jesus of sin, not to mention babies and the unborn.

But he doesn’t mean that. And when we read that passage in the context of the whole Book of Romans, not to mention the rest of Scripture, we can see that it in no way contradicts Mary’s Immaculate Conception.

XXI. FROM BIBLE TO LITURGY

Some of you may be thinking that you’re learning all of this for the first time, but if you’ve gone to Mass on December 8, the **Feast of the Immaculate Conception**, you’ve heard it all before.

In the liturgy for that day, all of the scriptural images we’ve talked about are brought together to form a complete picture of Mary, the all holy Mother of God.

Entrance Antiphon

- The Entrance Antiphon for the Mass puts the words of the prophet Isaiah into the mouth of Mary:

“My soul rejoices in my God, for he has clothed me in the garment of salvation...like a bride adorned with her jewels.”
(Is 61:10; cf Lk 1:46-47)

Presenters’ Note: Because the NAB is the approved text for the Church’s liturgy, the NAB translation is quoted for slide 24-26.



Opening Prayer

- The Opening Prayer explains the great mystery of the Immaculate Conception in God's plan for the world's salvation:

“Father, you prepared the Virgin Mary to be the worthy mother of your Son. You let her share beforehand in the salvation Christ would bring by his death, and kept her sinless from the first moment of her conception.”

First Reading

- The First Reading for the feast is the story of Adam and Eve's sin and the proto-evangelium.
- The Second Reading is drawn from Paul's letter to the Ephesians and includes the same verse we spoke about earlier: Eph 1:6.

Paul's words in Ephesians were originally addressed to every believer in Christ. Read in the Liturgy, they apply first and foremost to Mary, the forerunner of every Christian.

- Who “before the foundation of the world...
- was chosen “to be holy and without blemish”...
- By the “grace that God granted” her...
- In the “Beloved,” Jesus.

What that verse reinforces is that the grace given to Mary in her mother's womb is to be the destiny of all who believe in her Son and are baptized.



XXII. FROM BIBLE TO LITURGY, CONT.

Second Reading

- The Second Reading on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception also reminds us that Mary was “destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will.”

In other words, God’s will, expressed in the First Reading about Adam and Eve’s sin and the promised Redeemer, born of a woman, is accomplished in Mary’s Immaculate Conception and her bearing of Christ.

- That truth is reinforced by the Gospel reading for the feast: Luke’s account of the Annunciation. (Lk 1:26-38)
- Finally, the special Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer for the feast is another summary of the biblical testimony to Mary’s Immaculate Conception. It reveals Mary to be a sign of the Church and a “promise of its perfection.”

XXIII. THE MOTHER CROWNED IN GLORY

The liturgy for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception is not, of course, the only liturgy that uses the biblical images of Mary we’ve studied to present the truth about the Mother of God.

All the Church’s liturgies for Marian feasts draw upon the biblical roots of Catholic teaching and Tradition to illuminate what the Church believes about Mary.



This is especially true for the Feast of the Assumption. We'll see that in the next session, when we trace the scriptural foundations for the fourth Marian dogma: Mary's Assumption and Coronation as Queen of Heaven and Earth.

We'll also take a look at the relationship between that dogma, Scripture, and the Marian devotions common in the Church today.

Preparation for Next Week – Lesson 6

Follow-Up Reading and Preparation for the Next Lesson

Hail, Holy Queen, Chapter 5 (pp. 107-113) and Chapter 6

Additional study resources can be found on the St. Paul Center website at: www.salvationhistory.com.