natural, where revolutions were causing social upheaval, and the industrial revolution had threatened the dignity of the worker and family life; therefore, Pope Pius want to spiritually recharge the faithful and saw no better way than presenting again the beautiful example of our Blessed Mother and her role in salvation history. On December 8, 1854, Pius IX solemnly defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in his bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (quoted in the opening paragraph).

Finally, it is also interesting that in several apparitions of our Blessed Mother, she herself has attested to her Immaculate Conception: On Dec. 9 (the date for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in the Spanish Empire) in 1531 at Guadalupe, Mary said to Juan Diego, "I am the perfect and perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God, through whom everything lives...." In 1830, Mary told St. Catherine Laboure to have the Miraculous Medal struck with the inscription, "Mary conceived free from sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee." Lastly, when she appeared to St. Bernadette at Lourdes in 1858, Mary said, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

In a homily on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception delivered in 1982, Pope John Paul II wrote, "Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who filled you, Virgin of Nazareth, with every spiritual blessing in Christ. In Him, you were conceived Immaculate! Preselected to be His Mother, you were redeemed in Him and through Him more than any other human being! Preserved from the inheritance of original sin, you were conceived and came into the world in a state of sanctifying grace. Full of grace! We venerate this mystery of the faith in today's solemnity. Today, together with all the Church, we venerate the Redemption which was actuated in you. That most singular participation in the Redemption of the world and of man, was reserved only for you, solely for you. Hail O Mary, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, dear Mother of the Redeemer."

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and as we continue our Advent preparation, may we invoke the prayers of our Blessed Mother, Mary Immaculate to draw ever closer to our Lord, Her Son, this Christmas.

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Pamphlet 160

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**The Immaculate Conception**

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Many people, especially non-Catholics, think that the term "Immaculate Conception" refers to Mary conceiving Jesus. My Protestant friend was surprised when I told her that it is about Mary being free of original sin. She then said, "Where is that in the Bible?" What is a good explanation for her?

Actually, the confusion over the "Immaculate Conception" is not uncommon. Some people mistakenly think the term is related to Mary's conception of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, the Immaculate Conception is the belief that "the most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin..." (Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*).

Keep in mind that in our liturgical calendar, the Solemnity of the Annunciation on March 25 marks the time when Mary conceived our Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit. Nine months later, on Dec. 25, we celebrate the Solemnity of Christmas, the birth of our Savior. To have Mary conceive our Lord on Dec. 8, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, and then have Him born on Dec. 25, does not make sense. Rather, Dec. 8 marks when Mary was conceived without original sin, and then Sept. 8 celebrates her birth.

In examining the history surrounding the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, we see the beauty of a Church founded by Christ, whose faithful followers struggle to grasp ever more
clearly the mystery of salvation. This struggle is
guided by the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus identified as "The Spirit of Truth," who "will instruct you
in everything and remind you of all that I told
you" and "will guide you to all truth" (cf. John
14:17, 15:26, 16:13).

Part of the "struggle" with the Immaculate
Conception is that there is no specific, crystal-
clear scriptural citation for it. Nevertheless, the
references in the Gospels to the Blessed Mother
and her role in the mystery of salvation intimate
this belief. In the Gospel of St. Luke, we find the
beautiful passage of the Annunciation, where
Archangel Gabriel said to Mary (in our familiar
wording as translated from St. Jerome’s Latin
Vulgate edition of the Bible), "Hail Mary, full of
grace. The Lord is with you." While some
scripture scholars haggle over "how full is full,"
the testimony of St. Gabriel definitely indicates
the exceptional holiness of the Blessed Mother.
When one considers the role Mary was to play in
the life of our Lord — whether His incarnation,
His childhood, or His crucifixion — she must
have been outstanding in holiness, truly "full of
grace" in accepting and in fulfilling her role as
the Mother of the Savior, in the fullest sense of
Mother.

Going further to the original Greek text of the
Gospel, we find the wording chaire
kecharitomene. Chaire means "grace." The verb
kecharitomene means "having been favored."
The form of the verb is also important: here the
verb does not simply imply "fullness," but rather
instrumentality. The late Scripture scholar, Fr.
Carroll Stuhlmueller noted, "Luke’s word puts
the emphasis upon the source of goodness rather
than upon its effects. In regard to Mary,
therefore, he points out that she is the object of
God’s grace and favor. Because the verb is also
a participle, Mary is shown to have been chosen
for a long time past; God’s full flow of favor has
already been concentrating upon her.... In her,
more than in anyone else, God’s messianic
fulfillment is achieved. As such, she has
received more— from and through God’s
anticipation of Jesus’ redemptive work— than
anyone else in the Old Testament of New
Testament" (The Jerome Biblical Commentary).
Moreover, Archangel Gabriel announces, "the
Lord is with you." Such a proclamation coming
from God Himself implies a particular office or
a special prerogative. Again, Fr. Stuhlmueller
noted, "The Redeemer-God professes to find an
eminent fulfillment of His promises in the
recipient of the greeting." Given this scholarly
examination of Scripture, we rightly believe,
therefore, that an exceptional, grace-filled
holiness extended to the very beginning of
Mary’s life, her conception, and that God had
prepared her to play an integral role in the plan
of salvation.

On the practical side, if original sin is inherited
through our parents, and Jesus took on our
human nature in all things except sin, then Mary
had to be free of original sin.

The question then arises, "How is Christ the
Savior of Mary?" Actually much of the debate
concerning the Immaculate Conception during
the Middle Ages focused on this problem. Duns
Scotus (d. 1308) posited one solution saying,
"Mary more than anyone else would have
needed Christ as her Redeemer, since she would
have contracted original sin... if the grace of the
Mediator had not prevented this." Quoting the
Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the
Catechism adds, "The ‘splendor of an entirely
unique holiness’ by which Mary is 'enriched
from the first instant of her conception' comes
wholly from Christ: she is ‘redeemed, in a more
exalted fashion by reason of the merits of her
Son’" (#492). In essence, since Mary was chosen
to share intimately in the life of Jesus from her
conception, He was indeed her Savior from her
conception.

Perhaps one reason why the discussion over the
Immaculate Conception was prolonged is
because the early Church was outlawed and
under persecution until the year 313, and then
had to address various problems surrounding
Jesus Himself. More reflection about Mary and
her role occurred after the Council of Ephesus
(431) solemnly affirmed Mary's divine
motherhood and gave her the title, "Mother of
God" in that she conceived by the power of the
Holy Spirit and bore Jesus who is second person
of the Holy Trinity, one in being with the Father.
Several of the early Church Fathers including St.
Ambrose (d. 397), St. Ephraem (d. 373), St.
Andrew of Crete (d. 740), and St. John
Damascene (d. 749) meditated on Mary's role as
Mother, including her own grace-filled
disposition, and wrote of her sinlessness. A feast
day in honor of the Immaculate Conception has
been celebrated in the Eastern part of the Church
at least since the sixth century.

As time passed, further discussion arose about
this belief. In 1849, Pius IX asked the bishops
throughout the Church what they themselves,
their clergy, and the people felt about this belief
and whether they would want it defined
solemnly. Of 603 bishops, 546 responded
favorably without hesitation. Of those opposing,
only 5 said the doctrine could not be solemnly
defined, 24 did not know whether this was the
opportunity time, and 10 simply wanted a
condemnation of any rejection of the doctrine.
Pope Pius also saw the spiritual malaise of the
world where the rationalist school of philosophy
had denied truth and anything of the super-