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Marian Mass

for the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem
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The first four words of the Hail Mary in Latin, "*Ave Maria, gratia plena*" – "Hail Mary, full of grace" – in themselves sum up the rationale for the extraordinary reverence Catholics, and many other Christians, have for Mary, the Mother of Christ.

Chosen by God to be the mother of his Incarnate son, Mary was always "*gratia plena*," "full of grace" and countless generations of believers acknowledged this in their prayers and popular piety. Nevertheless, it took nineteen centuries before this widespread component of our faith was precisely articulated in a doctrinal form to be held by all the faithful. When Pope Blessed Pius IX, surrounded by a world-wide assembly of Cardinals and bishops, spoke from the chair of St. Peter's on December 8, 1854, 150 years ago next month, he defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in carefully chosen words, "the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her Conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin." (*INEFFABILIS DEUS, 12-8-1854*)

This declaration brought to a climax centuries of theological debate where saints were pitted against saints, religious communities against other religious communities and university faculties were often divided among themselves. The problem was not Mary's role in her maternity of Christ or the respect and reverence with which she should be treated because of her obvious holiness in the most intimate relationship the world has documented. The problem arose because of a dilemma – it is the teaching of the Church that all men and women inherit the disabilities associated with original sin. All of us, without exception, need Christ as our savior. How, then, could Mary, born of human parents, traditionally known to us as Joachim and Anne, not be afflicted by the universality of original sin?

The battle lines were drawn. Especially during the medieval period the spirited arguments of both sides provide us with as thrilling a contest as you will find in any realm of art or literature. It gives us a wonderful insight into the concept known as the development of doctrine. It may very well be the classic example of how God allows us to unfold, layer by layer, the shadows which hide the beauty of truth. A homily cannot deal with all the implications of scripture or the reflections of the Fathers of the Church in the early centuries but all of these constitute essential chapters in outlining our understanding of how the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception came to be.

Keeping in mind that they were all deeply devoted to professing Mary's outstanding holiness St. Bernard, St. Thomas of Aquinas and other vaunted saints of the Church could not excuse her from the concept of the universality of redemption. One might say, their hearts were in the right place but their minds could not explain it. It took a Franciscan theologian, John Duns Scotus, to discover the principle by which the puzzle, several centuries later, was solved. His

contention that Mary was preserved free from the limitations of original sin because she shared in the future merits of her Savior Son, was to win the day and provide the key to unlock the argument. Duns Scotus died in 1308 but the theological bantering continued for at least another four hundred years. In the meantime there was one source of enlightenment which was not influenced by theological niceties.

This was the devotion of the people, often referred to as the "*sensus fidelium*." In every nation, in every culture touched by Christianity, the ordinary people voiced prayers and constructed liturgies to honor Mary as the sinless one who, after the Savior himself, was their most influential intercessor before the throne of God. Gradually the Popes began to echo the sentiments of the people in their pastoral writings and the Council of Trent considered but did not follow through on a request to seek a solemn definition. As the 1800s dawned it could be safely maintained that the Church had within its grasp an almost universally accepted truth about Mary's preeminent holiness which had not been defined. Testimony to this fact was the decision of the bishops of the United States at their Provincial Council in Baltimore in 1846. They named the Immaculate Conception as the patronal feast of our country. This was eight years before the actual definition.

Strangely enough, it was probably a private revelation which sparked the impetus for serious consideration of an official declaration of the dogma. Private revelations, as you are probably aware, have a very tenuous link, if any, with what we call the deposit of faith, generally speaking, the truth revealed to us by God through the ministry of Christ and his chosen apostles. But as we are also aware, we do not place strictures on the providence of God.

In 1830, the Sister of Charity, now canonized, Catherine Laboure, was gifted with a vision of the Virgin Mary in her convent on the Rue de Bac in Paris. This apparition resulted in the widely-used Miraculous Medal and the phrase, "Mary, conceived without sin." Was Mary sending us a message? Mary spiritual writers would answer in the affirmative. With petitions pouring in from all corners of the Catholic world Pope Pius IX began the final process. In exile in Gaeta, a consequence of the many wars which plagued Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, in 1849 he authored an encyclical to the universal church declaring his intention of defining the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. He asked for public prayers worldwide and he established a commission of Cardinals and theologians "to examine the subject in every aspect, and with the most extreme care, and to report their matured judgment thereon." As was to be expected, some Protestant leaders attacked his proposal as an attempt to make Mary "divine" but these discordant voices were drowned out by the overwhelming desire of Catholic leaders in favor of the declaration. Many of the bishops of the world came to Rome in November 1854 to spend four intense days debating the proposal and on December 1st the College of Cardinals voted unanimously to support the Holy Father's decision. In magnificent ceremonies enriched by all the sacred music and liturgical panoply which is the heritage of the Church the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was solemnly defined on December 8, 1854. The American hierarchy, small at the time in comparison to its current membership, was represented by six bishops, prelates from New York, Pittsburg, Buffalo, Philadelphia (John Neuman), Baltimore and New Orleans. Mary's new and officially sanctioned title resulted in a spate of new churches and shrines dedicated to her honor, not least among them the National Shrine in Washington and our own local Cathedral. Was it a coincidence or a gesture of gratitude when four years after the definition, in 1858, a young poorly-educated girl, Bernadette Soubirous, hectoring by the pastor and the mayor of Lourdes, was to return to her interrogators and inform them that the lady of the grotto identified herself as the "Immaculate Conception?"

We are indeed fortunate that this significant anniversary will fall within the special Year of the Eucharist. This gives all of us an ideal opportunity to renew our faith in the Redeemer Christ who stays with us forever through his Real Presence in the Eucharist and the privileged mother who was destined by God to form his heart and share his sufferings.

O Mary, conceived without sin! (Pray for us who have recourse to thee!)

You got that one right.

AMEN