

INTO THE DEEP

MARY

KEY TERMS:

- **Immaculate Conception** - The preservation and exemption of the Blessed Virgin Mary from every stain of original sin from the first moment of her conception.
- **Protoevangelium** - The first Gospel; in Genesis 3:15 God first promised to send a Redeemer to redeem humanity from sin.
- **Fiat** - Mary's willing "yes" to God's will as she told the angel Gabriel "Be it done unto me."

IMMACULATELY CONCEIVED

Mary has a number of roles in our Catholic faith – Mother of God, Mother of the Church, disciple, model of faith, intercessor, and the list goes on and on. When we hear about the "Immaculate Conception," we may think this refers to Jesus becoming incarnate of Mary. This, however, is not the case. The Immaculate Conception does not refer to Jesus being conceived in Mary's womb, but rather to Mary being conceived in her mother's womb.

The word "immaculate" means perfectly clean or flawless. So, an immaculate conception means that someone was conceived flawless, perfectly clean. We are not born perfectly clean or flawless. Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, we are all born with original sin. Christ died to rescue us from original sin, and it is through the Sacrament of Baptism that we are sanctified, or made pure, from the stain of original sin.

So if Mary's conception was immaculate, what does that mean? From the very first moment of Mary's life, the very moment of conception, God preserved Mary from the stain of original sin. Mary was handpicked by God to be the vessel by which Christ would enter into humanity. Her womb was the very first tabernacle. This privilege required a perfectly clean vessel so God set Mary aside from the very beginning.

Simply put, Mary was always in a state of grace. So, since Mary was always immaculate, does that mean she did not need a Savior? Absolutely not. Even though God set Mary aside, Mary still needed her Son to save her. Just like Christ's sacrifice removes our sin, Christ's sacrifice is what preserved Mary from sin. Without Christ, Mary would not have been immaculate.

There are two Scripture passages that help us to understand this truth about Mary's unique holiness. The first is called the protoevangelium, meaning "first gospel." Now, many of you might be thinking it must be a verse out of the first of the four gospels to be written. But it isn't. The protoevangelium, or "first gospel" is actually out of the Book of Genesis. It says: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel." This verse immediately follows Adam and Eve's eating the fruit in the Garden of Eden and in it God is directly addressing the serpent.

INTO THE DEEP

MARY

It is called the protoevangelium because it is the first time God promises redemption to fallen humanity. God, immediately following the first sin, promises us that He will send a Savior to redeem us. But He

doesn't just send anyone; He says He will send redemption through the offspring of the woman. Sound familiar? The woman in the protoevangelium is a prophetic foreshadowing of the Virgin Mary.

God says that He will put enmity between the serpent and Mary. Enmity comes from the word enemy and is a deep, mutual hatred. So God tells us, immediately after the Fall, that He will make the serpent the direct enemy to Mary and her offspring. In order for there to be true enmity between Mary and the serpent, she could not have ever been subject to him and sin. Therefore, God made her sinless from the moment of conception. As for her sinless offspring, this verse prophesizes that Jesus Christ will win victory over sin and death and, as we know, that is exactly what He did.

...ALL FULL OF GRACE

The second Scripture passage that helps us understand Mary's Immaculate Conception is the passage of the Annunciation. We all know the basics of that passage – the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, tells her not to be afraid and that she will bear a Son even though she had no relations with a man. This Scripture passage is a whole lot deeper than just the basics, though.

Read Luke 1:26-38

The very first thing we hear the archangel Gabriel saying to Mary is “Hail, favored one!” “Favored one” is a title the angel is giving to Mary and it was a unique title that no one had ever been given before. In the Greek, the title is *kecharitomene*. This Greek word is not used anywhere else in Scripture. Not only does it speak of the favor she found with God, but the fact that no one else in Scripture has ever been called this title, proves that God set her apart to be unlike anyone else.

Then Gabriel says, “The Lord is with you.” This may not seem important to us, but was very important to Mary. As a Jewish woman, Mary would have understood that every time that phrase is used in Scripture, God is asking someone to play a key role in the story of salvation. So Mary, upon hearing the angel Gabriel's greeting, was troubled because she knew that whatever the angel was going to say on God's behalf was going to be important. We know that it was very important. The angel Gabriel tells Mary, a virgin, that she will bear a son. But not just any son, the divine Son of God through a miraculous conception by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Talk about a lot of information to be hearing for the first time! Though Mary was spared from the stain of original sin, she was still fully human with the same thoughts and emotions as any of us. When you get really big information – life changing information – how do you respond? Do you ask a lot of questions? Do you see what your other options are? Do you ask for time to think and pray about it? Do you get angry and upset if it is something that changes the plans you already made?

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MARY

Not Mary. Instead, Mary says, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” This is called Mary’s fiat. Fiat is Latin for “let it be done.” Mary’s fiat expresses her complete obedience to God and His plan. But even more than that, Mary joyfully accepts and embraces God’s call for her. She has no complaints, concerns, or fears – only complete surrender to God’s will.

To play such an important role, one might think Mary had to be exceptional, but Mary wasn’t exceptional in anything other than her holiness. God favors the poor, humble and lowly servants who aid Him in fulfilling His plan for salvation and Mary stands out among them all.

THE NEW EVE

There was one other woman who had an immaculate beginning – Eve. She was also created free from all sin. But we know that she didn’t stay that way.

Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden changed everything – suddenly sin and death enter the world. Mary’s obedience to God during the Annunciation and every day after allowed God the Father to send His Son into the world to redeem us – suddenly sin and death were no match for the victor, Jesus Christ.

The Early Church Father Irenaeus explained Mary’s role as the new Eve: “The knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. The knot of which the virgin Eve tied by her unbelief, the Virgin Mary opened by her belief.” Eve’s disobedience brought sin and death into the world. Mary is referred to as the “New Eve” or the “Mother of the living” because she brought about abundant life through her Son. The Virgin Mary bore salvation in her womb.

Mary is given many titles for her roles in our Church. The title “New Eve” is a constant reminder of her faith and obedience and the tremendous fruit her virtue bore.