



IMMACULATE CONCEPTION NOVENA

On December 8, we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. This is the most important Marian feast in the liturgical year. To prepare for this feast we invite you to pray a novena for purity. A novena (from the Latin word *novem*, meaning nine) is a traditional prayer that it is said for nine consecutive days. The hope is that after praying for nine days, some special blessings will be given by God.

Every Day

- **Read** the Meditation by John Henry Newman
- **Pray** the Rosary
- **Do** a prayer of consecration to Mary after the daily offering

Prayer of Consecration to Mary

My Queen, my Mother, I give myself entirely to you. And to show myself devoted to you, I consecrate to you my eyes, my ears, my mouth, my entire being without reserve. Since I am yours, my good Mother, preserve me, defend me, as your property and possession. *Amen.*

Day One

Mary is the “Virgo Purissima,” the Most Pure Virgin

BY the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin is meant the great revealed truth that she was conceived in the womb of her mother, St. Anne, without original sin.

Since the fall of Adam all mankind, his descendants, are conceived and born in sin. “Behold,” says the inspired writer in the Psalm Miserere— “Behold, I was conceived in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me”. That sin which belongs to every one of us, and

is ours from the first moment of our existence, is the sin of unbelief and disobedience, by which Adam lost Paradise. We, as the children of Adam, are heirs to the consequences of his sin, and have forfeited in him that spiritual robe of grace and holiness which he had given him by his Creator at the time that he was made. In this state of forfeiture and disinheritance we are all of us conceived and born; and the ordinary way by which we are taken out of it is the Sacrament of Baptism.

But Mary never was in this state; she was by the eternal decree of God exempted from it. From eternity, God, the Father, Son, and

Holy Ghost, decreed to create the race of man, and, foreseeing the fall of Adam, decreed to redeem the whole race by the Son's taking flesh and suffering on the Cross. In that same incomprehensible, eternal instant, in which the Son of God was born of the Father, was also the decree passed of man's redemption through Him. He who was born from Eternity was born by an eternal decree to save us in Time, and to redeem the whole race; and Mary's redemption was determined in that special manner which we call the Immaculate Conception. It was decreed, not that she should be cleansed from sin, but that she should, from the first moment of her being, be preserved from sin; so that the Evil One never had any part in her. Therefore she was a child of Adam and Eve as if they had never fallen; she did not share with them their sin; she inherited the gifts and graces (and more than those) which Adam and Eve possessed in Paradise. This is her prerogative, and the foundation of all those salutary truths which are revealed to us concerning her. Let us say then with all holy souls, Virgin most pure, conceived without original sin, Mary, pray for us.

Day Two

Mary is the "Virgo Prædicanda," the Virgin who is to be Proclaimed

MARY is the Virgo Prædicanda, that is, the Virgin who to be proclaimed, to be heralded, literally, to be preached.

We are accustomed to preach abroad that which is wonderful, strange, rare, novel, important. Thus, when our Lord was coming, St. John the Baptist preached Him; then, the Apostles went into the wide world, and preached Christ. What is the highest, the rarest, the choicest prerogative of Mary? It is that she was without sin. When a woman in the crowd cried out to our Lord, "Blessed is the womb that bare Thee!" He answered, "More blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." Those words were fulfilled in Mary. She was filled with grace in order to be the Mother of God. But it was a higher gift than her maternity to be thus sanctified and thus pure. Our Lord indeed would not have become her son unless He had first sanctified her; but still, the greater blessedness was to have that perfect sanctification. This then is why she is the Virgo Prædicanda; she is deserving to be preached abroad because she never committed any sin, even the least; because sin had no part in her; because, through the fulness of God's grace, she never thought a thought, or spoke a word, or did an action, which was displeasing, which was not most pleasing, to Almighty God; because in her was displayed the greatest triumph over the enemy of souls. Wherefore, when all seemed lost, in order to show what He could do for us all by dying for us; in order to show what human nature, His work, was capable of becoming; to show how utterly He could bring to naught the utmost efforts, the most concentrated malice of the foe, and reverse all the consequences of the Fall, our Lord began, even before His coming, to do His most wonderful act of redemption, in the person of her who was to be His Mother. By the merit of that Blood which was to be shed, He interposed to hinder her incurring the sin of Adam, before He had made on the Cross atonement for it. And therefore it is that we preach her who is the subject of this wonderful grace.

But she was the Virgo Prædicanda for another reason. When, why, what things do we preach? We preach what is not known, that it may become known. And hence the Apostles are said in Scripture to "preach Christ." To whom? To those who knew Him not—to the heathen world. Not to those who knew Him, but to those who did

not know Him. Preaching is a gradual work: first one lesson, then another. Thus were the heathen brought into the Church gradually. And in like manner, the preaching of Mary to the children of the Church, and the devotion paid to her by them, has grown, grown gradually, with successive ages. Not so much preached about her in early times as in later. First she was preached as the Virgin of Virgins—then as the Mother of God—then as glorious in her Assumption—then as the Advocate of sinners—then as Immaculate in her Conception. And this last has been the special preaching of the present century; and thus that which was earliest in her own history is the latest in the Church's recognition of her.

Day Three

Mary is the "Mater Admirabilis," the Wonderful Mother

WHEN Mary, the Virgo Prædicanda, the Virgin who is to be proclaimed aloud, is called by the title of Admirabilis, it is thereby suggested to us what the effect is of the preaching of her as Immaculate in her Conception. The Holy Church proclaims, preaches her, as conceived without original sin; and those who hear, the children of Holy Church, wonder, marvel, are astonished and overcome by the preaching. It is so great a prerogative.

Even created excellence is fearful to think of when it is so high as Mary's. As to the great Creator, when Moses desired to see His glory, He Himself says about Himself, "Thou canst not see My face, for man shall not see Me and live;" and St. Paul says, "Our God is a consuming fire." And when St. John, holy as he was, saw only the Human Nature of our Lord, as He is in Heaven, "he fell at His feet as dead." And so as regards the appearance of angels. The holy Daniel, when St. Gabriel appeared to him, "fainted away, and lay in a consternation, with his face close to the ground." When this great archangel came to Zacharias, the father of St. John the Baptist, he too was troubled, and fear fell upon him." But it was otherwise with Mary when the same St. Gabriel came to her. She was overcome indeed, and troubled at his words, because, humble as she was in her own opinion of herself, he addressed her as "Full of grace," and "Blessed among women;" but she was able to bear the sight of him.

Hence we learn two things: first, how great a holiness was Mary's, seeing she could endure the presence of an angel, whose brightness smote the holy prophet Daniel even to fainting and almost to death; and secondly, since she is so much holier than that angel, and we so much less holy than Daniel, what great reason we have to call her the Virgo Admirabilis, the Wonderful, the Awful Virgin, when we think of her ineffable purity!

There are those who are so thoughtless, so blind, so grovelling as to think that Mary is not as much shocked at wilful sin as her Divine Son is, and that we can make her our friend and advocate, though we go to her without contrition at heart, without even the wish for true repentance and resolution to amend. As if Mary could hate sin less, and love sinners more, than our Lord does! No: she feels a sympathy for those only who wish to leave their sins; else, how should she be without sin herself? No: if even to the best of us she is, in the words of Scripture, "fair as the moon, bright as the sun, and terrible as an army set in array," what is she to the impenitent sinner?

Day Four

Mary is the "Domus Aurea," the House of Gold

WHY is she called a House? And why is she called Golden? Gold is the most beautiful, the most valuable, of all metals. Silver, copper,

and steel may in their way be made good to the eye, but nothing is so rich, so splendid, as gold. We have few opportunities of seeing it in any quantity; but anyone who has seen a large number of bright gold coins knows how magnificent is the look of gold. Hence it is that in Scripture the Holy City is, by a figure of speech, called Golden. "The City," says St. John, "was pure gold, as it were transparent glass." He means of course to give us a notion of the wondrous beautifulness of heaven, by comparing it with what is the most beautiful of all the substances which we see on earth.

Therefore it is that Mary too is called golden; because her graces, her virtues, her innocence, her purity, are of that transcendent brilliancy and dazzling perfection, so costly, so exquisite, that the angels cannot, so to say, keep their eyes off her any more than we could help gazing upon any great work of gold.

But observe further, she is a golden house, or, I will rather say, a golden palace. Let us imagine we saw a whole palace or large church all made of gold, from the foundations to the roof; such, in regard to the number, the variety, the extent of her spiritual excellences, is Mary.

But why called a house or palace? And whose palace? She is the house and the palace of the Great King, of God Himself. Our Lord, the Co-equal Son of God, once dwelt in her. He was her Guest; nay, more than a guest, for a guest comes into a house as well as leaves it. But our Lord was actually born in this holy house. He took His flesh and His blood from this house, from the flesh, from the veins of Mary. Rightly then was she made to be of pure gold, because she was to give of that gold to form the body of the Son of God. She was golden in her conception, golden in her birth. She went through the fire of her suffering like gold in the furnace, and when she ascended on high, she was, in the words of our hymn,

Above all the Angels in glory untold,
Standing next to the King in a vesture of gold.

Day Five

Mary is the "Mater Amabilis," the Lovable or Dear Mother

WHY is she "Amabilis" thus specially? It is because she was without sin. Sin is something odious in its very nature, and grace is something bright, beautiful, attractive.

However, it may be said that sinlessness was not enough to make others love her, or to make her dear to others, and that for two reasons: first, because we cannot like anyone that is not like ourselves, and we are sinners; and next, because her being holy would not make her pleasant and winning, because holy persons whom we fall in with, are not always agreeable, and we cannot like them, however we may revere them and look up to them.

Now as to the first of these two questions, we may grant that bad men do not, cannot like good men; but our Blessed Virgin Mary is called Amabilis, or lovable, as being such to the children of the Church, not to those outside of it, who know nothing about her; and no child of Holy Church but has some remains of God's grace in his soul which makes him sufficiently like her, however greatly wanting he may be, to allow of his being able to love her. So we may let this question pass.

But as to the second question, viz., How are we sure that our Lady, when she was on earth, attracted people round her, and made them love her merely because she was holy?—considering that holy people sometimes have not that gift of drawing others to them.

To explain this point we must recollect that there is a vast difference between the state of a soul such as that of the Blessed Virgin, which has never sinned, and a soul, however holy, which has once had upon it Adam's sin; for, even after baptism and repentance, it suffers necessarily from the spiritual wounds which are the consequence of that sin. Holy men, indeed, never commit mortal sin; nay, sometimes have never committed even one mortal sin in the whole course of their lives. But Mary's holiness went beyond this. She never committed even a venial sin, and this special privilege is not known to belong to anyone but Mary.

Now, whatever want of amiableness, sweetness, attractiveness, really exists in holy men arises from the remains of sin in them, or again from the want of a holiness powerful enough to overcome the defects of nature, whether of soul or body; but, as to Mary, her holiness was such, that if we saw her, and heard her, we should not be able to tell to those who asked us anything about her except simply that she was angelic and heavenly.

Of course her face was most beautiful; but we should not be able to recollect whether it was beautiful or not; we should not recollect any of her features, because it was her beautiful sinless soul, which looked through her eyes, and spoke through her mouth, and was heard in her voice, and compassed her all about; when she was still, or when she walked, whether she smiled, or was sad, her sinless soul, this it was which would draw all those to her who had any grace in them, any remains of grace, any love of holy things. There was a divine music in all she said and did—in her mien, her air, her deportment, that charmed every true heart that came near her. Her innocence, her humility and modesty, her simplicity, sincerity, and truthfulness, her unselfishness, her unaffected interest in everyone who came to her, her purity—it was these qualities which made her so lovable; and were we to see her now, neither our first thought nor our second thought would be, what she could do for us with her Son (though she can do so much), but our first thought would be, "Oh, how beautiful!" and our second thought would be, "Oh, what ugly hateful creatures are we!"

Day Six

Mary is the "Rosa Mystica," the Mystical Rose

HOW did Mary become the Rosa Mystica, the choice, delicate, perfect flower of God's spiritual creation? It was by being born, nurtured and sheltered in the mystical garden or Paradise of God. Scripture makes use of the figure of a garden, when it would speak of heaven and its blessed inhabitants. A garden is a spot of ground set apart for trees and plants, all good, all various, for things that are sweet to the taste or fragrant in scent, or beautiful to look upon, or useful for nourishment; and accordingly in its spiritual sense it means the home of blessed spirits and holy souls dwelling there together, souls with both the flowers and the fruits upon them, which by the careful husbandry of God they have come to bear, flowers and fruits of grace, flowers more beautiful and more fragrant than those of any garden, fruits more delicious and exquisite than can be matured by earthly husbandman.

All that God has made speaks of its Maker; the mountains speak of His eternity; the sun of His immensity, and the winds of His Almightyness. In like manner flowers and fruits speak of His sanctity, His love, and His providence; and such as are flowers and fruits, such must be the place where they are found. That is to say, since they are found in a garden, therefore a garden has

also excellences which speak of God, because it is their home. For instance, it would be out of place if we found beautiful flowers on the mountain-crag, or rich fruit in the sandy desert. As then by flowers and fruits are meant, in a mystical sense, the gifts and graces of the Holy Ghost, so by a garden is meant mystically a place of spiritual repose, stillness, peace, refreshment, and delight.

Thus our first parents were placed in “a garden of pleasure” shaded by trees, “fair to behold and pleasant to eat of,” with the Tree of Life in the midst, and a river to water the ground. Thus our Lord, speaking from the cross to the penitent robber, calls the blessed place, the heaven to which He was taking him, “paradise,” or a garden of pleasure. Therefore St. John, in the Apocalypse, speaks of heaven, the palace of God, as a garden or paradise, in which was the Tree of Life giving forth its fruits every month.

Such was the garden in which the Mystical Rose, the Immaculate Mary, was sheltered and nursed to be the Mother of the All Holy God, from her birth to her espousals to St. Joseph, a term of thirteen years. For three years of it she was in the arms of her holy mother, St. Anne, and then for ten years she lived in the temple of God. In those blessed gardens, as they may be called, she lived by herself, continually visited by the dew of God’s grace, and growing up a more and more heavenly flower, till at the end of that period she was meet for the inhabitation in her of the Most Holy. This was the outcome of the Immaculate Conception. Excepting her, the fairest rose in the paradise of God has had upon it blight, and has had the risk of canker-worm and locust. All but Mary; she from the first was perfect in her sweetness and her beautifulness, and at length when the angel Gabriel had to come to her, he found her “full of grace,” which had, from her good use of it, accumulated in her from the first moment of her being.

Day Seven

Mary is the “Virgo Veneranda,” The All-Worshipful Virgin

WE use the word “Venerable” generally of what is old. That is because only what is old has commonly those qualities which excite reverence or veneration.

It is a great history, a great character, a maturity of virtue, goodness, experience, that excite our reverence, and these commonly cannot belong to the young.

But this is not true when we are considering Saints. A short life with them is a long one. Thus Holy Scripture says, “Venerable age is not that of long time, nor counted by the number of years, but it is the understanding of a man that is gray hairs, and a spotless life is old age. The just man, if he be cut short by death, shall be at rest; being made perfect in a short time, he fulfilled a long time” (Wisdom 5).

Nay, there is a heathen writer, who knew nothing of Saints, who lays it down that even to children, to all children, a great reverence should be paid, and that on the ground of their being as yet innocent. And this is a feeling very widely felt and expressed in all countries; so much so that the sight of those who have not sinned (that is, who are not yet old enough to have fallen into mortal sin) has, on the very score of that innocent, smiling youthfulness, often disturbed and turned the plunderer or the assassin in the midst of his guilty doings, filled him with a sudden fear, and brought him, if not to repentance, at least to change of purpose.

And, to pass from the thought of the lowest to the Highest, what shall we say of the Eternal God (if we may safely speak of Him at

all) but that He, because He is eternal, is ever young, without a beginning, and therefore without change, and, in the fulness and perfection of His incomprehensible attributes, now just what He was a million years ago? He is truly called in Scripture the “Ancient of Days,” and is therefore infinitely venerable; yet He needs not old age to make him venerable; He has really nothing of those human attendants on venerableness which the sacred writers are obliged figuratively to ascribe to Him, in order to make us feel that profound abasement and reverential awe which we ought to entertain at the thought of Him.

And so of the great Mother of God, as far as a creature can be like the Creator; her ineffable purity and utter freedom from any shadow of sin, her Immaculate Conception, her ever-virginity—these her prerogatives (in spite of her extreme youth at the time when Gabriel came to her) are such as to lead us to exclaim in the prophetic words of Scripture both with awe and with exultation, “Thou art the glory of Jerusalem and the joy of Israel; thou art the honour of our people; therefore hath the hand of the Lord strengthened thee, and therefore art thou blessed forever.”

Day Eight

Mary is “Sancta Maria,” the Holy Mary

GOD alone can claim the attribute of holiness. Hence we say in the Hymn, “Tu solus sanctus,” “Thou only art holy.” By holiness we mean the absence of whatever sullies, dims, and degrades a rational nature; all that is most opposite and contrary to sin and guilt.

We say that God alone is holy, though in truth all His high attributes are possessed by him in that fulness, that it may be truly said that He alone has them. Thus, as to goodness, our Lord said to the young man, “None is good but God alone.” He too alone is Power, He alone is Wisdom, He alone is Providence, Love, Mercy, Justice, Truth. This is true; but holiness is singled out as His special prerogative, because it marks more than His other attributes, not only His superiority over all His creatures, but emphatically His separation from them. Hence we read in the Book of Job, “Can man be justified compared with God, or he that is born of a woman appear clean? Behold, even the moon doth not shine, and the stars are not pure, in His sight.” “Behold, among His saints none is unchangeable, and the Heavens are not pure in His sight.”

This we must receive and understand in the first place; but secondly we know too, that, in His mercy, He has communicated in various measures His great attributes to His rational creatures, and, first of all, as being most necessary, holiness. Thus Adam, from the time of his creation, was gifted, over and above his nature as man, with the grace of God, to unite him to God, and to make him holy. Grace is therefore called holy grace; and, as being holy, it is the connecting principle between God and man. Adam in Paradise might have had knowledge, and skill, and many virtues; but these gifts did not unite him to his Creator. It was holiness that united him, for it is said by St. Paul, “Without holiness no man shall see God.”

And so again, when man fell and lost this holy grace, he had various gifts still adhering to him; he might be, in a certain measure, true, merciful, loving, and just; but these virtues did not unite him to God. What he needed was holiness; and therefore the first act of God’s goodness to us in the Gospel is to take us out of our unholy state by means of the sacrament of Baptism, and by the grace then given us to re-open the communications, so long closed, between the soul and heaven.

We see then the force of our Lady's title, when we call her "Holy Mary." When God would prepare a human mother for His Son, this was why He began by giving her an immaculate conception. He began, not by giving her the gift of love, or truthfulness, or gentleness, or devotion, though according to the occasion she had them all. But He began His great work before she was born; before she could think, speak, or act, by making her holy, and thereby, while on earth, a citizen of heaven. "Tota pulchra es, Maria!" Nothing of the deformity of sin was ever hers. Thus she differs from all saints. There have been great missionaries, confessors, bishops, doctors, pastors. They have done great works, and have taken with them numberless converts or penitents to heaven. They have suffered much, and have a superabundance of merits to show. But Mary in this way resembles her Divine Son, viz., that, as He, being God, is separate by holiness from all creatures, so she is separate from all Saints and Angels, as being "full of grace."

Day Nine

Mary is Sancta Dei Genetrix, the Holy Mother of God

Mary was no mere instrument in God's dispensation; the word of God did not merely come to her and go from her; He did not merely pass through her, as He may pass through us in Holy Communion; it was no heavenly body which the Eternal Son assumed, fashioned by the Angels, and brought down to this lower world: no, He imbibed, He sucked up her blood and her substance into His Divine Person; He became man of her; and received her lineaments and her features, as the appearance and character under which He should manifest Himself to the world. He was known doubtless, by His likeness to her, to be her Son. Thus His Mother is the first of Prophets, for of her came the Word bodily; she is the sole oracle of Truth, for the Way, the Truth, and the Life, vouchsafed to be her Son; she is the one mould of Divine Wisdom, and in that mould it was indelibly cast. Surely then, if "the first fruit be holy, the mass also is holy; and if the root be holy, so are the branches." It was natural, it was fitting, that so it should be; it was congruous that, whatever the Omnipotent could work in the person of the finite, should be wrought in her. I say, if the Prophets must be holy, "to whom the word of God comes," what shall we say of her, who was so specially favoured, that the true and substantial Word, and not His shadow or His voice, was not merely made in her, but born of her? who was not merely the organ of God's message, but the origin of His human existence, the living fountain from which He drew His most precious blood, and the material of His most holy flesh? Was it not fitting, beseemed it not, that the Eternal Father should prepare her for this ministration by some pre-eminent sanctification? Do not earthly parents act thus by their children? do they put them out to strangers? do they commit them to any chance person to suckle them? Shall even careless parents show a certain tenderness and solicitude in this matter, and shall not God himself show it, when He commits His Eternal Word to the custody of man? It was to be expected then that, if the Son was God, the Mother should be as worthy of Him, as creature can be worthy of Creator; that grace should have in her its "perfect work"; that, if she bore the Eternal Wisdom, she should be that created wisdom in whom "is all the grace of the Way and the Truth"; that if she was the Mother of "fair love, and fear, and knowledge, and holy hope," "she should give an odour like cinnamon and balm, and sweetness like to choice myrrh." Can we set bounds to the holiness of her who was the Mother of the Holiest?

Such, then, is the truth ever cherished in the deep heart of the Church, and witnessed by the keen apprehension of her children, that no limits but those proper to a creature can be assigned to the sanctity of Mary. Did Abraham believe that a son should be born to him of his aged wife? then Mary's faith was greater when she accepted Gabriel's message. Did Judith consecrate her widowhood to God to the surprise of her people? much more did Mary, from her first youth, devote her virginity. Did Samuel, when a child, inhabit the Temple, secluded from the world? Mary, too, was by her parents lodged in the same holy precincts, at the age when children begin to choose between good and evil. Was Solomon on his birth called "dear to the Lord"? and shall not the destined Mother of God be dear to Him, from the moment she was born? But further still; St. John Baptist was sanctified by the Spirit before his birth; shall Mary be only equal to him? is it not fitting that her privilege should surpass his? is it wonderful, if grace, which anticipated his birth by three months, should in her case run up to the very first moment of her being, outstrip the imputation of sin, and be beforehand with the usurpation of Satan? Mary must surpass all the Saints; the very fact that certain privileges are known to have been theirs, proves to us at once, from the necessity of the case, that she had the same and higher. Her conception then was immaculate, in order that she might surpass all Saints in the date as well as the fullness of her sanctification.

CONCECRATION PRAYER

(To be prayed on December 8)

I, _____, a repentant sinner, renew and ratify today in your hands, O, Immaculate Mother, the vows of my Baptism. I renounce Satan and resolve to follow Jesus Christ even more closely than before.

Mary, I give you my heart. Please set it on fire with love for Jesus. Make it always attentive to his burning thirst for love and for souls. Keep my heart in your most pure Heart that I may love Jesus and the members of his Body with your own perfect love.

Mary, I entrust myself totally to you: my body and soul, my goods, both interior and exterior, and even the value of all my good actions. Please make of me, of all that I am and have, whatever most pleases you. Let me be a fit instrument in your immaculate and merciful hands for bringing the greatest possible glory to God. If I fall, please lead me back to Jesus. Wash me in the blood and water that flow from his pierced side, and help me never to lose my trust in this fountain of love and mercy.

With you, O Immaculate Mother—you who always do the will of God—I unite myself to the perfect consecration of Jesus as he offers himself in the Spirit to the Father for the life of the world. Amen.