

The Conception of Mary

by Bishop Steve



On December 8th the Church celebrates the feast of the conception of the Virgin Mary by her parents Joachim and Anne. On this major festival which finds its place in the Church's preparation for Christmas, the faithful rejoice in the event by which Mary is conceived in fulfillment of her parents' prayers in order to be formed in the womb, born on the earth, dedicated to the Lord, and nurtured in holiness to become by God's grace the mother of His Son the Messiah.

The Church, with the exception of the Roman Catholic Communion, particularly in the present time, does not call the feast of Mary's beginning the "immaculate conception", although perhaps in ancient times this title would have been fully acceptable. The Ecumenical Catholic Communion in its Constitution (Canon 15) affirms the Declaration of Utrecht of 1889 which explicitly states: "We also reject the dogma of the Immaculate Conception promulgated by Pius IX in 1854 in defiance of the Holy Scriptures and in contradiction to the tradition of the centuries" (no. 3). This "dogma" was an attempt to assert unilateral papal infallibility contrary to the conciliar understanding and practice of the Church up to that point.

This is not because we consider Mary's conception to have been somehow "maculate" or "stained" (macula means "stain" in Latin). It simply means that we do not want to support the conviction that God had somehow to intervene at the moment of Mary's conception with a special action to remove the "stain" of the original sin transmitted by the act of human reproduction because, simply put, like our Eastern Christian sisters and brothers, we do not hold that such a "stain" exists.

We affirm original sin, teaching that all human beings, including the Virgin Mary who is a "mere human" like the rest of us-- unlike her Son Jesus who is a "real human" but not a "mere human" because He is the incarnate Son and Word of God-- are born into a fallen, death-bound, demon-riddled world whose "form is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31). We are all born mortal and tending toward sin. But we are not born guilty of any personal sin, certainly not one allegedly committed "in Adam." Nor are we born stained because of the manner in which we are conceived by the sexual union of our parents. If sexual union in marriage is in any sense sinful, or the cause in itself of any sinfulness or stain, even in the conditions of the "fallen world," then, as even the rigorous Saint John Chrysostom has taught, God is the sinner because He made us this way, male and female, from the very beginning.

Mary is conceived by her parents as we are all conceived. But in her case it is a pure act of faith and love, in obedience to God's will, as an answer to prayer. In this sense her conception is truly "immaculate." And its fruit is woman who remains forever the most pure Virgin and Mother of God.