

# Mary's Immaculate Conception

## Introduction

"Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, 'full of grace' through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854:

The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not declared until 1845, belief in Mary's immaculate conception goes back to the earliest days of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> However, the Patristic support of this doctrine will be ignored to focus on its biblical foundation.

## Sacred Scripture

The angel Gabriel addresses Mary in a most extraordinary manner using the title "full of grace" which highlights the innermost state of her soul rather than using her given name. The use of this title is notable because it goes to the heart of Mary's formation in preparation for her vocation as mother of God and her participation in her son's work of redemption.

The Greek word used, *kecharitomene*, means "graced," "endowed with grace," or "highest grace." It indicates a perfection of grace.<sup>3</sup> The Greek verb used by Luke, *charitoo*, is rare. It is only used one other time in the New Testament (Eph 1:6). It belongs to a class of verbs ending in "oo" that are **causative**, that is, they indicate an action which **effects** something in the object.<sup>4</sup> To understand how St. Luke uses this verb it is necessary to explore Greek grammar.

The Greek language employs 9 distinct verb stems. These stems are important because they express different modalities of a verb's lexical meanings. Thus in the active sense *charitoo* means "to enrich with grace." In the passive sense it means "to be enriched with grace." However, in the **perfect passive participle**, as used in Luke 1:28, it means "to be enriched with grace in a permanent way." In addressing Mary the angel Gabriel attests that she is endowed with grace of a permanent and singular kind, **a perfection of grace** or **perfect holiness**. This implies that the *fullness of grace* is both intensive and extensive:

**intensive** - in that Mary's reception of grace was as complete as possible

**extensive** - in that it was applied to the whole of Mary's life, from the very moment of her conception<sup>5</sup>

In sharp contrast with Luke's use of *charitoo* as a perfect passive participle, St. Paul uses the same verb in Ephesians 1:6. However, the meaning is significantly different because the **active indicative** [*echaritosen*] form is used. "To the praise of his glorious grace which he freely **bestowed** on us in the Beloved" (Eph 1:6). The meaning here is "he graced," or "he bestowed grace." It expresses a momentary action which does not show perfection with a permanent result as does the perfect passive participle used in Luke 1:28.<sup>6</sup>

A comparison with another New Testament use of the past perfect tense will add clarity to the use in Luke 1:28. In John 19:30 Jesus proclaims: "It is finished." The meaning is clear. The work of redemption is complete both intensively and extensively. In other words, it is perfectly completed.

Martin Luther finds no difficulty in defending Mary's complete sinlessness based on Luke 1:28. "She [Mary] is full of grace, proclaimed to be **entirely** without sin... Moreover, God guarded and protected her from **all** that might be harmful to her"

Additional biblical support for Mary's Immaculate Conception is discovered in the Bible's exposition of Mary as the true Ark of the Covenant.<sup>8</sup> God demanded that only the finest materials and the purest gold be used in the construction of the Ark (Ex 25:10-22). Similarly, the Holy Spirit used only the purest material to tabernacle the Divine Son. For in Mary "the Word became flesh and dwelt [literally "tabernacled" or "pitched his tent"] among us" (Jn 1:14).

In her role as the New Eve, "the woman" of Genesis 3:15,<sup>9</sup> it is clear that Mary's victory in crushing Satan's head is complete through the infinite merits of her Divine Son. That would not be the case if for one moment Mary was under Satan's power through sin. For all eternity Satan could brag, "At least for that moment I possessed your mother." In addition had Mary been conceived in Original Sin, God would have done something less for the Second Eve, the favorite daughter of the Father, the spouse of the Holy Spirit and the Mother of Jesus Christ, than he did for the first Eve.

### **Some Objections**

Mary couldn't have been conceived immaculate, that is, free from Original Sin because she would not need a savior, since she would have nothing to be saved from. Yet, the Bible proclaims in Mary's own words that she had a savior. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my **Savior**" (Lk 1:46-47).

The fact is correct. Mary did have a savior. However, the conclusion is erroneous. Mary's Immaculate Conception indicates that she had a greater salvation. We have been saved **curatively**, that is, we contract Original Sin but Christ's atoning death frees us from it. Mary, on the other hand, was saved **preventatively**, that is, she was saved from contracting Original Sin because of the infinite merits of her Divine Son.

A second objection that is voiced is based on Romans 3:23 and 11:32. Those passages are as follows.

Rom 3:23 "since **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"

Rom 11:32 "For God has consigned **all** men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon **all**."

The argument is made that these passages use "all." "All" means just that all. It is a universal declaration that allows no exceptions. Thus to exclude Mary is contradictory to the clear meaning of these passages.

The problem with this interpretation is that this explanation of "all" includes Jesus. Yet, Jesus is clearly an exception (Heb 4:15). It would also include Adam and Eve, who were created by God free from sin. Jesus is an exception. Adam and Eve were exceptions. Clearly, then, Mary could be another exception without contradicting Romans 3:23 and 11:32.

If one argues that the passages cited in Romans refers to personal sin, as some Fundamentalists have done, the argument breaks down nevertheless. Jesus is clearly an exception. In addition, unborn babies are not capable of personal sin because they do not have the use of reason. St. Paul, for example, speaks of the time when Jacob and Esau were unborn babies as a time when they "had done nothing either good or bad" (Rom 9:11).

The reality is that there is no biblical basis for rejecting Mary's Immaculate Conception, but there is compelling evidence to support it.

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1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 491, citing Pius IX in *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1954: DS 2803.
  2. Charles Dickson, *A Protestant Pastor Looks at Mary* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., c. 1996), pp. 88-90.
  3. Father Mateo, *Refuting Attacks on Mary*, A Defense of Marian Doctrines (San Diego: Catholic Answers, c. 1993), p. 5; Stefano M. Manelli, *All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed: Biblical Mariology*, translated by Leonard Maluf (Still River: St. Bede's Publications, c. 1974), p.131.
  4. Ignace de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, translated by Bertrand Buby (New York: Alba House, c. 1994), p. 17.
  5. H.W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, c. 1968), pp. 108-109; Manelli, *All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed: Biblical Mariology*, p. 131; de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, pp. 17-20; Bertrand Budy, *Mary of Galilee*, (New York: Alba House, c. 1994) Vol. I, pp. 71-3.

6. Mateo, *Refuting the Attack on Mary*, p. 5.
  7. Jeroslov Pelikan, editor, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia) "Personal Prayer Book" 1522, Vol. 43, p. 40.
  8. For a discussion of the biblical basis for calling Mary the true Ark of the Covenant, see the essay: "Mary, the Mother of God - Where It All Begins."
  9. Ibid.
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