Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5:30pm Vigil, 6:30am and 6:30pm Masses – 650 words

At the sixth provincial council of Baltimore in 1846 – a meeting of all the bishops of the United States at that time – the bishops unanimously agreed that our great nation should be placed under the patronage, or special heavenly protection and prayer, of the Mother of God under her title of “the Immaculate Conception”. The following year, the pope gave his own endorsement to their resolution. Thus for almost 175 years now we have enjoyed the particular help and assistance of Immaculate Mary as our country has grown and changed in so many ways. Even still, it would seem we need her intercession now, more than ever!

Pope Pius IX’s approval of our bishops’ decision took place seven years before he solemnly defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. In 1854, in his document Ineffabilis Deus (“The Ineffable God”), he wrote: “We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.”

In pronouncing this dogma, the Holy Father was not introducing any new teaching, but definitively confirming a very ancient one. Christians had always believed that the Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from original sin, in order to make her a fitting mother for the Son of God. Yes, there were theological disputes down through the centuries – most notably, between the Dominicans and Franciscans – but the prevailing belief was that Our Lady was Immaculate. Thus the U.S. bishops chose this title even before it was solemnly defined – for it was what virtually all Catholics believed. The definition of the dogma was a crowning of that belief.

There is another important event connected with devotion to the Immaculate Conception that bears mentioning today. In 1830, in a convent in Paris, the Virgin Mary appeared to Sister Catherine Labouré and gave her the form of a medal that she wanted struck – what has come to be known as the Miraculous Medal. On it, our Blessed Mother’s hands are extended, with rays of grace coming from them down upon the earth. Some of the rays are darkened, to signify the graces we could have if we would but seek them. And then there is the prayer that encircles it: “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us, who have recourse to thee.”

Very soon after people began wearing this medal in honor of the Immaculate Conception, there were widespread reports of answered prayers and other special blessings. Things had been rather bleak in Paris and throughout France until that point, following upon the terrible Revolution and the various Napoleonic regimes. But now there was new hope – and for good reason, for as we heard in the gospel, Mary, having been filled with grace, understood perfectly that nothing was impossible for God. What kind of seeming impossibilities do we see all around us at present? But Our Lady has great confidence that God will bring us through them!

Yes, I think that devotion to Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception will be a great boon for us today, also. If you do not wear her Miraculous Medal, you might put that on your Christmas list and soon begin wearing it (be sure to have the medal blessed by a priest). If you do not pray the short prayer on it, add that to your daily routine. But more than medals and prayers, we would do well regularly to meditate in our hearts about Mary’s response of faith and her great confidence in Almighty God. Things do often seem so dark and bleak – but today, as then, nothing shall be impossible for God.