

Friends at Court.

GLEANINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S CALENDAR.

(Written for the N.Z. TABLET.)

December 3, Sunday.—First of Advent.
 " 4, Monday.—St. Peter Chrysologus.
 " 5, Tuesday.—St. Barbara, Virgin and Martyr.
 " 6, Wednesday.—St. Nicholas, Bishop.
 " 7, Thursday.—St. Ambrose, Bishop and Confessor.
 " 8, Friday.—Feast of the Immaculate Conception.
 " 9, Saturday.—St. Eutichianus, Pope and Martyr.

FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY.

'THE woman shall crush the serpent's head.' 'Such was the merciful promise made by God to our first parents when they stood before him in terror and confusion to hear the most just sentence of punishment passed upon them. Heaven was now closed to them and their descendants, and the pit of hell lay open. The guilt and stain of sin, the sting of concupiscence, labour, sickness, and all the ills of life, terminable only by the anguish of death, were henceforth to be their portion and the inheritance of their race. But, through the infinite mercy of God, they had now the consolation of knowing that the day would come when a second Eve, the daughter of her who had brought death into the world, should bring back life—when the child of her who had been overcome by the devil should conquer him in turn, and by bringing into the world the promised Redeemer 'should crush the serpent's head,' in other words, should destroy the power of Satan whose malice had brought ruin to mankind.

The first beginning of the fulfilment of this promise is seen in the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin. Mary, the second Eve, was from the first moment of her existence triumphant over the power of the devil, being by a special privilege preserved from the guilt and stain of original sin and from all motions of concupiscence, that is, the natural inclination to evil which is the consequence of sin. She alone of all mankind was ever pure and spotless—a beautiful and snow-white lily in the midst of unsightly thorns, an enclosed garden into which Satan could never penetrate, but wherein the Tree of Life, Jesus, the Saviour of the world, was to spring forth, bearing the fruit of innumerable souls redeemed from sin and hell.

That Mary was conceived Immaculate has always been the belief of the Church, but it has not always been defined in express words as an article of faith. Indeed, there have been good and holy men who thought it more probable that Mary was conceived like the rest of mankind in the sin of Adam, but was purified in her mother's womb, as we read of St. John the Baptist. This opinion never found favour with the Holy See, the pure fountain of revealed truth. Those who followed it were not indeed condemned as heretics, for the Church had not yet spoken, but they were bidden to be silent and not publicly assert or defend such a doctrine. On the contrary, those who affirmed in word or writing that Mary in her very conception was perfectly pure and spotless, who established confraternities, erected altars and churches or set up statues, pictures, or other works of art in honour of her Immaculate Conception, received the warm approval and blessing of the Vicar of Christ, along with many indulgences and other spiritual favours.

For a long time an ardent desire had prevailed throughout the Church that Mary should not only be loved and honoured by the faithful as ever pure and spotless, but that the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception should be solemnly proclaimed to the world as a necessary article of faith, so that no one could ever call in question this greatest of all her privileges. This universal desire at length found expression in petitions from all parts of the world signed by an innumerable multitude of bishops, priests, and laymen, which went up to the Holy See in humble request that the Vicar of Christ would, by defining the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, satisfy the longing aspirations of the faithful. Whereupon the venerable Pontiff Pius IX., after consulting the Holy Spirit in prayer and fasting, published on December 8, A.D. 1854, the famous Bull in which he declares, as Supreme Teacher and Pastor of the flock of Christ, that the doctrine which teaches that this Blessed Virgin was in her first conception, by a special grace and through the merits of her Divine Son, preserved from all stain of original sin, is a truth revealed by God, which no one can deny without incurring the guilt of heresy.

Since the public definition of the Immaculate Conception the devotion to this mystery, which was always a favourite one with the Saints of God, has become more widely known and deeply impressed in the hearts of the faithful. No one indeed who loves the Blessed Virgin can help rejoicing at this her most glorious privilege.

St. Alphonsus Ligouri tells us that the devotion to this mystery is especially efficacious in enabling us to overcome the dangerous temptations of the flesh; whence he was accustomed to recommend his penitents who were tempted to the sin of impurity to recite daily three Hail Marys in honour of Mary Immaculate. And the Venerable John of Avila assures us that he never found anyone who practised a true devotion to the Immaculate Conception of Mary and did not in a short time obtain the gift of that angelic virtue which renders us so dear to her virginal heart.

'O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee! By thy Sacred Virginity and Immaculate Conception, O most pure Mother and Queen of Virgins, obtain for me purity of soul and body! Amen.'

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