

Conception of St. Anne (Immaculate Conception)

St. John Damascene, the Doctor of the Incarnation, tells us that the Feast of the Conception of St. Anne was celebrated in the East in the eighth century and already was ancient at that time. Before the age of the schisms in the Church event the Eastern schismatics accepted this feast, proving that it did exist many centuries in antiquity. In the east, the Feast of St. Ann was entitled by the name of the “Child-begetting of St. Anne” as opposed the name of the feast in the West which entitled it the “Immaculate Conception.”

The Tipikon of St. Sabbas in the year 485 AD mentions the feast and this seems to be the earliest documented evidence for its existence in the Church’s liturgical year. St. John Damascene tells us about the wonder, “Plainly, the virgin birth (of a once sterile mother) was necessary that the road was to be a new thing under the sun and the chief among wonders should be paved by wonders and a gradual ascent should be made from the lower to the more sublime. For the rest, I can advance another higher and more Divine reason. Nature yields before grace and stands irresolute, ceasing to act. Since therefore the Mother of God was to be born a virgin of Anne, nature did not dare to impede the bud of grace but remained devoid of fruit while grace was bring forth its fruit.” (First Sermon on the Nativity of Mary).

This feast is similar on its basic idea to the conceptions of Christ and St. John the Baptist. St. John the Baptist was conceived by St. Elizabeth who was before thought barren. The angel’s announcement to Zachary that she would conceive is analogous to the situation of St. Anne and the news of the conception of the Mother of God to one thought barren — St. Anne! Joachim and Ann were advanced in years like Zachary and Elizabeth. They were disappointed in that they had no children. This was a great disgrace for Jewish women because although the Jews do not recognize Jesus to be the savior, still each Jewish woman hoped to be His mother. St. Anne gave birth to the God Bearer, Mary, and her reproach was turned into joy at such a wonder.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was solemnly defined by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854 stating: “that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted to her by almighty God through the merits of Christ Jesus, Savior of Mankind, was preserved from all stain of original sin is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore must be held firmly and constantly by all faithful Christians.”

The feast has always been celebrated on December 9th in the Eastern European countries. But, because this feast is the Patronal Feast of the United States of America under the title “Immaculate Conception,” the Eastern in this country celebrate the feast on December 8.