The Seal of Orthodoxy': Mary and the Heart of Christian Doctrine

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Granted, it is not always easy these days to say with complete clarity what the centre and focus of 'orthodoxy' are; but the point of having such a concept in the first place is that Christians should be recognizable to each other, that they should be able to talk to each other in the same language, whatever local dialects may spring up. At the deeper level, the assurance that there is such a language at the centre, and that it remains intelligible across some pretty formidable barriers of history and culture, reinforces the sense that Christian discourse continues to wrestle with the same obstinate reality it displays its concern with an abiding truth, rather than just what makes immediate sense in any particular here and now. The idea of orthodoxy, so far from being a tiresome restriction on what we can say, ought to be an opening out on to a perspective always larger than what I, as an individual, or even we as a contemporary community can grasp and cope with. It points us into a new and fuller world whose patterns are determined by the mysterious action of God in our history; and it invites us to find how the patterns of our own lives may be woven in with these and opened up to the full scope of God's loving act.

The idea of orthodoxy, then, is inextricably linked to the idea of holiness. Not (God knows) that right belief makes you holy; 30 seconds' reflection will disabuse you of any such nonsense. But the idea of an orthodox faith makes no sense unless it is about the conditions that make it possible to live a holy life and the criteria by which Christians recognize this or that life as holy. Adhering to orthodoxy is certainly a matter of honouring truth; but truth and life are inseparable in our faith, and

doctrinal truth is discovered in our history *as* people discover what newness of life in Christ is. Orthodox teaching is teaching that invokes and evokes (it is better not to say 'describes', as that might suggest too mechanical an operation) the sort of God who makes possible the life that Christians know in the communion of the Holy Spirit. When this newness of life becomes obscured, the energy of doctrinal commitment and the clarity of doctrinal understanding weaken; and when insistence upon exactitude of doctrine as an end in itself obscures the connection with renewed life in Christ, the life of the worshipping community becomes 'thinner' in texture, more and more dependent upon the chances of subjectivity and the shifts of cultural fashion. The great and lasting revivals of Christian spiritual seriousness (the monastic revival of the 12th century, the Reformation, the new religious movements associated with Teresa of Avila or Ignatius Loyola, the Methodist revival in England and Wales, the early days of the ecumenical movement in our century) have all been occasions for the renewal of doctrinal depth and passion for the rediscovery of the dense and vital texture of credal truth. Our contemporary difficulties over some doctrinal issues need to be put into this perspective: if we are bored or uncomprehending about aspects of our doctrinal tradition, it just might be because we have lost certain spiritual skills; and if our worship and spirituality feels shallow and frustrating, we may need to look again at how to restore its grounding in a richer theological language. Chickens and eggs.

But these are very large issues that need more sustained work than a short essay can offer; the salient point is simply to try and answer the question of why we might care at all about locating Mary within a theological schema. It is more than a matter of intellectual tidiness, as I hope will be obvious. But what are the central features of this schema, the faith set out in the Holy Scriptures and Catholic creeds and historic formularies, to use the familiar Anglican phraseology? Briefly: that we believe in a God whose eternal being is constituted by the relation of three distinct and interdependent subsistent realities (a bit misleadingly called 'persons' for short); that one of these realities, one moment or dimension of the eternal relation, is embodied as

completely as possible in the entire human life of Jesus of Nazareth, so that the way the eternal 'person' relates to its source is exactly the way the earthly Jesus relates to this source (as Son to Father or, more abstractly, as mind itself to active intelligence or, more metaphorically, as stream to spring); and that through this embodiment of the eternal Son or Word, the third 'moment' in the divine life becomes newly active in the world, bringing to life in those who unite themselves to Jesus Christ a relation like his to his divine source, so that we too, in dependence upon him, can pray, 'Abba, Father'. This process of growth in the Spirit is bound up with the symbolic actions Christians perform in the belief that these actions will open us up more and more fully, body and spirit, to the power of renewal; the shape of Christ's life becomes naturalized in us through the sacraments – which are always the Spirit's work before they are our activity.

Now, pivotal in all this is the second point in the schema, the entry of God the Word into our world as a concrete, historical agent. The eternal action of God streaming out from the eternal source and reflecting back to it an eternal glory and love, the action which theology calls the generation of the Son from the Father and the Son's eternal self-offering of love to the Father – this is translated into human terms: it becomes not simply an eternal truth about God but a series of events in our world. The theology of the early centuries wrestled painfully and at enormous length with how to say all this without making Jesus either more or less than human as we are human, and without ascribing to God a process of change that would compromise God's completely self-subsistent life. (God doesn't need us in order to be God, and God doesn't belong inside a system of actions and reactions, since he is pure activity in himself.) The precariously balanced statement of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 insisted that Christ be spoken of as *complete* in respect of both humanity and divinity; the theology of both East and West in the centuries that followed spelled out further how this could be said without contradiction and without dehumanizing Jesus. If Mary belongs at the heart of such a doctrinal schema, then, it must be because something about her involvement in the human

translation of divine relations illuminates and secures the sense of that double completeness that the Council defined. If this can be teased out, we may understand why a proper theological evaluation of Mary is a crucial part of expounding the truth about God in Christ as the orthodox faith receives it.

If we begin to reflect upon Mary's relation to the complete *humanity* of Jesus, there are some very obvious leads to follow. Humanity exists in time and growth, and so it always has in it elements of dependence. We don't all at once turn into the people we're going to be and, in the interval, we need the input of others to become ourselves. Clearly then, for Jesus to become himself, he needed other human beings 'making him human', contributing their identity to the making of his identity. Jesus is the Word Incarnate only as a human being in a *context*; for him to be uniquely the Word of God in the human world, a range of conditions in that human world must be there. He is only the Word Incarnate as a Jew, for instance – as someone who knows God through the inheritance of *this* unique history of faith and suffering and exile and hope; as someone already living in a covenant relationship with God. Or again, from a different perspective, he is only the Word Incarnate with his disciples, as the focus of a community he shapes. He is himself *as* the one followed, heard, received (and betrayed) by the Twelve. Here is Austin Farrer on the subject, memorable as always:

> Humanity is a social fact: we need other men, to be human ourselves. What is our mind, but a dialogue with the thought of our contemporaries or predecessors? And what is our moral being, but a complex of relationships? ... Have you reflected that Jesus was that Jesus because of Mary and Joseph and the village rabbi, a man to us unknown: above all because of the disciples to whom he gave himself and the poor people to whose need he ministered? But for these people, he would have been another Jesus. To be a man, he must have them, and to continue a man (as he still indeed is) he must retain them.
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> (*A Celebration of Faith*, pp.89–90)

Farrer mentions Mary and Joseph; and it should be clear that those *primary* relations that shape our human character – relations with parents – are of exceptional importance. What Jesus, humanly speaking, grew up into was made possible by his closest human contacts; so that what he is able to give God through his human will and understanding is what is given to his developing humanity by those who first nurture him. If Jesus is able to live in a way that means that all his dealings are, without obstacle, open to God, this must (in the ordinary processes of human development) be enabled by what is given to him by the first human other he encounters. And that first human other is Mary. At the foundation of Jesus' historical humanity lie his relations with his parents but, more particularly, with Mary; hers is the first human face he will in any real sense be aware of. What he sees there is crucial to how he sees God.

If we ignore Mary at this point, if we shrug our shoulders and say that it doesn't much matter what sort of person Mary was, we deny the real humanity of Our Lord, a humanity to which other humanities necessarily contribute. There was once a prevailing style of piety and theology so nervous of saying anything about the human development of Christ, for fear of reducing him to a mere fallible mortal, that it ended up with a Jesus so devoid of human psychological depth as to sound like an automaton. I hope we have got a bit beyond that (though we need to be beware of the opposite peril of blithely assuming we can speculate about the details of Jesus' psychology so as to present him as the prototype of the well-integrated modern subject; if anything, I find this even more depressing . . .); and if we have, then we need simply to acknowledge that Jesus *learned* how to be human. If the humanity he learned was exceptional, the conditions of that learning must have been in some way exceptional. And Mary must be at the centre of that exceptional situation.

I am cautions about rushing to conclusions concerning Mary's preservation from all sin and too readily endorsing the doctrine of her immaculate conception (a distinctively Western teaching with a controverted history, depending heavily on one specific view of original sin); but the instinct behind the doctrine seems to me intelligible enough. Mary so lives in relation to God and

others – including her son – that she makes her son uniquely free for God and for others. Her *own* freedom, her own holiness, is part of how God becomes human, human in the real time of the human world, the time in which we grow and learn. We must also say something very similar about all that stands behind Mary, picking up the language of some of our hymnody about Mary as 'daughter of Israel', the one in whom the convenantal calling of God's people comes to fulfilment. *She* is who she is as a Jew – and as a peasant in an occupied country, a woman speaking for those poor and hungry whose voice is raised in the 'Magnificat'. That human reality of poverty and exclusion is also part of what makes Mary Mary – and so of what makes Jesus Jesus. But in all this, the mystery and uncertainty of human freedom is still at work (which is one reason for my caution over the immaculate conception): God brings about his purpose of incarnation by that completely obscure weaving together of his will and human wills that makes way for him in this world of contingency. The role of Mary is not, then, just the free consent to the angel's message at the Annunciation; it is all the diverse ways in which her freedom makes room for God, throughout her life, in such a way that this freedom makes possible the humanity of her son. And it is this freedom in turn, developing through the circumstances of being a Jew and a person of no social or political weight, and a member of a subject people, that so works for God; behind Mary's life is the chaos of human freedom for good and evil that produces both Jewish faithfulness and the sins of aggression, war and occupation. In all this, to borrow Kant's famous dictum, God writes straight with crooked lines.

Taking Jesus' historical humanity seriously, then, obliges us to take Mary seriously. But all that has been said so far doesn't quite take us to the heart of the mystery. It *could* be expressed just by saying that Mary is an extremely marked case of all the relational factors that make Jesus who he is. And it could be misunderstood as suggesting that Mary makes possible a humanity of such high quality that we call it divine – which is emphatically *not* what the orthodox doctrine is claiming! We believe that Christ's entire human existence, from the moment

of conception is the presence, action and communication of God. Jesus doesn't become so exceptionally holy by the processes of his human learning and discovering that he is promoted to Godhead. Mary doesn't make Jesus God by being a superlatively good mother. The theological mystery here is that Jesus really does grow and learn as a human being; yet that maturation is a constant bringing to light, bringing to particular life, something that is *already* real at the centre of his being, that is more than just a human psyche – the given, abiding presence of God the Word, the real relation of divine love to divine love that is eternal in heaven. There it is at the root of his identity; all he does and experiences as a human subject will be the out-working and translating of this reality, this divine filiation. Mary does not enable the Word to be God, or Jesus to become divine; she enables a humanity in which there is no obstacle for the divine to be active and self-expressive.

This point is made in a rather different way by an American Protestant theologian writing about the belief in Jesus' virginal conception. It is a belief, he says, that expresses the Christian's refusal to accept

> that the life of Jesus is ultimately subject to any other life . . . With the Resurrection the proclamation is that all things are now subject to his hands, and the birth as well as the passion and death of Jesus are now seen in this light. Here is said to be the one birth and death of a human subject to which all other human births and deaths are subject.
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> (Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit. A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, p.152).

The entire event of Jesus' earthly life expresses the total freedom of God, and the affirmation of God's freedom at work in the very conception of Jesus makes the point dramatically. As Morse goes on to say, it also underlines our belief that the working of the Holy Spirit is not accessible to the documentations of human history. The *fact* of Jesus as the one human life that overcomes death and determines the new limits of human existence must not depend on any process that we can observe or analyse. It is, in

the terms already used, the expression of a relational reality of divine love that is always there before us.

Morse does not have much to say specificially about Mary; but the implication of what he says is fairly clear as we turn back to consider again the character of Mary's free response to God. I said a little while ago that her role was more than that of freely consenting to the angel, but was something sustained in all her life. But we had better not forget what the assent to the angel means: there is a specific act in which she receives into herself a reality quite independent of her. She is open to the action of God the Word to so profoundly that 'what is to be born of her', in the Lucan phrase, will be wholly suffused with that action and that life which lives in eternity with the Father. Her continuing discipleship in her own life and death is central to Jesus being humanly what he was (and is), to Jesus being a human personality with the freedom to allow God to speak in all his acts and words. But the God who speaks in Jesus is one who has already bound himself to that human life in the unparalleled closeness of the relationship theologians call the hypostatic union – the relationship that constitutes God the Word the foundation of the specific existence of Jesus in the first place. Mary's nurturing love, however deep and faithful, could of itself do no more than foster another life of extraordinary human holiness; but the incarnation means more than this. The life that is born of Mary is a life of unique potential from the moment of conception because it is the life that is directly sustained by the Word, the life taken by the divine Son in order to create in the human world a perfect enactment of the eternal relationship of the second to the first person of the Trinity which, in turn, is made accessible to human beings by the gift of the Spirit. In brief, Mary receives the creative act of the Word before her work begins of the formation of this human identity over time. The paradoxes of grace and freedom are, of course, especially acute here: the interweaving of the sovereign freedom of God, of the contingent freedom of Mary in relation to God, and of the freedom of Jesus, shaped by the contingencies of his mother's responses to God and by all the rest of the changes and chances of the history into which he comes – all this defies tidy

statement. To speak of the 'miracle' of incarnation is not primarily to identify a break in the natural order, but to point to the utterly contingent and free, yet utterly congruent and 'necessary' coming together of these different orders of liberty.

But I think we can and must go a little further here. Mary receives the Word of God, according to Scripture, simply by saying yes to God's promise that she will bear a son. Her assent is an assent to *nothing but* the gift of God's act as the foundation for the new life she will carry in her womb. The virginal conception has become a controversial matter these days, and few seem interested in defending it in strictly theological terms; I suspect this is a failure of nerve or imagination. The affirmation that Jesus comes to be in the world by the pure gift of God entails that Mary has to say yes to God without any worldly support or guarantee; she has to exercise a wholly 'dark' faith, believing the promise of God's gift without anything to support or interpret it ('How can this be?'). We lose something of great significance if we regard the narratives of the virginal conception as an embarrassing extra to the 'real' doctrine of the incarnation. I don't say that belief in the incarnation is not possible without belief in the virginal conception, or that stringent tests should be applied to ensure that all Christian pastors and teachers purport to believe it; only that at the very least we need to wonder whether there are aspects of the full richness of the doctrine that can only be explored by taking seriously these stories. J.N. Figgis, in an article on 'Modernism versus Modernity' written in 1913/1914 and published as an appendix to *The Fellowship of the Mystery*, describes movingly his rediscovery of belief in the virginal conception over many years.

> Freedom ... was seen to involve far more than had been thought. That notion of development which made miracles impossible was seen to be mechanical; the immanental philosophy was seen to be, if pushed to the extreme, a Pantheism identifying God and the World. So the glorious liberty of the children of God seemed given; and all the world grew younger day by day, as it does still'. (p.295).

Something about the freedom of God and the freedom of human beings seems to be encoded here in this belief; something too, I have proposed, about Mary's reception in darkness of the Word's full action, which has things to say to all believers about receiving the Word and the cost of it.

The doctrine of the incarnation states that there is no moment of Jesus' life when he is not the Word incarnate; it also states that he is not Word incarnate in virtue of an overruling of human liberty – his or anyone else's – and that the presence of divine action in his action is pure gift, not a reward for outstanding holiness, and thus present before his active life begins. What kind of event could hold or express all this? The narrative of the virginal conception suggests that the answer is this: the absolute welcome of the Creator by a creature in the darkness of a totally unsupported faith, such that the creative freedom of God the Word acts to establish an identity that rests on grace alone, the new life that is Jesus, 'allowed' to exist by Mary's free assent to the angel, nurtured into actual historical life by Mary's free exercise of holiness.

Critical issues about the gospel story remain; so too does the legitimate anxiety that the unique mode of conception somehow detracts from the integral humanity of Jesus. On the former, I can say no more than that these questions are not going to be soluble by historical investigation, and that no amount of apologetic will deliver proof positive of the claim about Mary's virginity. Sara Maitland observes acidly in her delightful book *A Big-Enough God* (p.140), that part of our problem here is a refusal to read imaginatively. She reports a conversation with a priest about the foundations of belief in the virginal conception: 'He said, not unreasonably, that I was cheating. I said I was being imaginative. He said that imagination only distorted the text. I said that they were imaginative texts to start with, so how could imagination distort them?' What if – the question seems to be – the only way of saying certain things really *is* this story? What if the only way of enacting the mystery was the unimaginable event of grace to which it points? What if? This is in fact how the doctrine of the incarnation is related to us in our foundational texts; what if this is how we also must continue to relate it, whatever

uncertainties will always surround its proveable foundation in history? If we do so relate it, it seems that insight follows; which may make it worth relating. The idea that there might be a serious theological alternative that captured the same significant complex of concerns would need a good deal of argument before it looked to be worth accepting. Austin Farrer discusses just this possibility in a correspondence, part of which was published by his biographer in 1985 (*A Hawk Among Sparrows: A Biography of Austin Farrer*, by Philip Curtis pp. 242–4). Farrer's correspondent had suggested that Jesus was born in the 'ordinary' course of nature, but that the intercourse of Mary and Joseph took place when both were ecstatically inspired by the Spirit. This would allow the special character of the event to be comparable to the transfiguration – a glorifying, not a bypassing of the processes of the physical world. Farrer does not believe that anything significant is contributed by such a suggestion: it may well be possible to hold an orthodox faith about the incarnation without the virginal conception, but this particular proposal falls between two stools. Farrer's implicit conclusion is, I think, that if we are going to ascribe any special character to Jesus' conception, no modern suggestion is going to make life any easier for the believer than it would be in the light of the actual canonical narrative. This seems to me correct; once the principle of a real supranatural initiative is granted (even in response to the joint spiritual openness of Mary and Joseph), the main point is conceded.

What of the objection that belief in the virginal conception fatally compromises the true or full humanity of Christ? This becomes a problem if we assume that having a really human history must involve being conceived according to the natural generative process. It isn't completely clear that this has to be granted. If Jesus is *perceived* as human, enters into the lives of other human beings as human, shares fully what a human psychology and physiology are open to, including pain, subjective doubt or uncertainty and ignorance about contingent matters of fact, and exists as an embodied person whose corporeal reality is exactly the same in character as our own, what does the natural generative process add to a claim that Jesus shares our nature in every respect of significance? It is obviously impossible

for Jesus to share every *possible* human condition (old age, parenthood, blindness and so on): the difficult question is whether sharing the characteristic of having been born as a result of sexual intercourse, or at least (with modern biotechnology suggesting a refinement of this) of the fertilization of an ovum by sperm provided by a male, is essential to any claim about sharing human nature. Theology has traditionally responded by distinguishing between the 'what' of Jesus' humanity and the 'how' of its coming-to-be, arguing (with Maximus the Confessor) that the answer to the former does not foreclose the answer to the latter – not least on the interesting ground that in the trinitarian life Father, Son and Spirit have different modes of origination, yet are identical in nature. Certainly no claim has ever seriously been entertained that the origin of Jesus' historical existence lay in any other event than the fertilizing of an ovum; notions of a kind of disembodied passage through Mary, bypassing the natural process entirely, did not find favour in the early Church. The objection would need to argue conclusively that virginal conception necessarily represented a deficiency in the concrete humanity such as to vitiate any claim for Christ's solidarity with us. If that claim still holds in every respect affecting the existence of Jesus as a distinct human subject, if, that is, it is still a claim that from the moment of conception Jesus is unequivocally on the same footing as we are, yet also wholly transparent to the life of God the Word, I don't think the objection can be conclusive. To borrow the language of patristic theology again, every aspect of human existence that needs to be touched, healed and transfigured by the incarnation is included in what we say about the existence of Jesus as a distinct being whose life begins at conception; and this is not necessarily affected by how we settle the question of the mode of the conception.

I see no quick end to the debate on the virginal conception as an issue in the critical study of the gospel narratives. My goal here has been simply to look at what those narratives might suggest for our understanding of what newness of life in Christ involves. The chief point is that, in addition to the obvious truth that Mary must have a central and crucial role in opening the way for Jesus

to be humanly who he is, Mary also embodies a crucial truth about our response to God in Christ. As already stated, she says yes to the living and eternal reality of God's Word in the absence of any worldly assurance or foundation. And in the life in Christ, this is the point to which, in some way or another, we are all drawn – the point of meeting God *as* God and for God's sake, with all our worldly supports taken away and the eyes of understanding darkened. When Mary says yes to the angel, she says yes to God as God – not as one who stands in a system of causes and results, but as the wholly free and wholly mysterious action that is at work in every moment of the universe's existence, and so as the one who can be captured by no identification with any one aspect of the world. Mary's unimaginably complete yes to God as God is what makes possible the action of God as God within the confines of the natural and historical world in a uniquely direct way – as the animating, activating source of a human individual, created by an act of drastic new beginning, by pure divine gift. And all this, not as a violent intrusion into the fabric of created reality, but by the supreme exercise of the highest human freedom, the freedom to empty oneself before the presence of Divine love.

Of course, we learn God from one another; the possibilities of understanding God that mould our faith are bound in with our context – which is why we can speak of Mary as daughter of Israel, and, in turn, of Mary shaping the human faith of Jesus as it evolves in an historical story. But what we learn draws us to a fuller and infinitely harder knowledge of God: the knowledge of the sheer liberty of God's transcendence, God's *glory*, which happens when all expectations, all argument and evidence, all props for faith give way to an encounter in nakedness and darkness. Many spiritual writers have compared the generation of the Word in the human spirit in darkness and unknowing with the conception of Christ in the womb of Mary. When the human self is still, dispossessed and unprotected by image or idea, the Word is free to enter. If the Word is literally and materially born from Mary's consent to 'God as God', we may well reflect not simply on her faith but on the utter darkness of that faith, so complete is her will to say yes to nothing but God.

To put side by side Mary's role as standing for the whole pattern of human dependence that shapes Jesus' identity, and Mary's darkness of self-giving faith, is to be reminded of the two dimensions of human sanctity as revealed in her and her son. There is no holiness without dependence, without taking on and assenting to the complex world that makes me who I am; no holiness for an individual seeking simple autonomy. Accepting that involves me in a profound letting-go of one of the most powerful forces opposing my healing – the illusion of my self-sufficiency. As I learn through my human relationships to assent to this letting-go, I am being prepared for the central and basic act of letting-go which is my nakedness before God as God. The highest act of our freedom becomes this nakedness. This is why St John of the Cross can say that Jesus, immobilized on the cross, surrendered totally to the Father, is more active than at any other point in his incarnate life. This is why we say that Mary's yes to the annunciation is the supreme moment of human welcome to the actuality of God in the form of the new creation that is Jesus, a welcome wholly independent of assurance, proof and ground. 'How can this be?' asks Mary; the answer is simply that the power of the Most High will do what is promised.

As we look at the relation of Mary and her son, we may understand just a little more of what God asks of us if we are willing to take seriously the pattern of orthodox faith we have received. Because of Christ, we are both summoned and enabled to walk with Christ to his cross and resurrection, to the nakedness of faith in the face of the nakedness of God's reality. The gradual formation in us of the likeness of Christ by the communion of believers and the whole mysterious complex of human lives and influences around, is moving us towards this end: the birth, the painful birth, of the eternal Word which comes when we are dispossessed enough to welcome God without reserve and without reassurance. If in some measure we are made free for this, we enter into the new life in which the divine energy lives freely in us: the saint's habitual experience of grace is an analogue, no more, but no less, of the perfect union of the divine and the human in Jesus. This is the orthodox faith; and it finds its lifeblood in the mystery summed up in Mary's yes, in her love-in-

darkness. Orthodoxy's lifeblood is here, just as – literally – Christ's lifeblood begins here.

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