

The Purification of Mary and the Immaculate Conception

By Greg Witherow

A Catholic friend was listening to a Protestant radio program where the speaker pointed out that Mary, the mother of Christ, underwent purification rites after giving birth. The minister stated this was proof that Mary was a sinner, like all of us, as she needed the cleansing these rites provided. If our Protestant minister is correct, Catholics have a problem, as it is a dogma that Mary was without sin¹. How does a Catholic respond?

In the gospel of Luke² we read of Joseph and Mary's presentation of Christ in the temple. It states,

“And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. **And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses**, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’ and to offer sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

The implication the Protestant speaker made from this text is that because Mary underwent the purification rites of childbirth, it proved she was a sinner. There are a few problems with this analysis. First of all, childbearing was not and is not a sin (more on this later). Secondly, the text in Luke states it was “time for **their**³ purification”. While not all translations pick up on this (but most do), all Bible commentators acknowledge the Greek requires “their” as opposed to “her”⁴. So who are “they”?

There were absolutely no purification requirements for a husband after childbirth in the Law of Moses, so this must rule out Joseph. Rather, in the narrative it was Mary and Christ that had rites performed upon them. Mary submitted to the childbirth purification ritual for the same reason Christ submitted to circumcision (a rite that symbolized being made holy or set apart - with a circumcised heart), the rite of redemption (being bought for God even though he was God), the Passover (a meal that was a sin offering so God would pass over your household) and the baptism of John (a sign of repentance and cleansing from sin). Likewise, Luke points out that Mary (and Christ) needed purification “according to the Law”, not because she (or Christ) had need of purification because of sin.

¹ The dogma of the Immaculate Conception states that Mary was free from the stain of sin from the first moment of her conception and that she committed no actual sin during her lifetime.

² Luke 2:21-24

³ The transliterated Greek word is “autos”. Throughout the King James Version Bible the word is translated him (1947 times), them (1148 times), her (195 times), it (152 times).

⁴ Regardless of the translation, it is obvious from the passage that Christ receives the rites of circumcision and redemption. In essence, both Christ and Mary had rites performed on them.

Why did Christ submit to these rituals? Jimmy Akin, a Catholic apologist has provided us with a list of reasons⁵ that I'll provide here.

1. Because he (like Mary) was born under the law (Galatians 4:4).
2. To remove any cause for criticism and slander on the part of others, Christ submitted to things in the Mosaic Law of which he had no personal need or requirement (see Matthew 17:24-27 where he pays taxes for the same reason).
3. Christ did these things in order to provide an example for others--an example of obedience to the Mosaic Law with regard to circumcision and Passover, and an example of obedience to the Christian Law in the case of baptism.

Akin goes on to note, "In fact, if there were any difficulty in explaining Mary's submission to the purification ritual, it would be ten times harder to explain Christ's submission to these rituals since he was **intrinsically** and **infinitely** holy, while Mary was merely **rendered** entirely sinless by God's grace, as we shall be". In conclusion, **Protestants, in trying to hang sin around the neck of Mary because of her purification rites, unwittingly impugn Christ as well.**

But what about the mandatory sin offering? As stated earlier, childbearing was not a sinful act in need of forgiveness. As such, commentators have offered two explanations of Leviticus 12:8 (where the requirement is defined). John Calvin opines that it was the stain of original sin in the offspring that caused the mother to become unclean (as child bearing is not a sin). As a result, not only would the child need circumcision (in the case of a boy) to rectify **his** uncircumcised heart, but the mother too would be pronounced unclean because of **her contact** with the defiled infant and as such in need of a sin offering. If is the case, then it is clear that Mary in actuality was not unclean, as Christ was not polluted with the stain of original sin. A second possibility put forth is that the mother may have sinned during the childbirth process (by overly desiring a child or in the pain of delivering having a bitter heart) and therefore in need of a sin offering⁶.

In summary, we see that both Mary and Christ underwent purification rites. While neither of them had sinned, nor bore the stain of original sin, they together submitted to these rites to fulfill the law of the Lord.

Does any of this prove Mary was immaculate, free from the stain of original or actual sin? No it does not. Are there other passages that must be dealt with in order to comprehensively address Protestant objections to the Immaculate Conception? Yes. However, we can see how Protestants err if they use **this passage** to "prove" Mary had sin. We will examine the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in further essays.

⁵ <http://www.cin.org/users/james/questions/q051.htm>

⁶ This is a theory of the Protestant Matthew Henry (1662-1714), an English Presbyterian clergyman in his commentary on Leviticus 12:8. Matthew Henry is well known in Protestant circles for his six-volume "Complete Commentary" of the Bible. These commentaries are widely read.