

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Review of Dogmas in the Church

The Immaculate Conception is the first of the two modern dogmas of Mariology which have become not only a matter of debate with non-Catholics but also a source of misunderstanding and misgivings within the Church.

1-In current theological terminology, generally accepted since the 18th century, dogmas are doctrines which have been declared by the authentic Magisterium of the Church as revealed by God.

2-God never reveals doctrinal statements.

3-A doctrinal formula is the subsequent interpretation and articulation of the divine revelation

4-All Christian doctrines are articulations of God's revelation and salvation through the person and mission of Jesus Christ.

5-The Christian message is entrusted not to a limited group, the Magisterium, but belongs to the whole people of God: "The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the Holy One cannot err in matters of faith." (LG 12)

6-Thus dogmas are not imposed on the faithful as something alien; they are the articulation of the faith by which the whole Christian community is sustained and bound together.

Holiness in the Bible

Holiness is God's own attribute. He alone is holy beyond all creation. "It is more than a divine attribute among others; it characterizes God himself." Israel becomes God's own, his holy people, not on account of their good deeds but because it is chosen by God: He is with them on their pilgrimage, in their history: "I your midst I am the Holy One" (Hosea 11:9). "This active presence of God confers holiness on a people which is not simply a ritual holiness but a genuine dignity calling for moral holiness." It is based on a free invitation of God to share in his life! This is realized first in Mary. Her holiness which was recognized and celebrated from early times does not isolate her from the Christian community but makes her the model of the whole Church.

Mary's Holiness

-All holiness is rooted in God's free choice. The unique holiness of Mary, celebrated in the Immaculate Conception, consists in her special place in God's plan of salvation.

-It is different with Mary: she is absolutely included in God's plan of salvation as Mother of the Savior. She is included in it from the **beginning**.

-However, this totality and absoluteness did not remove Mary from our earthly situation and struggle. She remains human. Holiness does not make her path of faith smooth and easy.

-The biblical text which positively expresses Mary's holiness is the salutation of the Angel: "**Hail, highly favored**" (Lk 1:28). The Greek word "Chrizo" occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and in Ephesians 1:6 where it stands for God's sanctifying action those who are chosen. The angel's salutation does not refer in any way to Mary's merits; her holiness is totally God's gift, the same gift that is offered to all who are called in Jesus Christ.

-Thus, the Marian tradition is not a doctrinal addition to the biblical revelation, but its unfolding and deepening articulation in the conscience of the Church.

Tradition is not an arbitrary development; it is guided by the Holy Spirit, takes place in the spiritual consciousness of God's people and is finally discerned by the Magisterium.

Problems of the Western Tradition

When in his controversies against Pelagius, Augustine taught the **universality of original sin among all descendants of Adam**, his adversaries accused him of putting all the saints, even the Blessed Virgin, under the law of sin. Augustine who was in a tight corner answered: "Except for the Holy Virgin Mary, for whom there can be no question of sin on account of the glory of the Lord for how could we know what greater measure of grace was granted to her to conquer sin in its entirety as she merited to conceive and give birth to him who is without sin; excepting, therefore, the Virgin, if we could ask all holy men and women...whether they are without sin they would cry out with one voice: If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

But the sharp mind of Julianus, a follower of Pelagius pinpointed the flaw in Augustine's defense: **If she "conquered sin" she must have been under sin in the beginning.**

Augustine is tortured. He has to continue to insist that all people are saved only through grace.

However, the interpretation of this “resolved through the grace of rebirth” becomes the **problem of the Western tradition** of the Immaculate Conception. If the universality of original sin for all Adam’s children is admitted, Mary must be included, and her sanctification can only be subsequent to her conception.

In Medieval Theology, two principles universally accepted: Original sin is communicated through natural generation, as Mary is conceived by her parents through natural generation, **she must be contaminated by it**. If Mary were free from original sin, **she would not be redeemed**. The doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception seems to deny the universality of Jesus’ work of redemption. The solution to the problem was already proposed by **Abelard**, one of the few defenders of Mary’s Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages. He distinguishes between active and passive generation: children are born in original sin not on account of the generative act of the parents but by the fact of **becoming through their conception members of a sinful race**. That is why they begin to share in the sinfulness of the human family. Also, **John Duns Scotus** (d. 1302), the Franciscan theologian and principal champion in the campaign for the Immaculate Conception, argues that **sin and grace are in the soul**, not in the body. Hence: just as God can create grace in the sinner though the body is infected by sin, “so can God do it in the first instance when he creates grace in the soul of Mary.”

The second problem becomes the main issue in the controversy. **Thomas** argues: “If this (conception without sin) is attributed to anyone except Christ, she would not need Christ’s redemption. Hence we should not give so much to the mother that it would diminish the honor of the Son who is Savior of all men.”

Duns Scotus answers this objection with the distinction between preventive and healing grace. Mary is redeemed more perfectly than all others. Grace has not healed her but prevented her from being tainted by sin. “She did need even more the Mediator so that she should not be affected by sin.”

From the 14th century onwards, it became one of the prominent topics of controversy. Franciscans followed Duns Scotus, defended the Immaculate Conception; and the Dominicans, keeping the line of Thomas, rejected it.

Council of Trent did not want to decide on questions still controversial among theologians. Yet it explicitly declared that “it is not its intention to

include in this decree (on the universality of original sin) the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin Mary." Teaching the sinfulness of all people this council declared Mary exempt from the general law: No one "Can avoid all sins, even venial ones, throughout his entire life unless it be by a special privilege of God as the Church holds of the Blessed Virgin Mary."