

Immaculate deception

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 16, 1999](#) issue

Knowledge of the finer points of theology is neither irrelevant nor a luxury. Lack of that knowledge can entail great risk and expense. A case in point: Suppose you are a woman capable of conceiving a child. Suppose you read that an insurance company will insure you against "immaculate conception." You fill out the forms and send in the money.

Now we ask why you took out such a policy. Did you read one of those tabloid stories about human parthenogenesis—a report about a woman who not only swears that she did not have sexual intercourse, but who, the tabloid editors claim, could not have? Yet she became pregnant and delivered a child.

If you read the tabloids, you will, like Alice in Wonderland, believe six impossible things before breakfast. You can believe in such parthenogenesis, such virgin birthing, such conception without a male, and still have room for five more impossibles. So you start fearing that this could happen to you, and you will be disgraced, because people who don't read tabloids will wonder where your baby came from.

Or you might have a second reason for buying an insurance policy against immaculate conception. You may misconceive what it represents and think that it refers to a slip in birth control methods. You intend to have sexual intercourse, and have taken measures against conceiving. But knowing that no method is foolproof, you want to be the fool who tries to prove that you were not with a male. The insurance policy, you think, will cover you if your birth control failed. The insurance company, you think, will pay child support and compensate you for the disgrace you think you will suffer.

Does anyone really purchase this kind of insurance? Someone does, according to "Harper's Index" in *Harper's* magazine, which included this item: "Number of virgins who have bought an insurance policy against immaculate conception next year: 10,113."

Jerry Engelbach of Brooklyn tried to clarify just who would be eligible for such insurance in a letter to *Harper's*: "The March *Harper's* Index entry 'Number of virgins who have bought an insurance policy against immaculate conception next year: 10,113' may be misleading. Despite the commonly held conviction that the term 'immaculate conception' refers to conception without sexual intercourse, it actually refers to the conception of the Virgin Mary, who according to Roman Catholic dogma was born with a soul free of original sin. Those 10,113 insured virgins are covered only if they conceive a child who is without original sin. If they thought they could collect for getting pregnant without the fun, they were mistaken."

That's helpful. As *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* reports, the 1854 dogma of the immaculate conception holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary "was, from the first moment of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God . . . preserved from all stain of original sin." The dogma does not have anything to do with conception without sexual intercourse.

So, dear 10,113 virgins, whatever you thought, you probably thought wrong. In fact, immaculate conception had to occur when your mother and father got together. It has to do with whether you came into the world without original sin. And if you did, you would not be worrying or planning.