

# **The Declaration of the Immaculate Conception: Why It Mattered and Why It Still Matters**

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**Eric Hester**

Let me start this article about the declaration of the Immaculate Conception with a series of anecdotes. First, I go back to the 1950s. In those days, it was not at all uncommon for BBC television to treat religion seriously and it was not anti-Catholic. Malcolm Muggeridge, not yet converted and still agnostic, was interviewing the then Bishop Heenan of Leeds . Muggeridge was blowing cigarette smoke towards the bishop who responded with an angelic smile and refused to be rattled. "Let us take the absurd business of the Immaculate Conception of Mary," said Muggeridge. The good bishop, still smiling asked Muggeridge, "Do you believe in original sin?" "Of course not," said Muggeridge. "Then," replied Bishop Heenan, with a tone of one saying "Game, set and match" or "I rest my case", you certainly believe in the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. But you believe in the immaculate conception of everyone; Catholics believe in the immaculate conception only of Our Blessed Lady."

Next, I consider the BBC Radio 4 programme Sunday, notorious for attacking authentic Catholic belief. A few weeks ago, a professor of theology of an English university spoke about the Immaculate Conception and committed the schoolboy howler of confusing it with the perpetual virginity of Our Blessed Lady.

My next story was told to me by a good priest friend now dead. I have only his authenticity for it but the man was Oxford educated and well read. He told me that when the newly restored English hierarchy was considering which days were to be kept as Days of Obligation and considering Pope Pius IX's stating in *Ineffabilis Deus*, that the 8th December was to be a Holyday, the English bishops of that time decided that there was no need to make this feast a day of obligation since, such was the love of the English for Our Blessed Lady that they would certainly go to Mass.

I consider now not an anecdote but the truth about that saint who might be seen as the most characteristic and glorious saint of the twentieth century – St Maximilian Kolbe, whose sacrifice of his life for another in Auschwitz will surely live in the Church for ever alongside St Martin's giving of his cloak to a beggar and St Francis's embracing a leper. This martyr had spent his adult life spreading devotion not just to Our Lady but specifically to Mary Immaculate.

Unfortunately, the next and last item that I record is also only too true. For the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of the Dogma, on 8th December 2004 , the Holy Father issued a special message and asked for celebrations but all this was ignored in England and Wales by official bodies. The Bishops' Conference website and all its publicity machine refused to publish the Holy Father's message and did nothing about the anniversary. When I enquired to a most senior figure in the English Bishops' bureaucracy about what was done to celebrate the anniversary I received this casual reply: "With regard to your final

question the Bishops' Conference as such rarely celebrates such things. Such celebration is a matter for individual Bishops in their Dioceses. I should imagine that each Bishop presided at a celebration of the Solemnity in their Diocese. Whether they did more I would not know." Yet Pope John Paul II himself specifically requested celebrations throughout the world. As is commonly known, Our Blessed Lady herself was not so casual about "that title so wondrous" and when she chose to appear to the little Bernadette at Lourdes on 25th March, 1858, she named herself using that actual title saying, "I am the Immaculate Conception." When we go back to the time of the declaration in 1854, we find times with similarities to our own. The Church was under threat, especially from secularism from outside and liberalism from inside. Pius IX, now Blessed, had been forced to flee Rome in disguise to save his very life. The response of some in the Church, as today, was that the Pope and the Church should keep a low profile and accommodate itself to the world. As now, there were those who thought that the Church should be the "sugar" of the world rather than the salt. Instead, Pius IX, ignoring the lukewarm, gave the world *Quanta Cura* and *The Syllabus of Errors*, called the Vatican Council that declared infallibility, and, in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, decided to "declare, pronounce and define that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her Conception was preserved Immaculate from all stain of original sin, by the singular grace and privilege of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, and that this doctrine was revealed by God, and therefore must be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful." In an allocution given on the day after the proclamation, Pius IX used these words: "The greatness of this privilege will also confute those who deny that human nature was corrupted by the first sin and who amplify the powers of human reason in order to deny or to diminish the benefits of revelation. May the Virgin Mary, who confounds and destroys all heresies, uproot and destroy all the most pernicious errors of rationalism which, in these unhappy times, have so afflicted and tormented not only human society but also the Church itself." Mgr Campana, a prominent theologian of that day wrote, "This day will be remembered until the end of time as one of the most glorious days in history. It was the most solemn affirmation of the vitality of the Church, just when perverse impiety flattered itself that it had destroyed her." How theologians have changed! A fine recent biography, *Blessed Pius IX* by Roberto de Mattei (Gracewing, 2004) shows what a brave and necessary decision this was. I recommend this biography and freely admit my own indebtedness to the ideas expressed so clearly in it.

When it was the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration, Pope (Saint) Pius X clearly showed its importance in his encyclical *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum*. He demonstrated how the dogma is an effective antidote to the "confluence of errors" of "the enemies of the faith". "These people deny that man was conceived in sin and that he therefore fell from his primitive nobility. They therefore reduce to the level of a fairy tale both original sin and the errors which flow from it; that is, the corruption at the very origin of the human race, hence the ruin of all human beings, the veils introduced among mortals and the necessity of a redeemer. It is therefore easy for them to be understood as meaning that

redemption comes neither from Christ, nor from the Church, nor from grace, nor from any other order which is superior to nature, in a word, the whole edifice of faith is undermined at its very basis. By contrast, people believe and confess openly that the Virgin Mary, from the first instant of her conception, was exempt from all sin. On this basis, it is necessary to believe both in original sin and in the redemption of men through the work of Christ the Gospel and the Church, and even the very law of suffering itself. With these things, 'rationalism' and 'materialism' are eradicated, it remains the merit of Christian doctrine to maintain and to defend the truth." St Pius X then shows how opponents of the church want to root out the idea of any obedience to the authority of the Church, leading to anarchy damaging to the natural and supernatural order. He declares roundly, "And again it will be shown that the Church is right to credit the Virgin Mary for having destroyed all the heresies of the world." All this accurately and specifically identifies the doctrines that were under threat and which were strengthened by the Declaration. But the same is true in our times. Original Sin, grace and redemption are either denied or played down. The Anglican interpretation of original sin can be rather different from ours, but CS Lewis, as so often, put it well when he said that he could not understand why people denied original sin since it was the one Christian doctrine that could be verified by a glance at the daily papers. Certainly, the denial of this doctrine has huge practical consequences, not least in education.

The French writer Bernados put this: " Il est assurément plus grave, ou du moins beaucoup plus dangereux pour l'homme, de nier le péché originel que de nier Dieu. For men it is certainly more grave, or at least much more dangerous, to deny original sin that to deny God." This is a huge claim but one can see what is behind it, with that word "dangerous".

The idea of original sin is certainly not considered an important doctrine in the book officially recommended by the Catechetical advisers for English schools, Icons. It is mentioned at all only in the book for Year 8 (Second form, 12 to 13 year olds) and then not in great detail. There is a similar neglect of the ideas of grace and redemption and The Immaculate Conception is never mentioned, let alone explained. Naturally, the situation is even worse in non-church schools. It is sometimes said that children today do not learn about morality in schools. As one who was head master of schools for twenty-four years I can report that pupils are, as they always have been, excellent learners. That is the trouble. They have learned what they are taught: that there is no such thing as objective right or wrong; that all views are equally valid; that the only thing universally wrong is intolerance; that there is no such thing as original sin. School pupils have, as I say, learned these lessons very well (and the reinforcement that the BBC gives them every day) and, indeed, do not merely regard them as inert and academic ideas: they put them into practice in their daily lives. That is why they steal our cars, vandalize our property, and confine the old and infirm to house arrest every night and ensure that frightened parents will not allow primary school children to walk to school any more.

The worst area for schools to be unaware of original sin is in sex education. The Catholic Church teaches quite clearly and consistently that no sex education at all should be given to children of primary school age; at secondary level, such sex education as might be given should be under the control of parents. This does not happen in many Catholic schools. It is the advisers of several dioceses who are pushing sex education. Parents would be appalled if they knew what was going on in some Catholic schools under the name of "sex education". Yet original sin and its consequences are most evident here. As a speaker at a conference of Catholic teachers with their archbishop present, I was unable for sheer embarrassment to read out material about the details of homosexuality which was being recommended for Catholic primary school children. Do not blame the schools or the teachers: they are doing as they are told by advisers for the dioceses. One of the many reasons for the increasing popularity of independent schools is that they work more closely with parents and do not feel themselves to be under the control of the diocese. But not all parents can afford Independent education under our present system in England .

So England has missed the boat in terms of celebrating the Sesquicentenary of the Declaration. Is there anything else that the former Dowry of Mary could do? Why do the bishops not now come in line with the rest of the world and declare 8th December a Holyday of Obligation? The Prime Minister has said that he wants an extra day's Bank Holiday. Well, as G.K. Chesterton once wrote, who wants to celebrate the fact that the banks are on holiday? But the Immaculate Conception, that is worth celebrating. The bishops could ask the government to make it a national holiday. This would bring us in line with most other European countries, something we are always being told is important as, for instance, when we want to buy a pound of sausages. The workers might be glad to have what they would see as a Christmas shopping day. Catholics would know better.