

COLUMNISTS

Immaculate Conception and views of sin

The feast of the Immaculate Conception celebrates the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in her mother's womb without the "stain" of original sin. In the dogmatic pronouncement of Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Latin, "Ineffable God"), issued on Dec. 8, 1854, Mary's preservation from original sin was a "singular grace and privilege" given by God "in view of the merits of Jesus Christ" as the savior of the human race.

This "singular grace and privilege" was easier to understand when it was the common opinion among theologians that original sin was indeed a "stain" on every human soul from the moment of conception. However, inspired in part by the Second Vatican Council's characterization of sin as also social and structural (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 25), original sin has increasingly been regarded as a human "condition" that everyone encounters from the moment of birth.

And so new questions arise. How could Mary have escaped the universal "condition" of human existence itself? Or did her "immaculate conception" mean that she was conceived in the fullness of grace, that is, in the state of closest possible union with God, in view of her future role as Mother of God?



essays in
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

This feast was celebrated as early as the seventh century in Palestine as the Conception by St. Anne of the Theotokos ("Mother of God"). Significantly, the doctrine itself was never accepted in the East, which had a different theological understanding of original sin. For Eastern Christianity, humans share in the guilt of Adam and Eve's sin only insofar as they willingly imitate the first parents by sinning. The sin of Adam and Eve is a model or prototype only.

The observance of the feast spread to the West by the ninth century, where it was still called the Conception by St. Anne of the Mother of God. In English monasteries in the first half of the 11th century, it was known as the feast of the Conception of Our Lady.

Upon the introduction of the feast in

France in the middle of the 12th century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux opposed it, launching in the process a controversy that would last for three centuries. Most of the scholastics, including Sts. Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great and Bonaventure, also opposed it on the grounds that it detracted from the universality of the Redemption.

They granted that Mary was sanctified in her mother's womb, but argued that she had to be touched by original sin for at least one instant. John Duns Scotus resolved these objections by arguing that Christ can save in two ways: First, he rescues from sin those already fallen; second, he preserves someone from being touched by sin even for an instant.

The Council of Basel (1439) affirmed the belief and 10 years later the Sorbonne required an oath of all its candidates to defend it. In 1476 Pope Sixtus IV approved the feast with its own Mass and Office, and the Council of Trent (1545-63) explicitly declared that its teaching on the universality of original sin did not include the Blessed Virgin.

Thereafter, the belief became general and was defended by Franciscans, Carmelites, many Dominicans, and the Jesuits. In 1708 Pope Clement XI extended the feast to the universal church

and made it a holy day of obligation.

At the First Council of Baltimore in 1846, the U.S. Catholic bishops chose Mary under her title of the Immaculate Conception as the patroness of the country. The apparition of Mary to Catherine Labouré in Paris in 1830 had also promoted the devotion, but it was the papal definition of 1854 that brought this whole development to a head.

Four years later, Mary is believed to have appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, France, saying: "I am the Immaculate Conception." Five years after that, in 1863, a new Mass and Office were prescribed.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is on the General Roman Calendar and is celebrated by the Church of England as the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (with no reference to "immaculate").

The feast of the Conception by St. Anne of the Most Holy Theotokos is still observed by the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches on Dec. 9, but on Dec. 8 in the West because it is exactly nine months before the feast of the Birth of Mary on Sept. 8.

...

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Best preparation for Christ's coming is true repentance

2nd Sunday of Advent (Dec. 10): (R3) Luke 3:1-6; (R1) Baruch 5:1-9; (R2) Philipians 1:4-6, 8-11.

St. Luke puts the preaching of John the Baptist in the context of history. What a history it was! A half-mad, vicious-tyrant, Tiberius Caesar, was on the throne of Rome. The land of Palestine was divided piecemeal by its conquerors. And the high-priesthood was in the dirty hands of the self-serving Annas family.

Into this darkness came a ray of light, John the Baptist, crying out in the desert: "Make ready the way of the Lord." The preparation he called for was a "baptism of repentance." How else can we, unholy as we are, prepare to receive the Lord's Son unless we repent?

C. S. Lewis once said: "Christianity has no message for those who do not realize they are sinners." We are sinners and God is righteous. If we are going to prepare for his coming, we better do something about our sin. Bells ringing, wishes of good cheer, unselfish giving of gifts — these are all well and good. But there is a deeper side to Christmas. A holy God has invaded our unholy world.

Once two high school boys were suspended from school, because they ate so much garlic that no one could stand to



a word
for
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

have them around. When the school officials protested about their odor, the boys simply laughed and said the smell couldn't be all that bad. After all, "We were blowing in each other's face, and we couldn't sense a garlic smell."

That is precisely the same approach many people take toward sin! Knowing what is wrong, they laugh and flaunt their participation in the wrong. They desensitize their own consciences by wallowing in the sin until the sin no longer smells bad to them.

John's word is a word of repentance. If there is something evil-smelling in our lives — something sinful — get rid of it by a good confession this Advent. That is the first step in preparation for the coming of the King of Kings.

However, repentance isn't all there is to preparing for Christmas. Repentance means being sorry for sin and promising to avoid the same sin in the future. However, true repentance has to include a change of direction.

A young man, filling out an application, was asked for personal strengths. He wrote: "Sometimes I am trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, brave, clean and reverent." When asked for weaknesses, he wrote: "Sometimes I am not trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, brave, clean and reverent." None of us is perfect. Yet if we are satisfied with just a little of the worst in us, we run the risk of destroying our lives and devastating those we love.

C. S. Lewis also said: "Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions we make everyday are so important. The smallest good act today is a strategic point from which, a few months later, we may go on to victories never dreamed of, whereas an apparently trivial indulgence in lust or in anger today can become a bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible."

It is not enough to try to reform one or two bad habits. We want a change of

heart, a total commitment to Christ.

When the Child Jesus appeared to St. Jerome in a dream, St. Jerome offered him money and other possessions. The Child refused them, saying "I want your sins. I want to take them away."

Christ came to take away our sins. Therefore, we can best prepare for his coming by repenting for our sins and by following him.

...

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, December 11

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 5:17-26

Tuesday, December 12

Zechariah 2:14-17 or Revelation

11:19, 12:1-6, 10; Luke 1:26-38

or Luke 1:39-47

Wednesday, December 13

Isaiah 40:25-31; Matthew 11:28-30

Thursday, December 14

Isaiah 41:13-20; Matthew 11:11-15

Friday, December 15

Isaiah 48:17-19; Matthew 11:16-19

Saturday, December 16

Sirach 48:1-4, 9-11;

Matthew 17:10-13



Gregorian Chant Mass

on the Solemnity of the

Immaculate Conception

sung by the Schola Feminarum

(Women's Chant Group)

Colleen Liggett, conductor

Friday, 8 December 2000, at 7:30 PM

Saint Anne Church

1600 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, New York



Catholic
Family
Center

Pregnant? Need Help?

Catholic Family Center's Pregnancy Hotline

CALL 1-800-CARE-002

25 Franklin Street • Sibley Tower Building, 7th Floor

Rochester, New York 14604-1007 • 716-546-7220

www.cfrochester.org

DISCOVER GREAT GIFTS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

- Nativity Sets • Children and Adult Books • CD's, Cassettes, Videos
- Jewelry • Pictures • Crucifixes, Rosaries & Figurines • Icons

Gift Certificates Available!

DeSales Ave Maria Shop
Religious Goods, Books, Gifts

21 High Street, Geneva, NY 14456

SR. ANNE PFRANG, MANAGER, 315-789-6922

IN THE HEART OF THE FINGER LAKES, NEXT TO DESALES HIGH SCHOOL

HOURS
Mon.-Sat. 10-5
Thurs. 10-7