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Seasoning the Seasons™

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The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary: December 8

On December 8 each year we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A solemnity is the highest ranking feast day on our liturgical calendar, and this particular feast day is also a holy day of obligation. And yet the Immaculate Conception might be the most misunderstood of all our feast days. If you were to poll Catholics as to what we are celebrating on this feast day, most would respond that we are celebrating Mary's conception of Jesus. But this is incorrect! We are actually celebrating the conception of Mary, herself, by her mother, Saint Anne.

The liturgical calendar, itself, can help us understand this better. There are only three births we celebrate in our Church Year: Jesus, Mary, and John the Baptist. And if you look at the liturgical calendar, you will see that we celebrate the birth of Mary (The Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary) on September 8. Now do the math. Exactly nine months before we celebrate Mary's birth we celebrate her conception!

These are not new feast days on our calendar. They have been celebrated for centuries. The Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary had its origins in the 5th century, while the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception originated in the 7th century in the Eastern Church as the "Feast of the Conception of Mary by St. Anne." This feast spread to the West by the 8th century, and by the 11th century was called the "Immaculate Conception" in the West. In the 18th century, it was celebrated as a feast by the universal Church. In 1854 Pope Pius IX declared in an infallible statement that the Blessed Virgin Mary had been preserved free from all



Immaculate Conception
Stained Glass Window
Annunciation Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

stain of original sin from the moment of her conception. This is the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception – that from the time of her conception Mary was free from sin. This preservation from sin was a gift from God, as God chose Mary to be the mother of God's son, Jesus.

The tradition of the conception and birth of Mary has been part of the tradition of our Church since the earliest years, and although it is not recounted in the Bible it has a long standing history in the liturgy, music, and art of both the Eastern and Western Church. In the Scriptures we first encounter Mary when the Archangel Gabriel visits her at the Annunciation (see Luke 1:26-28). Nowhere in the Bible do we hear about Mary's early life, nor are her parents, Saints Joachim and Anne, mentioned. Yet each year on July 26 our Church celebrates the feast of Saints Joachim and Anne, Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as an obligatory Memorial. If they aren't mentioned in the Bible, how do we even know their names?

Recall that there were many writings in the early Church, many, if not most, of which never made it into the official canon of Scripture. But these writings, and the stories they recounted, were well known amongst the early Christians. Most of these stories come to us from the early apocryphal sources, especially the *"Protoevangelium of James."* It is from this document that we learn, for example, the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna (Anne).

According to the *"Protoevangelium of James,"* Joachim was a wealthy man. But when Joachim went to the temple to offer his gifts, as was the custom of his people, he was refused entrance. He was told that since he had no children, he was not worthy to offer his gifts to God. Joachim even researched the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and found out that he was the only one of the righteous men who did not have a child. This greatly disturbed him, and instead of going home to his wife, Anna, he went out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights and fasted, living only on prayer.

As the story goes, Anna then mourned for both the loss of her husband and for being childless. But because it was a time of celebration in the Jewish faith, Anna cleaned herself up and put on her wedding garments. She then went out into the garden, sat under a tree, and prayed to God to bless her with a child, just as God had



Saint Joachim; 11th Century
Nea Moni Church, Chios, Greece

blessed Sarah with a son, Isaac. Just as Anna was lamenting that all of creation except her – even the birds and beasts – were fruitful, an angel appeared to her and told her that God had heard her prayer and that she would conceive and bear a child. Anna rejoiced and said she would bring her child as an offering to God to minister all the days of his/her life.



Prayer of St. Anna; 11th Century
Daphni Monastery, Katholikon

Then two angels came to Anna and told her that Joachim was returning. An angel had also appeared to Joachim and told him to go home because his prayer had been answered and his wife would conceive a child. As Joachim was returning with his flocks, Anna was at the gate and when she saw him she ran and threw her arms around his neck.

The story continues that on his first day back, Joachim rested. The next day, he returned to the temple with his offering of gifts, and this time his offering was accepted. He left the temple and went home rejoicing and giving glory to God. After nine months, Anna bore a daughter, whom she named Mary. And that is the story of Mary's conception and birth, as recorded in the "*Protoevangelium of James*."



Joachim and Anna; 16th Century
Museum of the Church
Sophia, Bulgaria

Today, when we celebrate Mass on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our first reading (Genesis 3:9-15,20) tells of the "Fall," or Adam and Eve's disobedience to God when they ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and were cast out of Paradise. In contrast, the Gospel (Luke 1:26-28) tells of Mary's obedience when she said her "yes" at the Annunciation. It is Jesus, the fruit of Mary's yes, who will redeem us and open the gates of Paradise once again.