

## Reflections on the Immaculate Conception

for “Recognizing Christ in One Another: A Baptist-Catholic Panel”  
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As a topic of “deep or even intractable disagreement,” I would focus on the weirdest Catholic doctrine of all, and the one that seems to be the biggest stumbling block for non-Catholics of all stripes: the Immaculate Conception. I was a Catholic for years before I understood even the basics of that mystery. But since then, I’ve found it to be a crucial clue to the whole puzzle—not just of who Mary is but of who Christ is and who we are, the Church, the Bible, the sacraments, human history, everything.

Let me explain why I think this doctrine matters. The incarnation occurred at one moment in time, when a Jewish girl alone in her bedroom said, “Let it be done,” *fiat*. At that moment, the love between God the Father and God the Son that brought the universe into existence, uniquely reflected in the love between man and woman that brings a new life into existence, found its only perfect consummation on earth. As God’s *fiat lux*, “Let there be light,” was the dawn of the first creation, so her *fiat mihi* was the dawn of the second. At that moment, the Word was made flesh, the creator of the universe became a single cell—a human being whole and entire—the bread from heaven within the new Ark of the Covenant, and he whose body, sacrificed, would become the fruit of the Tree of Life. With her unqualified “yes” to God, Mary became the New Eve, reversing our first mother’s fateful “no”; she became the New Jerusalem, the all-beautiful bride, the most perfect realization of the Church—the one whose sole command is “Do whatever he tells you,” and to whom God himself says, “Mother, behold your son.”

Love is the gift of self. If Mary had been, like Ivory soap, only 99.44% pure, the remaining .56% would have prevented her from offering that gift without reservation. But by God’s prevenient grace, through no merit of her own, she too was created a perfect human being even from the moment of her own conception, and remained so throughout her life, so that her *fiat* held nothing back. To be a Christian is to try, however imperfectly, to echo that *fiat*, so that Christ can begin to grow within us—the substance of things hoped for. And all our woe, all the bitter fruit of the threefold concupiscence that Freud and Marx and Nietzsche tell us is the whole of Man, stems from our failure to understand and our fear to reenact that moment.

So while I obviously don’t expect my Baptist brethren to buy into this off-putting Catholic doctrine right away, I can at least hope that they’ll begin to see what’s at stake with it. Truly, we must continue to grieve for and strive to redress the horrors, past and present, perpetrated by that gangrenous body of sinners which is the Church we see. But I submit that to find true healing we must also, all of us, fix our eyes on her who is what the Church is meant to be, and—this is the hardest part to believe!—in some unfathomably mysterious way, already is.

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