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021 - The Immaculate Conception and the United States

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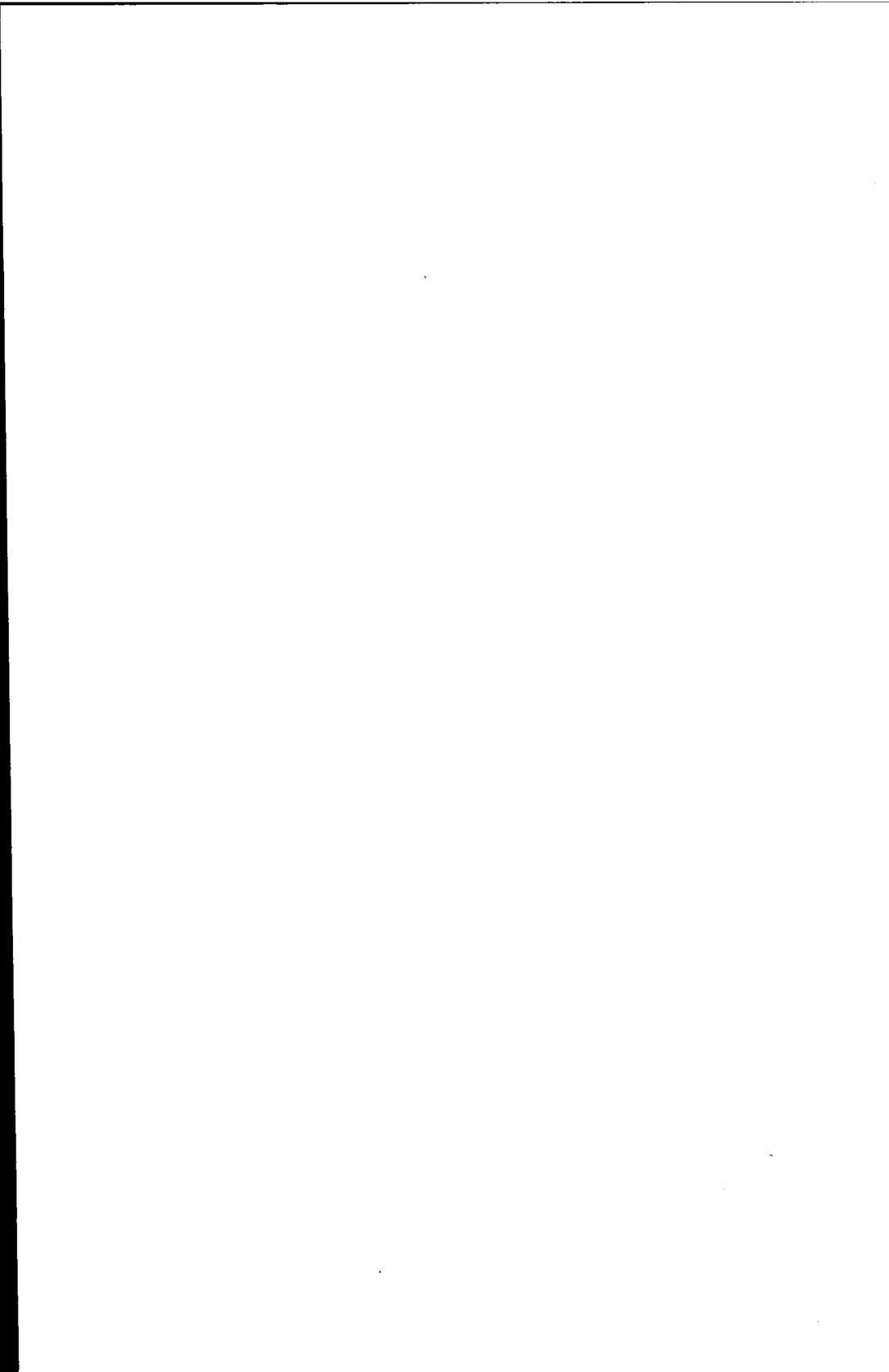
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*The
Immaculate Conception
and the United States*

By RALPH J. OHLMANN, O.F.M.

Number 21



The Immaculate Conception and the United States

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ONE NEED NOT MOVE LONG AMID THE CATHOLICS OF THE UNITED STATES to discern that beneath their seemingly pragmatic and matter-of-fact externalisms there lies a deep filial devotion to the Mother of God. It is not exuberant, nor ostentatious, but quiet and sincere, pervading the atmosphere and cleansing the air like a delicate perfume. Though generally well-educated, the American Catholic may not understand the full implications of the Immaculate Conception, the Co-Redemption, and other Marian privileges, but like Saint Augustine, he cannot associate the notion of sin with her, and like Scotus he feels that whatever is excellent must be attributed to her, and like Saint Alphonsus Ligouri he never grows tired of hearing about her.

Witness to this enthusiasm for Our Lady is his genuine liking for the rosary, his conscientious observance of her feast days of obligation, his keen interest in the message of Fatima and the apparitions at Lourdes, his joy at the proclamation of the definition of her Assumption. Catholic America loves Mary: there is a laudable attendance at May devotions and October devotions, large enrollments in the Sodality and the Legion of Mary; almost everyone places himself under her heavenly protection by wearing the scapular or the miraculous medal; almost 5000 churches and institutions in the United States bear Mary's name in some form or other.

How can this extraordinary devotion to Mary in wealth-bitten America be explained? We know that God and his Blessed Mother have given the increase, but who planted and who watered the seed? There was never a stream without its tributaries and never a brook without its spring or trickle of rainwater; and so the flood of Marian devotion in the United States owes its origins to many rivulets, rivulets which had their sources in Spain, France, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland; in fact, who e Europe was the watershed from which Mary's present glory derives.

There is not a great deal of historical, theological, and inspirational source material to which we can turn in studying devotion to the Immaculate Virgin in America. The Blessed Virgin has never deigned to appear within the borders of the States. We are without a Lourdes, a Fatima, a Guadalupe, a LaSalette, a Banneux. Nor have we any famous shrines blessed with miracles in the past and serving as a point of departure for the present — no Walsingham, no Einsiedeln, no Rocamadour, no Le Puy en Velay, no Lady of Czestochowa. And until the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is completed, we can not claim a church in America whose size and architecture excite the wonder of the world: neither a

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Notre Dame de Paris nor a Chartres; neither a Strassbourg nor a Rheims Cathedral graces our skylines.

And if we turn to the chronicles of the past seeking inspirational leaders in things Marian, we find no St. Bernard to teach us how to praise the Virgin, no Scotus to champion her privileges, no Montfort to make us her slaves. And in those early days where were the Dominicans with the rosary, and the sons of St. Francis, who had been born in the shadows of St. Mary of the Angels and had become natural heralds of devotion to Mary? Canada and the Spanish possessions were solidly established in Marian devotion at an early date, but the English colonies had to wait.

It would be wrong to say that Mariology was unknown in colonial days, for among the early missionaries were many men of eminent learning who had received a thorough theological training at Douay (the university founded by Cardinal Allen in 1559 to counteract the Reformation, and which is ever to be remembered for its contribution to the preservation of the faith in England) or at other reputable seats of learning on the continent. Such men could not have been ignorant of the famed discussions on the Immaculate Conception which were the talk of the day in the university towns of the seventeenth century.

But there was neither time nor occasion for Mariological speculation among the Indians and early settlers, where a horse's back served as a pulpit and a felled tree in the clearing as a pew for the listener. Circumstances limited theological output to sermons and catechesis, with sometimes a sprinkling of controversy and apologetics used against obstreperous Protestant neighbors. Nevertheless, we must render homage to those pioneers who did not merely speak of Christ and His Mother, but succeeded in transplanting Them as something living into the very hearts of the people.

FOR MARY, UNDER THE TITLE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, was given a permanent footing in the Americas from the beginning. Christopher Columbus, sailing in the **Santa Maria**, named the first island he discovered **San Salvador**, after Our Savior, but the second he called **Santa Maria de la Concepcion**, to honor Our Lady. She was now firmly established in the New World, and from here the Spanish **Conquistadores** carried her in triumph, attributing their conquests to her and dubbing her with the title **La Conquistadora**. In the North, the French were no less overt in attributing their gains to the Queen of Heaven. In 1638 King Louis XIII of France officially consecrated his possessions in America to the Blessed Virgin, and France assumed the position of a world power under the banner of Our Lady.

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How different was her introduction to the Middle Atlantic states! There her arrival had to be kept rather secret. But she was there; it was like the years spent in the little house of Nazareth. She was biding her time, waiting for the words: "Mother, behold thy son!" What is one hundred years to her? She was preparing an imperceptible conquest.

Officially, Our Lady had not been expelled from England; she had been ungraciously eased out of the land which for centuries had been known as "Our Lady's Dowry." The Articles of 1536 stated that prayer to the Virgin is laudable but not necessary, and in the Prayer Book of 1549 all feasts of Our Lady were suppressed except the Annunciation and the Purification, which were looked upon as feasts of Our Lord. Mary's places of pilgrimage became desolate: Our Lady of the Oak at Norwich, Our Lady of Grace at Southampton, the "Slipper Chapel" at Walsingham, where Henry VIII presented Our Lady with a rich necklace in 1510, only to take it back in 1538. Nor were they satisfied with removing her from the liturgy and the altar. By banning the doctrines of her champions from the universities they sought to extinguish her in the minds of a people who had cherished her as their Queen since the time of Augustine and Ethelbert.

Is it any wonder, then, that Our Lady sailed for America with the **Ark** and the **Dove**? The narrative of this voyage, which was probably written by Father Andrew White, tells of the priests on the **Ark** uniting the Catholics in prayer and consecrating the province to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. The first Lord Baltimore, George Calvert, had fought a long and bitter battle with the King and Parliament to obtain a charter for a tract of land in the Americas where religion might be practiced freely. After his death, his son, Cecil Lord Baltimore, put the plan into effect. The Catholic party landed on St. Clement's island on March 25, 1634, the Annunciation of a new land to be born to Mary. In accordance with the King's instructions they named the land **Terra Mariae**, Maryland, after Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I, but in the hearts of these settlers it was really Mary's land. For shortly afterwards they sailed up a river which empties into Chesapeake Bay and established a settlement in an old Indian village, where religious liberty found a home. Both the river and the village were named St. Mary. In 1649 a Religious Toleration Act was passed in England, and sometime later a William Bretton gave a tract of land for a church to be built "in honor of Almighty God and the ever Immaculate Virgin."

But Mary threatened quickly to become a casualty along with the Mass and the Cross as a result of the "No Popery" attitude which had been exported to the thirteen English colonies from England and Scotland. The

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charters granted to the settlers of Massachusetts Bay and Virginia contained provisions curtailing freedom of worship and exercise of political rights for Catholic, and all other colonies proscribed Catholicism at one time or another. In the district of Maryland the Catholics formed only a minority among the total population, and in 1654 a law was enacted that no Catholic would be protected in that colony; forty years later the Church of England was made the established Church.

But whereas the Immaculate Virgin seemed to be losing ground in Maryland she was actually strengthening her flanks on the North and South. In 1632, Isaac Jogues, the first martyr of America to be canonized, took over the state of New York in the names of Jesus and Mary. He had taught its children to say the **Ave Maria** and chant the **Regina Coeli** and had consecrated its land to the Immaculate Conception. In 1666, at Quebec, the oldest church in America dedicated to the Immaculate Conception became the Cathedral of the first bishop of Canada, and a little later there arose at Prairie de Magdalen in Louisiana a little thatched church in honor of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception (1675).

AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME, A GREAT DEVOTEE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, Pere Jacques Marquette was waiting near the shores of the Great Lakes for the arrival of the emissary of Count de Frontenac, then governor of Canada, who was to bring him permission from his superiors to go in search of the Great River to the West. Joliet arrived on the eighth of December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, with the desired permission. It is Marquette who tells us that "above all I placed our voyage under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Immaculate, and promised her if she obtained us the grace of discovering this great river I would give it the name of Conception, as I would do to the first mission I should establish among those new nations." And so the Mississippi was originally called the Conception by its discoverer. When his party was attacked by hostile Indians and death seemed inevitable, Marquette remarks: "We had recourse to our patroness and guide, the holy Virgin Immaculate and we had great need for her assistance, for the savages were urging each others to slaughter by fierce and continual cries." And in his last **Journal**, dated December 30, 1674, Marquette on his death bed is grateful to the Blessed Immaculate Virgin who had taken care of him in his wanderings.

In the eighteenth century, Spain crowned the apostolic works of her loyal servants by consecrating her American possessions to Our Lady under the beautiful title of her Immaculate Conception, thereby proclaiming to the world the queenship of the Holy Virgin over the lands which

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had been conquered in her name. But during the first seventy-five years of that century one hears little or nothing of the Virgin in the thirteen original colonies.

After the colonies had liberated themselves from British domination and had rid themselves of Puritan-Episcopal authority, freedom of religious practice was introduced by the Constitution of the United States. Mary was now ready to come into her own. However, her children were few at the start. According to estimates of the time, the number of Catholics might total 16,000 souls in Maryland, 7,000 in Pennsylvania, and 1,500 in the other states. But the future was more promising.

In 1789 John Carroll was named first Bishop of Baltimore, which was erected as a diocese by Pius VI on November 6 of that year. The new Bishop invited several religious orders to America and called together the First National Synod in the United States wherein the Blessed Virgin was chosen as patroness of the diocese of Baltimore. He died in 1815, deserving by his outstanding work and the authority he exercised in the early days of the union the title of Founder of the Church in the United States.

FOR THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, CATHOLICS moved among their fellow-citizens quietly and with exceeding humility and meekness, says Bishop McQuaid. They were especially careful not to offend their separated brethren and in turn received becoming pity and tolerance. No one feared them — they were so few in number. With increasing immigration, however, large and costly churches were erected, convents and colleges were opened, and bishops and priests became more numerous. All of this turned the pity of Protestants into fear and another anti-Catholic wave struck the country.

In the vilification of Catholic practices even Our Lady was not spared. **The Worship of the Virgin Mary** was the first of a series of "No-Popery" tracts published in **The Protestant** (September 25, 1830—October 22, 1831), the first anti-Catholic journal in America. Later, in the all-out push of the Native Americans, one enemy of Mary declared: "If in the next village of ours, in enlightened New England, the inhabitants were all pagans, and bowed down daily in a temple of Jupiter or Venus, we are persuaded the Holy Majesty of heaven would be less insulted and less offended than He is by actual worship of Mary and the saints by a multitude among us who bear the name of Christians."

But the Church was not without its champions. Many French priests came to our shores, driven from their homeland by the revolution of 1789. Sulpicians for the most part, they were men of learning and piety and

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a deeply imbedded devotion to Our Lady. Chevereux and Matignon, Dubois and Brute, Flaget and his companions in the West, Dubourg in the South, and the Sulpicians whose center of activity was Baltimore, performed noble work and laid solid foundations. But head and shoulders above all of them in the defense against the charges of Protestantism stood John England, the first Bishop and organizer of the diocese of Charleston, who was known for his theological knowledge and who, because of his vigor and the amount of his literary output, had been dubbed the "steam bishop."

NOW IN ONE OF THE DARKEST HOURS OF THE CHURCH IN AMERICA, the hierarchy of the United States saw fit to make a special appeal for the protection of the Mother of God by placing the entire Church of this country under her special protection. In 1846, the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore, made up of twenty-three bishops and representatives of four religious orders, decided to ask the Holy See for the privilege of inserting in the Office and Mass of December 8 the word **Immaculata** and in the Litany of Loreto the invocation, **"Queen, conceived without original sin, pray for us."**

But the Council did not stop there. It selected Mary, Immaculately Conceived, as the patroness of the entire United States and requested the Holy Father to confirm its choice. Therein lies its bid for Marian immortality, for this selection of Mary Immaculate was made eight years before the definition of the dogma. In a letter dated September 15, 1846, Cardinal Franzoni, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, praised the Council for its decree on the Immaculate Conception and enclosed a rescript from Pius IX granting the privileges requested by it.

In the ensuing Pastoral directed by the Council to the clergy and laity of the American Church we read:

"We take this occasion, brethren, to communicate to you the determination, unanimously adopted by us, to place ourselves, and all entrusted to our charge throughout the United States, under the special patronage of the Holy Mother of God, whose Immaculate Conception is venerated by the piety of the faithful throughout the Catholic Church. By the aid of her prayers we entertain the confident hope that we will be strengthened to perform the arduous duties of our ministry, and that you will be enabled to practice the sublime virtues, of which her life presents a most perfect example."

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception had long been nourished and cherished in the Church, and it would probably have been defined

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by the Council of Trent had not that group been forced to concentrate its efforts on the distributing heresies of the day. Now Pius IX decided to concede to the demands of the faithful throughout the world for a formal definition. In 1848, despite political upheavals in Italy, he appointed a special committee of cardinals and theologians to examine the question. And while in exile in Gaeta he sent an encyclical letter (1849) to all of the bishops of the Catholic world bidding them "inform him severally by their own letters what was the belief of their own clergy and flock concerning the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God, and chiefly, what the bishops themselves thought on the subject, or what they desired in relation to it."

At the very first public congregation of the Seventh Council of Baltimore, after hearing the views of the theologians present, the bishops decided to petition the Pope to make it an article of faith that, from the first instant of her existence, her conception in her mother's womb, she was free from the original sin of Adam, since this was the universal belief of the hierarchy, clergy, and faithful of the United States.

Among all the doctrines defined by the Church hardly one caused such a stir in non-Catholic circles as did that of the Immaculate Conception. The Cincinnati **Volksblatt** on January 11, 1855, expressed surprise that the dogma was defined in our "enlightened age." The papal definition naturally gave rise to the ancient charge that Catholics adore Mary, that the Immaculate Conception means that Mary was not conceived of man, but of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine had a strange appeal to Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy, who is said to have posed as the "Immaculate Conception." Her followers insisted that she held the first place in human history, as the woman revealed in the Apocalypse clothed with the sun and crowned with twelve stars: "The Virgin Mary brought forth Jesus, but Mrs. Eddy brought forth a book, **Science and Health.**"

IN 1866 THE AMERICAN HIERARCHY SENT A PETITION TO ROME asking that the feast of the Immaculate Conception be made a holyday of obligation for all the faithful. Two years later the petition was granted and the privilege of transferring the feast to the following Sunday, which had been used up to that time, was taken away.

The impulse given to the piety of the faithful by the definition of the Immaculate Conception and by the appearance of Our Lady to Bernadette at Lourdes, has carried over to our day. The immediate outgrowth was the erection of a host of churches and institutions dedicated to her under this title about 700 such places bear the name of the Immaculate Conception. Yet still, for the most part, we look in vain for Marian writers of international repute in the American field. True, many devotional and

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inspirational works have appeared from time to time, but of most of them might be said what was said by Noyon of Marian literature in general in the half century following the definition, that in general the quality is inferior to the quantity. It is significant that in the bibliography appended to his article on the Immaculate Conception in the **Catholic Encyclopedia**, Holweck does not mention a single American author. However, steps have been taken to remedy this situation in recent years. The organization of the **Mariological Society of America** (1950) has already done much to stimulate interest in Mariology, and the fifth annual meeting of this group in 1954 was devoted to the Immaculate Conception. The **Franciscan National Marian Commission** (1947) and the **Marian Institutes** (1953) of the Marian Library of the University of Dayton, also provide opportunities for continued Marian study. Furthermore, a number of Catholic universities have introduced regular courses in Mariology of late.

THE MARIAN YEAR WILL ALSO SEE THE RESUMPTION OF WORK ON the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. The crypt was built more than twenty-five years ago, and until now has stood as a blight on the American Catholics' reputation for getting things done. When completed, this monument to Mary Immaculate will be one of the world's greatest religious edifices, with a total volume of approximately seven million cubic feet.

For the first two centuries after Our Lady landed in Maryland, there is little data available on devotion to her, but we know that she was there all the while, working in her quiet, unassuming way, preparing the land for the flood of immigrants that was to come, greeting them on their arrival and making them feel at home in a foreign country because she was there. The Councils of Baltimore recognized her as the gracious comforting hostess, and they made sure that she would stay by giving her in exchange for her lost "Dowry" the broad expanse of the United States. This gesture must have pleased her, for she has not failed to shower blessings upon American Catholicism since that time.

The American Catholic's attitude towards Marian devotion may well be summarized in the words of Bishop Chatard of Vincennes, delivered at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore:

"We, I say, may be pardoned for looking on ourselves as a providential people, of the foremost, destined to show, as perhaps none other has done, what Christian civilization and Christian liberty can do with man. To effect this, however, a high ideal must be reached, and the ideal of the highest life of virtue we have in her to whom we are bid direct our eyes as the model and patroness — in Mary Immaculate, Mother of God."



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