



Mary – Immaculate Conception and Assumption

While very little is known of the historical life of Mary, the Mother of God, the Catholic faith has bestowed upon her a prominence befitting her role as a key figure in the life of the Church. This is reflected in two dogmas of the Church that do not have a basis in scripture. A **dogma** is a solemn teaching of the Church carrying the highest authority.

The first dogma concerns Mary's Immaculate Conception and states that from the moment of conception Mary was free from sin. It is important to note that this dogma has nothing to do with her physical conception or the circumstances surrounding it, but is a theological statement that honours Mary's role as the Mother of God. The dogma was promulgated by Pope Pius IX in 1854.

Sin can be thought of as an obstacle that blocks the free-flowing love of God. Through negative choices, a person rejects this offer of unconditional love always and everywhere on offer by God. If Mary can be thought of as an exemplary disciple (SEE: Mary Mother of God), the dogma teaches that Mary is the example of the total giving of oneself, free from the binds of sin, that enables the "birthing" of Jesus in the world today. Mary, the Immaculate Conception, becomes the aspiration for the disciple who strives to give of them self through positive choices that enables life to the full.

The second dogma concerns Mary's assumption into heaven. This dogma was promulgated by Pope Pius XII in 1950 and states that when the course of her life had finished, Mary was taken, body and soul into heaven. The Assumption of Mary is considered a key teaching of the church and its feast day (August 15th) is a holy day of obligation in Australia, requiring Catholics to attend Mass.

In a world of scientific rationalism, the literal interpretation of this dogma sits uncomfortably with many people. However rather than rejecting it on scientific grounds, the person of faith is invited into a deeper understanding of its meaning. To begin with, one can think of heaven not as a place but the reign of God characterized by justice, peace and love. Mary's assumption signifies the example of discipleship Mary provides; to give of herself, body and soul – in other words her totality - not only in her death but throughout her whole life. From the encounter with an angel at the Annunciation when she gave her *fiat* – her "Yes" - through to her grieving place at the foot of the cross, and onto her own death and glorification, Mary exemplifies total surrender and abandonment into the mystery of love. Discipleship invites a similar abandonment of hope and trust into that same mystery, requiring the giving of oneself totally - body and spirit.