

Celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception with your kids

This year the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is Dec. 8 and is a holy day of obligation. Why are we celebrating? A lot of Catholic kids (and adults) don't actually know, so here's a little crash course that you can share with your kids.

Explaining the Immaculate Conception to kids

What the Immaculate Conception is not

Let's start by clearing up a common misconception about the Immaculate Conception: It is not, as many Catholics believe, the virginal conception of Jesus Christ in Mary. Nor is it the virginal birth of Jesus by Mary.

The Immaculate Conception means Mary was always free of original sin

Instead, the Immaculate Conception refers to the doctrine that Mary, from the very moment of her conception, was never stained by original sin. The word *immaculate* literally means pure, or without blemish.

Here's how Blessed Pope Pius IX defined the doctrine in his proclamation of December 8, 1854: "The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin."

How original sin fits in

So the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is connected to another commonly misunderstood doctrine, the doctrine of original sin.

In the simplest terms, original sin refers to the fact that all of humanity was harmed by the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve. (See [Genesis 3](#) for the biblical account.) None of us are *personally* responsible for their sin. But because of the unity of the human race (*Catechism* 360), we all “inherited” an injured or faulty human character. As a result, all people have a fundamental tendency to repeat the sin of Adam and Eve by trying to take God’s place (Genesis 3:5) in one way or another.

Mary is immaculate because of Jesus

It’s important to note that Mary was not “immaculate” by any merit of her own, but by the saving (“sanctifying”) grace of Jesus Christ, her savior. That’s the same grace that washed your kids free of the stain of original sin at their baptism. But in the case of Mary, the saving grace of Jesus Christ preserved her from being stained by original sin in the first place. She was conceived with the same original innocence, holiness, and justice that Adam and Eve possessed before they broke away from God. She was, as the angel Gabriel declared, “full of grace” (Luke 1:28).

Mary still experienced the earthly effects of original sin, such as death or sadness, just as Christians experience these effects even after being washed clean in the waters of baptism. However, she did not experience the same desire to place herself over God that other human beings do.

Why would God preserve Mary from original sin?

Why would God go to all this trouble? If you listen carefully to the prayers the priest says during the Eucharistic liturgy,

you might hear him say that God preserved Mary from original sin in order to “prepare a worthy Mother for your Son and signify the beginning of the Church, his beautiful Bride without spot or wrinkle.” Let’s break those two pieces down.

Mary: A worthy mother for the Son of God

You might remember from the Old Testament that people who encountered God would often lay on the ground prostrate or otherwise cover their faces. The expectation was that they would die, because how could something (or someone) tainted by evil continue to exist in the presence of the holy God? In fact, many of the Jewish laws about diet and worship were concerned with how to maintain the purity of the worshipper so that he or she could be worthy to encounter God. It makes sense, then, that Mary would be made pure in order to prepare her to carry the Son of the Living God in her womb for nine months.

Mary: The beginning of the Church

Besides being made a worthy mother for the Son of God, Mary was also made pure in order to be a sign of the beginning of the Church. We can say that she is the beginning of the Church because she is the first person to be redeemed by the saving sacrifice of her Son, Jesus Christ. She is the first fruits of the “new creation,” a kind of “sneak preview” or foreshadowing of what all of the faithful will become in Christ. So all of the good and wonderful things we say about Mary ultimately describe our own destiny!

Young children and the Immaculate Conception

“There is no way I can explain all that to my kids!”

That’s right, at least when it comes to young children or older kids just beginning their faith journey. The Immaculate Conception is a good, meaty doctrine that you can circle back around to year after year on the feast day.

When first introducing this concept to young children (ages 3-6), keep it super simple: “God was with Mary in a special way that helped her to do only what was good, instead of making bad choices. That made her a really good mom for the baby Jesus. Most moms and dads make bad choices sometimes, but not Mary! When we say ‘yes’ to God like Mary did, then God helps us to be just as good and holy as Mary.”

Of course, you can adjust this script to fit your own kids’ faith development. Kids who have already been introduced to the concept of sin (perhaps through their sacramental prep class) might get a similar script but with *sin* replacing “bad choices.”

Celebrating with your family

Go to Mass—and listen carefully

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is a holy day of obligation in the United States, where Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception is the patron. Make Mass part of your celebration of the feast day!

Have your older children and teens listen carefully at Mass for references to the doctrine of the immaculate conception, not only in the readings and the homily, but also in the prayers the priest says during the liturgy of the Eucharist.

Make a Mary Candle

This is a great day to make or set out your Mary Candle. You’ll need a large white pillar candle. Decorate it with symbols of Christ, such as a *chi rho* (the first two letters of Christ’s name in Greek; it looks like a large letter P with an X across the bottom part of the stem). Place it in your family oratory and cover it with white cloth or lace for the

remainder of Advent. The candle represents Christ, and the white cloth represents Mary. At Christmas, remove the cloth to reveal Christ, and light the candle all through the Christmas season.

Eat something white

At our house, we'll celebrate with a white cake with a blue M (for Mary) on it, along with vanilla ice cream. We also usually eat pierogies, a potato-filled Polish pasta...very white!

If you want to go big on a white-themed feast day meal, head over to [Catholic Cuisine for an abundance of Immaculate Conception ideas](#).

Pray a Marian prayer

There are many Marian prayers that you can pray with your kids on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Ave Maria Stellis is a beautiful song that is traditional to this feast. The Hail Mary and Hail, Holy Queen are basic Marian prayers that are good for Catholic kids to know by heart. And the [Magnificat](#), Mary's own prayer and her longest speaking part in the Bible, is a wonderful prayer for any Marian feast day.

Learn more

[What is the Immaculate Conception?](#)

[Understanding the Immaculate Conception](#)

[Catholic Encyclopedia: The Immaculate Conception](#)

An exhaustive explanation of the theology of the doctrine.

[Readings for the Liturgy of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception](#)

The readings for the Mass, including the Eucharistic prayers,

are a good way to learn about the Church's understanding of this doctrine.