

## Mariology: the Immaculate Conception by Justin Killam

Considering the connection between Jesus Christ and his mother Mary it is not surprising to find that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is easily confused as dealing with the birth of Jesus Christ, when in actuality it is a doctrine concerning the birth of Mary herself. More specifically the Immaculate Conception is a Dogma that states that Mary was conceived into the world preserved from the taint of Original Sin. After a long time of theological debate the theology of the Immaculate Conception was finally declared Dogma on December 8, 1854 by Pope Pius IX in the *Ineffabilis Deus*:

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. (McKenna, 21)

This doctrine raise many questions that can be summed up in two kind of question, how and why. How was Mary conceived into the world unstained from Original Sin? The answering of this question is the reason behind the long period of time of debate and thought before it's final deceleration as Dogma, as well as the problems that many may still have with it. More important than the how is the Why. Why was this doctrine debated and finally made Dogma, of what vital importance to Christianity does this doctrine hold? The study of this mysterious theological thought and the answers to the above questions are interesting and, although far from free of continued problems and criticism, indeed a vital part of Christianity and Mary's role in the rebirth of the world through Jesus Christ.

Mary was born without the stain of Original Sin, the first question is how? This theological thought was debated greatly and because of this was never made Dogma until 1854, and even then there still remained some opposition. In the book *A Complete Mariology*, Friethoff reviews some of the theories and views that were taken to explain how Mary could have been conceived without the stain that all of humanity is born with since the fall of Adam and Eve. Many of the theories described by Friethoff are baseless, "refuge in inconsistency: at that moment Mary had original sin and at the same time she had not. Others in purely imaginative inventions . . . Mary's parents were said to have not had any concupiscence at the time of the marriage act." (55) Theories of inconsistency explain nothing and the theory of concupiscence is based on yet another theory, that the stain of original sin is passed on by concupiscence or sexual desire during the conception.

Another two theories, the theory of the immaculate molecule and the purified seed, were debated. Friethoff describes both of them as well as the argument used against them. The theory of the immaculate molecule proposes that when Adam fell he was entered by the devil who took him over, all but a single molecule, which provided the unstained material for Mary's conception. The purified seed is similar in that Mary's exception from original sin is explained by unstained material for Mary's conception, in this theory it is God that purifies the material for her conception. However the problem that these two theories raise, and which is used to argue against them, is that if the material used for Mary's conception was unstained then Mary would have no need for a redeemer, no need for Jesus. (55-56) Both of these theories seem to view the stain of original sin as biological, almost like a disease. The problem with these theories, and the major argument against the Immaculate Conception, is that Mary is born with no need for a future redeemer. She was born free

of original sin and has no need to be brought forth out of this stain.

The prevailing solution to these problems is the preservation of Mary. The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception uses this term in its declaration, preservation from original sin instead of a kind of exclusion from it. Friethoff explains the preservation as developed by Duns Scotus:

By the sacrament of baptism which produces sanctifying grace in us we are cleansed from the guilt of original sin already in us, although it still remains a fact that we are without the gifts bestowed in Paradise. In the same way it must also be possible for God to free from this guilt at the first moment of his human existence a man in whom these gifts are lacking. But in that case, this man is not, like us, cleansed from a guilt that was actually present but preserved by sanctifying grace from the entrance of original sin. (56)

This solution still seems pretty much the same as an exception to the law of original sin, in that Mary is spared its stain. However the preservation is a solution to explain the Immaculate Conception in that Mary, preserved from the entrance of original sin instead of being excluded from it, does require a future redeemer, which was the problem of the former proposed theories. The former theories propose that, regardless of what happened after Mary's conception, Mary would be free of the stain of original sin. The preservation suggests that Mary may at some point in the future not be preserved from the stain of original sin, joining the rest of humanity in their fallen state and in need of a redeemer. Mary accepts God's will and carries Jesus, giving birth to the redeemer and continuing her life of sinlessness, redeemed by Jesus as everyone else is, but she may have refused.

As confusing as the how of the immaculate conception is, the bigger question and perhaps the answer of the how is the why. Why, despite the problems of its theological thought, does the preservation of Mary from original sin carry with it such importance, especially considering there is no direct scriptural support of Mary's birth? The earliest writing of Mary's birth is found in the Apocryphal Book of James or Protevangelium. Mary's parents, Ioachim and Anna, and the event of her birth are written of in this noncanonical book:

in the ninth month Anna brought forth. And she said unto the midwife: what have I brought forth? And she said: A female. And Anna said: My soul is magnified this day, and she laid herself down. And when the days were fulfilled, Anna purified herself and gave suck to the child and called her name Mary. (5:2)

Although the story of Mary's conception is shown as a miracle given to a barren Anne by the grace of God, much like the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke as well as Abram and Sarai in the book of Genesis, it in no way mentions any kind of miraculous intervention by God to preserve Mary from original sin. With no direct scriptural support for this doctrine and many passages of scripture, such as Romans 3:23, "For all alike have sinned, and are deprived of the divine glory," seemingly in direct contrast to it why did it continue to develop until becoming Dogma?

The importance of the Immaculate Conception can perhaps be discovered when looking at the Jesus event and Mary's important role in it. Jesus Christ was born to be the redeemer of humanity, to reverse the fall of Adam and original sin. Jesus is often compared to Adam in this regard, "as the result of one misdeed was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all. For as through the disobedience of one man many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one man many will be made righteous," (Romans 5:18-19) as righting the wrong committed by Adam. The Jesus event is a reversal of the fall of Adam and Eve.

However in the fall of Adam and Eve, Eve plays a large roll, in that she is given the choice first of whether or not to be obedient to God. While Adam completes the fall, it is Eve who begins it with that choice to eat of the forbidden fruit. In the event of Jesus, Mary plays a similar roll in that

she is given a choice and begins, based on that choice, the redemption of original sin. The events leading to and including Eve's choice to disobey God in Genesis 3:1-6 are recreated in the Gospel of Luke 1:26-38. In Genesis the serpent comes to Eve and her obedience is tested, in Luke the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and her obedience is also tested. Eve fails and chooses freely to disobey God, while Mary reverses this failure and obeys, "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; 'may it be as you have said.'" (Luke 1:38) It is in this recreation of Eve's failure that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception becomes clear, for there is one thing that is missing in this recreation. Adam and Eve were presented with the free will to make their decision but unlike Mary they are not stained in anyway by previous sin at the time of their decision. In order to completely recreate that moment, the beginning of the fall, and reverse it, the beginning of the redemption, Mary needed to be as Eve was, unstained by original sin. Through the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception Mary becomes, "a model of humanity before the Fall. Just as Eve and Adam were created sinless, so, too, was Mary, who by her free consent would cooperate with God." (Cunneen, 250) Her preservation from original sin completes the recreation.

Suddenly the how and why of this doctrine become clearer. The doctrine is needed in order to more completely recreate the reversal of the Fall of humanity in Eve and Adam. Just as Eve, sinless, begins the fall and the introduction of original sin into humanity, Mary, sinless, begins the salvation and the introduction of redemption from sin into humanity. The preservation also becomes clearer in that Mary by her choice does not complete the redemption and could still become stained by original sin except through the completion by the redeemer, Jesus. Previous scriptural passages, like Romans 3:23-24, which were seen to question the doctrine can now be seen differently, "Mary's sinlessness is the ultimate confirmation of Romans 3:23, and especially of the following verse (24). Mary has been "justified freely by this grace through the redemption in Jesus Christ.'" (The Mary Page) Although there is still no direct scriptural support for this doctrine, there is a great deal of support that can be brought out of scripture passages such as this one.

While the importance of the Immaculate Conception was at first confusing it has become quite clear in it's role of Mary as a recreation of Eve's decision. However the source of that initial confusion may still have some importance. When the choice of Mary was given to her and she choose to accept and obey the will of God, my first reaction was not that there was anything missing from the event. Even after researching this paper and rereading the event, I find myself questioning the importance of the Immaculate Conception. Would the choice made by Mary not be of even greater significance if she did indeed make it of her free will AND stained by original sin? Then not only would Mary have made the right decision and started the redemption of humanity, but would have done so by overcoming the original failure instead of being preserved from it's influence.

#### Endnotes

Book of James, or Protevangelium. 5:2.

Cunneen, Sally. In Search of Mary, The Woman and The Symbol. Ballantine Books, New York. Pg. 250.

Friethoff, C.X.J.M. A Complete Mariology. Blackfriars Publications London, 1958. Pg. 55-56.

McKenna, Reverend Bernard A. The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Washinton, D.C. 1929 pg. 21.

The Mary Page

The Oxford Study Bible, Oxford University Press, New York.

Romans 3:23, 5:18-19. Luke 1:38.