

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

This reflection appeared first in *The Church World*, the diocesan weekly of Maine.

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REJOICE IN YOUR MOTHER

On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX, in the presence of the College of Cardinals, read the words of his bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, which committed the Roman Catholic Church to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. He declared: "To the honor of the holy and undivided Trinity, to the glory and adornment of the Virgin Mother of God, to the exaltation of the Catholic faith, and the increase of the Catholic religion, We, by the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, of the Blessed Apostles, Peter and Paul and by Our Own, declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her Conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the omnipotent God, in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and is therefore to be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful."

This proclamation came after centuries of controversy when some theologians had contested Mary's special exemption from original sin. To them, it seemed the redemption accomplished by Jesus was bypassed. The Franciscan order took up the cause of Mary's immaculate conception with special vigor and insight. Their friar John Dun Scotus argued persuasively in favor of the doctrine. Christ's salvific power to overcome sin, he declared, was exercised in a supereminent way for His mother by effecting her sinlessness before He won salvation for the rest of the human race through His death and resurrection. On Dec. 8, 1477, the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV established the feast we now celebrate.

Our Lady under the title of the Immaculate Conception is patroness of the United States, Brazil, Portugal, and Corsica. To have a mother so honored is to honor all the rest of us, her children. We see how God elevates human flesh, when Mary, who is wholly of our nature, is preserved from all stain and corruption. Our mother at no moment of her existence is subject to sin. She is the new Eve whose Yes to God helps to repair what was destroyed in the garden of Eden.

Today we are aghast at the cruelty and contemptuous attacks on the bodies of those taken prisoners by warring factions. These captives have been vilified and humiliated, their dignity as men and women reduced through torture and abuse. Tormentors engage in a horror that looks upon another's pain with satisfaction and even laughter. Here there is no sense of the brotherhood and sisterhood that unites all of us in the common bond of our skin and bones. To delight in the suffering of another animate creature is to exhale a breath of hell.

Mary our mother is the mother of all who are humiliated so mercilessly. Her immaculate heart beats for those afflicted and also for the perpetrators of such horror. We turn to her in supplication for any who degrade human flesh in whatever way. We ask her to assist us to recognize the supreme worth of humanity in the variety of forms we encounter it, including the homeless, the ill, the old, the crippled.

God's creative touch shines forth in all of us with a beauty that Mary helps us behold. Every human being is of inestimable value, each one a true child of Our Lady.

The Constitution on the Church of Vatican II states, "Adorned from the first instant of her conception with the radiance of an entirely unique holiness, the Virgin of Nazareth is greeted by God's command by an angel messenger as 'full of grace'....As St Irenaeus says, she 'being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race'" (Ch 8, #56).

Mary's special privilege does not put her at a distance from us but rather makes her all the more available. To a young teenager, Bernadette Soubirous, a beautiful woman appeared who asked the adolescent to drink from a flow of water that miraculously emerged as the fourteen-year-old scratched on the ground. Bernadette was told by church officials to ask the name of the lady whom she saw. The reply coming four years after the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* seemed to confirm Pope Pius IX's declaration in a special way. The voice of the apparition said "**I am the Immaculate Conception.**" Since then, thousands of pilgrims have made their way to Lourdes where miracles take place through contact with the spring water.

Our Lady is not an exalted queen who looks down on her subjects. We do not crawl in abjection to her throne. She comes to us, her arms gathering us to the warmth of her Immaculate Heart. Always, always she leads us to our Brother, her Son Jesus.

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