

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

(Year A, B, & C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 3:9-15, 20
<i>Response</i>	Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 1:26-38

On December 8th throughout the world Catholics celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Now the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and this feast day in particular, is one of my favorite topics to discuss for three reasons. First, it's one of the most misunderstood Catholic doctrines. Second, it's one of the most controversial Catholic doctrines. And then third, it's a great example of how the readings that are used in the mass can be very baffling, very confusing, if you don't know the tradition of the church and you don't look at the New Testament in light of the Old Testament and the Old Testament in light of the New. So let me walk through those briefly before we look at the passages for today.

First, the Immaculate Conception is one of the most misunderstood doctrines. In my experience over the years, I've seen this over and over again, when you say the Immaculate Conception to a lot of people what they think you mean is the virginal conception of Jesus. So let's just get that off the table right away. The Catholic Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception has nothing to do with the conception of Jesus, right. That's the doctrine of the virginal conception. When we talk about the Immaculate Conception, we're talking about the conception of Jesus' mother Mary, right, in the womb of her mother — traditionally named Anne. The doctrine here has to do with the fact that Mary was conceived without any stain of original sin,

that she was preserved immune from all stain of original sin from the moment of her conception. It also involves the fact that she committed no sin her entire life long. We'll come back to that. So when we talk about the Immaculate Conception, it's the Immaculate Conception of Mary, not the virginal conception of Jesus.

Now second, this doctrine is one of the most controversial doctrines because it is virtually universally rejected by all non-Catholic Christians. So if you look in the Protestant world for example, they'll open their Bible and they'll say where do you see in the New Testament that it says that Mary was conceived without sin, that she was conceived without original sin. And it's true, if you open your Bible and you look for the expression Immaculate Conception in the New Testament, you're not going to find it. If you look for any statement in the New Testament, any explicit statement that Mary was conceived without original sin, you're not going to find it. So the Immaculate Conception is one of these doctrines of the Catholic Church that for many non-Catholic Christians it's just patently un-biblical. In other words, it's an obvious example of the fact that Catholics believe things that are not just not in the Bible, but that are contrary to Scripture. So for example, in Romans 3, Paul says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," right. So for many non-Catholics they'll say "look, Romans 3: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God', clearly that includes Mary." Therefore, Mary's a sinner, so for us to say that Mary was conceived without sin is not just not a Biblical teaching, positively speaking, it's actually unbiblical in the sense that it's contrary to Scripture, it contradicts it.

The third reason I love talking about the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in particular is because when you look at the readings for today's mass they don't seem to have anything to do with the doctrine that we're celebrating, right — with not just the doctrine, the mystery I should say — they don't have anything to do at first glance with the mystery that we're celebrating, the mystery of Mary's conception without the stain of original sin. So for example, if you look at the readings for today, the first reading from the Old Testament is the story of the fall of Adam and Eve, right. What does that have to do with the Immaculate Conception? The Psalm for today is just a Psalm singing praise of God's marvelous works. What does that have to do with the Immaculate Conception? The second reading from the letter to the Ephesians seems to be about the church, not about

Mary. And then finally, the gospel for today, which is the centerpiece of today's mass, is the story of the Annunciation to Mary, where Gabriel appears to Mary and delivers, you know, the good news that she's going to be the mother of the Messiah. You might be thinking if you go to mass, well if we're celebrating the Immaculate Conception, why are we reading about the Annunciation, right. In fact, that might play a little role why some people get confused and think that the Immaculate Conception is about the virginal conception because the reading for today is focused on that.

So what I want to do in this video is answer all three of those points. I want to clarify exactly what the Immaculate Conception is about. I want to show where it comes from in Sacred Scripture through the light of Sacred Tradition. And I also want to explain why these particular readings are chosen for this solemnity. I hope by the end of the video you'll get a good sense of how the church's selection of these Scriptures, when they're read in the light of tradition and the ancient Christian church fathers, not only makes sense but they shed enormous light on the mystery that we're actually celebrating today, the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception.

So let's begin with the Gospel reading for today and then we'll go back to the Old Testament and we'll try to work through those texts and see how it is that they're tied to the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Alright, so the gospel for today is the story of the Annunciation in Luke 1:26-38. It's kind of a long passage, but I'll read through it and then I'll highlight just a couple of key points that are important for today's solemnity. So in Luke 1:26 it says this:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, 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, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for

ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.¹

Okay, so that's the Gospel reading for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Again I just want to reiterate, you can see here why some people might get confused and think that this is about the virginal conception, because what we're reading here is Luke's narrative of the announcement of the virginal conception to Mary by the angel Gabriel, right, but that's not the reason that the church chooses this passage for today. There are two reasons why this passage is chosen for today. First, there are a limited number of passages about Mary in the New Testament. So just on a practical level, if we're going to have a feast that's dedicated to Mary we're going to have to pick a gospel reading about Mary and there just aren't that many in the New Testament. Most of them are found in Luke. The stories of the infancy of Christ in the first two chapters of Luke really tell that story through Mary's eyes, so to speak, so that's where we have most of the passages about Mary. So we have the Annunciation, Visitation, and Nativity in Luke. You have a little bit about Mary in the first two chapters of Matthew, she pops up once or twice in the public ministry of Jesus, and then she's at the foot of the cross in the Gospel of John. So it's a handful of texts, so the church can only select from passages we actually have about Mary. So that's just the first reason.

The second reason is actually the deeper reason, and it has to do with what Gabriel says to Mary in this particular passage. So there are two elements of the account of the Annunciation that are important for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The first is Gabriel's greeting to Mary. So when he meets her he says these words

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

to her, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.” Okay, so those words in the original Greek literally say *chairō kecharitōmenē*, right. Hail, *kecharitōmenē*. Now that Greek word is difficult to render into English, and you’ll sometimes see different translations say different things like “hail, favored one,” or “hail, full of grace,” or “hail, highly favored one.” I mean there are different ways to translate it. The most ancient translation that we have into Latin that was done by Jerome is *gratis plena*, literally, full of grace. That’s where our English traditional rendering in the Catholic Church of hail full of grace comes from, it flows from Jerome’s Latin translation of that Greek participle *kecharitōmenē*.

Now what does the Greek word itself mean? Well we could do a whole video just on that. For our purposes here it’s really just important to highlight the fact that it is a participle in Greek that is rooted in the word *charis*, which is the Greek word for grace. So you could literally translate this she who has been graced, right, or one scholar translated it she who has been transformed by grace. It’s a perfect participle, so it means an action that has come to completion and remains in the present. So in some way shape or form Mary has been the recipient of God’s grace to such an extent that Gabriel actually addresses Mary almost as if it’s a title, right. Like hail, graced one or hail, favored one, or as Jerome put it, hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. The reason I say it’s a title there is because Gabriel doesn’t use the word Mary, and this’ll be a little bit of a surprise for us Catholics. So if you grew up Catholic and you grew up saying the Hail Mary, we add a word to that. We say, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” but that’s not actually what Gabriel says. He doesn’t use her birth name, he uses this title hail, full of grace. If you want a parallel with that you can think about how in the Gospel of John 19 the soldiers used a similar expression. They say to Jesus, “Hail, King of the Jews,” right. It’s the same word *chairō*, right, hail, King of the Jews, and Gabriel says hail, full of grace. This was a standard greeting, but in certain contexts it could have royal connotations, like when the soldiers use it for Jesus at the cross. So the first reason the church picks this passage is because of that title that Gabriel gives to Mary that’s rooted in the Greek word for grace, *charis*.

The second reason the church picks this passage is that Gabriel repeats the fact that Mary is the object of God’s grace, that she’s the subject who’s received the grace of God. If you look at that verse, Mary is afraid, she’s troubled by the greeting, she’s kind of puzzled, maybe because the angel doesn’t use her name. The angel

responds by saying don't be afraid, you have found favor with God. Again, the English translation here is a little weak, right, because literally in Greek what it says is you have found grace with God. The Greek word there is once again *charis*. It's the standard word that gets translated as grace in all of the letters of Paul for example. The Latin here is *gratia*, where we get the English word grace from. So the reason the church picks this particular gospel is that on two occasions it emphasizes that Mary is the recipient of divine grace, she's the recipient of God's favor. She's going to become, through that grace, the mother of Christ, the mother of the Messiah, the mother of the son of God, and through her yes to that announcement of the Annunciation, salvation is going to come into the world. This is how the mystery of the incarnation will be actualized in history, through the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Okay, so that's the New Testament passage.

Now with that in mind, let's go back to the Old Testament reading for today. The Old Testament reading for today is from the Book of Genesis. It's the account of the aftermath of the fall of Adam and Eve. So we all know the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. God creates man and woman, puts them in the Garden of Eden, tells them not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent comes in, deceives the woman, the woman takes the fruit, she gives some to her husband, and they both eat and they fall, right. So what happens here for today's solemnity is the church picks up the Old Testament reading right in the wake of the fall of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge and it gives us these verses, Genesis 3:9-15, and then skips down and gives us also verse 20. So let's read those readings today. Genesis 3:9:

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 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.”

Then it skips down to verse 20 and the lectionary says this:

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

Alright, end of Old Testament reading. Again, if you're sitting in church and you're hearing this reading on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, you might be thinking, what does this have to do with Mary being conceived without sin? I mean what possible reason could be given for choosing this account of the fall. Well let me point to two things. First, the primary reason the church picks this passage has to do with verse 15, it's God's declaration to the serpent about this battle between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's seed and the woman's seed. So if you look at that verse again real carefully, notice what it's describing here. God is condemning the serpent for causing the fall, and he's also pronouncing a kind of cryptic oracle about the future, the future relationship between the serpent and the woman. So there's going to be a war. It says that I will put enmity between you, the serpent, and the woman, between your seed, meaning the serpent's seed, and her seed, meaning the woman's seed. Then it says he shall, literally in the Hebrew, *shuph*, he shall strike your head but you shall strike his heel, *shuph*. Okay, so there's a battle going on in this verse between the woman and the serpent, between the woman's seed and the serpent's seed.

Now this passage, as we're going to see in a little bit, in the ancient Christian tradition was known as the *Protoevangelium*, in Latin “the first gospel,” because it was seen as a prophecy of a future battle between the Messiah, the seed of the woman, and the serpent who is Satan, both in Jewish tradition and in later Christian tradition. Now you should be aware here that in contemporary Old Testament scholarship there is a tendency to say well this prophecy, this oracle here, is just about the, shall we say, tense relationship between women and snakes, or between human beings and snakes, right. Okay, so according to this view what we have here is called an etiology. It's kind of an ancient story explaining the

conflict between snakes and human beings. Okay, well that's one reading of the text but that's not how ancient Jews and how ancient Christians read it. In the ancient Jewish tradition, and you see this represented in Jewish commentaries like the *Targums*, in Aramaic *Targums*, as well as the *Midrash Rabbah*, these ancient Jewish commentaries on Genesis, they saw this text as a prophecy of the time of the Messiah in which the Messiah, who would be a son of Eve, he would be descended from Eve, would arise and he would be in conflict with the serpent who represents Satan, and that eventually the Messiah would overthrow the devil, the Messiah would overthrow Satan. That was an ancient Jewish tradition.

In the ancient Christian tradition they saw this prophecy as a prophecy of the mother of Christ, of the mother of the Messiah, and of the Messiah's battle with the devil. So according to this reading the woman in question is the mother of Jesus, Mary, right, who is being depicted as a kind of new Eve, and unlike the first Eve who succumbed to the devil's temptation, this future woman, this future Eve, is going to be in a battle with the serpent, in a battle with the devil. Her offspring, the Messiah, Christ, will also be in a battle with the offspring of the devil and he's going to conquer the devil and his offspring by striking the head of the serpent, right. But at the same time the serpent will strike his heel. Now I grew up in South Louisiana, lots of snakes, killed lots of snakes in my lifetime, in my childhood. The one thing you know if you grow up where there are snakes is that if you want to kill a snake you go for the head, you crush the head, right. You try to either chop the head off or crush its head, that's how you'll kill it. However, you also know that if you try to crush its head with your foot you're putting yourself in danger of getting bitten, right, and you yourself might get killed, right, through the poison of the snake. So in this case, what's mysterious about this oracle is that both sides of the battle appear to lose, right. The serpent's head is crushed so he dies, but the heel of the woman's son is struck and so, if it's a poisonous serpent, he too would be presumed to die. So it's this mysterious battle in which the serpent will be conquered but the woman's seed will also die, will also be struck by the serpent.

Okay, so what does this have to do with Jesus and Mary? Well in the ancient Christian tradition, as we're going to see in just a bit, they saw this as a prophecy of the passion of Jesus Christ, of the incarnation and the passion, in which Mary, as the mother of the Messiah, is a new Eve and she gives birth to the Messiah, the

new Adam, Jesus, who comes in the world to conquer not just my sin or you're sin, but the original sin of Adam and Eve, the first sin, and all of its effects by conquering the devil, right, by overthrowing death itself. So they saw this as a prophecy of the passion of Christ, right. So Christ is the new Adam, he's the Messiah, he's going to be struck by the serpent in the sense that he will die on the cross, but precisely by being struck, precisely by dying, he will also conquer death and therefore conquer the serpent as well. That is the good news, that's the gospel, that Jesus conquers sin and death through his passion, death, and then his resurrection. Okay, so that's very important, the *Protoevangelium*, the first gospel.

There is one other element though here that is important to highlight and that's why the church skips down to verse 20; verse 20 is after the fall. The man, Adam, names the woman Eve because she was the mother of all the living. Now what does that mean? Well in Hebrew the word Eve is *Havah*, it's based on the root *chaya* which means to live. So literally what it says in Hebrew is the man called his wife's name life because she was the mother of all the living, or you could say in Hebrew the man called his wife's name *Havah* because she was the mother of all the *chaya*, all the other people, all of the those who are alive. Actually in Greek that word Eve is *Zōē*, okay, like the name Zoe is from the Greek word that means life. Eternal life is *Zōē aiōnios*, okay. So Eve's very name is life because she's the mother of all the living. So all human beings, according to Genesis 3, are descended from this one woman, this woman named Eve. Now one reason that's interesting is because, although we always call her Eve, Genesis doesn't call her Eve until well after the fall. Before the fall and during the fall she's called woman. Woman, woman, woman, 12 time she's called woman in the Book of Genesis. Only after does she get this name Eve because she's the mother of all the living. Which by the way, is kind of an ironic title, because what does Eve give to her children? Well not just natural life but she also gives them death, because through her sin death comes into the world. So there's kind of an irony there in Genesis.

Okay, so that's the first reading from the Old Testament and the gospel. I have one other quick point I want to make here. The Responsorial Psalm for today is "Sing a new song to the Lord," and it's simply a song of praise for the miracles that God does. So verse one of Psalm 98, it says this:

O sing to the LORD a new song,

for he has done marvelous things!

So it's just a praise of God's victory of the marvelous things that he's done in salvation history. Then the final reading for today that I want to highlight real quickly is the second reading from the letter to the Ephesians. So for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception we read Ephesians 1:3-6 and then 11-12. So I'm just going to walk through that real quickly, this is what it says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

And then it skips down to verse 11:

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.

Alright, well that's a beautiful passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, but what does that have to do with the Immaculate Conception? If you look at it, what Paul's describing here is the blessings that have been poured out upon the church. It's kind of describing the church here in feminine terms, like the church is the beloved of God, the church is like the bride of Christ. It says here about the church that those of us in the church have been chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless, and that he destined us in love to be the recipients of his glorious grace. Well, what does that have to do with the Immaculate Conception? Well, we'll come back to that at the very, very end but let me for now just point out two things. The church chooses this reading for two keywords that are described in it. First, if you look at that verse four it says that we were chosen in the church to be holy and what? Blameless.

Now the Greek word there for holy is *hagios*, the Latin is *sanctus*, right, we get the word holy from that. But the second term blameless is interesting. Now in Greek

that word is *amōmos*, which just means blameless, without blame, but in Latin it's *immaculatus*, or immaculate would be an English translation of that, right. Without any stain is what immaculate means or *amōmos*, okay. So this is one of the few times in the New Testament where we actually have the word immaculate in the text. Now you can't see it; if you're reading an English Bible you're not going to see that. But remember the church chose these readings over the centuries from the Latin vulgate. So the Latin word here is that the church is chosen to be immaculate before him. The second reason this passage is chosen, if you go down just a couple of verses, is that the church is made immaculate through the bestowal of God's glorious grace. Again the Greek word *charis*, the Latin word *gratia*; so we have the grace of the church being made immaculate or blameless in the eyes of God. I think you can see where this is going, but for now just keep that in the back of your mind.

Okay, so with all those readings in mind, what does this have to do with the Immaculate Conception? How does it lay the foundation for the Immaculate Conception? The answer to that question is real simple. It starts with the first reading, and it's this...Mary, according to the Old and New Testament when they're read together, isn't just the mother of the Messiah, she is the new Eve, right. This is very important. If you look in the New Testament, over and over again you're going to see that Christ is depicted as the new Adam, like in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. He comes in the world to undo the effects of the fall that we see in Genesis. Now any First Century Jew and any early Christian would have recognized that that begs a question. If Jesus is the new Adam, then who is the new Eve? Because when you go back to Genesis, Adam doesn't fall by himself, he falls with Eve. They cooperate in bringing sin and death into the world, right. People always say, well who's fault was it? Well they both were active, they cooperated in the fall. The same thing is going to be true in the redemption, right. If Jesus is the new Adam, who is the new Eve? Well if you look at the New Testament and you look at the ancient Christian fathers, they all agree that Mary is the new Eve, right.

Now I don't have time to go into this in detail but I have written a book about it. It's called *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary: Unveiling the Mother of the Messiah*. And in one of the very first chapters I take you through how the New Testament itself, in the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, depict Mary as the new

woman, as the new Eve, the mother of the Messiah, right. It's one of the reasons Jesus calls Mary woman in the Gospel of John and not Mary or my mother, because he's alluding to Eve in the Old Testament, the first woman. Same thing with the Book of Revelation, it describes her as the woman clothed with the sun. These are allusions to the Book of Genesis, to the first woman Eve. Now let me just give you a couple examples of this from the early church. Listen to these quotations. This is from, already in the Second Century A.D., Irenaeus of Lyons. He's writing around 180 said this:

[T]he knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary.²

What obedience is Irenaeus talking about? He's talking about the obedience of Mary in the Annunciation, when Gabriel appears to Mary and Mary says, "let it be done unto me according to your word." What Irenaeus and other fathers say is that when Mary said yes to God she undid Eve's no to God, right, and in that way became a kind of new Eve through whom Christ comes into the world. Again Cyril of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century A.D. says the same thing:

Death came through a virgin, Eve. It was necessary that life also should come through a virgin...³

And then St. Jerome, very famous early church father, said the same thing:

Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary.⁴

Now there are lots more quotes there that I could show you, I go through them in the book *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary*, but for our purposes here what I just want to state is this: In the east and the west, in Greek and Latin, from the Second Century all the way through the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh Century, the church fathers are unanimous in identifying Mary as the new Eve, as the one who fulfills the

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4

³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 12.15

⁴ *Letters* 22.21

prophecy from Genesis 3:15 of a woman who's going to be at war with the serpent and whose son will overthrow the serpent, right, a kind of new Eve along with the new Adam. Now why does that matter? It matters for understanding the Immaculate Conception because Mary's identity as the new Eve is the foundation for the other ancient Christian belief that Mary was preserved free from all stain of sin. You might think, well wait, where do ancient Christians say that? I'll give you two quotes, one from an Eastern church father named Ephrem the Syrian, who was writing in Syriac, and another from Augustine of Hippo, a Western church father writing in Latin, just to show you that it's both in the east and the west. They're writing in the Fourth Century A.D. So listen to this. Ephrem the Syrian in the Fourth Century said this about Mary:

*Only you [Jesus] and your Mother are more beautiful than everything. For on you, O Lord, there is no mark; neither is there any stain in your Mother.*⁵

So Fourth Century A.D., an Eastern church father already saying there's no stain in Mary. Remember the Greek word for stain or unstained is *amōmos*, right. So immaculate in Latin means no stain. Again, listen to this. This is from Augustine of Hippo, who's respected by Protestants and Catholics alike as like the father of the doctrine of grace. What did Augustine say? When it comes to sin he says this:

We must except the holy Virgin Mary...

And that means except with an 'E', not accept with an 'A'.

*We must except the holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I wish to raise no question when it touches the subject of sins, out of honor to the Lord; for from Him we know what abundance of grace for overcoming sin in every particular was conferred upon her who had the merit to conceive and bear Him who undoubtedly had no sin.*⁶

⁵ *Nisibene Hymns* 27.8

⁶ *On Nature and Grace* 42

So that's from Augustine's book on nature and grace. So notice both in the east and the west you've got fathers saying Mary is the only other person after Jesus who was preserved from any sin.

Now why would they say this? Don't they know Romans? Where Romans says, chapter 3, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." I mean Augustine wrote a commentary on Romans, right, surely he would know what St. Paul says about everyone sinning. And of course he did, but what he also knew was that Mary was the new Eve, and that as the new Eve she had a special grace conferred upon her that preserved her from Original Sin. Why? Well think about it for just a second. Sometimes people say, well no, every other human being who was ever created was created in a state of sin except for Jesus, only Jesus was created without sin. But from a biblical perspective if you look at the whole Bible, not just the New Testament but the Old Testament, that isn't true. There are two other individuals who were created without sin in the history of salvation: Adam and Eve. If you go back to the Book of Genesis it says that God made the man and the woman on the sixth day and that when he made them they were "very good," right. God does not create Adam and Eve in a state of sin, right. He creates them good, morally upright, morally just, without sin. The Catholic Church calls this a state of original holiness or original righteousness, right.

So what the fathers recognized is this, if the first Adam and the first Eve were created without sin, and Jesus and Mary are the new Adam and the new Eve, then it makes sense, it's fitting, that both Jesus and Mary would be created without sin. Otherwise, the first Adam and the first Eve would be greater than the new Adam and the new Eve, right. If the first Eve is created without any sin and Mary came into the world under the power of sin, then she wouldn't be greater than the old Eve, she would be lesser than the old Eve. Does that make sense? So you don't have to take my word for it. You can actually listen to one of the world's experts on the early church fathers, Cardinal John Henry Newman, he was writing in the 19th century. He said this about Mary as the new Eve, and its relationship to the Immaculate Conception. He wrote this:

"[I]f Eve had this supernatural inward gift given her from the first moment of her personal existence, is it possible to deny that Mary too had this gift from the very first moment of her personal existence? I do not know how to

resist this inference—well, this is simply and literally the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. I say that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is in its substance...*really does seem to me bound up in the doctrine of the Fathers, that Mary is the second Eve.*”⁷

So what is Newman saying there? He’s just saying what I just pointed out to you. That if in the Old Testament Adam and Eve were both created without sin, the old Adam and the old Eve, then in the New Testament it makes sense that the new Adam and the new Eve would also be created without sin. Now you might be thinking, well why haven’t I heard this before? I can’t answer that question for you but what I can say is that this is not news. This isn’t some new idea, this certainly isn’t my personal insight. This is just the official teaching of the Catholic Church. So if you look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is the official compendium of all the church’s teachings on matters of faith and morals and you turn to paragraph 411, or actually 410 and 411, listen to what the church says about the Book of Genesis, and Mary’s identity as the new Eve, and the Immaculate Conception. It says this about the prophecy of the woman and the serpent in Genesis 3:

This passage in Genesis [3:15] is called the *Protoevangelium* (“first gospel”): the first announcement of the Messiah and Redeemer, of a battle between the serpent and the Woman, and of the final victory of a descendant of hers. The Christian tradition sees in an announcement of *the “New Adam”* who, because he “became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,” makes amends superabundantly for the disobedience of Adam. Furthermore many Fathers and Doctors of the Church have seen the woman announced in the Protoevangelium as Mary, the mother of Christ, *the “new Eve.”* Mary benefited first of all and uniquely from Christ’s victory over sin: *she was preserved from all stain of original sin and by a special grace of God committed no sin of any kind during her whole earthly life.*⁸

There it is, right there in the Catechism. Why do we believe Mary was

⁷ John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*.

⁸ CCC 411

immaculately conceived? Well because of her identity as the new Eve. She received a special grace of God by which she was conceived in this world without original sin and committed no sin her whole earthly life.

Well you might think, well hold on, why do we say that? Well think about it. If Mary is the new Eve, if at any moment in her life she were to sin, right, then she would become less than the first Eve, because that's exactly what the first Eve did. So it's fitting that God's grace would sustain her throughout her whole life as the new Eve, right. To be free, not just from the first sin, but from all sin. She lives a life of holiness. In a sense, she's a kind of an icon of the beginning of a new creation. Now you might be thinking, well hold on a second, to not sin for that to be possible she would have to be God, she would have to be divine. And I would respond to you, are you sure about that? Do the saints in heaven continue to sin? I'm assuming your answer's going to be no. Well if the saints in heaven don't sin does that mean that they are not human anymore? Well no, of course not. Why do the saints in heaven no longer sin? They no longer sin because they are full of God's grace, because of the grace of God, right. The same thing is true about Mary, but she begins that process right here on earth, right. Through God's grace she commits no sin her whole earthly life so that she is the new Eve and, not just new Eve, but the mother of all the living, not the natural life that Eve gave to her children but the mother of those who are truly living the life of grace, the life that God gives us through Christ.

Another aspect of this passage that's important to emphasize is, you'll sometimes hear people say, oh, well Mary was immaculately conceived because if she wasn't free from sin she would have passed the sin onto Jesus, right. So in order to keep her from passing that sin to Jesus she had to be immaculate. That is not the church's teaching here. For one thing, that would create a problem because then it would mean that Mary's parents would also have to be free from sin, and then their parents would have to be free from sin, and their parent's all the way back. It's not about not transmitting the sin to Jesus. It's not as if the church is saying that's necessary for that to happen. It's about what's fitting given her identity as the new Eve, right. She and Christ, as new Adam and new Eve, and the beginning of a new creation, would, like the first Adam and first Eve, be created without sin, would be created good through the grace of God. That comes to her not because of anything she did to earn it but as a pure gift, as a gift of God's grace.

Okay, in closing then, one last point. So what about the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception? Where do we even get the language of immaculate if, you know, the New Testament itself doesn't use that with reference to Mary. Well in this case there's one other paragraph in the Catechism that can be helpful, and I'll end with this, it goes back to the second reading for today, the reading from the letter to the Ephesians, which as we saw, talked about those of us who are in the church being chosen by God to be blameless and to be holy before God. If you look in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 490, it actually quotes that very text from the letter to the Ephesians with reference to Mary's Immaculate Conception. So let's look at that together:

To become the mother of the Savior, Mary “was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role.” *The angel Gabriel at the moment of the annunciation salutes her as “full of grace” (Luke 1:28)*. In fact, in order for Mary to be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God's grace. Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, “full of grace” through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854... *The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person “in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” and chose her “in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:3-4).*⁹

That's from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 490 & 494. Okay, so did you see what the church just did? It took what Paul says about the church being given the grace to be blameless or immaculate and applies it to Mary as, the reality which she is, the first Christian at the moment of the Annunciation. So those two scriptural texts, the Annunciation, when the angel greets Mary as full of grace, and then Ephesians 1, which describes the church as immaculate through God's grace, applies both those text to Mary as the living embodiment of what it means to be a Christian, and as a kind of living icon of the church itself, holy and blameless in

⁹ CCC 490-94

the eyes of Christ, not through our own efforts but through God's grace and through the love of Christ. So isn't that fascinating. The very passages we look at today for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Genesis 3, Luke 1, and Ephesians 1, are the three texts cited by the Catechism to explain the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. It's almost as if the church knows what these passages means and has chosen them very deliberately in order to lay out this mystery of her Immaculate Conception for us, the mystery of Mary as the new Eve.