

“I will put enmity between you and
the woman,
and between your offspring and
hers;
He will strike at your head,
while you strike at his heel”

(Genesis 3:15, NIV).

Mary of Nazareth was *the* woman at enmity with the Devil; like her Son, she was (and is) Satan’s adversary.

These insights were not lost on the early Church. When we look at the writings they left behind, this contrast between Mary and Eve immediately comes to the fore:

Eve, a virgin and undefiled, conceived the word of the serpent, and bore disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy when the angel Gabriel announced to her the glad tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, 155 A.D.)⁵⁴

The knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. What the virgin Eve had bound in unbelief, the Virgin Mary loosed through faith. (Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, *Against Heresies Book III*, 180-199 A.D.)⁵⁵

Eve had believed the serpent; Mary believed Gabriel. That which the one destroyed by believing, the other, by believing, set straight. (Tertulian, *The Flesh of Jesus Christ*, 210 A.D.)⁵⁶

The Uniqueness of Mary’s Salvation

Deep reflection on the Scripture passages we have looked at, guided by the Holy Spirit over centuries, lead believers to recognize the uniqueness of Mary’s salvation. To receive Jesus into her, she had to have been healed of the brokenness resulting from our first parents’ sin. When did this occur? As

⁵⁴ Jurgens, William. *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Volume 1. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970) p.141.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.93

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.147

the New Eve, paralleling Jesus as the New Adam (Romans 5:12-19), then would not she - like Adam, Eve, and Jesus - have been *created* with the Spirit at her core? If John the Baptist could respond to the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb (Luke 1:41,44), how can we object to Mary receiving the Spirit but a few months earlier, at conception?

Look again at how the angel Gabriel addressed her, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!...Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:28,30). "Full of grace," or "O favored one," in some versions of the Bible, is a translation of the Greek term "Kecharitomene." It refers to an absolute plenitude of grace, Mary "'has been' and 'is now' filled with divine life."⁵⁷ There was never a moment of separation between she and God. This belief is what Catholics mean when they speak of her "immaculate conception."

Mary herself said, "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47). She, like all of us, was saved from sin – only the manner differs. We are saved from sin by being united to Jesus' offering to the Father at some point in our lives. Cutting through time and space, His sacrifice is the source of salvation for people from the beginning of history until its end (Hebrew 9:28; Revelation 13:8; 1 Peter 3:19-20). By the Father's unmerited gift, the effects of Jesus' victory were applied to Mary at conception. She never experienced the brokenness of original sin. She had no way to earn this gift; it was granted at the instant she came into being. Nor was it a requirement to bear the sinless Jesus. It was certainly fitting, but not a requirement.⁵⁸ It was God's sovereign choice.

⁵⁷ Hahn, Scott and Curtis Mitch, *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke* (San Francisco, 2001), p.19.

⁵⁸ If sinlessness was a requirement for Mary to bear Jesus, then her mother would have had to be sinless to bear her, etc., etc. No, the reason for Mary's immaculate conception lies solely in the graciousness of God. This is precisely what Pope Pius IX said in the Apostolic Constitution, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), when he formally voiced the Catholic Church's position on the matter: "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"