

Ancestral Sin and the Immaculate Conception

Why the East Honors Mary as All-Holy and Refuses 1854—and How Close the Two Accounts Really Are

by Richard Whiting

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I. The Puzzle of the Orthodox Refusal

No church on earth honors the Mother of God more lavishly than the Orthodox. Her icons face the faithful in every temple; the liturgy calls her *Panagia*—the All-Holy—and *achrantos*, the immaculate, in prayer after prayer; the East even keeps a feast of her conception by St. Anne, on December 9, and has since before the schism. And yet when Rome defined the Immaculate Conception in 1854, the Orthodox refused it. The refusal puzzles Catholics and Protestants alike, since the East plainly believes Mary all-pure. The explanation lies a level deeper, in the two communions' accounts of what Adam's children inherit—and this essay will argue that once both accounts are stated accurately, the distance between them shrinks to something the polemical literature on both sides has badly overdrawn.

II. Ancestral Sin, at Full Strength

What do Adam's children inherit? The East answers: his *condition*, not his *crime*. Through one man sin entered the world, "and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom. 5:12). The Greek says *because all sinned*; the old Latin version read *in quo*—"in whom" all sinned—and on that rendering, the Orthodox argue, Augustine built the Western doctrine of inherited guilt: every infant born already culpable in Adam. The East never taught it. Ancestral sin (*propatorikon hamartema*) is the inheritance of mortality, corruption, and a world tilted toward sin—a disease passed down, not a verdict. Each human being sins in his own person, under the tyranny of death; none is born guilty of another man's act.¹

From this the Orthodox objection to 1854 follows cleanly. Grant the Western premise—every child conceived in inherited guilt—and something like the Immaculate Conception becomes necessary: the Mother of God must be rescued from the general verdict by special decree. Remove the premise, and the dogma answers a question no one asked: Mary inherited mortality, as her Son did; she inherited no guilt, because no one does. And behind the matter stands the manner: in 1854 a pope, acting alone, sixteen years before Vatican I, bound the whole Church to a doctrine the undivided Church never defined. Whatever is true of Mary, that—for Orthodoxy—is not how the Church knows her faith.²

III. The All-Holy

On Mary herself the East yields to no one. Orthodox piety holds that she committed no personal sin; the liturgy sings her titles daily—All-Holy, spotless, immaculate; and the December feast celebrates her conception as a holy thing. But she was conceived as we all are, the East teaches, sharing the common inheritance of mortality and corruption. Her all-holiness is the achievement of grace in a free human life, crowned when she answered the angel—not a special exemption installed at the first instant of her existence. To exempt her from the ancestral condition, the objection concludes, would detach her from the humanity she gave her Son.

IV. What 1854 Actually Defined

Now read the definition, because the Orthodox case just stated rests on two pillars: that Rome teaches inherited personal guilt, and that 1854 exempted Mary from redemption. Here is the defining formula of *Ineffabilis Deus*: the most Blessed Virgin Mary, "in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by 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."³

Every clause answers an Orthodox fear. Not exempted from redemption but redeemed more radically: preserved, by Christ's merits, as a man is saved from a pit either by being pulled out or by being caught before he falls in—and the second rescue is the greater. This was precisely Duns Scotus's resolution of the difficulty that had made Aquinas himself hesitate: preservative redemption is not an exception to the universality of Christ's saving work but its most perfect instance. And Mary is not detached from humanity: she needed the Savior as absolutely as any child of Adam, which is why she herself sings, "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47). The dogma does not lift Mary out of the human race; it declares what grace did, first and most perfectly, in one of us.⁴

V. The Guilt That Rome Does Not Teach

The premise-attack collapses on the *Catechism's* own sentence: original sin "does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam's descendants."⁵ It is, the same paragraph teaches, a deprivation of original holiness and justice; human nature is wounded, mortal, inclined to sin—and the previous paragraph adds that the word "sin" applies here only analogically: contracted, not committed; a state, not an act. Set that beside the Orthodox description—inherited mortality, corruption, and inclination, without personal culpability—and the two accounts are describing the same wound.

Whatever Augustine said at his harshest, and whatever the old Latin of Romans 5:12 once suggested, the defined Catholic doctrine is not inherited crime. Modern Catholic exegesis reads Romans 5:12 with the Greek, exactly as the East does. The East's strongest argument, in short, is aimed at a position its intended target does not hold—a pattern this site's companion essays on grace and theosis found at the same depth: the two traditions' vocabularies differ more than their doctrines.

VI. The Angel's Greeting, and the East's Own Witness

Now let the Orthodox liturgy testify. The East calls Mary *Panagia* and *achrantos* in every service; its piety holds her free of personal sin; it keeps the feast of her conception. The angel's own greeting points the same direction: *kecharitōmenē* (Luke 1:28)—a perfect passive participle, not "favored" for the occasion but *already having-been-graced*, named by her grace as though it were her title. The RSV's "O favored one" and the older "full of grace" are both reaching for the same completed action standing behind the angel's word.⁶

If Mary is all-holy, spotless, and graced from the beginning—and the East's prayers say all three—then the disagreement with 1854 is not about Mary. It is about the metaphysics of one instant, described in the vocabulary of a doctrine of original sin that, examined above, the two communions no longer hold apart. A church that sings *achrantos* to the Theotokos every evening is nearer to the Immaculate Conception than its polemics allow.

VII. What Actually Remains

Strip away the two fallen pillars and what remains is honest and familiar. The East asks: even if true, may a pope define it alone? That is not a Marian question; it is the question of authority—who may say *this is the faith*, and how—which this essay’s companions on the first millennium and the councils take up directly. It deserves its own answer, not a Marian proxy war.

On the substance, the calibrated conclusion runs: the Orthodox liturgy’s witness, the angel’s greeting, and the shared doctrine of the inherited wound are all consistent with what 1854 defined, and none of them requires its denial. The reader from either communion is invited to run the test this essay has run—state the other side’s doctrine of the fall in its own words, read the defining formula whole, and mark how much of the quarrel survives. What is left standing is not a disagreement about the Mother of God. It is the old disagreement about the keys—and she, who is honored on both sides of it, deserves better than to be its battlefield.⁷

Endnotes

1. Rom. 5:12 (RSV); the Vulgate’s *in quo omnes peccaverunt*. Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version. For the Orthodox account, John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, on Rom. 5:12 in the Greek fathers; Timothy Ware (Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church*, on the fall and on the Immaculate Conception.
2. *Ineffabilis Deus* (8 December 1854); Vatican I defined papal infallibility in 1870.
3. *Ineffabilis Deus*, the defining formula.
4. Luke 1:47 (RSV); on Scotus and preservative redemption, and Aquinas’s hesitation, the standard histories of the doctrine; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§490–493, with Lumen Gentium 53 and 56, on Mary as redeemed “in a more exalted fashion.”
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §405; §404 on “contracted, not committed.”
6. Luke 1:28 (RSV); the Greek participle *kecharitōmenē*. On the December 9 feast of the Conception by St. Anne of the Most Holy Theotokos, the Byzantine calendar.
7. On the modern dialogue’s judgment that authority, not Mariology, is the dividing question, see the agreed documents discussed in the companion essay *Orthodoxy and the Great Schism*.

For Further Reading

Ineffabilis Deus, by Bl. Pope Pius IX (1854)—the definition itself. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm>.

Byzantine Theology—Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes, by John Meyendorff—the Orthodox doctrine of the fall and Romans 5:12 in the Greek fathers.

The Orthodox Church, by Timothy Ware (Kallistos)—ancestral sin and the Orthodox view of the Immaculate Conception.

Hail, Holy Queen—The Mother of God in the Word of God, by Scott Hahn—the biblical case for the Marian doctrines.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, esp. §§396–409 on the fall and §§490–493 on the Immaculate Conception.

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“Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

—Luke 1:28

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and its relation to the Orthodox doctrine of ancestral sin*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.