

# The Immaculate Conception

By Greg Witherow

On December 8, 1854 Pope Pius IX defined the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of the Church<sup>1</sup>. The dogma defines Mary as free from the stain of Original Sin (and Actual Sin) from the moment of **her conception**<sup>2</sup>. We find this dogmatic truth embedded in the Annunciation where the angel Gabriel makes two visits, the first to Zechariah and the second to Mary. The two encounters are similar in many ways, but depart in a small and almost unnoticeable detail. The divergence clues the reader that there is something very different between Zechariah and Mary. We will explore this difference by examining Gabriel's first meeting with Zechariah.

“And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled **when he saw him** and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah”

Gabriel tells Zechariah not to be afraid. And what struck fear into Zechariah? The passage tells us "he was troubled **when he saw him** [the angel] and fear fell upon him". It is clear that the presence of Gabriel (not Gabriel's words) struck Zechariah with fear. It is Gabriel's words that soothe him, telling Zechariah to not be afraid. Now let's compare Zechariah's experience to Mary's exchange with Gabriel six months later.

“And he [Gabriel] came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" But she was **greatly troubled at the saying** and considered in her mind **what sort of greeting** this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid Mary.”

Mary's fear is exactly reversed from Zechariah's; it is the words not the presence of Gabriel that make her afraid. This is important. The passage tells us, “She was **greatly troubled** at the **saying**”. To make sure we get it Luke goes on to say that she "considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be". Luke wants to make sure we understand that it is the “saying” and not the “seeing” that unsettled Mary. In contrast Zechariah shook with fear when **he saw**. To hold that Gabriel's mere presence caused Mary's fear (as it did for Zechariah) is to stray from the text. In fact, Mary seems to **almost ignore** the small detail she's standing in the company of an Archangel as she weighs the impact of Gabriel's words. Incredibly, this young woman is the only person in scripture who knowingly stands before an angel without feeling the terror of the angel's **mere presence**<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There are four Marian dogmas; Mary the Mother of God (the Theotokos), the Perpetual Virginity of Mary, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary.

<sup>2</sup> Many people mistakenly believe that the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary's virgin conception of Christ. Rather it refers to Mary being free from the stain of sin starting at her first moment of existence.

<sup>3</sup> In the Old Testament, Daniel stands before the same angel Gabriel, falls down on his face in fear and passes out. See Daniel chapter 8 for this story.

## **Kecharitomene**

So what did Gabriel say that frightened Mary? After all, he has simply greeted her. At this point, he **has not told her** about bearing Christ in her womb. Therefore we must dismiss the fear of having God (Jesus) in her womb for nine months as the reason for the fear. To find the answer Luke and Mary call us to consider what sort of greeting this might be.

Gabriel's greeting was a bit odd in that, unlike Zechariah he did not address her by her given name. Instead Gabriel addressed her as "full of grace", as if that was her title<sup>4</sup>. But beyond this, what is so frightening in the words, "Hail full of grace, the Lord is with you"? This all sounds reassuring. God is with her. God has given her an abundance of grace. Are these not words that would fill us with feelings of elation? Wouldn't each of us long to hear such reassurances? Doesn't the Psalmist often sing for joy over God's presence? But it's fear, not joy that seizes Mary. We almost see her trembling hands. We almost see her slowly drop to her knees. Why? The answer is most likely this; Gabriel addressed her as **Kecharitomene** (translated "full of grace" or "highly favored one"), a word found nowhere else in the Bible<sup>5</sup>. It is this word that frightened her. And it is at this moment (not at his appearance) that Gabriel must intervene to steady her.

The root of the word is "charitoo" which means "to be graced". So here we see the concept of grace is embedded in whatever Gabriel is getting at. With its attached prefix (ke) and suffix (mene) the word itself is a passive participle. The prefix ke signifies the word is in the perfect tense. This indicates a present state which is the result of a completed **past action**. The suffix on charitoo, mene, makes this a passive participle. "Passive" means that another agent performs the action on the subject, in this case Mary. The verb is "grace" and the implied subject is Mary. The passive usage means that "someone graced Mary," rather than "Mary graced." Kecharitomene has verb properties (are graced) and noun properties (used as if it were a name). The kind of grace it describes is only attributed to Mary<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Gabriel did not say, "greetings one who is full of grace" but "greetings full of grace". It would be like addressing a baseball player as "Mr. Baseball" instead of "here is a man who is a great baseball player".

<sup>5</sup> Christ is described as full of grace in John 1. But the Greek word used is charis. The root word of kecharitomene is charitoo. It is used in Ephesians 1:6 in describing all of the saints and is translated "accepted". In some manuscripts, but not the textus receptus (and therefore not found in Strong's Concordance), the Greek word charitoo is used to describe Stephen just before his martyrdom. It is translated as "full of grace".

<sup>6</sup> There has been much written on this word. See the following website for one such discussion. <http://www.bringyou.to/apologetics/al16.htm>. Also, the Church Father Origen, commenting on Luke 1:26-38 says, "The angel greeted Mary with a new address, which I could not find anywhere else in Scripture.... The angel says, "Hail, full of grace." The Greek word is kecharitomene [kecaritomene]. I do not remember having read this word elsewhere in Scripture. An expression of this kind, "Hail, full of grace," is not addressed to a male. This greeting was reserved for Mary alone."

Therefore to render more exactly the nuance of the Greek word one should not say merely "full of grace," but "**made** full of grace," or even "**filled** with grace," which would clearly indicate that this was a gift given by God to the blessed Virgin. This term, in the form of a perfect participle, enhances the image of a perfect and lasting grace, which implies fullness<sup>7</sup>.

**Protestant** Greek New Testament scholars say the following on the word kecharitome (emphasis mine),

"It is *permissible*, on Greek grammatical and linguistic grounds, to paraphrase kecharitome as **COMPLETELY, PERFECTLY, ENDURINGLY** endowed with grace." (Blass and DeBrunner, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament*).

### **To Whom Much Is Given...**

In other words, Mary was completely, perfectly and enduringly graced. Paraphrasing Gabriel, he addressed Mary as "the Immaculate Conception". This is what Mary reflected on. And this is what struck fear into her heart.

Gabriel immediately tries to calm her, "Do not be afraid!". Mary sensed she had been given an unprecedented gift **with unprecedented obligations**. And Gabriel was about to announce those obligations and seek her consent. Within moments she would wear the titles, "the Ark of the Covenant"<sup>8</sup>, the "Theotokos" and the "Immaculate Conception". Oh the difference a day can bring! But why did God do such a thing?

### **The Necessity of the Immaculate Conception: Divine Maternity**

"And indeed it was wholly fitting that so wonderful a mother should be ever resplendent with the glory of most sublime holiness and so completely free from all taint of original sin that she would triumph utterly over the ancient serpent. To her did the Father will to give his only-begotten Son -- the Son whom, equal to the Father and begotten by him, the Father loves from his heart -- and to give this Son in such a way that he would be the one and the same common Son of God the Father and of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was she whom the Son himself chose to make his Mother and it was from her that the Holy Spirit willed and brought it about that he should be conceived and born from whom he himself proceeds." Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*.

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<sup>7</sup> Pope JP2

<sup>8</sup> The Ark of the Covenant was a type or sign of a future figure, namely Mary. The Ark was made of pure gold and resided in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. **Nothing sinful was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies**. The High Priest entered only once a year, after many rites were performed on him. Lest he do something sinful while in the Holy of Holies, he had a rope tied around his leg. If God struck him down, the sinners outside could pull the dead High Priest out.

## The Protoevangelium

“And I will put enmity **between you and the woman**, and between your seed and **her Seed**; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel<sup>9</sup>.”

So says God to the Serpent in the Garden. But God did not cast Adam out of the Garden without first giving him the hope of the gospel (as proclaimed in this passage). In that first gospel message we see the prophesy of a woman at enmity with the Serpent and her Seed, who will strike the fatal blow upon Satan’s head<sup>10</sup>. The woman is Mary and her Seed (with the Virgin birth alluded to) is Christ. Being at enmity with Satan means that Mary never, even for an instant, was on Satan’s side, in Satan’s camp under the allure of sin. All mankind are born under the domain of Satan, at least for a while, being born with Original Sin. But Mary and Christ, identified in the protoevanglium (Genesis 3:15), are always in **complete opposition and enmity** to Satan.

## The Greek Fathers

The Greek Fathers, who spoke the language of the New Testament and lived its culture, are an important source for how they understood kecharitomene<sup>11</sup>. One such Father is Gregory Thaumaturgus (205-270 AD). He penned the following:

O purest one  
O purest virgin  
where the Holy Spirit is, there are all things readily ordered. Where divine grace is present  
the soil that, all untilled, bears bounteous fruit  
in the life of the flesh, was in possession of the incorruptible citizenship, and walked as such in all manner of virtues, and lived a life more excellent than man's common standard  
thou hast put on the vesture of purity  
has selected thee as the holy one and the wholly fair;  
and through thy holy, and chaste, and pure, and undefiled womb  
since of all the race of man thou art by birth the holy one, and the more honorable, and the purer, and the more pious than any other: and thou hast a mind whiter than the snow, and a body made purer than any gold

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 3:15

<sup>10</sup> We see these 3 characters re-engage in Revelation 12.

<sup>11</sup> The Orthodox churches all believe Mary was without sin and immaculate. However, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is not defined in the east. Orthodox theologians debate whether Mary was made immaculate before or after her conception. But regardless, the Orthodox believe she was without the stain of sin when she conceived Christ, nor did she ever commit actual sin. This was the view of St. Thomas Aquinas. However, the dogma had not yet been defined during his lifetime and he was therefore free to dissent until the Church ruled on the matter. This is very similar to St. Jerome’s situation, where he dissented on the inclusion of the deuterocanonical books in the Old Testament until the Church made a ruling. Then he changed his opinion.

## Common Objections

**Objection #1: This is one of several Catholic doctrines where Mary is made equal to Christ. Only Christ was conceived without the stain of Original Sin.**

**Response: Mary is not equal to Christ. It is impossible for a Creature to be equal to God. An absence of Original Sin does not make one equal to Christ. This is demonstrable in that others were created immaculate without equality to the Godhead.**

It is true that Christ was conceived without the stain of Original Sin. No orthodox Christian debates this. However, all Christians acknowledge that the angels and Adam and Eve were “conceived” without the stain of Original Sin. True, they were conceived in an unusual way, with God intervening in their creation in an unusual way. But for that matter, Christ was conceived in an unusual way too. But even before the Fall, Adam and Eve were never close to being equal to Christ. The same is true of Mary.

There are two examples in scripture of men, while conceived with Original Sin, were born into this world without it. Most Bible scholars agree that John the Baptist and Jeremiah the prophet were saved (made regenerate – born again) in the womb before they were born. By definition, once a person becomes a child of God, Original Sin is wiped out forever. While these two men went on to sin (and repent) during their lives, they came into the world immaculate, but not from conception. And in heaven we will all be immaculate.

**Objection #2: Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. Therefore the Bible contradicts the Catholic doctrine of Mary being conceived without sin.**

**Reply: Romans 3:23 speaks of Actual Sin, not Original Sin.**

The Greek word used in the cited passage is “harmartano”. It is a verb and connotes committed or actual sin, not Original Sin. Original Sin is not something you do; it is a condition of the soul<sup>12</sup>.

But the dogma of the Immaculate Conception includes a belief that Mary committed no Actual Sin. Does Romans 3:23 therefore negate the dogma? The answer is, only if there is no reason to think an exception is made to the Rule. For example, Hebrews 9:27 states that, “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”. But we know there are exceptions. Scripture states that both Enoch and Elijah did not die.

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<sup>12</sup> Even if Original Sin was included in the texts meaning, there can be exceptions if warranted. For example, Christ is an exception, which is not noted by Paul in this passage. His exception is noted elsewhere in scripture. But a case needs to be made for exceptions; they cannot be made on whims. The Magisterium, Tradition and the testimony of Scripture point to Mary as an exception.

Likewise, when Christ comes again there will be billions of people on earth who are still alive. And the people who Christ raised from the dead died a second time. But this does not negate the text in Hebrews, as most men will die (once).

Another exception to Actual Sin is the case of unborn babies. Romans 9:9,10 says, “And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls).”

If scripture calls for an exception to a Rule, we must acknowledge the exception based on the arguments made for it. We look to the Church to judge the exceptions, not private judgment.

**Objection #3: If Mary had no sin, she had no need for a Savior. But she herself states that God is her Savior in the Magnificat.**

**Reply: God also saved Mary.**

If a person falls into an abyss but is rescued - we say that person was saved. And if a person is about to fall into an abyss but someone snatches him from danger – we say that person was saved too. We were saved in the former way. Mary was saved in the latter way. Like all mankind, Mary was saved **only by the merits of Christ**. And with her we call God our Savior.