

The Early Church Fathers on The Immaculate Conception

In Genesis 3:15 God says to Satan: "I will put enmity between you and the woman [Mary] and between your offspring and hers [Jesus]. He will strike at your head while you strike at His heel." The seed of Satan is sin. The seed of the woman is Jesus. Enmity is a complete separation. God applies the term to Mary and Satan as well as to Jesus and sin. If Mary were to sin even once there would be no complete separation between her and Satan. Since the Word of God said there would be enmity between Mary and Satan, the Early Fathers believed it and taught accordingly. Those who say the woman spoken of here was Eve or the Church or even Israel forget that all of those entities either were guilty of sin or were comprised of sinners. Thus, there could not be any enmity between them and Satan.

The Odes of Solomon

So the Virgin became a mother with great mercies. And she labored and bore the Son, but without pain, because it did not occur without purpose. And she did not seek a midwife, because he caused her to give life. She bore as a strong man, with will. . . . [Implied as pain during childbirth is the consequence of sin Gen. 3:16] (19 [A.D. 80]).

Justin Martyr

[Jesus] became man by the Virgin so that the course that was taken by disobedience in the beginning through the agency of the serpent might be also the very course by which it would be put down. Eve, a virgin and undefiled, conceived the word of the serpent and bore disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy when the angel Gabriel announced to her the glad tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her, for which reason the Holy One being born of her is the Son of God. And she replied, "Be it done unto me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) (*Dialogue with Trypho* 100 [A.D. 155]).

Irenaeus of Lyon

Consequently, then, Mary the Virgin is found to be obedient, saying, "Behold, O Lord, your handmaid; be it done to me according to your word." Eve . . . who was then still a virgin although she had Adam for a husband — for in paradise they were both naked but were not ashamed; for, having been created only a short time, they had no understanding of the procreation of children . . . having become disobedient [sin], was made the cause of death for herself and for the whole human race; so also Mary, betrothed to a man but nevertheless still a virgin, being obedient [no sin], was made the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race. . . . Thus, the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. What the virgin Eve had bound in unbelief, the Virgin Mary loosed through faith (*Against Heresies* 3:22:24 [A.D. 189]).

Origen

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.D. 244]).

Hippolytus

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]).

Athanasius

The Word, then, visited that earth in which He was yet always present; and saw all these evils. He takes a body of our Nature, and that of a spotless Virgin, in whose womb He makes it His own, wherein to reveal Himself, conquer death, and restore life (*On the Incarnation of the Word* 8 [A.D. 319]).

Ephraim the Syrian

You alone and your Mother are more beautiful than any others, for there is neither blemish in you nor any stains upon your Mother. Who of my children can compare in beauty to these? (*Nisibene Hymns* 27:8 [A. D. 361]).

Ambrose of Milan

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]).

Gregory Nazianzen

He was conceived by the virgin, who had been first purified by the Spirit in soul and body; for, as it was fitting that childbearing should receive its share of honor, so it was necessary that virginity should receive even greater honor (Sermon 38 [A.D. 390]).

John the Theologian

And from that time forth all knew that the spotless and precious body had been transferred to paradise (*The Falling Asleep of Mary* [A.D. 400]).

Assumption of Mary

And a voice, as if of the Son of man, was heard, and the seraphim in a circle round the house where the holy, spotless mother of God and virgin was lying, so that all who were in Bethlehem beheld all the wonderful things (A.D. 400).

Augustine

We must except the Holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I wish to raise no question when it touches the subject of sins, out of honor to the Lord; for from Him we know what abundance of grace for overcoming sin in every particular was conferred upon her who had the merit to conceive and bear Him who undoubtedly had no sin (*Nature and Grace* 36:42 [A.D. 415]).

Theodotus of Ancrya

A virgin, innocent, spotless, free of all defect, untouched, unsullied, holy in soul and body, like a lily sprouting among thorns (Homily 6:11 [ante A.D. 446]).

Proclus of Constantinople

As He formed her without any stain of her own, so He proceeded from her contracting no stain (Homily 1 [ante A.D. 446]).

Jacob of Sarug

[T]he very fact that God has elected her proves that none was ever holier than Mary, if any stain had disfigured her soul, if any other virgin had been purer and holier, God would have selected her and rejected Mary (ante A.D. 521).

Romanos the Melodist

Then the tribes of Israel heard that Anna had conceived the immaculate one. So everyone took part in the rejoicing. Joachim gave a banquet, and great was the merriment in the garden. He invited the priests and Levites to prayer; then he called Mary into the center of the crowd, that she might be magnified (*On the Birth of Mary* 1 [d. ca A.D. 560]).