

The feast day of our nation: Celebrating the Immaculate Conception



The Immaculate Conception by Jose Antolinez (1650)

Today we join with Catholics across the United States in celebrating the feast day of our nation, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Patroness of the United States:

Archbishop John Carroll, my school's namesake, had a tremendous devotion to Our Lady. He was the first to place our nation under the protection of the Blessed Mother under the title of the Immaculate Conception.

He also displayed his deep devotion when he worked with architect Benjamin Latrobe to design the first Catholic cathedral in Baltimore, using the Marian title of the Assumption for the name of this center of worship which was built from 1806-1821 on what is now Cathedral Street.

Eleven years after his death, in 1846, the U.S. bishops officially petitioned the Holy Father, Pope Pius IX, to declare Our Lady as patroness of our country under the title of the Immaculate Conception. This title refers to the dogma which teaches us that the Blessed Mother was preserved from original sin from the very first moment of her existence at her conception.



The Immaculate Conception by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1768)

Dogma of the Immaculate Conception:

On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed in his Apostolic Constitution entitled ***Ineffabilis Deus***: “The most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by the Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” December 8 has been a holyday of obligation ever since.

This solemnity is celebrated each year on December 8, but this year (2013), due to the timing of the Second Sunday of Advent, the observance of the Immaculate Conception has been transferred to Monday, December 9.

Misconceptions:

Over the years I have witnessed a lot of misunderstandings about what is celebrated on this feast day. It seems that a lot of people mix up the Immaculate Conception and the Annunciation. The first feast relates to the conception of Mary in her mother Anne’s womb, while the latter refers to the miraculous conception of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb.



Mary’s parents, Saints Anne and Joachim, patron saints of grandparents

Part of the confusion, I believe, comes about during Mass since the Gospel reading for the Immaculate Conception is actually Luke’s account of the Annunciation. Despite numerous attempts to explain the definition of this solemnity by Religion teachers, parish catechists, and our priests at Mass, many members of the faithful still leave church under the impression that they just celebrated the conception of Jesus.....

I remember back in my college days in the ‘70s, leaving the noon Mass on December

8, when a religious sister/Math professor was “clarifying” the wrong definition of the Immaculate Conception to a group of students. Being a theology major, I remember just shaking my head and continuing on my way to the dining room for lunch. Arguing with this dear Sister would have been a ‘lose-lose’ situation. I’m chuckling now as I type this memory.

The Gospel reading illustrates how God’s providence in being preserved from original sin allowed Mary to be worthy of the Annunciation in her young adult life. And there is no account of her natural conception in the Scriptures to serve as a more definitive Gospel reading for the occasion. Thus lots of confusion ensues...

The liturgical calendar includes the celebration of the Nativity (birth) of the Blessed Virgin Mary exactly nine months after the Immaculate Conception on September 8. In the same manner, Christmas Day is celebrated exactly nine months after the March 25 Annunciation, the conception of Jesus. I always point out this ‘perfect Math’ to my students when teaching about these feast days.



Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

The National Shrine in Washington, DC:

In 1913, Pope Pius X approved plans for the construction of a national shrine in Washington, DC. The cornerstone of what is now the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception was laid in 1920. This Marian shrine is referred to as “America’s Catholic Church.” It is said to not only be the largest church in our nation, but in the entire western hemisphere as well. A place of pilgrimage and prayer, the National Shrine has hosted millions of tourists and the faithful from around the world.

On this feast day of our nation, may we always look to our Blessed Mother to intercede for us with her Son, our Lord Jesus.

Prayer on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception:

Father, The image of the Virgin is found in your Church.

*Mary had a faith that your Spirit prepared and a love that
never knew sin,*

*for you kept her sinless from the first moment of
her conception.*

*Trace in our actions the lines of her love,
in our hearts her readiness of faith.*

*Prepare once again a world for your Son who lives and reigns with your and the Holy
Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*

—“Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers”