

The Immaculate Conception
– Sanctuary of Our Lady of
Sameiro, Braga (Portugal)



²⁶ The Angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ Then the Angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of David his father ³³ and He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ But Mary said to the Angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

³⁵ And the Angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; ³⁷ for nothing will be impossible for God."


³⁸ Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the Angel departed from her (Lk 1:26-38).

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
— DECEMBER 8 —

The Most Sublime Gift in the Order of Creation

In Mary, God wished to unite the unsurpassable dignity of divine motherhood with the greatest gift of grace, which restored the beauty of the created universe and began the history of our Redemption.

I - GOD'S VISION IS THE TRUE VISION

uring our earthly life, we human beings find it difficult to view events from a divine perspective. Because we are subject to the laws of time, our reasoning is discursive, while God—for Whom everything exists as present—has a different way of thinking. When we reach eternity and meet Him face to face, everything will be much simpler, as our intelligence will become deiform.

In this world, however, we know things by our senses, and we tend to regard only what they grasp as real, for we imagine this to be the most effective method of observing reality. But this idea is not correct, for everything is in God, as St. Paul taught the Areopagus of Athens, “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Each creature was in God from all eternity, and when He creates, He does this also within Himself, because nothing exists outside of God. While we see things externally, God sees everything within Himself, with absolute perfection.

Two ways of looking at reality

An example would be useful in furthering our understanding of this problem. In the past, astronomical observato-

ries were equipped with large and heavy scopes, called refracting telescopes. They were cumbersome and extremely costly to manufacture, because of the special lenses they required. With the advance of technology, such instruments were replaced by simpler, more efficient and less expensive reflecting telescopes that mainly use mirrors instead of lenses. By this system, the observer does not examine the stars directly with lenses, but rather, images of the heavenly bodies reflected in mirrors. The result is a more accurate and precise vision of the firmament.

Something similar happens with us: when we look with our poor human vision, it is like using an outmoded telescope. Conversely, if we seek things in God, we will see everything in Him with greater clarity and accuracy. This is why we should strive to discern facts from God's perspective instead of judging them on our own.

History seen from the divine perspective

Naturally, we view history chronologically. As we see it, for example, there was the creation of the Angels; one of them rebelled and was cast into hell, taking a third of the other heavenly spirits with him. Then, Adam and Eve were created and placed in Paradise, where they lived happily until the moment when, deceived by the serpent, they disobeyed God, and stained the universe with sin. Later, Our Lord came to redeem us. This succession of events is true, but insufficient, and far from being the entire reality! What, then, is this reality?

Clearly, we are unable to penetrate what takes place within the Most Holy Trinity. How can we tap into the brilliant loftiness of divine thought? They are three Persons Who are identical, yet Who derive supreme happiness from their mutual company! Try as we might, we will never form an accurate notion of how the order of the universe was idealized, with all the wonders it contains. Yet, there is nothing to prevent us from pondering this. Because of our nature, we need

images to help our understanding; we need to almost “humanize” God. Accordingly, we may imagine the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit planning creation, in a conversation held from all eternity. For us, just trying to conceive of something that had no beginning is already a hurdle...

The foundations of the universe

God has within Himself—we purposely use the word *has* because, as was said, for Him there is neither past nor future—infinite possible universes, Angels and men that were not created, as well as endless possible ways for humans to interact



Gustavo Kralj

In the edifice of creation, the fundamental rock upon which everything rests is Our Lord Jesus Christ

Monument of Pius VIII (detail) – St. Peter’s Basilica, Vatican

with one another, or humans with Angels, and so on, indefinitely. However, He chose and created this world in which we live, which is surely the best for the fulfilment of His designs, for since God is Perfection, He cannot prefer something inferior to what exists.¹ According to our concept, the formation of this universe would have been similar to the process of constructing a building. We begin with the foundations, established deeply in the earth, and upon them build up the walls, and finally add the upper parts. In the mind of God, however, the foundation is the noblest and highest point. Therefore, the plan of creation starts with the *princeps* of creatures; Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by reason of Him that the rest is constructed, as St. Paul teaches in today's second reading: "He chose us in Him [Christ], before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before Him. In love He destined us for adoption to Himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of His will" (Eph 1:4-5).

Now, it is common doctrine of the Church that, in the divine project, Our Lord Jesus Christ and Our Lady occupy the same place.² So God composed the universe taking both of them as His point of departure.

The most excellent of creatures

Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity incarnate, God and Man. He does not have a human, but rather a divine personality; He is the Son Himself, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, although He assumed our nature. Mary, Mother of God, has only a human personality, but she is the highest of creatures, the realization of the apex in the created world and even in the world of possible creatures that were never created. From all eternity, she was a cause of contentment for the three Divine Persons. We can imagine the Father, con-

1) Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. *Summa Theologiæ*, I, q.25, a.6, ad 3.

2) Cf. PIUS IX. *Bula Ineffabilis Deus*. In: DOCUMENTOS PONTIFÍCIOS. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1953, p.3-23; PIUS XII. *Munificentissimus Deus*, n.40; JOHN PAUL II. *Redemptoris Mater*, n.8; ROSCHINI, OSM, Gabriel. *Instruções Marianas*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 1960, p.22; *La Madre de Dios según la fe y la teología, vol. I*. (Ed.2). Madrid: Apostolado de la Prensa, 1958, p.177-178; ROYO MARÍN, OP, Antonio. *La Virgen María*. Madrid: BAC, 1968, p.57.




In the plan of the Most Blessed Trinity,
Our Lady was especially adorned with gifts
The Blessed Trinity – Hotel Monasterio, Cuzco (Peru)

templating her, exclaiming: “She will be my Daughter!”, the Son saying: “She will be my Mother!”, and the Holy Spirit: “She will be my Spouse!” In Their boundless love, They showered her with every fitting bequest from the beauties of creation and the treasures of grace, and crowned her with a singular gift: the Immaculate Conception.

It should be recalled here that this gift, like all the other prerogatives of the Blessed Virgin, flows from her essential privilege—divine motherhood. It was this unsurpassed dignity that raised her in a relative but authentic way to the seventh plane of creation; that of the hypostatic order. These premises give us a better understanding of the Liturgy of this Solemnity, whose first reading and Gospel bring us two Scriptural passages alluding to the Immaculate Conception: the famous verse of Genesis called the *Protoevangelium* (cf. Gn 3:15) and the Angel’s salutation to Mary (cf. Lk 1:28), respectively. As

this text of St. Luke has been discussed on other occasions,³ let us take this opportunity to make some considerations on the Immaculate Conception, based on the episode narrated in the first reading (Gn 3:9-15, 20). In the plan of creation mapped out by God, this incident was included as the antipode of the one we celebrate today.

II - “I WILL PUT ENMITY BETWEEN YOU AND THE WOMAN”

ove is eminently communicative: those who love someone for love of God want to give themselves entirely to the one they love. God loves us in this way from all eternity. Therefore, in addition to setting man as king of creation, placing the other earthly creatures under his dominion, He gave him an abundance of natural, preternatural, and supernatural gifts. Adam and Eve, however, accepted the devil's offer—“you will be like God” (Gn 3:5)—and tasted the forbidden fruit, after which they suffered the consequences of their disobedience. Feeling their emptiness, or frustration, which is the inevitable sensation resulting from mortal sin, they tried to hide from God. Since then, as a consequence of original sin, humanity has fallen into the same error; that of fleeing from God after committing a fault. This attitude is a veritable spiritual suicide. The example of David, of St. Mary Magdalene, of St. Augustine and of so many other Saints throughout history who were mercifully received when, repenting of their errors, they beseeched God's pardon, shows us how mistaken our first parents were. At every moment, God is there, ready to forgive us.

3) Cf. CLÁ DIAS, EP, João Scognamiglio. Can Mary Re-establish the Order of the Universe? In: *Heralds of the Gospel*. Nobleton. n.53 (Mar., 2012), p.10-17; Gospel Commentary for the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, in this same volume; Gospel Commentary for the Fourth Sunday of Advent — Year B, in Volume III of this collection.

The sinner always seeks to justify himself

The Creator then asked the man, “Where are you?” (Gn 3:9). Obviously, God already knew... Adam was within Him! But this was a way of awakening his conscience and leading him to recognize his sin. And so Adam tried to explain himself: “I heard You in the garden; but I was afraid” (Gn 3:10).

Again, despite having full knowledge of all that had happened, the Lord enquired: “You have eaten, then, from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat!” (Gn 3:11) With this dialogue, God adapted Himself to the human mode of reason, to lead Adam, who was already trying to forget his guilt, to contrition. Whoever commits a mortal sin—in this case, one of disobedience—tends to immediately create a justification for his action. No one practices evil for the sake of evil.⁴ Adam and his wife sinned with the illusion of obtaining a good: being equal to God. So Adam excused himself: “The woman whom You put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it” (Gn 3:12). That is, instead of asking forgiveness, he imputes the responsibility of the crime to God, as if to say: “The fault is Yours, not mine. You created this woman; she brought me the fruit and I ate it.” Eve reacted similarly to God’s questioning: “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate” (Gn 3:13). When we do not assume responsibility for our error, we invariably cast the blame on others.

The consequences of sin... and God’s plan

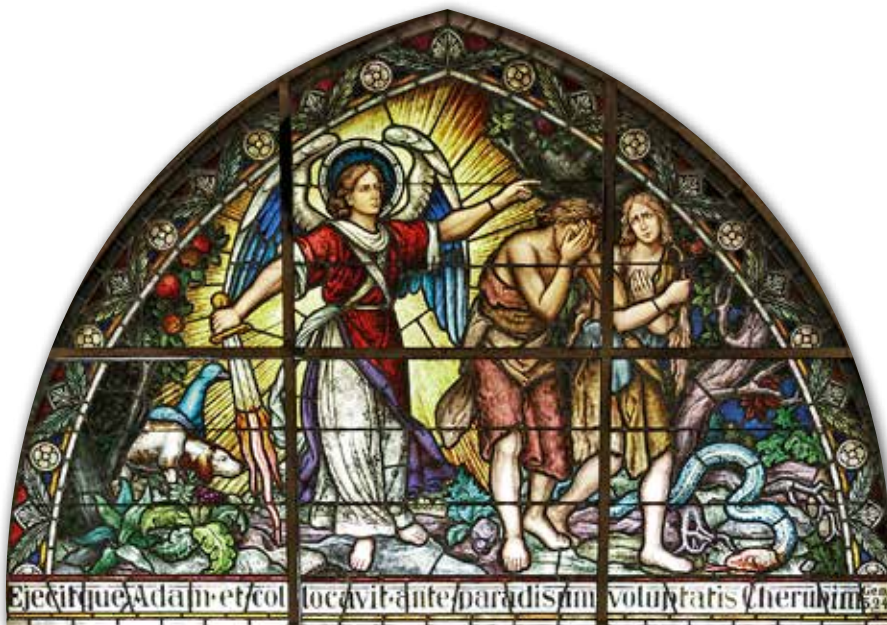
The consequences of original sin are drastic for humanity. For having engaged in enmity with God, Adam and Eve lost sanctifying grace and, with it, all their other supernatural gifts. Moreover, they forfeited their preternatural gifts, such as immortality and integrity—that perfectly stable balance between the passions, the reason, and the will—and, in Adam’s case, infused knowledge. Human nature was weakened,⁵ as the intelligence became darkened and the will leaned toward choosing evil. Adam

4) Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, op. cit., I-II, q.77, a.2.

5) Cf. ROYO MARÍN, OP, Antonio. *Dios y su Obra*. Madrid: BAC, 1963, p.499-500.

and Eve were left weak in the fight against temptation. And as their descendants, we also receive this legacy from them.

No human being was capable of paying this debt. And although God could have forgiven it freely and unconditionally, since He was both the offended party and the Judge, the Second Person of the Trinity wanted to offer reparation to the Father, by assuming flesh to operate the Redemption. Therefore, after cursing the serpent which the devil used as an instrument of temptation, God declared: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel” (Gn 3:15 –DR). These words contain a synopsis of the Gospel message, because “by this divine prophecy, the merciful Redeemer of mankind, Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son of God, was clearly foretold; His most Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary, was prophetically indicated; and, at the same time, the very enmity of both against the evil one was significantly expressed. [...] The most holy Virgin, united with Him by a most intimate and indissoluble bond, was, with Him and through Him, eternally at



Sebastián Cadavid

The expulsion of our first parents from Paradise
brought every form of disgrace for humanity

Adam and Eve expelled from Paradise – San Rafael Church, Heredia (Costa Rica)

enmity with the evil serpent, and most completely triumphed over him, and thus crushed his head with her immaculate foot.”⁶

How did Our Lady crush the devil’s head? The answer comes to us in the Gospel. While Eve, accepting the serpent’s temptation, drew a curse upon the human race, Mary, by saying “may it be done to me according to your word”(Lk 1:38), and consenting to be used as the venue for the clash between the Son of God and satan, defeated not only sin, but also death.

Sin serves to highlight Mary’s immaculate purity

It was in light of this “*Fiat!*” that the Blessed Virgin received the gift of the Immaculate Conception, filling the whole universe with joy, as its primeval beauty, marred by the stain of Adam’s guilt, was restored and received something additional in Mary. The mineral, vegetable, animal, human and spiritual kingdoms represented in her, were elevated by Mary’s fullness of grace and her relative participation in the hypostatic plane. In her are thus summarized the seven degrees of creation.

Here, what was said at the beginning applies: if we set aside our human perspective of the chronological succession of events, and look at things from God’s eyes, we will understand that He chose this world, in which there was both the sin of the angels and of men, because in it, the mystery of the Incarnation and the privilege of Our Lady, free of all sin, would shine the most brilliantly. If there had been no original sin, her immaculate purity would not be as splendid and glorious.

III - THE GLORY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

According to an expression repeated by many Saints, *de Maria nunquam satis* — of Mary, one can never say enough.⁷ And just as we never feel sated of hearing about her, we

6) PIUS IX, op. cit.

7) Cf. ST. LOUIS MARIE GRIGNION DE MONTFORT. *Traité de la vraie dévotion à la Sainte Vierge*, n.10. In: *(Euvres Complètes*. Paris: Du Seuil, 1966, p.492-493.

must also never be complacent when it comes to glorifying her. By establishing the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in Advent, the Church suspends the austere character of this liturgical time to celebrate it with pomp and rejoicing. Among the abundant reflections which this celebration awakens, let us remember that this exceptional gift of Mary represents a triumph of Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, for all that is hers is due to the fact of her being His Mother. In this way, the tribute we pay to the Mother has the Son as its cause and its ultimate object.

The divine motherhood was precisely one of the arguments which popular piety used to support the Immaculate Conception, long before the proclamation of the dogma. Through the natural process of gestation, Our Lady's blood was used in the physical constitution of the Saviour, so that the Flesh and Blood of Jesus is the flesh and blood of Mary. It would be absurd to imagine the God-Man being formed from impure blood, in a maternal womb tainted by original sin, for an impure wellspring cannot bring forth purity. In virtue of the Incarnation, Mary had to be free of sin. If we uphold the divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we must also defend the Immaculate Conception of His Mother.

Another beautiful aspect of this privilege is the glory it signifies for the Church, of which Our Lady is Mother. Since the Church's mission is to fight sin, diminish its effects and distribute grace to souls, there can be no greater honour for it than to have a Mother and Queen who is Immaculate and full of grace. But the Church, in turn, in relation to Mary, exercised its sanctifying office with a perfection impossible to equal in any other creature. For during the years of the Blessed Virgin's life after Jesus' Ascension, as she maternally guided and supported the nascent Church, she benefited from the Sacrament of the Eucharist, each Communion unfathomably increasing the extraordinary treasure of grace she had received in her Immaculate Conception.

The proclamation of the dogma

It was the privilege of Blessed Pius IX—whose long pontificate unfolded during a period of great tension against the

Church—to include this Marian title among the dogmas of Faith.

The Catholic world was already prepared, especially since the Holy Father and several of his predecessors had long promoted devotion to the Immaculate Conception, along with the prohibition of spreading these contrary to this doctrine.

It is recounted that, on one occasion, the Pope having been exiled to Gaeta, Cardinal Lambruschini said to him: “Holy Father, Your Holiness will not change the world except by declaring the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.” It was shortly afterwards, on February 2, 1849, that the Pope launched the Encyclical *Ubi Primum*, addressed to the Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops and Bishops of the Universal Church, to consult them on the question.⁸ With very few exceptions—less than ten percent of a total of more than 600 letters—the responses were favourable. When he returned to Rome in 1850, Pius IX convoked all the bishops of the world to contribute to the work of the commission charged with preparing the Bull defining the dogma.⁹

Finally, on December 8, 1854, at eleven o’clock in the morning, two hundred ecclesiastical dignitaries gathered in St. Peter’s Basilica, including Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, for a solemn Pontifical Mass, during which the ceremony for the defini-



Classical Numismatic Group

Among the glories of the long pontificate of Pius IX, is that of having proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady

Commemorative medal struck in the Pontifical States in the sixth year of the pontificate of Pius IX

8) Cf. BIBLIOTHÈQUE DES ÉCOLES CHRÉTIENNES. *Pie IX. Nouvelle Biographie*. Tours: Mame et C^{ie}, 1852, p.84-89.

9) Cf. VILLEFRANCHE, Jacques-Melchior. *Pio IX. Sua vida, sua história e seu século*. São Paulo: Panorama, 1948, p.130-133.

tion of the dogma took place. Before the Offertory, Cardinal Macchi, dean of the Sacred College, approached the Pope seated on the pontifical throne, and addressed to him the prescribed and ceremonial supplication on behalf of the Church: “Holy Father, deign to raise Your apostolic voice during the celebration of this unbloody sacrifice already begun, and pronounce the dogmatic decree of the Immaculate Conception, which will be a subject of new jubilation in Heaven, and fill the world with joy.” Rising, Pius IX ordered that the *Veni Creator Spiritus* be intoned, accompanied in unison by all present. At the end of this chant, the people knelt, and the Pope, standing, began reading the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, whose climax consisted in the following words:

“Wherefore, in humility and fasting, we unceasingly offered our private prayers as well as the public prayers of the Church to God the Father through His Son, that He would deign to direct and strengthen our mind by the power of the Holy Spirit. In like manner did we implore the help of the entire heavenly host as we ardently invoked the Paraclete. Accordingly, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for the honour of the Holy and undivided Trinity, for the glory and adornment of the Virgin Mother of God, for the exaltation of the Catholic Faith, and for the furtherance of the Catholic religion, by the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own:

We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.”¹⁰

After the proclamation, a cannon salute was heard from Castel Sant’Angelo together with the pealing of the bells of the Eternal City, celebrating the Church’s official recognition of this Marian privilege, which makes the Heavens rejoice, and hell

10) PIUS IX, op. cit.



AlfvanBeem

The dogmatic definition of the
Immaculate Conception of Mary filled Christendom with joy

Pius IX proclaims the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin – Vatican Museums

tremble; it fills her children on earth with consolation and her adversaries with misery. In short, it is a dogma which highlights the enmity between the offspring of the Virgin and that of satan.

Some considerations on the formula of the dogma

The beauty and precision of the terms used in the dogmatic formula are worthy of admiration. For example, the expression “in the first instance of her conception” indicates that Mary was free from sin from the moment that God, so to speak, pronounced the *fiat* for her creation and she began to exist in time, just as she had been idealized from all eternity. The words “by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God” make it clear that it would have been normal for Our Lady to have been conceived with the stain of sin like any descendant of Adam and Eve; but since nothing is impossible with God, He wanted to waive this inheritance of death for His Mother. The fundamental theological argument for the dogma is then expressed: “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, [she] was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” Explaining this doctrine, theology uses an expressive analogy: the two ways of redeeming a captive. In some cases, a captive, being in prison, is released upon the payment of a ransom. There are other cases, however, in which the person faced the risk of being taken into captivity, but someone paid his ransom before this happened. Recalling that eternal conversation of the Blessed Trinity, we may suppose that the Son addressed the Father, saying: “Before original sin touches My Mother, I apply to her the price of My Blood which will be shed on Calvary.” Having been the object of this preventative Redemption, “Mary shares in common with all men, the fact of having been redeemed by the Blood of her Son; but with something particular, for this Blood was taken from her chaste body. [...] She shares in common with us that this Blood was poured out to sanctify her; but has in particular that she herself was its source. We may thus say that Mary’s conception is, as it were, the first origin of the Blood of Jesus. It is from there that this beautiful river began to spread, this river of graces that flows in our veins by the Sacraments, carrying the breath of life to the whole body of the Church.”¹¹

11) BOSSUET, Jacques-Bénigne. II^e Sermon pour la Fête de la Conception de la Sainte Vierge. In: *Œuvres choisies*, vol. X. Versailles: Lebel, 1822, p.34.

Therefore, the story of our Redemption began with Our Lady's conception. Today's Solemnity is the feast of the liberation of those who were slaves of the devil but surrender themselves completely to Our Lord Jesus Christ, by the hands of the Blessed Virgin. We are children of Mary Immaculate! And just as we cherish our natural mothers, so much the more should we love the Mother of our supernatural life! Filled with gratitude, let us ask her that, just as she triumphed over sin, she triumph also in our soul, enlightening it with a ray of her immaculateness. And cleansed from all our defects, may we be assisted by her Divine Spouse, and be transformed into effective instruments for the hastening of another triumph, the one that she promised at Fatima and for which we so long: that of her Wise and Immaculate Heart. ✧

Just as Our Lady triumphed over sin, we are confident that she will also triumph over the failings of souls who duly seek her maternal aid

The Immaculate Conception –
Chapel of the Major
Seminary of Quito



