

A Feast for Baltimore

The Catholic Review

Some months ago I heard a well-known TV news commentator and talk show host, a Catholic, chide one of his guests for not knowing the meaning of the Immaculate Conception.

“Every Catholic knows,” the spin master proclaimed, “that the Immaculate Conception means that Jesus was born without sin.” Surely, Jesus was born without sin, but the Immaculate Conception, in the words of Pope Pius IX as he proclaimed this infallible dogma in 1854, signifies that:

“From the first instant of her conception, by a singular and privileged grace of Almighty God and in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, the Virgin Mary was preserved intact from every stain of original sin.”

On Monday of this week, I was happy to celebrate this Feast of Our Lady at St. Michael’s Church in Frostburg and at Immaculate Conception Church in Towson. Last year, my first as Archbishop of Baltimore, I celebrated the Feast at Immaculate Conception in Baltimore City, established, significantly, in 1850.

As is the case with so many events in American Catholic history, this feast has a special relevance for Catholics in Baltimore and Mary’s land.

It was in 1846, eight years prior to the formal definition of the dogma, that the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore, meeting in the Archbishop’s residence adjacent to our Basilica, requested the Holy See to name Mary, under the title of the Immaculate Conception, Patroness of the United States of America, a petition Pope Pius IX granted a year later.

More than 200 years earlier, moments after the passengers of the Ark and the Dove disembarked on the shore of St. Clements Island, Maryland, on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1634, they fell to their knees and consecrated the future of their new colony to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.

While the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was officially proclaimed in 1854, the belief in this mystery of God's special grace can be traced to the Church's earliest years as believers pondered the implications of Gabriel's greeting to Mary at the Annunciation: "Hail, Full of Grace." Many of the earliest theologians of the Church favored the comparison of the first Eve, the sinful one, with Mary, the sinless New Eve.

In latter days, few have made that comparison more convincing than, as usual, Cardinal John Henry Newman, who reflected on the original sinlessness of the first Eve:

"And if Eve had this supernatural inward gift given her from the first moment of her personal existence, is it possible to deny that Mary too had this gift from the first moment of her personal existence?

"Is it any violent inference that she, who was to cooperate in the redemption of the world, at least was not less endowed with power from on high?

"Well this is simply and literally the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception."

As we ready for the birth of her Son, might we pray that we too, by God's grace, may approach Christmas Day with the same joy, peace, love and awe that marked the life of Mary Immaculate, during the days of that very first Advent.