



MARIAN CATECHIST APOSTOLATE  
INTERNATIONAL OFFICE  
MEMORANDUM

TO: ALL MEMBERS  
FROM: RAYMOND LEO CARDINAL BURKE, INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR  
SUBJECT: MARY'S SINLESSNESS  
DATE: MAY 1, 2019 – SAINT JOSEPH THE WORKER

**Member Question:** I am a Consecrated Marian Catechist and in need of your assistance in clarifying Church teaching about Our Blessed Mother Mary's sinlessness. Many disagree that Mary "could not" sin. Some say that Mary was exactly the same as Eve before the Fall. They say, that we cannot say, that "Mary **could not** sin" and we cannot say that the "saints in Heaven **cannot** sin," but that we can say that "Mary **would not** sin" and that the saints in Heaven **would not** sin. They believe that if one "**cannot** sin" or "**could not** sin," then one lacks a free will and is nothing more than a puppet. This has caused quite a debate.

Questions about Mary's sinless in Father Hardon's *Basic Catholic Catechism Course* are 3-32, 3-37 and 5-57; in the *Advanced Catholic Catechism Course* 7-63, 7-67.

**Answer:**

Laudetur Iesus Christus!

One of the effects of original sin is that the freedom with which God created man, the freedom of a creature created in God's own image and likeness, is tainted, so that it no longer corresponds to the truth and needs the help of God's grace, so that in a moment of temptation, the soul chooses what is true rather than the falsehood presented by Satan, 'the Father of Lies' (Jn 8, 44). By the singular grace of her Immaculate Conception, the Blessed Virgin Mary was conceived with her freedom intact, with her heart one with the Divine Heart, with her will perfectly conformed to the will of God. She received, in anticipation, the grace of the Redemption, so that no stain of sin touched her soul. For that reason, although she witnessed the temptation to sin and acts of sin, she herself was not subject to concupiscence and could not sin. Her perfect freedom would not permit her to do anything even minimally contrary to the divine will. In this way, her condition, in virtue of the Mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation, is superior to that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were by a special grace exempt from concupiscence, but they were subject to sin, that is, the transgression of the precept of their probation: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2, 16-17). From their sin [original sin], concupiscence which, in the words of the Council of Trent, "originates in and inclines [man] to sin" (Conc. Trid., Sess. V, can. 5) entered the world. The Blessed Virgin Mary, by the grace of the Redemption in which she shared in anticipation, was subject neither to concupiscence nor to sin. I refer you to no. 412 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

There is the tendency to define freedom in terms of choosing between good and evil, and thus to see the Blessed Virgin Mary's perfect freedom as a negation of her freedom. Hence, the claim that the fact that Mary could not sin renders her a robot. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in no. 1732, states: "As long as freedom has not bound itself definitively to its ultimate good which is God, there is the possibility of choosing between good and evil, and thus of growing in perfection or of failing and sinning." In no. 1733, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* continues: "The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to 'the slavery of sin' (Rom 6, 17)." But Mary's heart, in virtue of her Immaculate Conception, was, from the beginning and forever, *bound definitively* to the Divine Heart. Therefore, there could not be in her the movement toward sin, called concupiscence, as Ludwig Ott, in his *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* [Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1974] writes: "It would be incompatible with Mary's fullness of grace and her perfect purity and immaculate state to be subject to motions of inordinate desire" (p. 202).

At the same time, she was not a robot. Her countless acts of love of God and neighbor were free and, therefore, won many merits for the Church, for those who would come to life in her Divine Son, Our Lord. Ludwig Ott writes: "Mary's merits are no more prejudiced by her freedom from concupiscence than are the merits of Christ, since concupiscence is indeed an occasion, but not an indispensable pre-condition of merit. Mary acquired rich merits, not by any struggle against sensual desire, but by her love of God, and by other virtues (faith, humility, obedience)." Ludwig Ott refers us to the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas, III, question 27, no. 3, ad 2. If the Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception, then she was also free from the inclination to sin; she could not sin. I refer you to nos. 491-493 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The Servant of God Father John A. Hardon, S.J., in his book, *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co) writes:

Christ's redemptive merits operated on his mother by anticipation. This preredemption is commonly taught to have consisted in the infusion of sanctifying grace into her soul at the moment of its creation, which was simultaneous with infusion into her body.

Exemption from original sin carried with it two corollary consequences: From the time of her conception, Mary was also free from all motions of concupiscence, and also (on attaining the use of reason) free from every personal sin during the whole of her life.

Like her divine Son, Mary was subject to the ordinary limitations of human nature, except those that involve moral defect. She was therefore free from the effect of inherited sin, which is the unreasoning drive of the appetites (sensual and spiritual), which are irrational precisely because they anticipate the dictate of reason and tend to perdure in spite of reason and free will telling a person that the urge in question is wrong. True, there is no actual sin in concupiscence unless a person consents to an inclination that he knows is morally bad. Nevertheless, concupiscence is incompatible with Mary's fullness of grace because, even without consent, it implies excitation to commit acts that are materially against God's will (pp. 158-159).

Father Hardon continues by indicating how the Virgin Mother's acts are meritorious, making reference to the two principal documents of the Magisterium in the matter: the Council of Trent and Blessed Pope Pius XI's Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* (8 December 1954).

Father Hardon concludes by explaining how the Virgin Mary's incapacity to sin was different from the incapacity to sin of her Divine Son:

Was the Blessed Virgin free from stain because she did not offend God, or because she was impeccable and incapable of sin? The latter is common teaching in Catholic Tradition, while distinguishing it from the impeccability enjoyed by Christ. His may be called *absolute* and derived from the union of his human nature with the divinity. He could not sin because he was God, and God is infinitely holy. Mary could not sin by reason of an inherent quality, which some place midway between the state of souls in the beatific vision and that of our first parents before the fall.

Concretely this quality may be identified with perseverance in grace as regards grave sin, and confirmation in grace for lesser sins. In either case, however, her incapacity for sin differed radically from that of Christ. Where his was based on the fact that he is a divine person, hers was an added prerogative. It was absolutely necessary that he could not sin, since God is sinless. It was a free gift of God's mercy that Mary could not sin, but only because she was protected by divine favor (pp. 159-160).

At the bottom of much of the confusion regarding Mary's incapacity to sin is a catechesis which has failed to teach sufficiently the great mysteries of the cooperation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Redemptive Incarnation. The distinct privileges of the Virgin Mother are not sufficiently understood because her singular place in the work of the Redemption is not taught.

Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke.