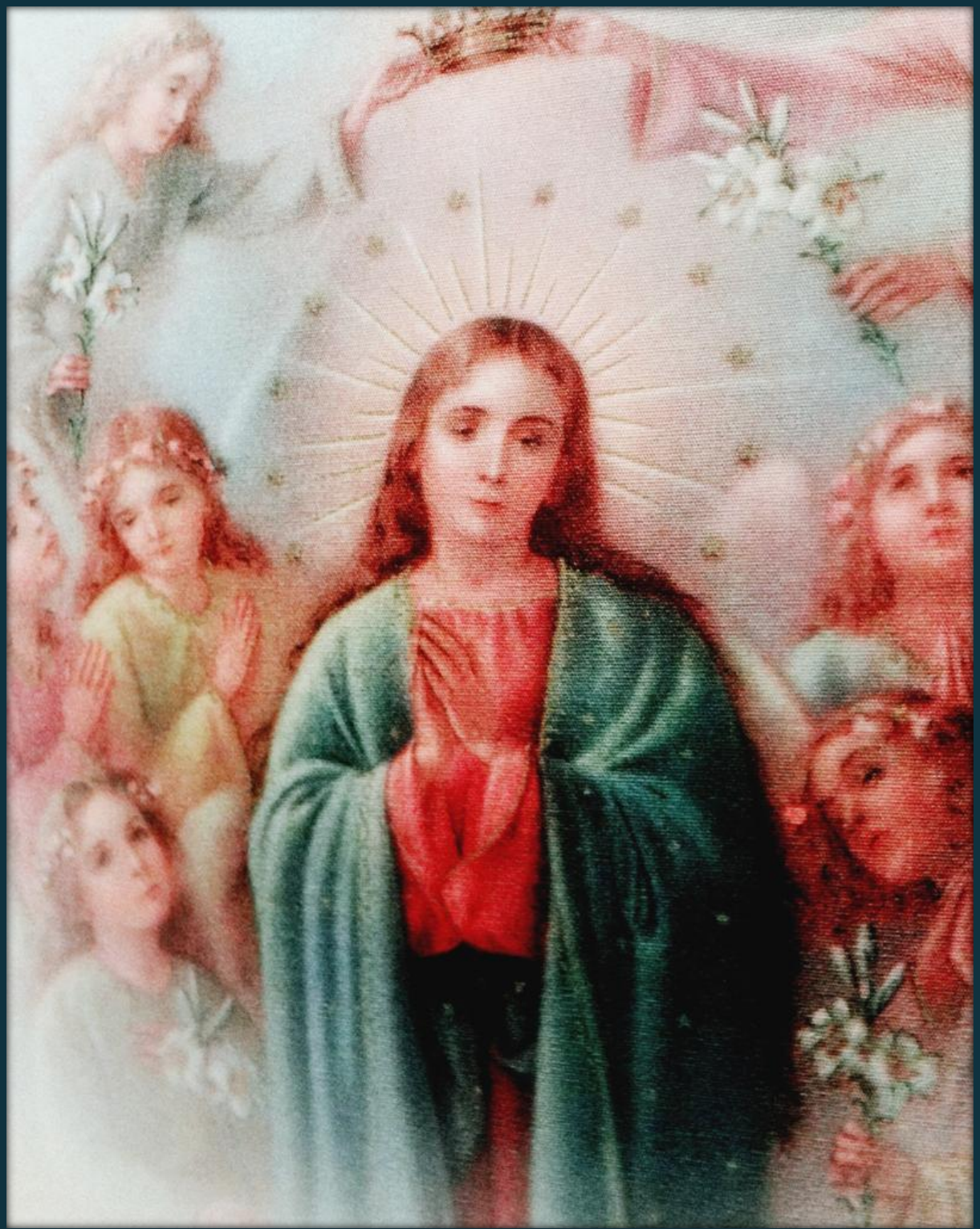




The Lady Was Immaculate

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Cover art taken from a hand-painted pall depicting

The Immaculate Conception

Courtesy: Servants of the Holy Family

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AREN'T we fortunate? At least we can always brag that we had one perfect woman. That should be important for us. We haven't made up our mind how to treat women, and women haven't made up their mind how they want to be treated. We don't quite know what we want from them, and they are very confused about what they want from us.

Yes, the twentieth century got women all mixed up. We idealized them and commercialized them; we adored them and we degraded them. We demanded that they lift us up and insisted that they let us drag them down. We were maudlin about mothers, but we gave publicity to childless divorcees.

Several generations ago a famous theatrical producer talked about, "Glorifying the American Girl," and started fashions that were pretty tough on those who wished to be decent.

We made women mistresses of our purses, but we filled those same purses by using them in advertisements must have made them blush, and baited our commercial hooks with their beauty.

Today marriage is the climax of all romantic fiction and theater and the beginning of problems like divorce court, soap operas, and sessions on the psychiatrist's couch.

One Perfect Woman

Yet poets, philosophers, painters, theologians, saints, and historians have a way of agreeing that we had and still have one perfect woman. "Our tainted nature's solitary boast," as Wordsworth sang in one of literature's most frequently quoted lines.

Strangely, Buddha is the world's most reproduced male figure. More artists have carved him in stone and painted him in frescoes than any man who ever lived. But Mary is the world's most painted woman. More women are called Mary or one of the names taken from Mary (Marian, Marion, Miriam, Marie, Marilyn, Maureen, and so on) than are named after any other woman that ever lived.

Wise Jews are proud that she comes in the long line of their distinguished Jewish women. Moslems usually speak of Jesus as the Son of Miriam. And only in very recent times, when some off-brands of Christianity thought to honor the Son by plaguing and distorting the Mother, has any Christian failed to be proud that Christianity gave the world the lovely Maid, the pure Virgin, the glorious Mother, the outstanding Heroine of all history.

It Starts With Christ

Catholics never forget that Mary begins with Christ. In point of time, of course, it is the other way around. In point of importance and logic and understanding, the Mother begins with the Son. But that is true of our whole Catholic world. Everything really begins or takes its new and true meaning from Christ.

The New World and the New Age begin with the Son of God. He is the fulfillment and climax of one half of history, the fountain and inspiration of the other. He unites the universe as the eternal Son of God comes to earth from heaven to show us the face of the perfect God made the perfect man. Divinity glows in the star of Bethlehem, the Transfiguration on the Mount, the miracles and prophecies of a lifetime, the perfection of His character, the splendid heroism of His death, the utter wisdom of His teachings, the amazing purity of His law. His humanity is ours raised to heights which become our most challenging aspiration.

He is all-simple and all-wise;

He is all human struggle and all human power;

He is the subject of four small volumes and the study of the ages;

He is the sinless among the sinful, the brilliant among the dull, the consistent among the inconsistent, the clear among the confused, the brave among the weak, the pure among the fleshly;

He is the Carpenter who, before He handled hammer and saw and planks, had given form and law to the universe.

Here is human perfection, the Perfect Man for whom philosophers had wistfully sighed. Here is our humanity at its highest, since it is divinity in humble disguise.

Who for His Mother?

This is Jesus Christ, the man the world has never dared forget, however uncomfortable it finds His law. This is man, as man would be, if he truly were like God; and God, as God became, when He stooped to the level of our earthbound existence.

For this perfect man, whom could God select as mother? For that matter, had we the selection, what kind of woman would we pick?

Certainly God would insist on a perfect mother for His perfect Son. And our sense of the fitness of things makes us give the same answer: Nothing less than feminine perfection to mother the perfect man.

Christ had for His one and only Father, the all-perfect God. The mother chosen for that perfect Son by the all-perfect God would in simple logic need to combine all the finest qualities we expect of motherhood, whether we mean the purity that precedes it or the absolute loyalty and gentleness, the care and tenderness that follow it.

This is what Christians (until very recent times) unanimously believed. They could not conceive a perfect Christ and a tainted Mother, an unselfish Son and a selfish, petty, irritable Dame. Like all mothers she gave Him life, was the very fountain from which His human nature took its origin. Then like all good mothers she gave Him His human education and training, her soul and heart and mind the sources of that "wisdom and age and grace" that marked His development. The Divine Nature of Christ proceeded from the Father in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity; the Human Nature was conceived by the Holy Spirit of the Mother on earth. It is inconceivable that that Mother should be other than as perfect as God's grace and her co-operation could make her.

Dear, Familiar Story

All who bother to learn the story of Mary, love it. It comes second in charm and graciousness to the story of Christ, her Son. Yet actually the two stories are so closely intertwined that the threads are often hard to distinguish. Where Mary is, Christ goes along. Where Christ goes, Mary follows Him.

The story of Mary had and retains its vivid and radiant climaxes:

The maiden of the Annunciation, dearest and best beloved figure in the whole history of painting.

The swift-moving and tender nurse of Elizabeth, whose child John was born to prepare the way for her Son.

The poetess of the Magnificat.

The incredibly beautiful Mother of the Nativity and the Queen of uncounted Christmas Days.

The modest, humble worshipper offering her Son in the Presentation in the Temple.

The “safe conduct” that guaranteed the safety of the Holy Child in that wild and hazardous flight into Egypt.

The dear companion of His Egyptian exile, and the guide of His safe return.

The loving mistress of the Holy House of Nazareth.

The successful pleader for His first miracle at Cana.

The self-obliterating watcher of His Public Life.

The heroic martyr upon Calvary.

The Mother whom He presents to mankind as a kind of final and climactic gift.

The security and centre of the frightened disciples during their wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Endless Tradition

Out of the vast volumes of legend and memory, of safe tradition and exaggeratedly pious fancy, the Church had preserved the lovely facts about Mary which the Gospels do not mention. It was not likely that the early Christians would easily forget the Mother who gave them Christ and who remained after His Ascension to be the Mother of the early Church.

All the Christians have loved to recall the presentation of the Child Mary in the Temple, and the years she spent in the Temple serving the sanctuary and mastering the law and the love of God. They dwell with affection on Ann and Joachim, her parents, and the wonder of her too-long-delayed birth. They cherish her betrothal to Joseph and the day of their chaste and unselfish marriage. Saints have meditated on what a house that contained Jesus and was managed by Mary would be like and have joined their souls in meditation to that perfect household. And all Christianity from the earliest days knew that the body of Mary, which had been tabernacle to the Lord of Life, would not know captivity in the grave. The Assumption of Mary and her Coronation by her Son as Queen of Heaven is not something recent piety invented; it was being recalled when Christians spoke their glorious good news in whispers and by night within the catacombs.

Mary's Returns

No generation has allowed the figure of Mary to seem a remote and distant reality. Her picture took on the features of every nation and race that painted her ... and all of them did. Something extremely fitting suggested to Christians that they name their churches for her. If her body had housed the living presence of the Incarnate Son of God, her name seemed to fit perfectly upon the churches that retained His living Eucharistic Presence.

And lest she be for a moment forgotten, God sent her back to earth in a perfect litany of apparitions. Mary has beautifully woven together earth and Heaven by her gracious comings and goings. From Our Lady of the Pillar to Our Lady of Fatima, Catholics have found it singularly right and proper that this daughter of earth who became the Queen of Heaven would return to the sons and daughters entrusted to her by her Son on Calvary. You who do not accept Catholic Faith may not accept the visions by which Mary repeated her presence upon earth. We with the Faith would find it almost strange if she did not return. We think it the restless love of a Mother for her absent children that brings her back recurrently to their waiting hands and eyes and hearts.

Important indeed. Candidly, we love Mary. We love her for what she did for Christ, our Redeemer, and for the unbreakable connection she bore Him. We love her for the dear Maid and gracious Mother she was in herself.

We are proud that the perfect Christ should have had for Mother the Perfect Woman. We are glad that the years of Christ on earth were spent in the pure, devoted, utterly unselfish companionship of earth's most radiant yet modest, glorious yet humble, exalted yet retiring, brilliant yet (seldom and then poetically) eloquent Maid and Mother.

We think it important that God's Son should have God's own choice for His Mother. And we doubt that God would pick less than the best.

1954

The year 1954 is a highly significant year. Because of its meaning, the Pope, Pius XII, pronounced it a Marian Year. One hundred years ago from 1954, the Holy Father, Pius IX, speaking out of the power that was Peter's, whose power had come with the voice of Christ, pronounced that belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary was an article of Christian faith. We call it the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

Actually 1854, over one and a half centuries and more removed from us, is recent history by the standards of the Church. Christ had been dead and ascended into Heaven over eighteen hundred years. The body of revelation had been closed with the death of Saint John the Evangelist eighteen centuries before.

How then did it happen that in that recent year, late in the Christian era, the Holy Father gave the world "a new dogma"? Even the word "dogma" has an unpleasant sound to many a non-Catholic ear. They forget that it simply means a Christian teaching, a revealed truth, one of God's guideposts along the road to Heaven, a basic principle by which men can more inspiringly and effectively live, a rule of right conduct, a basis for deeper inquiry into God's truth.

But "a new truth in 1854!" Isn't this something added to Christian teaching? Isn't it strange that at that late date Catholics were called upon to believe "something they had never believed before?"

Old as Christianity and Older

The fact is that the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception is as old as Christianity. We'll explain just what it means to Catholics in a bit.

But now, turn instead to the first time in Christian times that the truth was declared.

The scene is a lovely little house in Nazareth where an engaged girl is busy about the kitchen of her old mother Ann and father Joachim. The leading characters are the Angel Gabriel, recently sent from the Throne of God with history's most important message, and the young woman who was shortly to marry the village carpenter whose name is Joseph.

In the stark, detail-less mastery of essentials that characterizes the Gospel, we hear the Angel speak.

"Hail, full of grace!" he cries. "The Lord is with thee."

Never had words, since "Let there be light" rang out from the Creative Voice of God, been so packed with meaning.

"Hail!" he cried, addressing her as one who rated the greeting of high Heaven. "Full of grace," he called her. He did not call her "holy" or "saintly" or "my good woman!" He looked upon her with the vision of an angel and found her full of grace. More than that, at a time when the Gates of Heaven had been slammed shut by sin and God no longer dwelt with the children of men, the Angel saw that here was an exception. The Lord God was with her. Because she was full of grace, she knew the indwelling of God. And because God was with her, she was filled with grace.

This Before Christ Came

Now it is important to remember that Christ had not as yet come to redeem us. In fact, His coming hinged on a decision this young woman would soon make. Mankind had not yet been saved. Grace was not flowing in the abundant streams that were to be released by the hands of the Savior. It was an almost graceless world, a world without God's intimate and affectionate presence.

Yet the Angel looked upon Mary and found her different. She was not just a good woman, she was filled with the grace of God. She was not someone upon whom a remote God smiled in approval. The Lord of heaven and earth was with her.

Now the Jewish wise man had said gravely that the just man falls seven times a day. Mary was more than merely just; she was filled with the life and power of God, which is grace. She was pleasing in the sight of the Creator, Who turned away in distaste from sin and defect and evil.

In a world of sin, Mary shone like the bright Morning Star. Her beauty of soul was the Aurora preceding the coming of the Sun of Justice. The clear vision of the Angel saw her for what she was, saw her with the vision of God Himself, and he hailed her as no creature was hailed before or has been hailed since. This was not a goddess; Christians have never claimed or thought she was. Here is a woman beloved of God. Here is not infinity; but perfect cleanness of soul.

Her Consent

The Angel Gabriel knew his mission and went swiftly about it. He came because the Redemption of mankind was at hand. As man had been responsible by disobedience for the Fall, so a man had to be responsible by obedience for the beginnings of our restoration. A maid had unleashed upon mankind the evils of the Fall. A maid must speak the words that restored mankind to its lost heritage.

In a moment the Angel would ask her consent to mother the coming Redeemer.

His angelic eyes would have turned away from her had she been a child of sin.

Could the destroyer of sin, about to come, enter the world through a woman stained by Adam's and Eve's guilt? Mary was too important for Redemption to be herself unredeemed. She was soon to mother the all pure Son of God; she dare not be herself even slightly soiled.

She was to be Mother of the Son of the Most High, Partner with the Eternal Fatherhood of God, Bride of the Holy Spirit. Could such a one be the victim of Sin, her own personal sin or sin inherited from the father of the human race?

Gabriel knew he stood before the body that was to give flesh to the stainless Redeemer of mankind. She must be pure in thought, word, will, and affection.

He was in the presence of the soul that was to envelop Christ from conception through all His formative years. She could not be, even in passing, the partner of the Devil, the Adversary, the Spirit of Evil.

Her character and cast of thought were to be passed on to her Child. She would teach Him and be the model for the long years of His human development. God would not take her for so precious and exacting a task if He found her spotted and warped and out of true balance and line.

What Gabriel saw was a woman not touched by grace, but full of it. He saw not a girl of whom God approved, but a girl with whom God had taken His abiding residence.

This was not an ordinary saint. This was not one of the extraordinary souls selected by God for some high responsibility among men. Here was a woman filled by God with grace from on high. Here was a maid fit to be mother to the Son of the Eternal.

Farther Back Still

The story of Mary goes far, far back into history, long before we even hear her name.

It begins with the sin of a woman. Eve, too, had been full of grace. Because she was to be the mother of all God's children upon earth, God had given her His love and His grace. Then in the sad flirtation of Paradise, she turned from God's love to embrace the love of the crawling serpent, evil in its most repellent form. Her hand had led her husband to temptation and her love had lured him into sin. And as the unlucky two gazed upon the ruins of their world, they heard the rustling of the underbrush where the serpent slithered away in slimy triumph.

Dead was their inner life. Gone was their right to call God their Father.

Already they felt within them the stirrings of vicious temptations from which they had been spared.

They had used their will to choose God's enemy in preference to Him and their will felt sick within them. All history opened before them ready to be written in blood and tears. And they knew their guilt. Then the voice rang out in promise. The slithering in the underbrush stopped as the voice of God brought the Adversary to a sharp halt. This time the threat was directed at him.

"I will place enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; and she shall crush your head; and you shall lie in wait for her heel."

Falling back from his reared position in the dead leaves, Satan must have heard the words in bewilderment. The woman? What woman? He was surely not afraid of Eve. He had already won her in one of the easiest of victories. Was there some woman soon to come with heel destined to grind his head into the mud? As he scampered away to drop his evil disguise, and as he resumed a thousand still uglier forms in hell, Satan must have puzzled, wondered, watched, and appraised every good woman who resisted him to some extent. Eventually, Satan must have grown a little cynical about the threatened woman and finally become almost careless.

He probably invented for womankind the title "the weaker sex." Eve had sorrowed, but she had not sought him out to slay him. She had wept, but she had not caused him any major anxiety. Actually she saw sin triumphing about her. Her strong first-born, Cain, invented murder to practice it upon her dearly loved Abel. She bore her children in pain to see them reach the age of reason and turn it into the age of sinful consent. Satan soon lost all fear that Eve would be the woman or that her heel would find his head.

The Jewish nation produced more than its share of notable and noble women. The Greeks and the Romans were proud of Vestal Virgins and devoted matrons. Each in turn Satan regarded with speculative eyes. Their heels never sought or by-chance found him. His head they did not bloody or bow.

Sometimes we can believe that Mary was hidden away in the obscure village of Nazareth and in the tiny cottage of Ann and Joachim in a divine and effective effort to hoodwink the Adversary. Undoubtedly he was watching the palaces and the mansions. He did not dream that from pious poverty and the humble home of a royal line would come the Woman of Prophecy.

Yet Mary was the one. From her would come the Seed that descended from Abraham, the Seed that would conquer the prolific seed of Satan. Her virginal heel would rest squarely upon the head of the Adversary. He would, while she lived and once she was enthroned in Heaven, dread her with unholy hatred born of experience.

Mary would never for a moment be in his power. He would be under her heel, not she under his. She would be neither his partner, his pawn, his victim, nor his slave.

She would bring forth the expected Seed that meant the ruin of the Adversary, Satan, the brutal enemy of God. Her otherwise gentle heel would force his head back into the depths of hell.

All this demanded untouchable purity. All this meant a woman far beyond the power or dominion of Satan. All this implied an immaculate Maid who was a spotless Mother, and who had never been other than Full of Grace and with God.

What Does It Mean?

What does the Church mean when it speaks of the Immaculate Conception? Of the many, many non-Catholics I have heard object to this teaching, not one has ever really known what it meant. They were all angry about something the Church never taught. They objected to a supposed truth that is not Catholic truth at all.

I even caught George Bernard Shaw explaining the Immaculate Conception as if it meant that Mary had no father.

“I violently object to your Immaculate Conception,” says my good non-Catholic friend. “Only Jesus Christ was born without a father.”

“One virgin birth is enough for Christianity,” says another, expressing the same objection slightly differently. “I believe in Christ’s Virgin Birth; I do not believe in any other.”

Now it is very important to remember that the Virgin Birth of Christ and the Immaculate Conception of Mary are two entirely different things!

Jesus had no earthly father, but Mary certainly did!

Jesus was not born as the result of marital relationship between a husband and a wife, but Mary certainly was!.

Jesus had one divine Father in Heaven and one human Mother on earth. Mary had a father, Joachim, and a mother, Ann!

The birth of Jesus was a miraculous thing. The birth of Mary was wholly natural.

Something Far Different

The fact is that most people who object to the Immaculate Conception haven’t the slightest idea of what is meant by Original Sin. And if you don’t understand Original Sin, it’s a waste of time talking about the Immaculate Conception.

The word “immaculate” is clear enough in use. It means that a person is absolutely pure, spotless, without taint or blemish, and totally filled with grace.

We speak of an immaculate or spotless reputation. In doing so, we are using the word a little carelessly, but we know what we mean. We say a man has immaculate or unquestionable honesty. Here is a girl of such purity that we think of her as immaculately virgin. That is a very high compliment, and hard to merit.

Now when we speak of the Immaculate Mary, the Immaculate Virgin, the Immaculate Mother, we use the adjective correctly. We mean that she did not know sin in any way that touched herself. She did not sin in thought or word or deed or desire. She was “full of grace” in all the states of life that were hers and “the Lord was with her” every moment of every day.

But we Catholics believe that this immaculate character of her soul was something that began the instant her soul was created. At the very instant that her parents united in their marital love and her tiny body was formed in Ann’s holy womb, the soul that came to give it life was totally free from sin.

She was immaculate the instant she was conceived. This is what we mean by the Immaculate Conception.

Adam's Strange Sin

But, the puzzled will insist, isn't that true of everyone?

Am I suggesting that the rest of the human race is guilty of sin when the soul enters the body at conception?

Is a little tiny infant, without power or will or reason or movement, capable of sinning? Isn't this absurd? What makes Mary any different from any child of good, sound, wholesome, God-fearing parents?

To understand that we have to backtrack a bit and remember Adam and the first human sin of all.

The sin of Adam was a sin of disobedience. God had given him a simple command that was the test of his obedience, love, and gratitude. Adam disobeyed God, broke the command, and sinned.

This was, of course, his own personal sin. The guilt rested on his own soul. Because of it, he was no longer God's friend. He had lost the right to call himself the son of God. His soul was dead within him; the divine life of grace destroyed.

Thus far, except for his greater light and knowledge and strength of character and closer association with God, his sin was like all human sins. He was a disobedient son, but the world has been filled with disobedient sons. He had flouted the law of God, but so would countless millions of murderers and criminals. He had turned to the love of a woman, preferring her to the all-good, all-generous, all-loving Father, as other millions would do as long as men are men and women are women. He had become the partner of Satan, God's relentless enemy; but then, the Devil was to win the cooperation of more men than he bothered to count until they were checked in for final judgment.

This personal sin was terrible, but was not the end. For Adam was the Father of the Human Race. So the sin of which he was guilty, under a second aspect was called Original Sin.

Original Sin

Sometimes we talk of Original Sin as we talk of original music or original inventions. You'd think it was something fresh and new and different and never before undiscovered. In a way, that is true, for this was the first sin, the start of sin, something new on the earth. Yet some of the angels had sinned through disobedience in Heaven. They had rebelled and tried to drive God out of His own kingdom. In the sense of first and fresh and new and undiscovered, this angel rebellion was the original sin.

Adam's Original Sin means something different. It is sin at the origin of our race, It is sin of the original man. It is the sin committed by him, Adam, who is the originator of life for all the rest of mankind. It is the origin of our woes and misfortunes. It originated the great problems that were to stain the course of history and the record of human life.

To understand this a little more clearly, let's make a comparison: Suppose that somewhere back in history you had a rich and noble ancestor. He is trusted by his country, high in the confidence of the king, honored with titles, and rich in lands and resources. It happens to the amazement of his contemporaries and the bewilderment of historians ever since, that your ancestor turns traitor. He goes over to the side of the invader; he rebels against the country, government, and king. He takes up arms, fights with the rebels and invading forces, and in the end goes down with them to defeat.

His crime of high treason is, of course, his own. What he suffers by way of just punishment when he falls into the hands of the king and the loyal government is his own personal affair.

Unfortunately for you, however, that is not the end. He had those titles, that rank, those lands, that wealth. All are lost when he takes part in the rebellion. He was a rich man but he dies poor. He would have left you a title, the castle, and his vast wealth. Instead, he leaves you nothing, for he has nothing left to leave.

Today you look back regretfully and wonder why he was such a fool. People have a way of remembering you are a descendant of a famous traitor. You have none of the things he once had and tossed away in the folly of his rebellion.

You may blame him because you are poorer because of his crime. Though you are not punished by the present government because of his personal crime, you actually suffer very considerably because of things you might have had but never will have because he threw them all down the drain by his crime of treasonous rebellion.

The Parallel Is Simple

We do not share in Adam's and Eve's personal sin. That was their own crime and, for that, they knew their own personal punishment.

But Original Sin is something different. It is the loss of all the precious things, those supernatural and preternatural gifts, that God had given Adam for himself and, through him, for us and that he lost in his treason and rebellion.

You see, there are certain things God gave us that belong to our nature: our power to digest, to propagate, to walk, to use our senses, to think, and to choose right or wrong. God gave us our immortality, which is also part of our nature. God took none of these things away from the rebellious Adam and Eve.

But in addition to these, God had given His son and daughter other marvelously generous gifts. They did not properly belong to human nature but were added to it. That is why they were called Supernatural Gifts, gifts above our nature.

Man was immortal, but God added to this the promise that our immortality would be something like His own eternity. We would be happy not as mere men could be, but as God is; for we would possess Him and see and know and love Him as He sees and knows and loves and possesses Himself.

To make that possible, God adopted Adam and Eve as His children and gave them divine power, which we call grace. This is a tremendous power, like the very power of God. We have no right to it by our nature; God gave it to men because He wanted them to be like Himself.

God gave Adam and Eve the right to inherit Heaven. God's own Heaven at the end of earthly life would be theirs.

All this they lost in their treason. Had they kept these lovely and gloriously rich blessings, they would have passed them on to us, their children. Once they were lost, Adam had nothing to leave us. He was poor and we were born poor.

This loss of those things that God had given to Adam and Eve is Original Sin. We are born in Original Sin because we are born without the right to Heaven; without grace, the divine power; and without the "adoption of the sons of God."

Added Losses

All men and women are conscious of what Saint Paul calls the "war in our members." A pagan poet referred to it by saying, "I see the better things and approve of them, and then find that I go chasing off after the worse." We are often amazed at ourselves. What makes us, in the midst of good resolutions, suddenly find ourselves acting like beasts? Why do we, in holy places, have evil thoughts? Why does the flesh lure us to stupid and criminal acts?

Why does my mind say "Do," while my senses say "Don't?"

Why am I so easily thrown off balance? So easily upset? So quick to break my best resolutions? So prone to evil?

What about all this that is called concupiscence, the concupiscence of the eye, the concupiscence of the flesh, and the pride of life? Were we made that way? Does God delight to see us torn apart between resolutions and failure--high ideals and low temptations?

All this is part of Original Sin. Adam and Eve were created in perfect balance. They saw things clearly. Their will was strong and firm. They could measure temptation with a just appraisal. Their flesh was under control and never rebelled against them. They were part of the perfect balance that they saw in the world around them. The stars followed the paths marked for them without erupting into fantastic forays on other stars. Nature moved in its calm and beautiful cycles. Even the animals obeyed God's natural law. And so did Adam and Eve.

But their rebellion threw all that out of balance. It was a strange, cruel, unreasonable, illogical thing that they did--to turn from God to the serpent, to believe the lies of the Adversary instead of the firm and beautiful promises of their Father and Creator. They did not sin out of a great, fierce temptation, coupled with hot rebellion of the flesh. They sinned almost coolly, gravely, calmly, without great pressure and in the face of sublime knowledge and great internal power.

Our Loss Forever

So it was that their minds were clouded and darkened. They had thrown their natures out of balance. Their wills were sick and weakened. Concupiscence, formerly in calm control, now broke loose and caused endless trouble. They had unsettled themselves and unsettled the whole human race. And that unsettlement also came to us with Original Sin.

We find it slow to learn. We see darkly and often confusedly. We swing wildly between right and wrong, good and bad. We find ourselves ever battling with our flesh. We are unsettled, unbalanced, at war with ourselves, and often at odds with the universe around us.

Had Adam been faithful, we would have known his calm and balance, his clear vision and strong will. He sinned; he lost this almost automatic control of himself; and his confusion, unbalance, and rebellions came down to us.

So Original Sin is really not a personal sin at all. It is an inherited loss. It is a deprivation of something God wanted us to have but Adam threw away before we even got the chance to inherit it. It is a kind of spiritual bankruptcy, a sort of susceptibility to spiritual bad health passed on from our ancestors, just as material bankruptcy and bad health are passed to us from careless or wastrel forebears.

Original Sin shows itself in a weakness of soul and a sinister strength of rebellious flesh. It is clearly shown in our inclination to senseless and stupid and destructive ill and evil. It accounts for the fact that repulsive sin seems attractive and the Devil in a thousand disguises can trick us with apparent ease.

Christ Wins Back

But in the Providence of God, things were not to stay wrecked.

What one disobedient son had ruined, an obedient Son would restore. The wreckage of the first man was to be rebuilt into order and beauty by the Greatest of the Sons of Men. Since man had destroyed, man must repair. Since a son had gone bankrupt, a Son must win back the inheritance. What Adam had thrown away in reckless prodigality, Christ would regain in labour and suffering and final death.

That is the simple Christian belief. Christ came into the world, the perfect Son of God.

As man He was and had all that Adam had once been and possessed. As man He would win all this back for all mankind.

But this time God would not give it freely as He had to Adam. Each man who would come to the age of reason would have to decide for himself whether he wanted to be God's son, to inherit Heaven, to possess the divine life or grace, and to win those strengths and aids that would help him rebalance his nature.

Christ won all this on Calvary.

He gave the sacramental system to the Church, beginning with Baptism, by which men can (with God's grace) take for themselves what Adam lost, what Christ Himself possessed and won for all of us, and what God in His Providence desires us all to hold now and forever.

As for Mary

We are all conceived in Original Sin.

But we all have it in our power to win back, as life progresses, the things that were lost in Original Sin. Was this the case of Mary?

Christians who thought rightly never really believed that it was. They knew that the Mother of the All-Pure must be immaculate. Since Christ was to be born as the new Adam, Mary could not be like the sinful Eve. Since He was to conquer the Adversary, how could He bear the scornful laughter of that Adversary who would cry out, "Once upon a time, your Mother was in my power. The flesh that gave you birth was once inclined to evil. You are the Son of God, but once upon a time, your Mother was not the daughter of God. You are the Fountain of Grace, but once at her conception your Mother was graceless. Yes, you are with her now; but there was a time when the Lord was not with her." Such mocking laughter might well make hideous disharmony in the plans of Christ.

So Christians knew that Mary could never have been stained and soiled and tainted by Original Sin. She had to be God's daughter always. She must ever be full of grace. The Lord would have been with her from the beginning. And her flesh could never have known the concupiscence, or her nature, the constant unbalance that is the consequence of Original Sin.

They all knew it had to be. But how?

Reason for Delay

That is why the proclamation of the dogma came so late. The Church had always believed Mary was immaculate. The Saints called her Mary Immaculate. Theologians were sure this was true. But they had a difficulty: in point of time, Mary comes before Christ.

She was conceived and born long before He had brought about our salvation.

So since our salvation had not been won until Christ died on Calvary at the age of 33, when His Mother was at least forty-eight, how could she have been free from the guilt of Adam at the moment of her conception, almost five decades before?

Slowly they saw the explanation.

They had always been sure of the fact. Original sin in Mary? How dreadful! How out of line! How totally undignified for the Mother of the world's Savior.

But how?

Well, they knew there were Saints on the earth before Christ came to earth. True, when they died, these saints did not go to Heaven, however holy they might be, not until Christ had come, died, and released them from Limbo (the Limbo of the ancients). They had been forced to remain in Limbo until our Redemption had been completed. Yet they had won back their right to Heaven; they had become adopted sons of God; they had gained the grace and the strength to balance their lives and hold their passions in check. This they had done by faith in the Messiah and the hope that He would come to save them. They had anticipated His death; and in anticipation of His death and because they believed He would come and save them, they got the grace before He actually died. They could not enter Heaven. Yet they had been saved by what He would do when His time had arrived.

So, said the theologians in a sudden burst of light, it's really very simple. Mary as a daughter of Adam would have been in Original Sin. God, however, looked ahead and saw how pure and holy her life would be under any circumstances. She would have shunned temptation and lived without personal sin. Here was someone who might well be chosen to be the Mother of the Saviour.

But the Mother of the Saviour must be protected against those evils that lie in Original Sin. She must always be the adopted daughter of God. She must always have the divine life of grace. If she is to welcome God from Heaven, she must have the right to Heaven. And God must see that she has the balance of life, the clearness of mind, the strength of character, and the strength of will that befit the Perfect Mother of the Perfect Man.

So in anticipation of the death of her Son, because He would win back all that Adam had lost, God gave to Mary--in advance--what He gave to the people of the Old Law through their act of faith and what he gives to us today through Baptism and the other sacraments.

As Pius XII states in his Marian Year encyclical, the infinite dignity of Jesus Christ and His office of universal redemption is not diminished by this, but rather is greatly increased.

Happy Truth

In an age when the purity of women is so attacked and besmirched, at a time when pure mothers are vitally important, when sin must be conquered at its roots, and the Adversary, now winning so much support in powerful quarters, must be completely vanquished, the Church determined to remind the world of what Christians had always believed.

The Mother of the Immaculate Christ is herself immaculate.

Of course, she never knew personal sin. She loved God too much for that.

But because she was to be the Mother of the Saviour, she was saved from taint even before His death. She was without touch of Original Sin from the first moment of her being. She was brought into the world with all the gifts that God had given to Eve. Not even slightly was she under the power of man's enemy and God's Adversary.

Mary is our pure Mother and the spotless example for womankind. This is the meaning of the Immaculate Conception.

Could anything be more reasonable? Could anything more completely explain the facts?



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