

Immaculate Conception

Catholics believe all people are sinners, even newborn babies. It's not that they've done anything wrong, babies would make rubbish criminals. But Catholics believe we're all born with what's known as 'original sin', the capacity to disobey God, and do wrong.

In the beginning, humanity and God got along just fine. The Garden of Eden was a great place to live, the rent was cheap, and it was so warm that there was no need to invent clothes. But then the thing with the fruit happened. It was a silly mistake, but it wasn't just Eve who had to go and sit in the naughty corner, it was all her descendants too.

So, according to Catholics we're all born in the state of original sin, and the only way to remedy it is through baptism, a blessing with holy water, to become united with Christ and be accepted as a member of the church.

The Catholic Church teaches that only one person in all of human history was born without original sin, Mary. When the Angel Gabriel popped up one day to have a chat with her, he greeted her by saying, "Hail, full of Grace, the Lord is with you".

Now, the angel's choice of words is important there. He didn't say, "Hail Mary, ooh you've got quite a bit of grace going on there, that's really not bad". He said "full of grace", which the Catholic Church takes to mean being full of God's love, and born without sin, or immaculate.

The Hail Mary echoes the words Gabriel spoke to Mary, and is the most important prayer in Catholic worship.

There was always an amount of debate in Christianity about the Immaculate Conception. Was it really possible for a person to be born without sin? This shouldn't be confused with the question of the Virgin Birth - that's a different argument altogether.

Catholics believe that only someone free from sin would be able to carry and give birth to the Son of God, and in 1854, Pope Pius settled the question, declaring that the idea of Immaculate Conception was officially, and undeniably, true.

So, on December 8 every year, Catholics around the world celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and the Pope visits the Column of the Immaculate Conception in Rome.

Protestants, though, are not so sure about the whole idea of Mary having been born free from original sin, the Immaculate Conception, particularly as there isn't any exact detail about Mary's early life in the Gospels.

Bitesize

We'll never be certain, as Mary didn't really like giving interviews.