



a Kendall Hunt Company

## Immaculate Conception, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



### Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for the session, read all the readings.

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

Psalms 98:1, 2-3, 3-4

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

Luke 1:26-38

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Was there a particular reading which appealed to you? Was there a word or image that engaged you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need for the session.

### The Word In Liturgy

During the Advent season Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is frequently presented to us through the Scriptures and in the theological reflection of the Church embodied in our liturgical observance. Her life, her witness, her role in the economy of salvation, and her very nature are today the subject of our meditation and inform the Church's prayer in liturgy.

Since the eighth century in the East and the eleventh century in the West, the Christian Church has set aside a day to celebrate Mary's conception in the womb of her mother Anne, thus indicating a reverence for Mary's whole person. The dogma of Mary's conception without sin, of Immaculate Conception, was not defined by the Church, however, until the mid-nineteenth century. The church of the United States, for whom Mary of the Immaculate Conception is its patron saint, holds this day in high esteem as one of its holy days of obligation.

The reading from Genesis sets the context for this feast in the sin of our first parents and traces the disorders of nature to this primordial sin in a rich, symbolic story. Blame for sin is shared among the man, the woman and the snake, with the snake bearing the greatest responsibility because of having instigated the deception. The passage focuses on the snake, who represents all the forces of evil in the world, just as the man and the woman represent the whole human race. Eve, the mother of all the living, stands at the head of a perpetual struggle. Her name, however, is a sign of hope: even though she shares responsibility for the catastrophe of sin, God's promise continues through her in the offspring she will bear.

This Lucan story is remarkable for its focus on Mary. In contrast to Matthew's gospel in which Joseph is the more central figure, Luke's account brings to light God's high regard for Mary. No Particular marks of social status are hers. She has neither husband nor child, she does

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not share Joseph's Davidic ancestry, and she is not described as virtuous under the law, as was Zechariah in Luke's parallel story of the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist. Yet the Lord favors Mary, despite her youth, her poverty, and her womanhood in a society that gave preference to men. The angel greets her with an address that is both respectful and beautiful in the original Greek, and for which there is probably no adequate translation. Finally, the event that is about to take place in Mary's life is affirmed by a sign that takes place in someone else's life—the pregnancy of Elizabeth in her old age. This way of calling attention to God's faithfulness is found often in the Acts of the Apostles (also written by Luke).

Mary's freedom from original sin signifies more than her own blessedness as 'highly favored' of the Lord. The relevance of the Immaculate Conception extends to all people: Because of Mary's assent to God, the incarnation and, thus, the redemption of the world become possible. Taken together, therefore, the first reading and the gospel embrace the human race's whole drama of sin and redemption. The reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians shows that this redemption was in the plan of God from the beginning.

### **Catholic Doctrine**

#### **The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

The Theological notion of the Immaculate Conception of Mary was opposed by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) and by St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and Albertus Magnus (d. 1280). These theologians were challenged by the Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus (d. 1308). For his efforts he is called the "Herald of the Immaculate Conception." This feast was approved in 1476 by Pope Sixtus IV and in 1568 it was extended to the entire Church by Pope Pius V. To give a final definition of the Immaculate Conception, Pius IX launched a theological commission in 1848 to study the issue. The following year he asked bishops around the world to comment. They responded almost unanimously in favor of this doctrine. In 1854 Pius IX issued the document *Ineffabilis Deus* that officially stated that Mary was free from sin from the first moment of her conception by a special grace from God.

What does this dogma mean for us? Paul VI in his Guidelines for Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary (1974) stipulates that the ultimate purpose of devotion to the Blessed Virgin is to glorify God and lead Christians to commit themselves to a life which conforms absolutely to his will. Mary's assent to the invitation to become the mother of God not only gives her an esteemed place in salvation history but also provides for us the model of a true disciple of Jesus—conformity to the will of God.