

MARY, ARK OF THE NEW COVENANT

A biblical look at the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

By Patrick Madrid

HIS FACE STIFFENED, AND HIS eyes narrowed to slits. Until now the Calvary Chapel pastor had been calm as he “shared the gospel” with me, but when I mentioned my belief in Mary’s Immaculate Conception, his attitude changed.

“The problem with you Roman Catholics,” he said, forefinger stabbing the air a few inches from my face, “is that you’ve added extra baggage to the gospel. How can you call yourselves Christians when you cling to unbiblical traditions like the Immaculate Conception? It’s not in the Bible—it was invented by the Roman Catholic system in 1854. Besides, Mary couldn’t have been sinless, only God is sinless. If she were without sin she would be God!”

At least the minister got the date right, 1854 being the year Pope Pius IX infallibly defined the doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, but that’s as far as his accuracy went. His reaction was typical of Evangelicals. He was adamant that the Catholic emphasis on Mary’s sinlessness was an unbearable affront to the unique holiness of God, especially as manifested in Jesus Christ.

After we’d examined the biblical evidence for the doctrine, the anti-Marianism he’d shown became muted, but it was clear that, at least emotionally if not biblically, Mary was a stumbling block for him. Like most Christians (Catholic and Protestant) the minister was unaware of the biblical support for the Church’s teaching on the Immaculate Conception. But sometimes even knowledge of these passages isn’t enough. Many former Evangelicals who have converted to the Catholic Church relate how hard it was for



them to put aside prejudices and embrace Marian doctrines even after they'd thoroughly satisfied themselves through prayer and Scripture study that such teachings were indeed biblical.

For Evangelicals who have investigated the issue and discovered, to their astonishment, the biblical support for Marian doctrines, there often lingers the suspicion that somehow, in a way they can't quite identify, the Catholic emphasis on Mary's sinlessness undermines the unique sinlessness of Christ.

To alleviate such suspicions, one must understand what the Church means (and doesn't mean) by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Pope Pius IX, in his constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* (issued December 8, 1854), taught that Mary, "from the first instance of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace granted by God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin." The doctrine includes the assertion that Mary was perpetually free from all actual sin (willful disobedience of God, either venial or mortal).

Several objections are raised by Protestants.

FIRST, IF ONLY GOD IS sinless, Mary couldn't have been sinless or she would have been God.

Second, if Mary was sinless, why did she say, "My spirit rejoices in God my savior" (Luke 1:47)? If only sinners need a savior, why would Mary, if free from sin, include herself in the category of sinners? If she were sinless, she would have had no need of a savior, and her statement in Luke 1 would be incoherent.

Third, Paul says in Romans 3:10-12, 23, "There is no one just [righteous], not one, there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God, all have gone astray; all alike are worthless; there is not one who does good, not even one. .

. . all have sinned and are deprived [fallen short] of the glory of God." In Romans 5:12 he says, "Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned . . ." These verses seem to rule out any possibility that Mary was sinless.

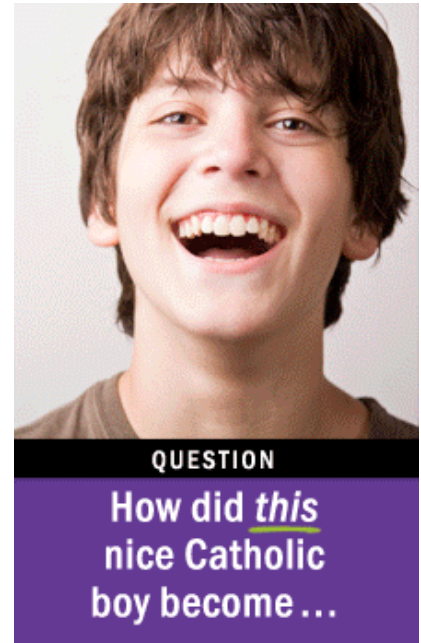
THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION EMPHASIZES FOUR truths: (1) Mary *did* need a savior; (2) her savior was Jesus Christ; (3) Mary's salvation was accomplished by Jesus through his work on the Cross; and (4) Mary was saved from sin, but in a different and more glorious way than the rest of us are. Let's consider the first and easiest of the three objections.

The notion that God is the only being without sin is quite false—and even Protestants think so. Adam and Eve, before the fall, were free from sin, and they weren't gods, the serpent's assertions to the contrary notwithstanding. (One must remember that Mary was not the first immaculate human being, even if she was the first to be conceived immaculately.)

The angels in heaven are not gods, but they were created sinless and have remained so ever since. The saints in heaven are not gods, although each of them is now completely sinless (Rev. 14:5; 21:27).

The second and third arguments are related. Mary needed Jesus as her savior. His death on the Cross saved her, as it saves us, but its saving effects were applied to her (unlike to us) at the moment of her conception. (Keep in mind that the Crucifixion is an eternal event and that the appropriation of salvation through Christ's death isn't impeded by time or space.)

Medieval theologians developed an analogy to explain how and why Mary needed Jesus as her savior. A man (each of us) is walking along a forest path, unaware of a large pit a few paces directly ahead of him. He falls headlong into the pit and is immersed in the mud (original sin) it contains. He cries out for help, and his rescuer (the Lord Jesus) lowers a rope



down to him and hauls him back up to safety. The man says to his rescuer, "Thank you for saving me," recalling the words of the psalmist: The Lord "stooped toward me and heard my cry. He drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp; he set my feet upon a crag" (Psalm 40:2-4).

A woman (Mary), approaches the same pit, but as she began to fall into the pit her rescuer reaches out and stops her from falling in. She cries out, "Thank you for saving me" (Luke 1:47). Like this woman, Mary was no less "saved" than any other human being has been saved. She was just saved anticipatorily, *before* contracting original sin. Each of us is permitted to become dirtied with original sin, but she was not. God hates sin, so this was a far better way.

PAUL'S STATEMENTS IN ROMANS CHAPTERS 3 and 5 (no one is righteous; no one seeks God; no one does good; all have sinned) should not be taken in a crassly literal and universal sense—if they are, irreconcilable contradictions will arise. Consider Luke 1:6. Common sense tells us whole groups of people are exempt from Paul's statement that "all have sinned." Aborted infants cannot sin, nor can



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young children or severely retarded people. But Paul didn't mention such obvious exceptions. He was writing to adults in our state of life.

If certain groups are exempt from the "all have sinned" rubric, then these verses can't be used to argue against Mary's Immaculate Conception, since hers would be an exceptional case too, one not needing mention given the purpose of Paul's discussion and his intended audience.

Now let's consider what the Bible has to say in favor of the Catholic position. It's important to recognize that neither the words "Immaculate Conception" nor the precise formula adopted by the Church to enunciate this truth are found in the Bible. This doesn't mean the doctrine isn't biblical, only that the truth of the Immaculate Conception, like the truths of the Trinity and Jesus' hypostatic union (that Jesus was incarnated as God and man, possessing completely and simultaneously two natures, divine and human, in one divine person), is mentioned either in other words or only indirectly.

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LOOK FIRST AT TWO PASSAGES in Luke 1. In verse 28, the angel Gabriel greets Mary as "*kecharitome*" ("full of grace" or "highly favored"). This is a recognition of her sinless state. In verse 42 Elizabeth greets Mary as "blessed among women." The original import of this phrase is lost in English translation. Since neither the Hebrew nor Aramaic languages have superlatives (best, highest, tallest, holiest), a speaker of those languages would have said, "You are tall among men" or "You are wealthy among men" to mean "You are the tallest" or "You are the wealthiest." Elizabeth's words mean Mary was the holiest of all women.

The Church understands Mary to be the fulfillment of three Old Testament types: the cosmos, Eve, and the ark of the covenant. A type is a person, event, or thing in the Old Testament which foreshadows or symbolizes some future reality God brings to pass. (See these verses for Old Testament types fulfilled in the New Testament: Col. 2:17, Heb. 1:1, 9:9, 9:24, 10:1; 1 Cor. 15:45-49; Gal. 4:24-25.)

Some specific examples of types: Adam was a type of Christ (Rom. 5:14); Noah's Ark and the Flood were types of the Church and baptism (1 Peter 3:19-21); Moses, who delivered Israel from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, was a type of Christ, who saves us from the bondage of slavery to sin and death; circumcision foreshadowed baptism; the slain passover lamb in Exodus 12: 21-28 was a symbol of Jesus, the Lamb of God, being slain on the Cross to save sinners. The important thing to understand about a type is that its fulfillment is always more glorious, more profound, more "real" than the type itself.

MARY'S IMMACULATE CONCEPTION IS FORESHADOWED in Genesis 1, where God creates the universe in an immaculate state, free from any blemish or stain of sin or imperfection. This is borne out by the repeated mention in Genesis 1 of God beholding his creations and saying they were

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"very good." Out of pristine matter the Lord created Adam, the first immaculately created human being, forming him from the "womb" of the Earth. The immaculate elements from which the first Adam received his substance foreshadowed the immaculate mother from whom the second Adam (Romans 5:14) took his human substance.

The second foreshadowing of Mary is Eve, the physical mother of our race, just as Mary is our spiritual mother through our membership in the Body of Christ (Rev. 12:17). What Eve spoiled through disobedience and lack of faith (Genesis 3), Mary set aright through faith and obedience (Luke 1:38).

We see a crucial statement in Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he will crush your head, and you will strike at his heel." This passage is especially significant in that it refers to the "seed of the woman," a singular usage. The Bible, following normal biology, otherwise only refers to the seed of the man, the seed of the father, but never to the seed of the woman. Who is the woman mentioned here? The only possibility is Mary, the only woman to give birth to a child without the aid of a human father, a fact prophesied in Isaiah 7:14.

YES. These are STRANGE and DIFFICULT times.



IF MARY WERE NOT COMPLETELY sinless this prophesy becomes untenable. Why is that? The passage points to Mary's Immaculate Conception because it mentions a complete enmity between the woman and Satan. Such an enmity would have been impossible if Mary were tainted by sin, original or actual (see 2 Corinthians 6:14). This line of thinking rules out Eve as the woman, since she clearly was under the influence of Satan in Genesis 3.

The third and most compelling type of Mary's Immaculate Conception is the ark of the covenant. In Exodus 20 Moses is given the Ten Commandments. In chapters 25 through 30 the Lord gives Moses a detailed plan for the construction of the ark, the special container which would carry the Commandments. The surprising thing is that five chapters later, starting in chapter 35 and continuing to chapter 40, Moses repeats word for word each of the details of the ark's construction.

Why? It was a way of emphasizing how crucial it was for the Lord's exact specifications to be met (Ex. 25:9, 39:42-43). God wanted the ark to be as perfect and unblemished as humanly possible so it would be worthy of the honor of bearing the written Word of God. How much

more so would God want Mary, the ark of the new covenant, to be perfect and unblemished since she would carry within her womb the Word of God in flesh.

When the ark was completed, "the cloud covered the meeting tent and the glory of the Lord filled the dwelling. Moses could not enter the meeting tent, because the cloud settled down upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the dwelling" (Ex. 40:34-38). Compare this with the words of Gabriel to Mary in Luke 1:35.

There's another striking foreshadowing of Mary as the new ark of the covenant in 2 Samuel 6. The Israelites had lost the ark in a battle with their enemies, the Philistines, and had recently recaptured it. King David sees the ark being brought to him and, in his joy and awe, says "Who am I that the ark of the Lord should come to me?" (1 Sam. 6:9).

Compare this with Elizabeth's nearly identical words in Luke 1:43. Just as David leapt for joy before the ark when it was brought into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:14-16), so John the Baptist leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb when Mary, the ark of the new covenant, came into her presence (Luke 1:44). John's leap was for precisely the same reason as David's—not primarily because of the ark itself, but because of what the ark contained, the Word of God.

ANOTHER PARALLEL MAY BE FOUND in 2 Samuel 6:10-12 where we read that David ordered the ark diverted up into the hill country of Judea to remain with the household of Obbedom for three months. This parallels the three-month visit Mary made at Elizabeth's home in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39-45, 65). While the ark remained with Obbedom it "blessed his household." This is an Old Testament way of saying the fertility of women, crops, and livestock was increased. Notice that God worked this same miracle for Elizabeth and Zachariah in their old age as a prelude to the greater miracle he would work in Mary.

The Mary/ark imagery appears again in Revelation 11:19 and

12:1-17, where she is called the mother of all "those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus" (verse 17). The ark symbolism found in Luke 1 and Revelation 11 and 12 was not lost on the early Christians. They could see the parallels between the Old Testament's description of the ark and the New Testament's discussion of Mary's role.

Granted, none of these verses "proves" Mary's Immaculate Conception, but they all point to it. After all, the Bible nowhere says Mary committed any sin or languished under original sin. As far as explicit statements are concerned, the Bible is silent on most of the issue, yet all the biblical evidence supports the Catholic teaching.

A LAST THOUGHT. IF YOU COULD have created your own mother, wouldn't you have made her the most beautiful, virtuous, perfect woman possible? Jesus, being God, did create his own mother (Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2), and he did just that—he created her immaculate and, in his mercy and generosity, kept her that way.

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