

The Immaculate Conception

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception teaches that Mary, the mother of Christ, was conceived without sin and her conception was thus immaculate. Mary's sinless conception is the reason why Catholics refer to Mary as "full of grace". William Wordsworth, a devotee of Mary, referred to her as 'our tainted nature's solitary boast'

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception is celebrated by Catholics on December 8th each year, nine months before her birthday on 8th September.

Many people confuse the Immaculate Conception with the "virgin birth"; the belief that Mary gave birth to Jesus while remaining a virgin. They are not the same thing. A less common mistake is to think that the Immaculate Conception means that Mary was not conceived in the ordinary way. In fact Mary had ordinary human parents, Joachim and Anne, who conceived her in the usual manner.

Mary received God's grace from the first moment of her existence, and was totally and completely redeemed by this grace. Because she was redeemed, Mary spent her whole existence in a perfect relationship with God.

God did this so that Mary would be worthy to be the Mother of God.

Mary received this redeeming grace not because of any merits of her own, but because God freely gave her the gift of his love.

The grace of Christ the Redeemer acted in her in anticipation, preserving her from original sin and from any contagion of guilt.

Pope St John Paul II, Dec 8 2003

This is an ancient teaching, but it remains controversial to some Protestants because it is not explicitly referred to in the Bible.

Early Protestant thinkers were more devoted to Mary than some of their successors.

Martin Luther, for example, was a firm believer in the Immaculate Conception:

From the first moment she began to live she was free from all sin.

Martin Luther

A 2005 report by Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians found common ground for this belief when it stated that:

In view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One (Luke 1:35), we can affirm together that Christ's redeeming work reached 'back in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings. (2005)

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed as infallible by Pope Pius IX in the Bull (official Papal document) 'Ineffabilis **Deus**' in 1854, and thus is an important article of faith for Catholics.

We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful.

Pope Pius IX, Ineffabilis Deus, 1854

Before proclaiming the doctrine the Pope took steps to see whether the Church as a whole agreed by asking 603 bishops whether he should proclaim the Immaculate Conception; 546 (90%) said that he should.

Bernadette's vision at Lourdes in 1858, where Mary revealed herself as the Immaculate Conception, put the stamp of God's approval on the doctrine.