

Immaculate Conception of BVM – Pius IX and the Definition¹

In the name of the Father ...

God ineffable ... having foreseen from all eternity the lamentable wretchedness of the entire human race which would result from the sin of Adam ... from the very beginning, and before time began ... chose and prepared for his only-begotten Son a mother in whom the Son of God would become incarnate ... [T]his mother, ever absolutely free of all stain of sin, all fair and perfect, would possess that fullness of holy innocence and sanctity than which, under God, one cannot even imagine anything greater, and which, outside of God, no mind can succeed in comprehending fully.

Thus begins the Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of Blessed Pius IX defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1854. Cardinal Giovanni Maria Mastai Ferretti had ascended to the papal throne eight years earlier in tumultuous times. Spurred on by the French Revolution, secret societies were plotting against the Church to bring about their secular agenda - the elimination of (the supernatural and the transcendent) from history and the so-called liberation of humanity. Indeed, the most audacious of those societies hoped to have a Roman Pontiff do their work for them.

Coming from a family with liberal tendencies, Pius' first acts as pontiff - granting amnesty to political prisoners and exiles, freedom to the press - had the revolutionaries rejoicing. Indeed, many thought that a pontificate finally had come to unite Church and Revolution, or rather subordinate the Church to the Revolution. The revolutionaries shamelessly lauded and exploited Pius' well-intentioned initiatives for their own ends, in the process creating the myth of a liberal pope.

In fact, the Pope – as temporal ruler of the Papal States and a good father – was determined to implement the remedies which the times demanded. But he had also undertaken reforms in the hope of correcting and mollifying the revolutionaries. His decisions had the opposite effect however: intent on their agenda, the revolutionaries simply increased their demands and protests. In 1848, the second year of his pontificate, revolution quickly spread across Europe and the Pope was overtaken by events. Indeed, Pius was even invited to lead the revolution. He could not. His refusal was seen as a betrayal, and the revolutionaries turned against him. The situation deteriorated, and Pius was forced to abandon the Papal States, fleeing Rome.

In exile, Pius denounced the revolution and excommunicated its leaders, an initiative which was met with insults and blasphemies. Indeed, Pius decried that *Rome, the principal seat of the Catholic Church ... had become ... a jungle full of ... apostates, heretics ... animated by the most terrible hatred of Catholic truth ... dedicated to ... the teaching and dissemination of pestilent errors of all kinds, and to the corruption of the hearts and minds of all, with the intention that, in Rome itself – as if this were possible – the Catholic faith will*

¹Much of the information in this sermon is taken from: [Roberto de Mattei, Blessed Pius IX \(Gracewing, Herefordshire UK\), 2004.](#)

collapse.

A Catholic alliance restored Pius to Rome after a year in exile, whereupon the Pope introduced the much-needed reforms. The most important work to which he devoted himself with all his strength for the rest of his thirty-two-year long reign, however, was the struggle against secularization and the revolution.

While in exile, the Pope had been contemplating the storm shaking the Church, when Cardinal Lambruschini approached: *Most blessed Father, you can heal the world only with a proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. This dogmatic definition alone can re-establish the scene of the truths of Christianity and draw minds back from the ways of naturalism in which they have lost their way.*

To us, the cardinal's suggestion might seem somewhat out of touch with reality. Surely it would be better to find a political solution, to dialogue. Pius, however, already had seen the bitter fruits of opening the Church's windows to the modern world. Moreover, the cardinal's suggestion was very much consonant with Pius' own thinking: he believed that the revolution's purpose was to eradicate Christianity and to establish a universal, egalitarian republic. Moreover, for Pius, politics could not be separated from religion. His political vision was based on a great theology of history, the struggle between revelation and revolution founded in that enmity between the woman and the serpent, destined to divide humanity implacably into two.

To understand the Pope's thought and the cardinal's suggestion, one must recognize that contemporary errors – the principles of modern society - are founded on the negation of sin, and particularly Original Sin; that naturalism, materialism, the revolution – these are the social organization of sin; that the devil was creation's first revolutionary, throwing off God's order; that the radical antagonism between the Church and the Revolution has its roots precisely in the disorder of the passions, themselves the fruit of the sin of fallen man.

The great Spanish thinker, Donoso Cortés, observed that it was no coincidence that the Pope connected the promulgation of the dogma with a condemnation of modern errors: *The negation of original sin is one of the fundamental dogmas of the revolution. To claim that man did not fall by original sin means denying that man has been redeemed. To claim that man has not been redeemed means denying the mystery of the redemption and the Incarnation ... To claim that the human will remains naturally intact and not to recognize the existence of sin and evil means denying the sanctifying action of God on man.*

The definition of the Immaculate Conception, therefore - far from just as an academic exercise - must be seen in its historical context, as manifesting Pius' conviction of a relationship between the Mother of God and human history, in particular the privilege of her Immaculate Conception as the antidote to contemporary error based on the negation of Original Sin. As the Pope observed: *The greatness of this privilege confutes those who deny that human nature was corrupted by the first sin and who amplify the powers of human reason in order to deny or diminish the benefits of revelation.*

Indeed, the relative necessity of the definition as a “supernatural” solution to an infernal problem was ratified from heaven when the revolution reached its ugliest incarnation in Russia, so that the Mother of God

came to Lucia, the only surviving Fatima seer, with a request - which *might seem somewhat out of touch with reality* - to ask for the consecration to her Immaculate Heart of Russia, to prevent the spread of its errors throughout the world, i.e., the spread of a revolution rooted in ... *the lamentable wretchedness of the entire human race which would result from the sin of Adam ... and ... animated by the most terrible hatred of Catholic truth ... dedicated to ... the teaching and dissemination of pestilent errors of all kinds, and to the corruption of the hearts and minds of all, with the intention that the Catholic faith will collapse.* It is a consecration for which we still wait: it will come – we have her word for it - but it will be late. Perhaps when we have another pontiff with the courage and vision of Pius IX.

When that consecration comes though, would that it be as glorious as that December day in 1854 when fifty thousand people crowded into St Peter's basilica. Accompanied by cardinals and bishops from all over the world, Pius processed to the papal altar to celebrate Holy Mass. After the gospel had been sung in Latin and Greek, the Dean of the college of cardinals prostrated himself at the Pontiff's feet and asked for the decree which ... *will be the cause of great joy in heaven and of great enthusiasm on earth.* After intoning the *Veni Creator*, the pope - wearing the triple tiara showing him to be king, priest and prophet - sat on his throne to read the definition. Everyone present affirmed that, at this solemn moment, the Pope was illuminated by an extraordinary light which admitted of no natural explanation and which showed his face covered in tears. As the Pontiff himself later confided: *When I started to announce the dogmatic decree, I felt my voice incapable of making itself audible to the immense multitude of people ... But when I got to the formula of the definition itself, God gave his vicar such strength and supernatural vigor that it resounded throughout the whole basilica. I was so overwhelmed by this divine succor that I was obliged to suspend my speech for a moment in order to give free flow to my tears.*

Regaining himself, the Pontiff pronounced the definition which was to excite such extraordinary enthusiasm in the Catholic world, demonstrating how alive was the sentiment of faith in a century ravaged by secularism, rationalism and naturalism – a definition which resounded throughout the world as an insuperable obstacle to the serpent and his seed, to the revolution and its pretensions.

Wherefore, in humility and fasting, we unceasingly offered our private prayers as well as the public prayers of the Church to God the Father through his Son, that he would deign to direct and strengthen our mind by the power of the Holy Ghost. In like manner did we implore the help of the entire heavenly host as we ardently invoked the Paraclete. Accordingly, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, for the honor of the Holy and undivided Trinity, for the glory and adornment of the Virgin Mother of God, for the exaltation of the Catholic Faith, and for the furtherance of the Catholic religion, by the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own: We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that 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, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.

O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.

Blessed Pius IX, pray for us.

In the name of the Father ...