

The Immaculate Conception

by Sebastian R. Fama

In 1854 Pope Pius IX affirmed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. He wrote, in part, "We declare, pronounce and define, that the doctrine which holds that the most blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, was preserved immune from all stain of sin, by a singular grace and privilege of the omnipotent God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ..." (*Ineffabilis Deus*).

We find support for this statement in Genesis 3:15 where God says to Satan, "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." The seed of the woman is Jesus; so, the woman is Mary. The seed of Satan is sin. Note that the word enmity appears only once, and it is applied to both situations. So, it must have the same meaning in both cases. If there is a complete enmity between Christ and sin there must also be a complete enmity between Mary and Satan. If Mary were to sin she would be cooperating to some degree with Satan and there would be no complete enmity. Logic would tell us that in order for Genesis 3:15 to be true Mary would have to be "Immune from all stain of sin."

Does this mean that Mary didn't need a savior? Not at all, remember that Pope Pius IX said Mary was preserved from all stain of sin "in view of the merits of Jesus Christ." There are two ways the grace of God can save us. We can be preserved from sin or we can be saved from sin. Mary was preserved from sin. On a smaller scale we are sometimes preserved from sin. By the grace of God, I have never killed anyone. I was preserved from a particular sin. There are murderers who have turned to Christ and no longer have the desire to kill. They were saved from a particular sin. In both cases a savior was needed.

Some claim that the woman in Genesis 3:15 is Eve while others claim it is the nation of Israel. Eve does not qualify because she sinned when she disobeyed God in the garden. Likewise, it couldn't be the nation of Israel as the Israelites were at times famous for their rebellion against God. There are others who identify the woman as the Church. This would seem to be the most unlikely choice as Jesus is the seed of the woman. This means that the woman came first. Clearly Jesus came before the Church as He was the one who established it.

Support for the Immaculate Conception can also be found in the New Testament. Luke 1:28 records the angel Gabriel addressing Mary with the words: "Hail full of grace" (Some Bibles say "highly favored one"). Note that Gabriel does not address Mary by name but by the title "Full of Grace." The Greek word *kekaritomene* (*κεκαριτωμένη*), which is translated as "Full of Grace" (or "highly favored one"), means, among other things, much graced or imbued with special honor. It is important to point out that the word *kekaritomene* is a perfect participle, which simply means that it refers to something that was completed in the past. In other words, it refers to a characteristic of Mary which pre-existed the event being recorded. While this is not an explicit proclamation of Mary's Immaculate Conception, it dovetails nicely with what we read in Genesis 3:15.

It is by the grace of God that we avoid sin. To be full of grace would be a prerequisite to being sinless. However, being sinless does not make Mary equal to God as some have claimed. Remember that Adam and Eve were immaculately conceived, though by another method, and no where do we read that they were equal to God. Likewise, Mary's Immaculate Conception does not make her equal to God. Adam and Eve became sinful by choice. And because of their choice, we, their descendants, have inherited their fallen nature. Mary, being full of grace, was created in the same spiritual state as Adam and Eve. Only in her case she chose not to sin. Scripture tells us that Jesus was the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). Expanding on this theme the early Church viewed Mary as the second Eve. Both women were conceived without sin, the first would fail; the second would triumph. Or as Irenaeus of Lyon put it: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith" (*Against Heresies* 3:22:4 [A.D. 189]).

But what about Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God?" Do you suppose that the word "all" includes severely retarded adults or babies who die at birth? Of course not. Paul is not speaking in the absolute terms that some assume he is. The meaning of this verse lies in its context. Who is Paul talking to? What is the issue being discussed? In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul is telling the Jewish Christians that they have no advantage over the Gentile Christians. In effect he is saying it doesn't make a difference, you are all in the

same boat. Jews and Gentiles have all sinned and fallen short. Mary's sin offering in Luke 2:22 does not present a problem either, as it refers to ritual uncleanness and was purely external.

A number of the Protestant reformers upheld the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Two notable examples are Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. Ulrich Zwingli was a Swiss Protestant Reformer. He wrote:

He who was about to remove our sins but not to make all men holy, must be himself holy. Hence God sanctified his mother: for it was fitting that such a holy Son should have a likewise holy mother...."; "I have never thought, still less taught, or declared publicly, anything concerning the subject of the ever Virgin Mary, Mother of our salvation, which could be considered dishonorable, impious, unworthy, or evil...I hope this is sufficient to have made plain to pious and simple Christians my clear conviction on the matter of the Mother of God: 'I believe with all my heart according to the word of holy gospel that this pure virgin bore for us the Son of God and that she remained, in the birth and after it, a pure and unsullied virgin, for eternity. (*Annotationes in Evangelium Lucae*, and *Sermon on "Mary, ever virgin, Mother of God"* [A.D. 1524]).

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation and the chief proponent of Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), said the following in a sermon: "But as the Virgin Mary was herself born of a father and mother in the natural way, many have been disposed to assert that she was also born in original sin, though all with one mouth affirm that she was sanctified in the maternal womb, and conceived without concupiscence." (*On the Day of the Conception of the Mother of God* [A.D. 1527]).

The early Church fathers called Mary "all holy," "all pure," "most innocent," "a miracle of grace," "purer than the angels," and "altogether without sin." In the year 244 Origen wrote: "This Virgin Mother of the Only-begotten of God is called Mary, worthy of God, immaculate of the immaculate, one of the one" (*Homily 1*). A few years earlier Hippolytus wrote: "He [Jesus] was the ark formed of incorruptible wood. For by this is signified that His tabernacle [Mary] was exempt from defilement and corruption" (*Orat. In Illud, Dominus pascit me, in Gallandi, Bibl. Patrum*, II, 496 ante [A.D. 235]).

One hundred and fifty years later Ambrose of Milan echoed the words of his predecessors: "Come, then, and search out your sheep, not through your servants or hired men, but do it yourself. Lift me up bodily and in the flesh, which is fallen in Adam. Lift me up not from Sarah but from Mary, a Virgin not only undefiled but a Virgin whom grace had made inviolate, free of every stain of sin" (*Commentary on Psalm 118:22-30* [A.D. 387]).

But why would Mary need to be immaculately conceived? Actually, she didn't need to be. To quote Pope Pius IX, it was "fitting." He goes on to say:

And hence they [the Church Fathers] affirmed that the Blessed Virgin was, through grace, entirely free from every stain of sin, and from all corruption of body, soul and mind; that she was always united with God and joined to him by an eternal covenant; that she was never in darkness but always in light; and that, therefore, she was entirely a fit habitation for Christ, not because of the state of her body, but because of her original grace. . . .

For it was certainly not fitting that this vessel of election should be wounded by the common injuries, since she, differing so much from the others, had only nature in common with them, not sin. In fact, it was quite fitting that, as the Only-Begotten has a Father in heaven, whom the Seraphim extol as thrice holy, so he should have a Mother on earth who would never be without the splendor of holiness (*Ineffabilis Deus*).

Mary was in every way a fitting vessel for Jesus who is our Lord and Savior and the Redeemer of mankind.