

Often, it is said that the story of the National Shrine begins on Jan. 29, 1846, with the publication of an item in the *Lowell Courier Journal* (Massachusetts), which states, “A magnificent Catholic church is to be built at Washington ... after the style of the cathedrals of the Old World.” It would seem however, that the story actually begins somewhat earlier, on Aug. 15, 1790, the Feast of the Assumption, at Lulworth Castle, Dorset, England. On this day and in this place, Rt. Rev. Charles Walmesley, O.S.B., Titular Bishop of Ramatha and Senior Vicar Apostolic of England consecrated John Carroll, S.J., the first bishop of Baltimore.

The burgeoning republic of the United States of America comprised the diocese of Baltimore. The newly ordained bishop was a son of an illustrious family – signers of the Declaration of Independence (first cousin Charles, the only Catholic signer) and the Constitution (his younger brother Daniel). He was a man respected and held in high esteem by those of political importance, having assisted Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Chase in securing the neutrality of Canada during the war of independence at the request of the Continental Congress. As the founder of the American Catholic Hierarchy, Carroll offered true leadership, particularly in matters of Church and State.

Among his initial administrative acts, Bishop Carroll convened the first National Synod of Baltimore (Nov. 7-10, 1791), attended by 22 priests of five nationalities, serving 35 parishes. As per tradition following a council or synod, Carroll prepared a pastoral letter (1792) in which, as in almost all that he wrote, he promoted devotion to Mary, the Mother of God and placed his diocese under her protection. Shortly before his death in 1815, while considering his achievements, Carroll ob-



nation, unanimously adopted by us, to place ourselves, and all entrusted to our charge throughout the United States, under the special patronage of the holy Mother of God, whose immaculate conception is venerated by the piety of the faithful throughout the Catholic church.... To her, then, we commend you, in the confidence that ... she will obtain for us grace and salvation” (*Pastoral Letter*, 1846).

The “determination” of the bishops notwithstanding, this resolution required approval of the Holy See, which Pope Pius IX granted in February 1847. Thereafter, in the public session that closed the provincial councils, after the singing of the *Te Deum*, the cantors stood before the altar and intoned, “*Most Blessed Virgin Mary,*

*conceived without original sin, patroness of these provinces, to you be everlasting honor!*” All present would repeat the intercession and then solemnly

proclaim in song, “*Amen! Amen!*”

As the appeals for papal definition of the doctrine increased, Pius IX issued an encyclical, *Ubi primum* (Feb. 2, 1849), in which he sought not only the counsel of his bishops regarding the “piety and devotion of their flocks towards the Immaculate Conception,” but also their thoughts and desires: “The repeated solicitations of Bishops from various parts of the Church ... have moved his Holiness to address all his colleagues, for counsel in regard to the definition of the doctrine, that the Mother of our Lord was preserved by divine grace from all stain of original sin ... hitherto [this has] been considered as a pious belief ... celebrated during several ages throughout the whole Church.”

During the Seventh Provincial Council at Baltimore, the American hierarchy jointly and resolutely encouraged Pius IX to de-

## Immaculate Conception Definition & Dogma

### A Concise History

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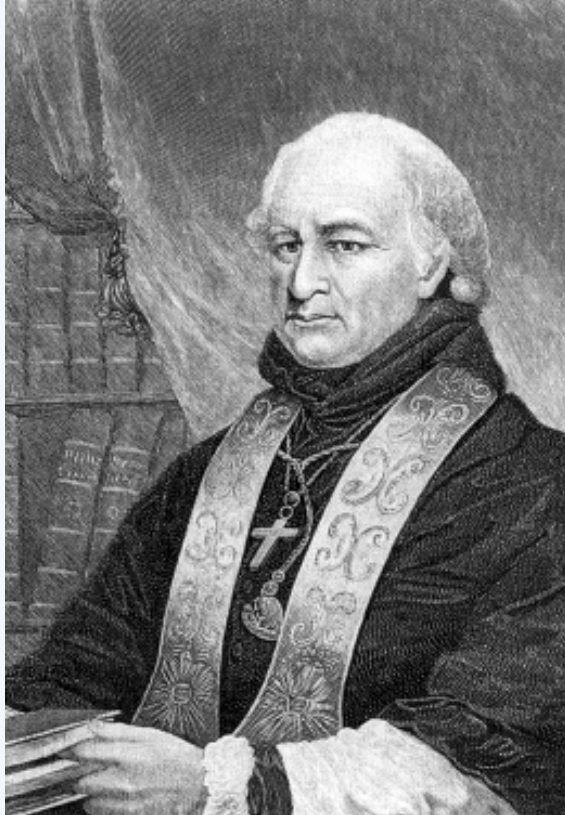
served, “Of those things that give me most consolation at the present moment, one is that I have always been attached to the practice of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary; that I have established it among the people under my care, and placed my diocese under her protection.”

As the nation grew, the formation of new dioceses and the appointment of new bishops mirrored the addition of new states and territories. By 1846, 21 bishops and one archbishop attended the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore, along with their theologians. It was at this Council that the American hierarchy named for the first time, the Blessed Virgin Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception as the Patroness of the United States: “We take this occasion, brethren, to communicate to you the determi-

fine the Immaculate Conception as dogma (*Pastoral Letter*, 1849). Regarding the discussions and debates as to the validity of the doctrine, the bishops stated that those who “assailed the veneration of the Virgin, have easily fallen into the denial of the Divinity of her Son;” that devotion to her “is an outwork of the Church protecting the belief of the divine mystery.”

The response to the Holy Father’s inquiry was voluminous. The Vatican later published these replies in 10 *octavo* volumes commonly known as the *Pareri* (1851-1854). In 1852, a papal commission was appointed and charged with the preparation of the work and the final study necessary to the definition. Two years later, on Dec. 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX brought to an end centuries of inquiry and debate, without the concurrence of an ecumenical council, and defined *ex cathedra* the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The Pontiff stressed that Mary’s sinlessness was not due to her own merits, but truly, by the merits of her son, Jesus: “We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful” (*Ineffabilis Deus*).

Present at the definition were 53 cardinals, 42 archbishops, 98 bishops and three elected bishops. Those representing the United States were Archbish-



In 1792 Bishop John Carroll, S.J. placed the Diocese of Baltimore, which comprised the entire United States, under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

ops John Hughes of New York, Anthony Blanc of New Orleans, and Francis Kenrick of Baltimore; Bishops Michael O’Connor, of Pittsburgh, John Timon, C.M. of Buffalo and John Neumann, C.Ss.R. of Philadelphia. In the general rivalry of patronage that prepared and accompanied the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the young republic, whose survival would soon be tested by a great civil war, held an illustrious and eminent place.

Following a hiatus of more than a decade, the American bishops once again assembled at Baltimore in 1866 and decreed that every diocese throughout the United States would observe the feast of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8, as a holy day of obligation. In 1884, at the Third and final Plenary Council, the bishops placed it among the six feasts of obligation, to which Pope Leo XIII gave papal approbation.

Although the Archbishops of the United States continued to meet annually, such meetings were without canonical status. Consequently, they did not issue pastoral letters. During this time, the American bishops busied themselves with many things, not the least of which was the establishment of a Catholic University. In 1887, with the curricula, faculty, and architecture of the Catholic universities of Europe as their model, the American hierarchy and Holy See established The Catholic University of America, the first pontifical university in an English-speaking country since the Reformation.

*This reflection will be continued in the next issue.*

*See related articles about the 150th anniversary of the Immaculate Conception dogma in the Rector’s Remarks and on the following pages.*



*Ineffabilis Deus*, Bull for the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in consistorial letter (booklet form). Folio with the seal and autograph signature of Pope Pius IX and the autograph signatures of Cardinals Vincent Macchi, Dean of the Sacred College of Cardinals, Bishop of Ostia and Velletri; Marius Mattei, Bishop of Porto and S. Rufina; Constantine Patrizi, Bishop of Albano.