

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

The angel Gabriel came to Mary and greeted her: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you! . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."²¹ Scripture relates that Mary was puzzled and wondered what sort of greeting this might be.²²

In anticipation of her divine motherhood, God had granted Mary the privilege of being "full of grace" so that she would be able to fulfill perfectly her unique mission as the Mother of God. This fullness of grace, which God gratuitously bestowed on Mary, is incompatible with the stain of Original Sin.

The Church, therefore, has always held that due to her unique status as the chosen Mother of Jesus Christ, Mary was conceived without Original Sin. This ancient belief of the Church was solemnly proclaimed on December 8, 1854, by Bl. Pius IX, in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, which declared the Immaculate Conception of Mary a dogma of the Faith:

We declare, pronounce, and define the doctrine that maintains that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary in the first instant of her conception, by a unique grace and privilege of the omnipotent God and in consideration of the merits of Christ Jesus the Savior of the Human Race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore must be firmly and constantly held by all the faithful.

As if in confirmation of the Church's proclamation of the Immaculate Conception, Mary appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes four years later and identified herself by the title: "I am the Immaculate Conception."

Whenever the Church teaches that all have sinned, it has always been careful to exclude the Virgin Mary. At the same time, it qualifies this immunity from sin as being a special privilege of God in anticipation of the merits of Christ.

It is also logical that the Virgin Mary—conceived without the stain of Original Sin—was not subject to concupiscence, which is a disorder of the passions. Her passions were subordinated to her intellect and will, which perfectly fulfilled the will of God at every moment of her life. In this regard, her condition was similar to that of our first parents before the Fall. Therefore, not only was she conceived free from sin, but she also remained sinless all the days of her life.



The Immaculate Conception by Zurbaran.

MARY EVER VIRGIN

From the beginning, the Church has always proclaimed its belief in the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. This is mentioned throughout Scripture and is precisely affirmed in the Apostles' Creed. Furthermore, it was confirmed many times by Church councils. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that:

From the first formulations of her faith, the Church has confessed that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, affirming also the corporeal aspect of this event: Jesus was conceived "by the Holy Spirit without human seed."²³ (CCC 496)

In addition to proclaiming Mary's virginity before the birth of Christ, the writings of the Church Fathers attest that the Church, from its earliest years, has taught that Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Christ. The Lateran Council (AD 649) specifically addressed this ancient belief in Mary's virginity before, during, and after childbirth, that is, her *perpetual virginity*.²⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that: "The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity."²⁵ So, the Church proclaims that Mary remained a virgin not only before the conception of Christ, but always.

The Bible makes reference to the "brothers and sisters of Jesus," but these are cousins or close relatives. At the time the Gospels were written, there was no word in the Aramaic language for "cousin," and it was customary to use "brothers" to indicate all close relations, including cousins as well as brothers and sisters.

For example, St. James, whose father was Cleophas, is referred to as a brother of Jesus when in fact he was Jesus' cousin. When one reads Jesus Christ's declaration from the Cross, "Behold, your mother,"²⁶ one can reasonably conclude that Mary was entrusted to St. John's care, because she had no other children.

Mary's perpetual virginity reflects the desire of the Holy Spirit that Mary remain a special creation in her role as Mother of the living God. Her virginal motherhood reflects the great value of virginity in both its bodily and spiritual dimensions. The call to live a life of virginity has always been honored as a reflection of Mary's virginity. Virginity frees a person to live a life dedicated totally to God, as the parenthood of the few is replaced with a parenthood of the many.²⁷



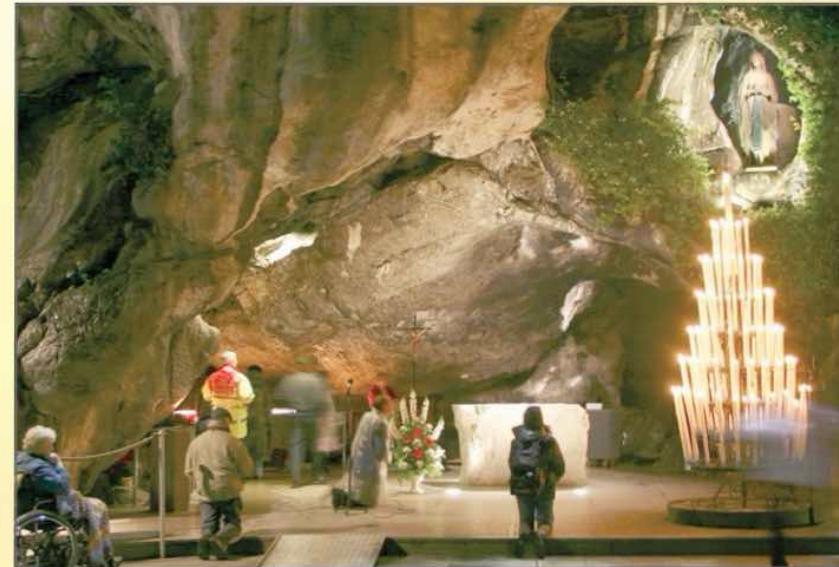
Torchlight Marian Procession of the Rosary Pilgrimage, Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes.

OUR LADY OF LOURDES

The appearance of Our Lady to St. Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes is one of the most famous of all Marian apparitions. The story began on Thursday, February 11, 1858, when fourteen-year-old Bernadette, a poor, uneducated peasant girl in southern France, went to a nearby river with her sister Marie and a friend to gather firewood. After the other two crossed the river, leaving St. Bernadette alone, she heard what sounded like a storm coming from a nearby grotto called Massabielle. Looking inside the grotto, she saw a golden cloud, and shortly thereafter a beautiful lady with a rosary draped over her right arm. St. Bernadette fell to her knees and began to pray the Rosary with the lady (although the lady only recited the *Our Father* and the *Gloria*). After completing the Rosary, the lady disappeared into the grotto without telling St. Bernadette who she was. St. Bernadette herself later wrote of this first apparition:

While I was saying the Rosary, I was watching as hard as I could. She was wearing a white dress reaching down to her feet, of which only the toes appeared. The dress was gathered very high at the neck by a hem from which hung a white cord. A white veil covered her head and came down over her shoulders and arms almost to the bottom of her dress. On each foot I saw a yellow rose. The sash of the dress was blue, and hung down below her knees. The chain of the rosary was yellow; the beads white, big and widely spaced.

This was the first of many apparitions. As word spread, many people would accompany St. Bernadette to the grotto, but only she was able to see the lady. During these apparitions, the lady would tell St. Bernadette to pray for sinners. On one occasion, the lady asked Bernadette to dig and scratch the ground and drink from the spring that flowed forth. This spring was later discovered to contain miraculous healing powers.



The Grotto of Massabielle, Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes

At the request of the village priest, St. Bernadette asked the lady who she was. On the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, the lady told St. Bernadette, "I am the Immaculate Conception." St. Bernadette repeated these words, which she probably did not even understand, to the astounded priest. (The dogma of the Immaculate Conception had been solemnly defined only four years earlier.)

In all, St. Bernadette received eighteen visitations from Mary over a six-month period. The Church declared the apparitions authentic in 1862, and today Lourdes is one of the world's most popular pilgrimage sites. Sixty-seven people have been declared, under the strictest of medical scrutiny, to have been miraculously healed of desperate illnesses and disabilities, and thousands more have claimed physical and spiritual healings resulting from their visits there.

THE ASSUMPTION

Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory.²⁸

Since the fourth century, the Church has celebrated the Feast of the Assumption of Mary on August 15. In the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, this feast is known as the “Dormition of the Virgin.” This dogma of the Faith was defined in 1950, by Pope Pius XII through the constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*:

By our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul in to heavenly glory.

The Assumption into Heaven of those especially close to God is not without precedent in the Old Testament. Scripture records, “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him.”²⁹

Likewise, speaking of great prophet Elijah, Scripture says, “Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. . . and he [Elisha] saw him no more.”³⁰ And finally, the New Testament refers to the “Assumption of Moses” when it relates the dispute between St. Michael and Satan over the Body of Moses.³¹

As daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, and spouse of God the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary has a unique relationship with God that surpasses all who had come before or who would follow. Furthermore, by her cooperation with God’s will, salvation was brought into the world through Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is fitting that as God had assumed into Heaven those who were closest to him in the Old Testament, Jesus Christ would bring his own Mother to Heaven as well.

The Assumption of Mary is also implied in the Book of Revelation when St. John refers to a “woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”³² Many theologians as well as the liturgy of the Church view this as a reference to the Virgin Mary, who appears in Heaven full of glory.

St. John also speaks of the Ark of the Covenant. “God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple.”³³ Christian tradition assigns to Mary, who bore God the Son in her womb, the title “Ark of the (new) Covenant.”



Assumption of the Virgin by Cabezalero.