

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception – December 8th.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception teaches that Mary, the mother of Christ, was conceived without sin and her conception was thus immaculate.

Mary's sinless conception is the reason why Catholics refer to Mary as "full of grace".

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception is celebrated by Catholics on December 8th each year.

Misconceptions & Mistakes.

There are two mistakes that people often make about the Immaculate Conception:

Many people confuse the Immaculate Conception with the "virgin birth"; the belief that Mary gave birth to Jesus while remaining a virgin. They are not the same thing.

A less common mistake is to think that the Immaculate Conception means that Mary was conceived without sexual intercourse. In fact, Mary had ordinary human parents who conceived her in the usual manner.

Catholic doctrine or teaching.

Mary received God's grace from the first moment of her existence and was totally and completely redeemed by this grace. Because she was redeemed, Mary spent her whole existence in a perfect relationship with God. God did this so that Mary would be worthy to be the mother of God.

...to the Christian intelligence the idea is unthinkable that the flesh of Christ, holy, stainless, innocent, was formed in the womb of Mary of a flesh which had ever, if only for the briefest moment, contracted any stain.

Pope Pius X, 1904

Mary received this redeeming grace not because of any merits of her own, but because God freely gave her the gift of his love.

Christians believe that God's redeeming grace is available to all believers: those who accept the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception regard Mary as the perfect example of the redeeming action of God's grace and believe that Mary was only able to receive this grace because Christ would later redeem all humanity through his death on the cross.

Chosen in advance to be the Mother of the incarnate Word, Mary is at the same time the first-fruits of his redeeming action. The grace of Christ the Redeemer acted in her in anticipation, preserving her from original sin and from any contagion of guilt.

Pope John Paul II, Dec 8 2003

Catholic and Protestant views - Divergent approaches

This is an ancient teaching, but it remains controversial to some Protestants because it is not explicitly referred to in the Bible.

Early Protestant thinkers were more devoted to Mary than some of their successors. Martin Luther, for example, was a firm believer in the Immaculate Conception:

The infusion of Mary's soul was affected without original sin...From the first moment she began to live she was free from all sin.

Martin Luther, sermon: On the Day of the Conception of the Mother of God

A 2005 report by Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians found common ground for this belief when it stated that:

In view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One (Luke 1:35), we can affirm together that Christ's redeeming work reached 'back in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings. This is not contrary to the teaching of Scripture and can only be understood in the light of Scripture. Roman Catholics can recognize in this what is affirmed by the dogma - namely 'preserved from all stain of original sin' and 'from the first moment of her conception.'

2005 report by Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians

Doctrine's "infallibility".

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed as infallible (without error) by Pope Pius IX in the bull (formal proclamation) *Ineffabilis Deus* in 1854, and thus is an important article of faith for Roman Catholics.

We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful.

Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854

Before proclaiming the doctrine, the Pope took steps to see whether the Church as a whole agreed by asking 603 bishops whether he should proclaim the Immaculate Conception; 546 (90%) said that he should.

In the visions of Our Lady to St. Bernadette at Lourdes in France in 1858, when asked by St. Bernadette who she was Mary revealed herself as the Immaculate Conception.