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IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

JOHN MACQUARRIE

THE ECUMENICAL SOCIETY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

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by John Macquarrie

This paper was delivered at a one-day conference organised by the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 7 October 1978 at the Convent of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart, Regents Park, London. The Reverend John Macquarrie is Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University.

Both before and since it was raised to the status of a formal dogma by Pius IX in 1854, the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception has been the subject of much controversy. In the centuries before the dogma was promulgated, many theologians had opposed belief in the Immaculate Conception. Among them was St. Thomas Aquinas himself. However, when we consider what he says on the subject,¹ we see that he did not deny the sanctification of Mary before her birth and that his difficulty lay to some extent in his theories about the beginnings of a human person, and in particular with his view that animation is subsequent to conception. He rightly held that it is unintelligible that either sin or grace can be attributed to anything but a rational creature, and so Mary could be sanctified only after her animation. We still argue over the question of when a human person comes into being – is it at conception, understood as the union of the spermatozoon and ovum from which the child will develop, or is it only after the implanting of the conceptus in the wall of the womb, or is it at some other time? I mention this to show that the alleged objections of St. Thomas and others to the doctrine turned largely on technical points, and were not intended as a denial of Mary's sanctification at or near the beginning of her life as a human person.

In the decades following the promulgation of the dogma, objections have come from Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant theologians. Vladimir Lossky claims that 'the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is foreign to Eastern tradition, which does not wish to separate the Holy Virgin from the sons of Adam'.² But once again this objection is less formidable than it sounds, for he goes on to claim that sin did in fact find no place in the Virgin, but this was due not to some special privilege in the mode of her conception but to a purifying grace which did not impair her liberty. Many Anglicans who have objected to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception have done so not because they reject its essential teaching but because they think it should not have been proposed as dogma. Thus, in the Anglican-Roman Catholic agreed statement 'Authority in the Church', we read: 'Special difficulties are created by the recent Marian dogmas, because Anglicans doubt the appropriateness, or even the possibility, of defining them as essential to the faith of believers'.³ Nothing is said about the content of the dogmas, and the objection is to their dogmatic form.

Still, it cannot be denied that the objections of some Anglicans would go further than this. Protestant theologians go further still. Karl Barth, though he has many affirmative things to say about Mary, objects to the modern mariological dogmas partly on the grounds that they represent an arbitrary innovation, partly on the grounds that they contradict the principle *sola gratia* by allowing some part to the creature in the work of redemption.⁴ Whether these charges can be sustained must be judged in the light of what follows.

It has become customary nowadays to distinguish between doctrines which constitute the core of Christian faith and those which are more peripheral, or, as it is also expressed, to recognize a hierarchy of truths. This is not perhaps as helpful as it is sometimes supposed to be, for Christian truth is really one, though we express it in a number of doctrines; and because it is really one, all of these doctrines are mutually implicative or coinherent. Nevertheless, we can acknowledge that the doctrine of creation, let us say, is clearly attested in scripture, and that the doctrine of the trinity of God, though not explicitly taught in scripture, belongs to the universal Christian tradition and is implicit in scripture, so that we can say that both of these doctrines would have strong claims to be considered as belonging to the core of Christian truth or as standing high in the hierarchy of truths.

By contrast, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary would seem to be much less securely founded. According to Ludwig Ott's manual of Catholic dogma, 'The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is not explicitly revealed in scripture'.⁵ He goes on to say that 'according to many theologians' it is implicit in a few scripture passages, beginning with the so-called *protevangelium* of Genesis. But it can hardly be denied that the exegesis of these passages is somewhat strained. They could hardly be used as a support for the dogma, and it is only in the light of the dogma itself that retrospectively we might see them as having a measure of symbolic appropriateness. Ott then goes on to say that 'neither the Greek nor the Latin fathers explicitly teach the Immaculate Conception of Mary', but he claims that it is implicit in their teaching about the holiness and purity of Mary and the contrast which they develop between Mary and Eve. It is only in the much later tradition that the doctrine takes definite shape, and here one should perhaps notice that the influence of Christian art has had its effect. This is entirely proper, since dogma is a matter not only of concepts but of images. Velasquez's great picture, 'The Immaculate Conception', surely tells us more about the meaning of the doctrine than many a treatise, for the idealized but entirely human figure of the Virgin, standing on the moon as it passes over the sleeping earth, clothed with the stars and illuminated with a mystic light, teaches a high metaphysical understanding of conception, to which we shall return presently. Still another argument adduced by Ott is based on reason. He expresses it in the formula: *Potuit, deuit, ergo fecit*, which might be translated, 'It was possible, it was fitting, therefore it was done'. This, however, is said to yield no certainty, but only probability.

It might be thought that the case for the dogma, as stated here, is decidedly weak. I think, however, that the appeal to scripture, tradition, development and reason, while appropriate in the case of the major Christian doctrines, is not appropriate in the case of those which stand lower in the hierarchy. The test for such doctrines is to consider whether they form part of the one truth of Christianity, and this in practice means considering whether they are implicates of those doctrines which can be founded on scripture and which have been acknowledged in the universal tradition of the Church. This procedure will show whether these secondary doctrines are, as Barth maintained, innovations and falsifications, or whether they are part of the

fulness of Christian truth, when we try to bring it to maximal expression. Incidentally, while I have referred to mariological doctrine as 'lower in the hierarchy' and as 'secondary', I have deliberately avoided the expression 'peripheral'. Mariology seems rather to be the meeting point for a great many fundamental Christian doctrines, almost like a railway junction where many lines converge and where connections are established. Anthropology, christology, ecclesiology, hamartiology, soteriology – these are among the doctrines which all touch upon mariology. If the dogma of the Immaculate Conception can be established, this will be accomplished by showing that it is an implicate of these other Christian truths. But the mariological doctrine will, in turn, throw new light on the truths from which it has been derived and will also show new connections among them and so will strengthen the coherence of Christian theology. This is one reason for believing that mariology is worthy of study.

The historical and methodological remarks made so far are of a preliminary character, and it is now time to confront the dogma directly, as it was expressed in the words of the constitution *Ineffabilis Deus: Declaramus beatissimam Virginem Mariam in primo instanti suae conceptionis fuisse singulari omnipotentis Dei gratia et privilegio, intuitu meritorum Christi Jesus Salvatoris humani generis, ab omni originalis culpae labe praeservatam immunem*.⁶ 'We declare that the most blessed Virgin Mary in the first moment of her conception was, by the unique grace and privilege of God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ the Saviour of the human race, preserved intact from all stain of original sin.'

The language of the constitution is that of mid-nineteenth century Catholic dogmatic theology, but we must pay attention not so much to the actual formulation as to what Bishop Butler once described as the 'governing intention',⁷ the essential meaning which the words seek to convey but which today we might express differently. The main difference would, I think, be this, that our theology today prefers personal to impersonal categories. If we can open up more clearly the personal meanings involved in the idea of an immaculate conception, then the doctrine will come alive for our minds and in this way too its close connection with some of the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith will become apparent.

Let us begin with the idea of conception itself. We have already noted that some of the earlier controversies and confusions turned on questions about the moment of conception and the moment of animation, and that even today, in discussions about abortion, for example, there are different opinions about the beginnings of a human life. What is important for the doctrine of Immaculate Conception is that we move away from any merely biological understanding of conception. Clearly, of course, Mary was conceived in a biological sense and in the normal way – there was never any suggestion of a virginal conception. But when we consider the theological question, we are not concerned with the biology of conception or with the many different ways in which conception has been understood, in ancient, medieval and modern times. The doctrine of Immaculate Conception is not tied to any theory about how conception takes place, and it was the recognition of this that led to the overcoming of some of the early difficulties with the doctrine.

So I want to define 'conception' for the purposes of this discussion as *the absolute origination of a person*. This is not a biological but a philosophical definition, and it speaks not of the fusion of cells or anything of the sort but of the mystery of the passing into being of a person. The conception of Mary in this philosophical sense can be considered on three levels: her conception in the mind of

God, her conception in the people of Israel, and her conception in the family of Joachim and Anna.

Let us begin then with her conception in the mind of God. Here we come back to that profound metaphysical understanding of Immaculate Conception expressed in the painting of Velasquez. It is expressed too in the portion of scripture that used to be read for the epistle on the feast of the Immaculate Conception: 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made anything, from the beginning. I was set up from eternity, and of old, before the earth was made. The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived' (Prov. 8, 22ff). That last sentence is translated in the Vulgate as *ego jam concepta eram*. The passage referred originally, of course, to wisdom, but it was felt to be fitting to apply it to the Blessed Virgin, just as many other passages in the Old Testament that originally had nothing to do with the Messiah came to be applied to Jesus in Christian interpretation.

'The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived.' This is the ultimate conception of Mary, her conception from eternity in the salvific purposes of God. Not only Mary originates in this ultimate conception. What we are thinking of here is the mystery of election and predestination as it affects the whole human race. In the beginning or even before the beginning, God conceived humanity as his child and his partner. He purposed to bring the human race into loving communion with himself, and he purposed to do this by himself assuming humanity and tabernacling with this people. He must then also have purposed to bring the human race to the moment when it had been so cleared of sin and filled with grace that it would be ready to receive the gift of himself. That moment in the history of humanity was Mary. Even if we did not know Mary's name and knew nothing at all about her history and background, nevertheless if we believed in the doctrines of creation and incarnation, we would have to posit this moment in humanity. There is a sense in which Mary's significance lies not in herself as an individual but as that moment in the spiritual history of mankind. Yet on the other hand we must not allow her individuality to be entirely swallowed up in her universal significance. History is compounded of the universal and the particular together, and its concreteness depends on the particular. When we speak of God's election and predestination, we are thinking not only of the general purposes of his providence but of his infinite care in choosing and calling particular individuals, usually weak and obscure individuals, to be the agents of his purpose. Among the highest of these was Mary, and we are not wrong in believing that long before she was physically conceived in the womb of Anna, she was ontologically conceived and sanctified in the divine purpose, so that we could also apply to her the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah: 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you' (Jer. 1, 5).

No individual exists in a vacuum, but always in a stream of history and in a culture. It is out of this historical and cultural background that the individual is formed. For Mary, this background was Israel, and we now go on to think of her as conceived in the history of Israel. We call Israel the chosen people, because this whole nation was elected by God to a peculiar destiny. God created the human race in his own image and gave to them an original disposition toward righteousness. Sin marred that image, and the original righteousness was perverted through the massive distortions of human life that persist from generation to generation and that have earned the name of original sin. But the human race did not fall into a total depravity, as some theologians have mistakenly taught. Something of the original capacity for righteousness survived and something of the divine grace continued to operate. God was still seeking to bring human beings into the relation with himself

that he had purposed, and, according to the Bible, his way of achieving his purpose was typical of him. He chose or elected or predestined a weak and obscure people. He bound that people to himself through successive covenants, he spoke his word to them through a long line of prophets and teachers. He kindled in them the thirst for righteousness, and encountered them in grace and judgment. It is rather as if the capacity for righteousness which survived in a sinful world and the divine grace by which that righteousness was elicited and sustained became concentrated in this nation of Israel. Its election was not a privilege, but a call to servanthood. God was preparing a people for the moment when it would be ready to receive, not for itself alone but for the whole race, what Newman called 'a higher gift than grace - God's presence and his very self'. Mary was conceived and brought forth by Israel as the culmination of its long history of education in the ways of God. We could say that the sparks of righteousness and grace that had been kindled and nursed in the story of Israel were now ready to burst into flame.

If the ultimate origin of a person is in God and the secondary origin in a history and culture, the proximate origin is in a human family. Conceived in the mind of God, conceived in the history of Israel, Mary was also conceived in the womb of Anna. This is indeed how we most naturally understand conception. But even on this level it is important not to think of conception in merely biological terms. The conception of an animal can be so understood, but not the conception of a human being, for a human being has his proximate origin in the personal relation of the parents, and this is never merely biological. At this point we must turn to the apocryphal *Book of James* or *Protevangelium of James* as it has also been called, a writing perhaps as old as the second century. Even if it is purely legend from the point of view of strict history, it presents an interesting account of the conception of Mary. It is a common story in the literature of Israel - that of a couple who have no children and are now almost past the age for parenthood. The husband Joachim went into the wilderness to fast, and prayed for a child. Meanwhile his wife Anna was making a similar prayer at home. Each of them was visited by an angel who gave assurance that the prayer had been heard. As Joachim returned from the fields, Anna went down and met him at the gate of the city. Now we come to the interesting point, and again it is Christian art that has interpreted the story. Artists have seized on the meeting of Joachim and Anna at the gate as the moment of the Immaculate Conception. A flash of light passes between their eyes, and that symbolizes the beginning of the new life in the womb of Anna. Now these artists were not implying that Mary was conceived without intercourse between her parents - they were not teaching a virginal birth or conception. But they rightly saw that the conception of a child is not primarily a physiological happening, but the loving personal commitment of the parents. Children, unfortunately, are sometimes conceived in drunkenness, sometimes in lust, sometimes by accident, and such children, alas, from the very moment of conception are being warped by the distortions of human sin. If we could imagine a child conceived out of pure love before God, would not such a child be from the very moment of conception - I mean, conceived in the loving desire of the parents for the child, even before they come together in sexual union - would not such a child be from the beginning the recipient of grace? It is no mere sentimentality but simply the recognition that human beings are persons, not animals, that sees the creative moment of conception, whether for good or bad, in the personal relation subsisting between the parents rather than in the biological phenomenon of the union of cells. Even before birth, a child is growing into relation with its mother, and from the beginning of life is becoming one kind of person or another through the relation with other persons.

To sum up the remarks, then, when we talk about the conception of Mary and understand by this her origin as a person and not just her physical beginnings, we

understand this first as her origin in the mind of God in eternity, next in the history of Israel as it moved towards spiritual maturity, and lastly in the loving devotion of her parents, represented in the tradition as faithful to the claims of Jewish piety. So when we read in the constitution of 1854 the words *in primo instanti suae conceptionis* ('in the first moment of her conception'), we do not understand this as the moment in which some physiological event occurred, but as an extended moment which goes back even into the eternity of God.

Having discussed the noun 'conception', I turn next to the adjective 'immaculate'. This introduces the subject of sin, and we must be determined to think of sin also in a personal way. This brings into question the notion of sin as 'stain', which appears in the formulation of the dogma. It is true, of course, that the image of a stain has been used since ancient times for sin, but it is an image which suggests too physical an understanding of sin. One might even say that it is somewhat Manichaean in tendency, as if sin were somehow a substance, or something existing in its own right, rather than essentially a lack or distortion, that is to say, something negative. Incidentally, the objection I am making here would strictly speaking apply also to the use of the adjective 'immaculate', which literally means free from spot or stain. But I think this adjective has been so long associated with Mary's conception that one would not wish to challenge it, and in any case its specific etymological sense is no longer obtrusive. With the rejection of the notion of sin as stain goes also the rejection of any understanding of original sin that would think of it as a kind of hereditary taint, passed along in the genes, as it were. It is, however, astonishing to find Hans Küng saying that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is made 'pointless' because we have turned away from the 'view of the transmission of "original sin" by the act of procreation'.⁸ This is a very superficial judgment, for the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception is far more than just a safeguard against the infection of a hereditary stain.

What then would be a more definitely personal way of understanding sin? I think this is to be found in the concept of alienation. Sin is alienation from God, and this carries with it alienation from one's fellow human beings and even from one's own true nature. Alienation, moreover, has social as well as individual dimensions, and these social dimensions which pervade all human society, persist from generation to generation and weigh upon individuals, constitute original sin. Alienation is nothing in itself. It is rather a lack, the lack of a right relation to God. Thus, when it is claimed that Mary was free of original sin, what is meant is that she did not lack a right relation to God. We must notice, however, that the expression I have used, 'she did not lack', is a double negative and therefore something affirmative in the highest degree. The traditional formulation, using as it did the image of sin as stain, represented Immaculate Conception as itself something negative, and so we get the statement that Mary was 'preserved intact from all stain of original sin'. This is far too negative and passive a way of expressing what is intended. The Immaculate Conception of Mary, like the sinlessness of Jesus Christ, is not a negative idea but a thoroughly positive one. Instead of putting the matter in the negative way of saying that Mary was preserved from stain of sin, we may put it in an affirmative way and say she was preserved in a right relation to God or that she was never without grace. Rather, she was surrounded with grace from her original conception in the mind of God to her actual historical conception in the love of her parents. This interpretation receives support from what Ludwig Ott says about the nature of original sin. 'Original sin', he declares, 'is the deprivation of grace'.⁹ It is, according to the Council of Trent, the 'birth of the soul', and the death of the soul is the absence of supernatural life, that

is, of sanctifying grace. Mary, by contrast, was the recipient of grace from the beginning, in the traditional phrase, she was 'full of grace'. To be filled with grace is to be in the opposite condition from that of original sin. Alienation has been overcome, the channels from God are open, the moment is ripe for incarnation. It is of this moment that Paul spoke: 'When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman . . .' (Gal. 4,4).

These remarks bring us now to consider Mary's place in the central doctrines of incarnation and atonement, and so of her relation to Jesus Christ. At this point a difficulty may arise. If one develops a high mariological doctrine, especially one that includes a doctrine of Immaculate Conception, then is there not a danger of making Christ Himself superfluous? If the human race could be brought in the person of Mary to the point at which original sin had lost its power, was there need of anything or anyone further? Have we not exalted Mary into the place that belongs to Jesus Christ alone, as indeed critics of what is called 'Mariolatry' have consistently claimed?

There are at least four responses that can be made to such a charge.

1. We may first of all ask the counter-question whether anything *less* could be claimed for Mary. She was, after all, the Mother of the Lord, and like all the other matters we have considered, motherhood is to be understood in its full personal sense. It cannot be understood as simply the biological relation of motherhood. The mother is, in her personal relation to her child, the principal formative influence in the formation of his mind and character. If Jesus Christ was to develop in a perfect filial relation to the Father, was it not necessary that his Mother's relation to the heavenly Father should be one of constant grace, certainly not of alienation?
2. Further, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception states explicitly that Mary's 'unique grace and privilege' in this matter (which we may equate with her election and vocation) were granted 'in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race'. Mary does not have her significance in herself, but in her relation to Christ. The latter's saving work, again, reaches backward in time as well as forward. So Mary is subordinate to her Son. She is the God-bearer, fully human. He is the God-man, fully human and fully divine.
3. I think this distinction becomes clearer when we consider the different kinds of righteousness that we see in Mary and Jesus. Mary's righteousness is faithful obedience to God, summed up in the famous words, 'Be it unto me according to thy word' (Lk. 1, 38). This perfected the old righteousness of obedience, and reversed that history of disobedience which is also the history of sin. Jesus too was faithful in his obedience to the Father, but he brought to light a creative innovating righteousness that opened up new spiritual horizons. The difference between the two has been very well brought out by John de Satgé. Recalling how the gospels depict Jesus as walking out in front of the disciples, he writes: 'We cannot fully identify with Jesus. He remains the one who strides out ahead of his disciples . . . But it is not so with Mary'.¹⁰
4. The last point I want to make concerns the charge made by Barth and others that the mariological dogmas infringe the principle of *sola gratia*. Perhaps it should first of all be said that this principle must not be understood in any way that would reduce the human being to a mere puppet, and this has been a constant danger in the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition. Men and women cannot be saved from sin without their consent, and there is this plain truth in a doctrine of synergism. It is the human consent and cooperation with God in

the work of salvation that finds expression in the application to Mary of the title *Co-redemptrix*. I think myself that this title suggests too much and obscures the fact that the human role is always no more than response to the divine initiative. But then is it not precisely the doctrine of Immaculate Conception that prevents such an exaggeration in the case of Mary, for that doctrine teaches that divine grace was there from the very first (prevenient) and that Mary's place is due not to anything of her own but to the gracious election that looks toward the incarnation of the Son?

No doubt it is possible to be a good Christian without making any explicit affirmation of the Immaculate Conception. For many centuries, indeed, there was no such explicit affirmation. No doubt too there are misleading ways of formulating the doctrine, and these call for critical scrutiny. But I think that its essential truth, its 'governing intention', is a clear implicate of basic Christian doctrines which we all accept. Immaculate Conception therefore is neither innovative, perverse or pointless, as some of its opponents have claimed, but is yet another precious insight into the one fundamental truth of God in Christ.

Notes.

1. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, q. 27.
2. V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p.140.
3. 'Authority in the Church', p.20.
4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 138ff.
5. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p.200.
6. H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, No. 1641.
7. B.C. Butler, *The Tablet*, 5 July 1975, p. 624.
8. Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, p.454.
9. Ott, op. cit., p.110.
10. J. de Satgé, *Mary and the Christian Gospel*, p.51.