

## “Immaculate Conception”

**H**er name was Miriam, a young girl, a resident of Nazareth, a small village in Galilee. The writers Matthew and Luke, some hundred years after the fact, describe her as a young maiden who conceived by the agency of the Holy Spirit while she was already the betrothed wife of Joseph of the House of David and awaiting their imminent formal home-taking ceremony (the concluding Jewish wedding rite).

Christians generally maintain that she was a virgin at the point of conception and at least until the birth of Jesus. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox Churches and some Protestant denominations also maintain that Mary remained a virgin throughout the rest of her life.

The first Gospel, Mark, which has no birth account, only refers to Mary twice: once on the lips of detractors who say “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.” (Mark 6:3) and this strange passage “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:31-35) So much for the veneration of Mary.

Apart from these passages and the birth narratives Matthew and Luke never mention the mother of Jesus again in their stories.

John’s story of Jesus does not have a birth narrative, so we first meet Mary at the wedding at Cana where she comes to Jesus complaining that they have run out of wine. After this she travels with him to Capernaum.

Then we don’t hear from her again until Jesus is crucified and Jesus asks one of the disciples to look after her.

Later writings, left out of the Bible, named the parents of Mary—Joachim and Anna. There are three places that claim to be the birthplace of Mary: Bethlehem, Seforis (three miles north of Bethlehem) and Jerusalem.

By the eighth century there were four feast days in honour of Mary the Mother of God: the Purification on February 2 where Mary at the age of three may a perpetual vow of virginity; the Annunciation on March 25 when the angel announces to Mary that she is with child; the Assumption on August 15 which is the belief that Mary went to heaven with body and soul united; the Nativity on September 8 her birthday.

It wasn’t until November 1, 1950, Pope Pius XII solemnly declared: “by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”

A hundred years before this Pope Pius IX that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary was declared. “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.” Simply put this means that Mary was free from sin for her whole earthly existence.

*Continued on page 2*

*Continued from page 1*

Now just in case all of this has you totally dazed, here is an old story that gives you insight into the whole development of Mariology within the church.

So one day in heaven Jesus approaches Peter who, acting in his roll as admissions officer, was sitting at the pearly gates. Jesus complains about the quality of people Peter is admitting into heaven, noting how many of them were of significantly questionable reputation. Peter responded, "I know Lord. But what am I to do? They come to me here and I turn them away. So they go around to the backdoor, talk to your mother, and she lets them in."

To the Medieval church, Mary was the approachable one. Her Son, the coming judge of the living and the dead, was more feared than revered in people's minds. Mary was the welcoming, understanding one, full of grace, to whom anyone could go for help, pleading that she beseech her son on their behalf. She was without sin and compassionate of all.

The virginal birth and the Immaculate Conception are simply theological extensions of this simple story. And if you can believe this, then there is no telling what you might believe. You might even believe the song that Mary sang. "Lord, you have shown strength with your arm, you have scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, you have put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; you have filled the hungry with good things, and the rich you have sent empty away."

The message is simply that the humbled have now been exalted, the powerful have been deposed, those formerly left with crumbs and hunger pangs are invited to feast. The day has come; we only have to recognize it.

In this age, the banquet table is set for a new clientele. It is a feast where the abundance of creation is shared equally with all for whom Mary sets the table. Joyce Holiday describes it this way.

At one corner of the table sits the homeless alcoholic who accepted a bus token from me one day and tried to sell it to a friend of mine the next. Next to him is the prostitute who moaned through the agony of heroin withdrawal in jail. And there sits the arthritic Mr. Washington from next door who always told me despondently, "The rich keep getting richer, and the poor keep getting nothin".

Never before has there been such a collection of the broken, the poor, the tortured. From all over the world come the refugees, the exploited, the ragged, the weary. And at the head of the huge table sits a young boy once crippled by poverty's personal attacks. A large tear of joy descends his cheek as his eyes take in with delight the feast before him: mashed potatoes and tortillas and fried rice, chitterlings and plantains, pork, and sweet potato pie. His eyes are as enormous as the pile of food in front of him.

The weak and lonely, now whole, join in laughter and share the global feast. Those whose food had been nothing but stark perseverance now revel in God's abundance.

Outside, peering through windows covered with the bars that they themselves once constructed, stand the hard-hearted, the selfish, the complacent. They cannot understand such a party. They alone are left out of this great banquet. For once a long time ago, a baby crept onto straw, and the event was too quiet for them to notice.

Inside at the foot of the table sits a figure with welcoming arms stretched wide to encompass all those seated around. He says, as if to answer the puzzlement of those who look in from outside, "For I the Lord love justice."

The son of Mary is about to be born. May he be birthed here, among us, within us.