Why the Catholic Church believes that Mary was conceived without original sin and remained sinless throughout her life on earth.

The Catholic belief called the Immaculate Conception is sometimes confused with the virginal conception of Jesus. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception affirms that Mary was conceived by her parents without original sin. From the moment of her conception, Mary was preserved by God from all taint or stain of sin. The word immaculate comes from Latin meaning "without stain." Mary's *virginal conception* of Jesus refers to the belief that she conceived Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit and without having sexual relations with a man.

Jesus did not leave the Church a handbook of Christian beliefs

Jesus preached and taught, but he never wrote a book on what Christians ought to believe. Led by the Holy Spirit, his followers were left with this task. Catholic beliefs and practices grew and developed as the Church meditated on the teachings of Jesus. For example:

- It was not until the late fourth century that the Church determined the number of books in the New Testament.

- It was only in 1215 AD at the *Fourth Lateran Council* that the Church finally settled on seven as pertains to the number of the sacraments. Prior to that, the Church had many rituals which were regarded as sacramental and bestowed God's grace on the recipient.

Marian doctrines

While all or nearly all Christians believe that Mary is a very special person simply because she is the mother of Jesus our Savior, only Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Church believe in Mary's Immaculate Conception, her perpetual virginity, her being the mother of God, and in her assumption into heaven at the end of her life on earth. These Marian beliefs took centuries to develop and the Church did not come to these beliefs without some controversy.

The Immaculate Conception

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not officially defined by the Church until 1854. Of course, the belief had existed in the minds and hearts of the faithful for many centuries prior to that.

We might ask why it took several centuries before Christians started to believe in Mary's Immaculate Conception. In the early centuries of Christianity, many theological battles focused on the person of Christ, especially on his humanity and divinity. Yet, as early as the fourth century, the Church started to extol the holiness of Mary. St. Ephrem wrote:

> *You Jesus and your mother alone*
> *are beautiful in every way.*
> *In you no stain,*
> *in your mother no spot.*

In the fifth century, theologians started to ask if Mary was conceived free of original sin. In the Middle Ages, the question of Mary's Immaculate Conception was debated by the great doctors of the Church. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, renowned for his devotion to Mary, opposed the doctrine. So did Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, theologians like Duns Scotus argued in favor of it.

Those who opposed the belief that Mary was conceived free from original sin did so because it seemed to imply that Mary was not in need of the salvation that Jesus came to bring. Didn't Mary need salvation just like everyone else? The answer is yes, she did.

Mary was saved but in a most unusual way

When the Catholic Church believes that Mary was sinless from the first moment of her conception and remained sinless all her life, it is *not* saying that Mary was not in need of Jesus' saving grace. Like everyone else, Mary, too, needed to be saved from sin—both original sin and personal sin—but her salvation occurred in a most unusual way. Protestant theologian Donald Dawe, writing on this doctrine, states: *"The grace of God that comes to us through Jesus flowed backward in time to Mary to prepare her for her role in the Incarnation. This is what is celebrated in the*

Immaculate Conception." Theologians remind us that the concept of time is a human construct by which God is not limited. God lives in a timeless eternal now.

So while Mary was *conceived* before Jesus achieved his saving work, that did not prevent God from doing his saving work in Mary prior to Jesus' death and resurrection.

It has been said that just as Jesus was conceived in a very unusual and spectacular way, so was Mary saved in a most unusual and spectacular way. On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the Church prays: "Father, you let Mary share *beforehand* in the salvation Christ would bring by his death and kept her sinless from the first moment of her conception."

A fitting belief. The Church reasons that it is only fitting that the one who housed the sinless Savior of the world would, by the grace of God, be free of all sin. "In preserving Mary from original sin, God was choosing a perfect door for a perfect God to enter an imperfect world" (Peter Kreeft).

"Full of grace." When the angel Gabriel came to Mary to invite her to be the mother of Jesus, she greeted her with the words "Hail, full of grace!" (sometimes translated as "Hail, highly favored one!"). Mary was not just graced like the rest of us; she was "full of grace," i.e., she was totally free of sin and totally full of God. Her union with God was never spoiled. St. Thérèse of Lisieux expressed Mary's sinless state in this way: *"Mary's soul was like a full glass of water that has no room for anything else."* As a result, she gave her son Jesus an untainted and spotless human nature.

Other considerations

• Even though Mary did not sin, she could have. She could have turned down the angel Gabriel and she could have said no to God in other ways. Like Jesus, Mary would have been tempted to sin.

• Even though Mary was preserved free from original sin, she did not escape the *consequences* of original sin, namely, sickness and suffering. Because of her relationship with Jesus, she suffered greatly.

Heavenly confirmation of the doctrine

Two events in the nineteenth century helped the Church to universally accept a belief that was quite controversial in the previous centuries. Both events have to do with apparitions of Mary.

In the Bible, we read how God sometimes sent angels to earth to deliver his message to selected individuals. In the gospel, we read about Moses and Elijah appearing to Jesus and the Apostles on Mount Tabor (Matt 17:1-8), and Jesus appearing to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). So we should not be surprised if God continues to send heavenly messengers to earth with a particular message.

Catherine Labouré. On December 17, 1830, Mary appeared to Catherine Labouré, a French nun. In the vision, Mary showed herself inside an oval frame around which were inscribed the words: *"O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee."* Mary asked Catherine to create a medal depicting the vision. The medal came to be called "miraculous" because of the many miracles attributed to it.

Bernadette of Lourdes. In 1858, four years after the Church solemnly declared the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to be infallibly true, Mary appeared several times to an uneducated French teenager named Bernadette Soubirous. After several visits, the skeptical local parish priest told Bernadette to ask the lady her name. On her next visit, the lady with outstretched arms and eyes looking to heaven told Bernadette that she was the Immaculate Conception. Since Mary's apparition to Bernadette, numerous medically verified miraculous healings have occurred at Lourdes. For more on this marvelous apparition, one can rent the movie *The Song of Bernadette.* Jennifer Jones won an academy award for her role as Bernadette. When it comes to belief on this doctrine, I find Mary's apparitions most helpful.

The Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary on December 8th.

Have a blessed week,