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# **The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

by

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Ad majorem Dei gloriam.

**Table of Contents:**

Preface.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Development of the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.....	5
Preparation for the Definition.....	23
Definition/Papal Bull.....	26
The Immaculate Conception Since <i>Ineffabilis Deus</i> .....	33
Conclusion.....	38
Concluding Prayer to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.....	41
Bibliography.....	42

## Preface

This thesis is dedicated to Jude Margaret Ranney and Isaac Joseph Ranney, two souls gone before ever truly known. We pray that God welcomes these souls into the eternal abode of Heaven and that the parents may be showered with incomprehensible blessing. May the Lord heal the wounds from these precious lives that were gone too soon. Immaculate Heart of Mary, be our comfort and be our peace! Amen.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to highlight notable circumstances and schools of thought which led up to Blessed Pope Pius IX's 1854 Proclamation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Namely, this paper seeks to show how the Immaculate Conception transitioned from a tradition held by the faithful to official Catholic Church dogma functioning as a core teaching of Catholicism. The Immaculate Conception's impact on Catholic teaching cannot be understated, and it has thus secured a place of importance in Mariology.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “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> Fourteen centuries would pass before this belief became formally defined. To what end? The solution would not present itself until 1854 when Pope Pius IX formally defined the Immaculate Conception in the *Ineffabilis Deus*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori Publications, 1994), 123-124, ¶ 491.

The Blessed Virgin Mary said “yes” to the Angel Gabriel when asked to be the Mother of God (*Theotokos*; in the Greek, “God-bearer”) at the Annunciation (Luke 1:38).<sup>2</sup> Tradition and Catholic teaching understand this moment to be that in which Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit without Mary’s having had relations with a man (Luke 1:34). This is Christ’s Incarnation, which is not to be confused with Mary’s own previous Immaculate Conception.

Even from a soteriological perspective, one can recognize that Christ, the Savior of the World Who redeemed humanity from sin, ought to be sinless. Christ’s Hypostatic Union (from the Greek *hypostases*; the union of being true God and true Man) predisposes one being open to the idea of His being born sinless. Yet this is not so obvious for Mary, since she is solely human. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “to become the mother of the Savior, Mary ‘was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role.’ The angel Gabriel at the moment of the Annunciation salutes her as ‘full of grace.’”<sup>3</sup> Mary’s saying “yes” to Gabriel was her own free will, and “in order for Mary to be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God’s grace.”<sup>4</sup> Mary’s birth by natural conception and thus bearing Jesus Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, became a conflicting scenario for the Church. How was it that Mary, born of natural conception (the understood cause of original sin on the soul), could conceive and bear a Christ, born free of original sin? Does this not imply that Mary was also free of original sin?

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<sup>2</sup> New American Bible (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1987). [Nota bene: I will be using the New American Bible henceforth in all Biblical references].

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori Publications, 1994), 34-35, ¶ 122-124.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori Publications, 1994), 34-35, ¶ 122-124.

In what follows, I am going to examine the development of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. I will first look at the early Christian doctrine, review early debates that took place during this time period, and highlight various Marian devotions. This will be achieved by reviewing the history of the Immaculate Conception, the Church's understanding of it, and explaining why the Catholic Church deemed it necessary for definition. These steps consist of reviewing writings from Church Fathers, exploring development of devotion to Mary during the medieval period, referencing Mariologists, and analysis of the eventual Papal bull.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**

The concept of Marian devotion is commonly understood to have arisen around the fourth century as a result of some traditions' veneration of her sinless life, in addition to influential authors like St. Athanasius (d. 373).<sup>5</sup> The faithful deemed this sinless life worthy of praise since its implications mean that God had chosen Mary for the special purpose of bringing Christ (the Sinless and Spotless Lamb) into the world. Even while this tradition was in its inception, there was still major silence regarding the Immaculate Conception within the Church for the first few hundred years.

There is not much evidence for the Immaculate Conception in Scripture. The Immaculate Conception, therefore, is truly a gradual movement whereby the faithful who had devotions to her saw legitimate reason for greater veneration. The Bible makes it clear that Mary is indeed "full of grace" per Luke's Gospel and thus, she is worthy of honor.

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<sup>5</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 11.

Mariologist Hilda Graef says “from the beginning of the world Mary was exempt from the fall of Adam – which would mean she did not need to be redeemed.”<sup>6</sup> Mary must not, however, have her exemption from original sin misconstrued as equating her to some sort of redemptrix that works separately from Christ. Christ alone has saved humanity from its sin. “Mary, like Christ, preceded Adam and was present at the creation of the world, because the Incarnate Christ was already there,” she says.<sup>7</sup> Further, Graef points out that “preservation from sin is a greater good than forgiveness; therefore, the Blessed Virgin, into whose soul grace had been infused at the first moment of her conception, was more indebted to her Son than those into whom it was infused only at baptism.”<sup>8</sup>

The ‘splendor of an entirely unique holiness’ by which Mary is ‘enriched from the first instant of her conception’ comes wholly from Christ: she is ‘redeemed, in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son.’ The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person ‘in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places’ and chose her ‘in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before Him in love.’<sup>9</sup>

Accepting and understanding Mary’s Immaculate Conception is intrinsically adjoined to properly understanding Jesus Christ. Since Mary and Christ are so intrinsically tied together, conflicts about Mary carried weight because they had potential to affect Christological understanding. For example, concern about the Blessed Virgin Mary arose in the Turkish town

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<sup>6</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 54.

<sup>7</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 51.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori Publications, 1994), 34-35, ¶ 122-124.

of Ephesus around 431, with public outrage over the heretical teaching of Nestorius, who refused to acknowledge the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Mother of God. While not specifically pertaining to the Immaculate Conception, this controversy is noteworthy in demonstrating the faithful's devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Mother of God.

Nestorius' position did not deny that Jesus was God. Yet his understanding of the divine linkage was shakier than that of his contemporary, St. Cyril. For example, Nestorius would frequently confuse Biblical references to humanity with those of divinity. Nestorius' teaching had the potential to not only lead souls astray from the Church but also capability to alter the landscape of Mariological understanding. Had his following grown, perception and belief in Mary's role and place in the Church could have well changed for the worse. Moreover, fundamental understandings of Christ's divinity and humanity might become skewed, such as the Catholic doctrine and belief in Christ's Hypostatic Union or of Christ's Incarnation.

A council was promptly called to settle the matter, presided by St. Cyril of Alexandria. The council lasted all day, resulting in the council's determination that Nestorius' teachings were false. Cheering with joy, the rejuvenated faithful spread perfumes and flowers in the path of the council fathers. Indeed, the faithful held Mary in great esteem as both Queen of Saints and Mother of God, and devotion to Mary saw major growth in Ephesus after this event. Interestingly enough, the number of bishops at this council would be the same as during the assembly in Rome for formal definition of the Immaculate Conception, some 1,400 years later.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 55-56.

Relative silence followed in devotion to Mary's Immaculate Conception until around the seventh century. One of the first indications of belief resembling Mary's Immaculate Conception stems back to the East and specifically to Andrew of Crete (d. 740), who wrote a liturgical hymn entitled "Canon for the Conception of St. Anne."<sup>11</sup> This feast is sometimes referred to as "the Annunciation of Mary's Birth to Joachim and Anne."<sup>12</sup> However, it is important to make the distinction that this feast did not specifically refer to Mary's being born without sin, but rather, being pure and eventually stainless from sin. This does not specifically imply what St. John of Damascus (d. 749; the last great doctor of the Patristic period in the East) contends in his belief that even the conception and birth of Mary were "completely governed by grace" and "even the act by which she was conceived were wholly without stain."<sup>13</sup> Once again, Mary's sanctification from sin is indicative of her being chosen by God and not being raised to a higher status than that of a human being. St. John of Damascus discusses the misconception of venerating Mary as being idolatrous in one of his homilies, noting that she is not upheld to be a "goddess." Further, St. John of Damascus encourages those challenged by objections to honoring/veneration of Mary to "close our ears to him [that is, the one who criticizes veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary]... and we should bear his reproach as a diadem of glory (*Sabbat. 37. 2-5.*)."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 35.

<sup>13</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene - Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 230.

St. John of Damascus describes St. Anne's conception of Mary as nothing short of a miracle. Remarkably, this description makes an excellent case for the Immaculate Conception without St. John's having understood the concept of original sin. He reasons the following:

It was fitting that she, who had kept her virginity intact in childbirth, should keep her own body free from all corruption even after death. It was fitting that she, who had carried the Creator as a child at her breast, should dwell in the divine tabernacles. It was fitting that the spouse, whom the Father had taken to Himself, should live in the divine mansions. It was fitting that she, who had seen her Son upon the cross and who had thereby received into her heart the sword of sorrow which she had escaped in the act of giving birth to Him, should look upon Him as He sits with the Father. It was fitting that God's Mother should possess what belongs to her Son, and that she should be honored by every creature as the Mother and as the handmaid of God.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, St. John of Damascus explains that Mary's freedom from sin is not to place her on some sort of higher pedestal than Christ, but rather to acknowledge Whom she brought into the world through the birth of her Son, Jesus Christ.

A manuscript prayer (circa 760) contained in *The Book of Cerne* (a Latin/Anglo-Saxon work) refers directly to Mary's Immaculate Conception:

Holy Mother of God, Virgin ever blest, glorious and noble, chaste and inviolate, O Mary Immaculate, chose and beloved of God, endowed with singular sanctity, worthy of all praise, thou who art the advocate for the sins (peril) of the whole world; O listen, listen, listen to us, O holy Mary. Pray for us, intercede for us, disdain not to help us. For we are confident and know for certain that thou canst obtain all thou willest from thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, God Almighty, the King of Ages, who liveth with the Father and the Holy Ghost, for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>16</sup>

This prayer clearly mentions Mary's chastity and virginity, in that she is both "chaste and inviolate," affirming belief in her perpetual virginity and Immaculate Conception (freedom from

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<sup>15</sup> Pope Pius XII, "Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII - Munificentissimus Deus - Defining the Dogma of the Assumption," 1950, ¶ 21, [http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apc\\_19501101\\_munificentissimus-deus.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html).

<sup>16</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 495.

original sin), respectively. We also see that the “Mary Immaculate” used as a title rather than merely describing Mary as immaculate, indicating a specific devotion to her as the Immaculate Conception.

However, acknowledgement and celebration of Mary’s Immaculate Conception significantly decreased some 300 years later at the time of the Norman Invasion (1066). Suppression of the feast likely occurred because of William the Conqueror’s conferring with various abbacies who had disdain for Saxon tradition, in addition to many of the writings used in establishing the feast were dubious in authenticity as they were based upon apocryphal works.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this pushback, loyal Saxon pride kept the Feast of the Immaculate Conception ongoing through traditional stories like the vision of Helsin (the Abbot of Ramsey). One portrait, *St. Anselm appearing to the Abbot Helsin*, combines two versions of the story in which the abbot was voyaging from Denmark when he encountered a storm. According to this story, Helsin was saved by an angel. The other story depicted is the appearance of St. Anselm, a long-contended founder of the feast of the Immaculate Conception in England.<sup>18</sup>

The Council of London confirmed its celebration less than 100 years later in 1129. The celebration of the Immaculate Conception then spread throughout the Norman and European

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<sup>17</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 3, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>18</sup> “Recto: St. Anselm appearing to the Abbot Helsin. Verso: An inscription describing a miracle,” Royal Collection Trust, Image from 1532, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/990601/recto-st-anselm-appearing-to-the-abbot-helsin-verso-an-inscription-describing-a>.

regions, bolstered by the theological logic of Eadmer (d. 1124), a Benedictine monk from Canterbury.<sup>19</sup>

Eadmer's argument for Mary's Immaculate Conception flowed from analyzing John the Baptist and Jeremiah's births: if they, born with sin, should be sanctified before birth, then how much more should Mary, the Mother of God, be without the stain of sin?<sup>20</sup> Graef characterizes Eadmer's logic in the following manner: "Though he realizes that the Scriptures say nothing about the Immaculate Conception, he does not think that belief in it is against the faith and therefore he proposes to defend it. If Jeremias and John the Baptist were sanctified in the womb, why should the unique propitiation of the whole world and the resting place of the only Son of God be deprived of the grace and illumination of the Holy Spirit at the first moment of her conception?"<sup>21</sup>

In short, Eadmer argued that Mary's soul did not incur original sin when the seed fertilized the egg (the moment typically acknowledged as the infusion of the soul in the thought of St. Augustine of Hippo some five centuries earlier), unlike the belief held for regular

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<sup>19</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 3, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>20</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 4, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>21</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 48.

conception.<sup>22</sup> This logic is directly opposite of what St. Augustine writes when he says he “hold[s] most firmly and never doubt[s] that every human who is conceived by the mating of a man and a woman, is born with original sin.”<sup>23</sup>

While a compelling argument to his contemporaries, Eadmer’s argument came under criticism from St. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), who posed the question of how it could be that Mary, conceived under normal circumstances, was free of original sin given that libido (the perceived catalyst for instilling original sin upon souls) was present at her conception. Furthermore, St. Bernard asked, did not the acknowledgement of Mary’s Immaculate Conception from her mother detract from the credit to be given to God for this miracle of Mary’s Immaculate Conception?<sup>24</sup> Scriptural proof of the Immaculate Conception for St. Bernard was questionable at best. St. Bernard’s objection to Eadmer’s proposal arose from extensive thought about the spiritual mechanics of conception; in short, he focuses primarily on how the soul might have been stained in original sin despite there having been divine intervention at some point.

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<sup>22</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 4, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>23</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 35, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>24</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 6, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

St. Thomas Aquinas is a prominent figure in Catholic philosophical thought, especially known for his thorough theological discussions and writings. Yet the influential philosopher also held some objections to the Immaculate Conception. Aquinas outlines his main objection in the third section of his best known work, the *Summa Theologica*. This objection “was based on the view that it would detract from the universality of Christ’s redemption; but he [Aquinas] teaches her sanctification in the womb, which was more perfect than that of other saints like Jeremiah and John the Baptist, so that she never committed any sin whatsoever, neither moral nor venial.”<sup>25</sup> In short, Aquinas reasons that if the prophet Jeremiah and St. John the Baptist were both sanctified, then it is also fitting that the Mother of God ought to have been sanctified in the womb.

Aquinas further says that “her dignity was in some way infinite, because it stemmed from the infinite God Himself Who had taken flesh from her.”<sup>26</sup> Aquinas makes this latter point in his answer to the question of “whether the Blessed Virgin Mary was sanctified before her birth from the womb” by saying “it is reasonable to believe that she, who brought forth *the Only-Begotten of the Father full of grace and truth*, received greater privileges of grace than all others.”<sup>27</sup> Aquinas reasons that this much can be inferred from the angel Gabriel’s salutation to Mary in Luke 1:28 when Mary is referred to as “full of grace.”

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<sup>25</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 52.

<sup>26</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 51-52.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica – Volume Two* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 2163.

Instead of proposing another mechanical objection, Aquinas argued the issue of the Immaculate Conception was much more fundamentally flawed. He contended that Eadmer's reasoning inherently detracted from Christ's own dignity since it placed Mary on a plane without original sin – a plane that, according to Aquinas, belonged to Christ alone, since Christ alone redeemed humanity from sin and thus was the only one Who needed to be born sinless:

Although the Church of Rome does not celebrate the Conception of the Virgin, yet it tolerates the custom of certain churches that do keep that feast; wherefore this is not to be entirely reprobated. Nevertheless the celebration of this feast does not give us to understand that she was holy in her conception. But since it is not known when she was sanctified the feast of her Sanctification rather than the feast of her conception is kept on the day of her conception.<sup>28</sup>

In his reply to objection in part three, article one of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas notes that while Mary might have been sanctified from original sin before birth, “she was not freed from the guilt to which the whole nature [that of humanity] is subject, so as to enter into Paradise otherwise than through the Sacrifice of Christ.”<sup>29</sup> Aquinas is speculating that while Mary might have been freed from original sin, her soul would have still merited atonement for the sin of humanity by virtue of being human. Put simply: Aquinas maintains that Mary was not exempt from needing to be saved by Christ regardless of whether her soul accrued the effects of original sin.

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<sup>28</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 7, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica – Volume Two* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 2164.

Objecting to the mechanics did not stop Aquinas from considering the mechanical, however. Aquinas also answers the question of “whether the Blessed Virgin was sanctified before animation” as having taken place after animation of the soul for two reasons. First, Aquinas points out that sin “cannot be taken away except by grace,”<sup>30</sup> the subject of which must be a rational being. He argues, therefore, that prior to the Blessed Virgin Mary’s having a rational soul, it was not possible for her to have had sin taken away. Similarly, Aquinas’ second rebuttal is that the rational being cannot be the subject of sin, and that prior to the soul’s infusion, there is no way that the Blessed Virgin Mary could have had sin upon her soul had she been sanctified prior to animation.<sup>31</sup>

Aquinas’ analysis of the Immaculate Conception foreshadowed further discussions as belief of the Immaculate Conception continued to spread. During the Advent season of 1291, an open-forum style debate was held at the University of Paris, at which the presiding Master of Theology (at the time, Henry of Ghent) had to answer any question posed. An attending student inquired of Henry by what belief ought the faithful celebrate Mary’s Immaculate Conception. Master Henry replied that the primary reason of celebration is not by mere virtue of the occurrence, but because of the person’s sanctity. Henry’s answer first proceeded by demonstrating that every liturgical feast is celebrated because of an individual’s sanctity. Henry suggested that Mary’s being immaculately conceived might have occurred upon the moment of

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica – Volume Two* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 2164.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica – Volume Two* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 2164.

her actual conception or as many as thirty-five or forty-two days after the “moment of animation.” Calculations of Mary’s actual birth versus that of her sanctification suggest that she was perhaps conceived in September, having been born in December.

Regardless, Henry understood the essence of the student’s question which asked if the purification of the soul was the same as the moment of animation of Mary’s soul. Henry arrives at the answer that if these two moments do not coincide, then there are two possibilities that remain: 1) “once the soul is infused in the body and infected with sin, it is immediately sanctified so that for no continuous period of time does it remain in a state of sin” or 2) “there is a period of time in which Mary’s soul remained in a state of original sin, whether it be long or short.”<sup>32</sup>

William of Ware (b. 1260), a teacher at the Franciscan house of studies in Oxford, defended the Immaculate Conception by reason that he would prefer to “err in giving the blessed Virgin too much than in giving her too little.”<sup>33</sup> William utilized the axiom: “‘He could, it was fitting, He did’ (*potuit, decuit, fecit*)” in his defense of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>34</sup> William reasoned that it was entirely possible for God to preserve Mary from original sin since it was her vocation to be the Blessed Virgin “even though it was infected by it on the part of those who produced the body.”<sup>35</sup> Hilda Graef adds:

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<sup>32</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 11, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>33</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 49.

<sup>34</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 49.

<sup>35</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 49.

[William of Ware] countered the overwhelming authority of St. Bernard by repeating a legend current in England soon after the saint's death, according to which he had appeared to a lay-brother in a radiant white garment on which, however, there was one small stain: his error in the matter of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>36</sup>

Blessed John Duns Scotus (from the mid-thirteenth century, known as the “Doctor of Mary”) was another influential writer in Marian thought whose writings would be referenced in the Papal bull some five centuries after he died. Scotus refashioned William's arguments into a more refined focus. The foundation of Scotus' argument was the concept of Christ as the perfect Redeemer. Scotus' view was that a redemption in which one is preserved from sin is more perfect than a redemption that frees one from sin after having committed it. For Mary, it had already been widely accepted that she was preserved from actual sin (the sins which we ourselves voluntarily commit). Yet as Graef points out, Christ “came in the first place to heal the wounds of original sin, only in the second place also those of actual sin.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, Christ's being the most perfect Redeemer would likely result in His exercising this act “at least once, and so it was, in the case of the blessed Virgin.”<sup>38</sup>

Scotus points out that Master Henry of Ghent is not too concerned with the length of time applied to this second possibility. Regardless, Henry's answer paved the way for further development of the idea of Mary's Immaculate Conception, examining the mechanical functions of such a metaphysical process. (For the curious reader, Master Henry thoroughly explores Aristotelean physics in time and juxtaposing agents in the sanctification process later in the work cited in footnote 32).

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<sup>36</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 49.

<sup>37</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 49.

<sup>38</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 49.

Scotus' promulgation of discussion and public thought of Mary's Immaculate Conception is nothing short of a landmark in theological thought. Scotus diligently assembled arguments brought forth by St. John of Damascus, Pope St. Leo I, St. Jerome (d. 461 and d. 420, respectively), and St. Bernard which stated that Mary was conceived in original sin but later purified, as well as writings of St. Anselm (d. 1109) and St. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) who argued for and against Mary's sinless conception.<sup>39</sup> Scotus explores these opposing ideologies in his third question "Was the Blessed Virgin conceived in original sin?"

Scotus arrives at three conclusive answers to the posed question of whether Mary was conceived sinless. Scotus says: "To the question I say that God could have brought it about that [1] she was never in original sin, or [2] she was in sin for only an instant, or [3] she was in sin for some period of time and at the last instant of that time was purged of it."<sup>40</sup> Scotus' conclusions placed an exclamation mark on the importance of Mary's Immaculate Conception through drawing the faithful's attention to the proof for its reality, but not on the precise metaphysical mechanics of it. For example, in his second part of this answer, Scotus endeavors to minimize the amount of time that Mary might have had sin in order to make the gap between animation and sanctification as little as possible. The astute reader will notice how closely the second

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<sup>39</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 35-37, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>40</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 49, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

answer resembles that of Henry of Ghent's answers, since Scotus reinterpreted the answers himself.

Scotus wrestled with the numerous propositions put forth by Master Henry of Ghent.<sup>41</sup> Regardless, Scotus' personal viewpoint is this: "which of these three possibilities is factually the case, God knows— but if the authority of the Church or the authority of Scripture does not contradict such, *it seems probable that what is more excellent should be attributed to Mary.*"<sup>42</sup>

Feasts of the Immaculate Conception would continue to be instituted, even after belief segued out of the age of Scotus and similar thinkers. In 1394, Don Juan I of Aragon issued a royal decree whereby the Feast of the Immaculate Conception would be celebrated. In his decree, Don Juan posed the question:

Why are some persons astonished that the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, should have been conceived without original sin, while we doubt not that St. John Baptist was sanctified in his mother's womb by that same God, who, coming from the highest Heaven, and from the throne of the most Holy Trinity, was made flesh in the blessed womb of a virgin?<sup>43</sup>

The Council of Basle of 1439 understood the Immaculate Conception to be a "pious option," and ten years later, a mandate was established, requiring all members from the

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<sup>41</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 49, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>42</sup> Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), 55, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/lib/bellarmino-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3240024>.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 489.

University of Paris to take an oath to defend the Immaculate Conception. The feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary would later have its own office and Mass and was included in the Roman rite calendar in 1708 once approved by Pope Sixtus IV.<sup>44</sup>

In 1548, the Immaculate Conception was taught in the Catechism under the authority of Archbishop Hamilton of the Archdiocese of St. Andrews (in Scotland) as the following:

The fruit of the glorious Virgin was allanerly blessit efter so excellent a manner, that nother He was borne nor consavit in syn; but also it was impossibil y he mycht be consavit and borne in syn, because He is baith God and man. He blessit the concepioun of His mother the Virgin Marie, quehen He preservit hir fra original syn.<sup>45</sup>

This teaching acknowledges the sinless birth of Christ in the Incarnation (by virtue of Christ's Hypostatic Union) and directly relates it to the Blessed Virgin Mary's birth (sanctified in the Immaculate Conception). Mary's Immaculate Conception has also been viewed through the lens of how it augments her roles in the Church. St. Lawrence of Brindisi (d. 1619) puts forth the idea that Mary has greater proclivity toward mercy than Christ, evident by her behavior during the wedding feast of Cana. Hilda Graef notes St. Lawrence "considers [the Immaculate Conception] even more admirable than the virginal conception of her Son because, he argues, it is more extraordinary that she should be conceived wholly from sinful parents than that Christ should have been conceived equally holy from the holy Virgin."<sup>46</sup>

This train of thought gives greater credence to the Immaculate Conception's role in the Catholic Church since, without it, the Incarnation of Christ would not make sense from a

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<sup>44</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 77.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 496.

<sup>46</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 29.

mechanical standpoint. Since the Incarnation of Christ is integral to His being the Savior of the World for humanity, it can be said that the Immaculate Conception directly impacts the salvific history of humanity. Further, St. Lawrence maintains:

Mary is also associated on an equal footing with her son in the forgiveness of sins. For as the first parents would have communicated the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, purity from sin and charity with all the other gifts of the spirit to their children had they not send, 'so Christ and Mary have obtained these three from us by their merits and together confer the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh and eternal life.'<sup>47</sup>

Mary also holds a prominent place functioning in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. St. Lawrence of Brindisi says:

'The spirit of Mary was a spiritual priest (*spiritualis sacerdos*), as the Cross was the altar and Christ the sacrifice, even though the spirit of Christ Himself was the principal priest, but the spirit of Mary was one with the spirit of Christ... Therefore the spirit of Mary performed the priestly office together with the Spirit of Christ at the altar of the Cross and offered the sacrifice of Christ to the eternal God for the salvation of the world,' so that one can truly say of her, as of God, to Whom she was most like in spirit, that she so loved the world that she gave her only-begotten Son.<sup>48</sup>

We understand that God the Father has begotten God the Son (Christ) and that Mary, while being the Mother of God to the only-begotten Son did not beget Him. The ontology of God the Father and God the Son is synonymous because of the Trinitarian relationship (though indeed, they are distinct), yet the ontology of the Mother of God and God the Son is separate in identity (that of human and the God-Man, respectively) yet conjoined in the salvific mission.

The Dominicans (founded by St. Thomas Aquinas) were not the only religious order who raised issue with the concept of the Immaculate Conception. The Jesuit doctor of the Church St.

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<sup>47</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 30.

<sup>48</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 30.

Robert Bellarmine (d. 1621) did not believe that Scripture contained sufficient evidence to appropriately define the Immaculate Conception. However, Bellarmine personally believed the Immaculate Conception to be true and even referenced it in his sermon on the feast, noting that Mary's greatest grace was that she "was prevented from contracting original sin by the merits of Christ's passion."<sup>49</sup>

Progress with furthering the belief and honor in the Immaculate Conception did not stop after Scotus' writings waned. In 1629, Emperor Ferdinand III of Austria, dedicated a column to the Immaculate Conception of Mary which was placed in a square in Vienna. The column's inscription reads: "Virgin Mother of God conceived without the stain of original sin."<sup>50</sup> This was literally a monumental triumph in advancement and public recognition for the Immaculate Conception.

About 150 years later, King Charles III of Spain, in cooperation with a brief from the Holy See, declared the Immaculate Virgin Mary "Universal Patrona de Espana è Indias."<sup>51</sup> This 1771 declaration is remarkable since the papacy had cooperated in an external declaration of the Immaculate Conception of Mary prior to providing a definition less than 100 years later.

Belief in the Immaculate Conception continued to manifest itself into the Americas. Father James Marquette, while known for his exploration of the Mississippi, is also noted for having spread the name of Mary Immaculate throughout his visiting various Native American

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<sup>49</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 24.

<sup>50</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 494.

<sup>51</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 493.

settlements and teaching Catholicism. In 1634 (Maryland's founding), the first Englishmen, ardent followers of the Immaculate Conception, built a chapel dedicated to Mary's Immaculate Conception. Additionally, these Englishmen named the nearby river, bay, and original settlement after her.<sup>52</sup>

## **PREPARATION FOR THE DEFINITION**

Tension within the papacy grew as it struggled to maintain relevance and legitimacy among Catholics and the rest of the world in the early nineteenth century. With reverberations of the French Revolution still making their way through Europe and a rise of reason under the Age of Enlightenment taking root, a serious questioning of the papacy's legitimacy became prevalent. Nationalism had taken root as a new school of thought, and the papacy faced threat as efforts for the Italian Unification came about, which sought to include the Papal States in its grips. The situation boiled over under the pontificate of Pope Gregory XVI, where rebel troops persisted despite the Papal army's being sent to stop them. Gregory called upon Austria and France to send forces to squash the rebellion, and the situation would quell some eight years after initially providing assistance.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, Catholics from around the world sent letters to the Holy See urging a formal definition of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Pope Gregory XVI made major strides in

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<sup>52</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 529.

<sup>53</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge Massachusetts & London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 58, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.bellarmino.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=582660&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

bringing this to fruition, yet he would not see its completion. Shortly thereafter, in 1846, the United States was placed under the care and protection of Mary, under title of “Immaculate Conception,” by the Sixth Council of Baltimore.<sup>54</sup>

After 1847, the Dominicans’ opposition to the Immaculate Conception ceased, further paving a way toward mainstream acceptance.<sup>55</sup> Pushback from the Dominicans gradually ceased with the realization that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was acceptable, despite its being contrary to the teachings of Aquinas.<sup>56</sup>

Blessed Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) was an “ardent promoter of the cause, [and] disregarded the views of the opponents.”<sup>57</sup> In 1848, Pope Pius IX started proceedings in arranging two preparatory commissions to investigate the soon-to-be established dogma. Wishing to further the cause, Pope Pius IX requested the opinions of 603 bishops in an encyclical, resulting in 547 in favor, with fifty-six disfavoring the proposition, including the archbishop of Paris.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 517.

<sup>55</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 79.

<sup>56</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 79.

<sup>57</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 77-79.

<sup>58</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 80.

The penultimate event prior to Pope Pius IX's definition of the Immaculate Conception in the *Ineffabilis Deus* was an encyclical letter he submitted to the bishops' hierarchy throughout the world. Entitled *Ubi primum*, this letter was issued in early 1849, to be finally confirmed by the American bishopric hierarchy confirming its approval for definition of the proposed dogma.<sup>59</sup>

At this point, I seek to turn the reader's attention toward the formal definition of the Immaculate Conception, focusing on the actions of Blessed Pope Pius IX. Fully aware of the preceding support for the definition of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Pope Pius IX acknowledged his predecessors' actions (those of Sixtus IV, Paul V, Gregory XV, and Gregory XVI) in the first chapter of *Ineffabilis Deus*.<sup>60</sup>

Graef makes clear that the only part of the Papal bull subject to infallibility is that of the definition itself. Historical recountings and allegations as to the progression of the feast of the Immaculate Conception are open for debate. For Graef, the remaining question is: "does this definition flatly contradict the teaching of St. Anselm, St. Bernard, St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure and so many other authoritative theologians who held Mary to have been conceived in sin?"<sup>61</sup>

Even during its formal promulgation, there remained opposition to the Immaculate Conception from liberal Catholics in Germany, France, and England. These Catholics' opposition to the doctrine's promulgation likely stemmed from concern in how Mary's position

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<sup>59</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 517.

<sup>60</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 9; 17.

<sup>61</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 82.

in relationship to Christ could be affected and how this might conflict with notions of Christ. Such pushback prevented Pope Gregory XVI from defining the doctrine. Thus, the task became deferred to his successor, Pope Pius IX. Pius had a devotion to the Immaculate Conception, and in 1848, a theological consulta and pontifical commission were ordered to further investigate the Immaculate Conception. The theological consulta resulted in a seventeen to three decision in favor of moving forward with defining the Immaculate Conception. Pope Pius IX consulted with bishops in an encyclical to poll favor in dioceses toward definition of the Immaculate Conception. Of the 603 bishops polled, fifty-six opposed. Of particular interest in this group was the archbishop of Paris who considered the potential doctrine of the Immaculate Conception neither able to be defined nor beneficial for the Church. Since more than ninety percent of the polled bishops favored the promulgation of the doctrine, Pope Pius IX formed a congregation whose task it was to draw up the bull.<sup>62</sup> With major objections quelled, the Papal bull could proceed. The *Ineffabilis Deus* is the most comprehensive and complete definition of the Blessed Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception.

#### **DEFINITION/PAPAL BULL**

On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX gave the official Church statement on the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The *Ineffabilis Deus* begins with an opening paragraph that defines the Blessed Virgin Mary both in identity and role in the Church in the following manner:

The statement that God prepared for Himself a mother whom He loved above all their creatures, and therefore gave her incomparably more gifts than to any other creature, human or angelic. That original innocence was closely linked to her great dignity of

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<sup>62</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 53-54.

Mother of God, the Catholic Church had inculcated ever more clearly, in this doctrine had been admitted from the earliest times period therefore her conception had always been presented as something exceptional, and the Church had applied to it in her liturgy the text referring to the divine wisdom.<sup>63</sup>

Immediately, this document draws attention to the importance of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her ties to the Catholic Church. Moreover, this introductory statement highlights that she is truly blessed above all other creatures, denoting her as possessing “incomparably more gifts than any other creature” and as “Mother of God.”

Pius IX then makes the case for Mary’s case based upon an ontological argument that resembles that of John of Damascus. Pius refers to Mary as “resplendent with the glory of most sublime holiness and so completely free from all taint of original sin” in relationship to God the Father and God the Son.<sup>64</sup> This not only specifies Mary as being worthy of great honor and veneration, but it also points out that she directly cooperates with God as Mother of God. As Mother of God, Mary has an integral role in the Catholic understanding of soteriological history, and thus, a definition for her own birth and status of her soul becomes necessitated.

The section on the “Liturgical Argument” is then presented, focusing on the faithful’s devotions to Mary, many of which have been described in this paper. The references to the traditions surrounding the veneration of the Immaculate Conception are continued in a proceeding section, though are mostly compiled in a dedicated section to acknowledge profound Marian devotion. Pius also makes note of the clergy’s efforts to further the cause, including that

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<sup>63</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 80.

<sup>64</sup> Blessed Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Vatican City, 1854), ¶ 2, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm>.

of the bishops. The emphasis on the Church's promotion and dedication to this doctrine is continued in the section entitled "Ordinary Teaching of the Roman Church," in which Pius secures the same, one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church to be the very entity which hereby prepares to make the definition at hand.

Pius also credits the papacy for its propagation of the doctrine. The Pontiffs have, Pius IX says, have "not only [made effort] to emphasize the object with the utmost zeal, but also to enunciate the exact doctrine."<sup>65</sup> Undoubtedly, Pius is referring to those Popes who made the Immaculate Conception a priority in their papacy prior to its definition, including that of Popes Sixtus IV, Alexander VII, Gregory XV, Paul V, and Gregory XVI.

Consequences are outlined under the next section entitled "Papal Sanctions" regarding measures which will be taken for those who fail to acknowledge the Immaculate Conception as Church dogma. This is complemented by the "Testimonies of the Catholic World," in which Pius recognizes how much research has gone into the Immaculate Conception prior to its formal definition.

Pius also makes mention of the Council of Trent, the council which established the concept of original sin. This demonstration of cooperation with other Church teaching further solidifies the Immaculate Conception as being congruent and relevant for the faithful. The Council of Trent is thus necessary to recount in the *Ineffabilis Deus* since without it the premise of the Immaculate Conception would have no foundation.

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<sup>65</sup> Blessed Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Vatican City, 1854), ¶ 8,

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm>.

In assuring the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception will retain its entire essence of its own truth and concept, Pope Pius IX dedicates a section entitled “Testimonies of Tradition” to emphasize how diligently the traditions of the Immaculate Conception have been preserved and analyzed. Pius explains:

if they [ancient documents of any Church dogma, particularly that of the Immaculate Conception] really are of ancient origin and if the faith of the Fathers has transmitted them, she [the Church] strives to investigate and explain them in such a way that the ancient dogmas of Heavenly doctrine will be made evident and clear but will retain their full, integral, and proper nature, and will [be] grown only within their own genus -- that is, within the same dogma, in the same sense and the same meaning.<sup>66</sup>

We see here that Pope Pius is fully aware of the responsibility that the Church has as the whole Body of Christ to safeguard its doctrine and to appropriately define it, as well as acknowledge the many Mariological traditions which have been outlined in this paper.

Appropriately defining doctrine entails properly interpreting Scripture where applicable. Pope Pius addresses Mary’s involvement with Scripture in the section entitled “Interpreters of the Sacred Scripture.” Here Pius draws upon two prefiguring depictions of Mary in the Bible: first, as Mediatrix, one who assists humanity in growing closer to Christ by crushing the head of the serpent; secondly, as a strong temple or fortress incapable of being overtaken (Pius references Noah’s Ark, Jacob’s Ladder, and the burning bush before Moses), protected, honored, and preserved as the Mother of God. For many traditions, Mary is considered the Mediatrix between humanity and Christ, for it was through Mary that Christ was brought into the world (thus, the idea of “to Jesus through Mary,” or *ad Iesum per Marie*).

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<sup>66</sup> Blessed Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Vatican City, 1854), ¶ 16,

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm>.

This realization of Mary's being worthy of praise for her Immaculate Conception is based in Scripture, found in Luke's Gospel, which Pius refers to in the section called "The Annunciation." Though later interpreted as being supportive of the Immaculate Conception, this passage from Luke clearly refers to Mary as being "full of grace" per the angel Gabriel's salutation.<sup>67</sup> Genesis 3:15 and the *gratia plena* from Luke 1:28 were later deemed worthy to support the doctrine.<sup>68</sup> Though the angel addresses Mary with the title of "full of grace," he is merely a messenger; this means that God had seen Mary "full of grace" for all eternity, and that her conception of Christ was not merely a vocational promotion, but rather one of fulfillment. The Catholic Church understands Mary's "yes" or *Fiat* to the angel Gabriel to be her consent to being the Mother of God. Thus, the role of Mother of God is that which Mary willingly accepted.

Pius IX also makes mention of Mary as the new Eve. Prior to Eve's sinning, a comparison between Mary and Eve can be made: innocence, incorruptibility, and virginity were similar qualities. Mary becomes the new Eve (and surpasses Eve) since she neither fell to temptation nor sinned. Thus, it can be said of the Blessed Virgin Mary that she "ever increased her original gift, and not only never lent an ear to the serpent, but by divinely given power, she

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<sup>67</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Holy Mass on the Occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Vatican City, 2004), § 2, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_20041208\\_immaculate-conception.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20041208_immaculate-conception.html).

<sup>68</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 78-79.

utterly destroyed the force and dominion of the evil one.”<sup>69</sup> In the “Biblical Figures” section,

Pius recalls the various names the Church Fathers have given Mary, including:

the lily among thorns, the land entirely intact, the Virgin undefiled, immaculate, ever blessed, and free from all contagion of sin, she from whom was formed the new Adam, the flawless, brightest, and most beautiful paradise of innocence ...the incorruptible wood that the worm of sin never corrupted, the fountain ever clear and sealed with the power of the Holy Spirit, the most holy temple, the treasure of immortality, the one and only daughter of life.<sup>70</sup>

In explaining such powerful roles of Mary, Pope Pius IX also finds it fitting to review the various devotions and names for the Blessed Virgin Mary in two parts: “Explicit Affirmation” and “Of a Super Eminent Sanctity.” These cooperate in demonstrating that the Immaculate Conception is a doctrine that affects a figure in the Catholic Church which one can reasonably understand as worthy of veneration and honor. Following this justification, Pius IX reviews the bishops’ consensus (aptly named “The Mind of the Bishops”) which further sets the stage for the definition of the Immaculate Conception, proving that its acceptance is neither questioned nor heavily debated. Rather, the promulgation of the bull is the summit of the faithful’s effort to accept the Immaculate Conception for laity and papacy alike.

Thus, with the necessary premises set, Pope Pius IX states the Catholic Church’s official definition of Mary’s Immaculate Conception as the following:

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

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<sup>69</sup> Blessed Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Vatican City, 1854), ¶ 21,

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm>.

<sup>70</sup> Blessed Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Vatican City, 1854), ¶ 22,

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm>.

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.<sup>71</sup>

We see here that Pope Pius IX states that from “the first instant of her conception,” Mary received the graces which cleansed her soul of original sin. This specification of time harkens back to the thoughts of St. Bernard and Blessed John Duns Scotus, who gave extensive thought to when the Blessed Virgin Mary might have been freed from the stain of original sin. We also notice Pius IX recognizes Mary’s freedom from original sin as a “singular privilege” to be “believed by all the faithful.” This not only places Mary in a special category as a truly being blessed, but it also makes known the Catholic Church will provide definition of freedom from original sin for no one else.

Christ is the perfect Redeemer for humanity and is Himself perfect in every way. Since Christ is humanity’s salvation and thus the model of every virtue, Christ *must* be born of someone sinless, a vessel in which salvation may be delivered to the world. If Christ’s Mother had any sin, such a stain would invalidate the sinless nature of Christ and therefore desecrate His birth and very divine and human existence. Mary’s conception without sin establishes a sacred place from which Christ springs forth to save humanity. Mary is the clean stage on which Christ acts in the roles of priest, prophet, and king in order that He might save humanity from sin.

Finally, Pius IX closes the *Ineffabilis Deus* with a section entitled “Hoped-For Results,” encouraging all in the Catholic Church to hear, understand, and rejoice at the news of the Immaculate Conception’s definition. Pope Pius states the Catholic Church ought to continually be in humble thanks to Christ for its arrival at this definition, and furthermore, he implores the

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<sup>71</sup> Blessed Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Vatican City, 1854), ¶ 34,

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm>.

Blessed Virgin Mary to intercede on the Church's behalf as "Mediatrice," "Conciliatrice," the "most excellent glory, ornament, and impregnable stronghold of the Church," and "Holy Mother of the Catholic Church." Pius encourages those within the Catholic Church to continually seek Mary as a source of help and guidance throughout their lives so that she might intercede on their behalf before God and also bring them toward Christ.

### **THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SINCE *INEFFABILIS DEUS***

Most Catholics received the definition of the Immaculate Conception with open arms. Non-Catholics, particularly Protestant communities and the Orthodox Church reacted negatively. The Protestant opinion of Mary sees her as being no different than the rest of humanity, sharing in the inheritance of original sin. As for the Orthodox Church's view, the concept of original sin differs so much from the Catholic Church that the concept of Mary's freedom from original sin is moot.<sup>72</sup>

The Immaculate Conception's significance did not cease once the Papal bull had been pronounced. On February 11, 1858, St. Bernadette Soubirous had a series of visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Lourdes, France. When St. Bernadette asked who she was for the third time, Our Lady responded "I am the Immaculate Conception."<sup>73</sup> This direct confirmation of Mary's title as the Immaculate Conception and the apparition are monumental events in the post-definition since they make the title of the Immaculate Conception relatable to humanity.

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<sup>72</sup> Hilda Graef, *The Devotion to Our Lady* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 79.

<sup>73</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 157-159.

Additionally, the faithful may accrue a three hundred day indulgence to be applied to souls in Purgatory each time this invocation is said: “Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us.”<sup>74</sup>

In effect, this appearance at Lourdes brought more dimension to this sacred dogma of the Church. The Rev. Dr. McKenna notes: “the Immaculate Conception is *an idea*, another fragment of Divine Truth, with which men can surcharge their minds. An idea it is, glorious, thrilling, and consoling but it becomes tangible and concrete in Lourdes.”<sup>75</sup>

In January, 1862, the bishop of Tarbes (a region about fifteen miles outside of Lourdes) released a document stating:

We judge that the Immaculate Mary, Mother of God, really appeared to Bernadette Soubirous on February 11th, 1858, and on succeeding days to the number of eighteen times in the Grotto of Massabiello, close to the town of Lourdes.<sup>76</sup>

This approved apparition has bolstered public belief in the Immaculate Conception, as well as drawing millions to the site at Lourdes where the sick become healed by the water from a spring the Blessed Virgin Mary instructed St. Bernadette to dig. This apparition more favorably popularized belief in the dogma defined some four years earlier.

In 1869, Pope Pius IX addressed a letter to Henri Lasserre, historian of Lourdes, noting that “the apparition of the Immaculate Conception in the Grotto of Lourdes is a fact of brilliant truth.”<sup>77</sup> Traditions in dedicating and honoring structures to the Immaculate Conception would

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<sup>74</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 633.

<sup>75</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 552.

<sup>76</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 158-159.

<sup>77</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 631.

continue, as in 1874, Pope Pius IX entitled the chapel at Lourdes to the rank of Minor Basilica, with his portrait adorning the façade in the form of mosaic. How appropriate it is that the Pontiff who oversaw the formal promulgation of the Papal bull be acknowledged with his mosaic portrait at a monument of a truly monumental doctrine!

In 1877, Pope Pius presented a golden rose to Our Lady of Lourdes which is blessed annually by the Pope, taking place on the fourth Sunday of Lent before Mass.<sup>78</sup> Souvenirs from Lourdes are plenty in the Vatican, including a statue of the Immaculate Conception in the Pope's study. The Papal garden displays a replica of the grotto in Lourdes by which Blessed Pope Pius IX would stop and pray a "Hail Mary" to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Additionally, Pius had a fountain which contained water from Lourdes which was used to heal infirmities of himself and others.<sup>79</sup>

Pope Leo XIII carried on Pope Pius IX's devotion to the Immaculate Conception. In 1883, under his pontificate, the cornerstone of the Church of the Rosary was laid by Cardinal Desprez, the Archbishop of Toulouse (a region about 110 miles northeast of Lourdes). Seven years later, Pope Leo XIII approved both the Office and Mass of the Apparition of Lourdes which was then proclaimed as being obligatory for Catholics under the pontificate of Pope Pius X on November 13, 1907.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 631.

<sup>79</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 631-632.

<sup>80</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 632.

In 1904, Pope St. Pius X celebrated the half-century of the Immaculate Conception's definition with the Marian encyclical *Ad diem illum*. The Saint had taken the motto of "to restore all things in Christ" upon his ascension to the papacy, and as such, Pope St. Pius X asks in this encyclical: "Can anyone fail to see that there is no surer or more direct road than by Mary for uniting all mankind in Christ?"<sup>81</sup> The Rev. McKenna points out that the Immaculate Conception is "the first victory of the Redemption" since it is Mary that is raised out of sin first by "the foreseen merits of Christ."<sup>82</sup>

Pope St. John Paul II also had a devotion to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. During the Holy Mass on the 150th anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Pope St. John Paul II delivered a brief homily which covered the functionality of the Immaculate Conception. Pope St. John Paul II explained how the salutation of the angel Gabriel to Mary is indicative of God's having seen Mary as the Immaculate Conception for all eternity.

Pope St. John Paul II also drew a parallel between the predestination of Mary and our own predestinations. He said the following regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary:

like that of each one of us, is linked to the predestination of the Son. Christ is that "seed" that was "to bruise the head" of the ancient serpent, according to the Book of Genesis (cf. Gn 3:15); He is the Lamb "without blemish" (cf Ex 12:5; I Pt. 1:19), immolated to redeem humanity from sin. With a view to the saving death of the Son, Mary, his Mother, was preserved free from original sin and from every other sin. The victory of the new Adam also includes that of the new Eve, Mother of the redeemed. The Immaculate

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<sup>81</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Volume II From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965), 128.

<sup>82</sup> Bernard McKenna, *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 552.

Virgin is thus a sign of hope for all the living who have triumphed over Satan by the blood of the Lamb (cf. Rv 12: 11).<sup>83</sup>

Here we see a distinct connection of Mary formally cooperating in the Redemption that Christ has provided for humanity. Mary's role as the new Eve (as Blessed Pope Pius IX mentions in the *Ineffabilis Deus*) provides a role of hope to humanity, just as Christ does as the new Adam. Further, the beauty that both Christ and Mary are free from original sin (as Adam and Eve were both enslaved to it) demonstrates that Christ's Redemption can be participated in by humanity by continually orienting our lives toward Him. While the power of the Redemption belongs to Christ alone, humanity indeed has a choice in whether to accept this mercy, just as the Blessed Virgin had complete free will to choose the sacred vocation to be *Theotokos*.

Pope St. John Paul II also addresses Mary's ontology in how she fits into ecclesial hierarchy. This is not to be confused with her role, which as previously stated works in conjunction with Christ and for Christ as His Mother. Pope St. John Paul notes that Mary is the beginning of the Church since she was the first follower of Christ. He also addresses her as Pope Paul VI did in his *Lumen Gentium* some sixty years earlier: "Bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle, shining with beauty" to further emphasize how present the Immaculate Conception is in her very being.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Holy Mass on the Occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Vatican City, 2004), § 4, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_20041208\\_immaculate-conception.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20041208_immaculate-conception.html).

<sup>84</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Holy Mass on the Occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Vatican City, 2004), § 6,

Pope St. John Paul II concluded this homily in the following prayer of supplication to the

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary:

To you, Virgin Immaculate, predestined by God above every other creature to be the advocate of grace and model of holiness for His people, today in a special way I renew *the entrustment of the whole Church*. May you guide your children on their pilgrimage of faith, making them *ever more obedient and faithful to the Word of God*. May you accompany every Christian on the path of conversion and holiness, in the fight against sin and in the search for *true beauty* that is always an impression and a reflection of divine Beauty. May you obtain *peace and salvation for all the peoples*. May the eternal Father, Who desired you to be the immaculate Mother of the Redeemer, also renew in our time through you, the miracles of His merciful love. Amen!<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Such has been the trajectory of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, a theological belief which originally started via the faithful and eventually worked its way to the papacy in Rome. The rich traditions and thorough debates have not been without cause, nor can their importance be understated. The early Church had sufficient grasp in understanding the impact such doctrine would have on Catholic theology. Thus, like any doctrine officially defined by the Holy See, Mary's Immaculate Conception has undergone strict scrutiny in determining its validity and deliberate thought (as well as divine inspiration) as to how to most succinctly define it. Belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception not only has a significant impact upon the believers by better demonstrating Mary's important role in the Church, but it also solidifies understanding

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[http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_20041208\\_immaculate-conception.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20041208_immaculate-conception.html).

<sup>85</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Holy Mass on the Occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Vatican City, 2004), § 7,

[http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_20041208\\_immaculate-conception.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20041208_immaculate-conception.html).

of Christ's Hypostatic Union as He existed as True God and True Man. Thus, it truly is fitting that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception place Mary in appropriate prominence in the midst of the faithful.

Belief and understanding in the Immaculate Conception also assists the faithful in growing closer to Christ, for the one who grows more to know and love the Blessed Mother will also grow in knowledge and love for her Son. As *Theotokos*, Mary is the pure vessel by which our salvation is procured through her obedience to God's Will. Mary's deliverance of Christ crushes the serpent's head so that it might not swallow humanity, but rather that humanity might take refuge in the merciful bosom of Christ. Her function as tabernacle (as St. John of Damascus notes)<sup>86</sup> is one of the ways in which she partakes in humanity's salvation. Mary also continually fixes her gaze toward her Son so that one who might come to Mary will be directed toward Christ. This assurance of fulfillment in Christ is what Mary's role in the Church seeks to do. Her Immaculate Conception is not to bestow honor upon herself (though indeed she is worthy of veneration), but rather to denote the sanctity of her Son, the source of all that is good.

Placing belief in the Immaculate Conception also makes one keenly aware of the validity of Catholicism, since its doctrine and truths truly have flourished *in saecula saeculorum* ("in the age of ages"). The singular truth of Mary's Immaculate Conception is strong enough to withstand the test of time, pointing the faithful toward its firm foundation in truth and also its own eternal implications for our salvation. In praxis, the Immaculate Conception can better

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<sup>86</sup> Pope Pius XII, "Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII - Munificentissimus Deus - Defining the Dogma of the Assumption," 1950, ¶ 21, [http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apc\\_19501101\\_munificentissimus-deus.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html).

assist the faithful to visualize the Blessed Virgin Mary as someone who witnessed Christ's life from the most unique point of view.

The Immaculate Conception also gives credence to Mary's rightful position of honor, veneration, and prominence in the Catholic Church for Whom she bore as *Theotokos*. The truth of the Immaculate Conception not only builds upon, but also complements other dogmas, such as Christ's Incarnation. The faithful can rest assured this dogma is secured in Catholic understanding through its formal definition, as well as centuries-old debates which have shown it to be robust, wonderful, and true.

Practically, the faithful can continue a generational devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception through specific prayer and meditating upon its mystery. The devotions mentioned (such as that to Our Lady of Lourdes) aid in making the doctrine more tangible as well as more relevant to Catholics' lives. Further, and most importantly, such approved apparitions like Lourdes contribute to knowledge of the Blessed Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception being spread so that souls might be saved.

This evidence outlined in this paper, therefore, is sufficient for understanding those noteworthy circumstances and varying thoughts which existed prior to the Immaculate Conception's formal definition by Pope Pius IX. Indeed, it is a mystery of the Church which possesses so much beauty in its reality, and, in Blessed Pope Pius' spirit of gratitude, we must be thankful that we are capable of understanding its existence. The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary will always be a gem of the Catholic Church in the honor it bestows upon Mary Immaculate, as well as the honor that it demands for her Son, Christ Jesus.

**Concluding Prayer to the Immaculate Conception  
of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Excerpt from *Ineffabilis Deus*):**

Our soul overflows with joy and our tongue with exultation. We give, and we shall continue to give, the humblest and deepest thanks to Jesus Christ, our Lord, because through His singular grace He has granted to us, unworthy though we be, to decree and offer this honor and glory and praise to His most holy Mother.

All our hope do we repose in the most Blessed Virgin — in the all fair and immaculate one who has crushed the poisonous head of the most cruel serpent and brought salvation to the world: in her who is the glory of the prophets and apostles, the honor of the martyrs, the crown and joy of all the saints; in her who is the safest refuge and the most trustworthy helper of all who are in danger; in her who, with her only-begotten Son, is the most powerful Mediatrix and Conciliatrix in the whole world; in her who is the most excellent glory, ornament, and impregnable stronghold of the holy Church; in her who has destroyed all heresies and snatched the faithful people and nations from all kinds of direst calamities; in her do we hope who has delivered us from so many threatening dangers.

We have, therefore, a very certain hope and complete confidence that the most Blessed Virgin will ensure by her most powerful patronage that all difficulties be removed and all errors dissipated, so that our Holy Mother the Catholic Church may flourish daily more and more throughout all the nations and countries, and may reign “from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth,” and may enjoy genuine peace, tranquility and liberty.

We are firm in our confidence that she will obtain pardon for the sinner, health for the sick, strength of heart for the weak, consolation for the afflicted, help for those in danger; that she will remove spiritual blindness from all who are in error, so that they may return to the path of truth and justice, and that here may be one flock and one shepherd. Amen.

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