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THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

A Search for Convergence

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Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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Fr Yarnold. At the 1984 Congress of the ESBVM, Bishop Kallistos gave an address entitled 'The Sanctity and Glory of the Mother of God: Orthodox Approaches' (*The Way*, Supplement 51, Autumn 1984, pp 79-96). The Bishop's aim was to explain how two Marian doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, namely, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, appear to Orthodox eyes. Those who heard or have read his paper will have been struck by its irenic approach. 'Incomparably more important than any differences', he concluded, 'are the things that we share in common' (p 94).

It is our purpose today to continue together the consideration which Bishop Kallistos gave then to the first of those two dogmas. It may be helpful if at the outset we remind ourselves of the terms in which that dogma was defined in 1854. In what Roman Catholics believe to be an *ex cathedra*, infallible act, Pope Pius IX proclaimed that it was a divinely revealed doctrine that:

the Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, was preserved immune from all stain of original fault by an unparalleled (*singulari*) grace and privilege of almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race (Denzinger-Schönmetzer 2803).

Bishop Kallistos affirmed that both East and West 'agree in regarding the Virgin as "most pure", as enjoying a special election and sanctification from the first moment of her existence'. For an Orthodox answer to the question whether the Virgin Mary was exempt from original sin, the Bishop quoted Serge Bulgakov:

The force of original sin, which varies generally from man to man, is in her case reduced to the point of a mere possibility, never to be actualized. In other words, the Blessed Virgin knows no *personal* sin; she was manifestly sanctified by the Holy Ghost from the very first moment of her conception (p 88).

Nevertheless the Orthodox tradition has been far from happy with the dogma as defined by Pius IX. Bishop Kallistos in his paper indicated two of the main objections which Eastern writers have felt obliged to raise in connection with the definition. I shall ask him to expound them in a moment.

We have called this session 'a search for convergence', and we have chosen these words carefully. We are not engaging in a debate as to which of our two traditions is right. Our purpose is to see if we can discover further agreement between our traditions in connection with these two problems which Bishop Kallistos will now explain to us.

Bishop Kallistos. 'I'm looking forward to the disputation', someone said to me as I made my way here; and another added, 'Will you be burning any heretics?'. I hope this morning they will both be disappointed. For, as Father Edward has just explained, the aim of our discussion is not confrontation but convergence. The point at issue is

significant but limited. It involves matters of genuine importance, but I believe that our two traditions, the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox, are not so far apart on the issue as is often thought - at any rate by many on the Orthodox side.

Orthodox and Catholics agree that the Mother of God was free from *actual* or *personal* sin. Was she also free from all taint of *original* sin? The definition of 1854, as we have just heard, commits all to affirming that she was. Almost all Orthodox, on the other hand, affirm that she was not.

A point that we should keep in mind is that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception only emerged very slowly in the West. During much of the Middle Ages - for example, from the twelfth to the fourteenth century - there was no agreed position on the matter. The doctrine was in fact denied by St Bernard, St Albert the Great, St Bonaventura and St Thomas Aquinas. It is probably true to say that it was not generally accepted in the Roman Catholic Church until the late sixteenth century. Thus it was not clearly and unambiguously affirmed on the Western side until after the schism between East and West. The doctrine is a specifically Western development, in which the Orthodox East has not been directly involved. It is significant that, at the reunion Council of Ferrara/Florance (1438-9) during the course of eighteen months of discussion, nothing was said about the Immaculate Conception. It had not yet become a definite cause for controversy between the two sides.

Although isolated Orthodox voices were raised against the doctrine as early as the fourteenth century, it was not until the seventeenth century that the criticisms became at all widespread. From this time onwards the normal Orthodox view is that the Blessed Virgin, while altogether free from actual sin, was subject to the effects of original sin, like the rest of humankind. But this was not the universal opinion. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a number of Orthodox who in effect upheld the doctrine. Since 1854 very few have done so. But I believe that, even today, if an Orthodox chose to believe the doctrine, he or she would not be termed a heretic for so doing. It remains in the last resort an open question for us Orthodox. We are not to exaggerate the degree to which Orthodoxy is monolithic.

In fact, however, the overwhelming majority of Orthodox deny the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and this we do mainly for two reasons. The first concerns the *continuity of sacred history*. We feel unhappy about the doctrine because, so it seems to us, it separates the Blessed Virgin Mary from St John the Baptist and the other saints of the Old Testament. For us she is the link between the old and the new, the last of those chosen by God under the Old Covenant, and at the same time the living heart of the New Testament Church on the Day of Pentecost. She belongs to both covenants. She is the highest expression of the sanctity present in the chosen people of Israel, the last in a long series extending all the way through the Old Testament - of men and women who said 'Yes' to God. We see her first of all as a daughter of Israel living under the Old Covenant. In this respect she stands close to St John the Baptist, whom we in the Orthodox tradition call the 'Friend of the Bridegroom'. You often see ikons with the Mother of God on one side of Christ and St John the Baptist on the other. We do not want to separate the Mother of God from St John the Baptist, from the other holy men and women of the Old Covenant.

Now it seems to us that by the definition of the Immaculate Conception Mary is being

taken out of the Old Covenant and included by anticipation in the New. What worries me in the definition of 1854 is above all the use of the word 'unparalleled', for that seems to divide her from St John the Baptist, for example. I am willing to accept that the Cross of Christ and its merits work retrospectively. That is what we are expressing through the myth of the Harrowing of Hell (in calling it a 'myth', I mean of course that it is a true myth). But should the Blessed Virgin be singled out and separated from the rest of Israel? That is what seems to us to be happening in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. We would wish to underline her solidarity with the rest of the human race before the coming of Christ.

The second reason concerns the *nature of original sin*. How do we understand this? Is this not something that needs rethinking in all our traditions? I doubt whether any part of Christendom has at the present moment a very satisfactory understanding of original sin. For all of us it is a problem. Those of you who are concerned with adult catechism will probably share my feeling: I am always relieved when we get past the session on original sin, because to most of our contemporaries it seems, first of all, unfair, unjust; secondly, it seems hard to reconcile with the picture of human evolution which modern science gives us. Surely it is wise if we do not over-dogmatise our understanding of original sin. Fortunately this is an area in which the Orthodox Church, at any rate, is committed to very few dogmatic statements.

Original sin may be seen as working on three interconnected levels. First, there are *physical* consequences: tiredness, illness, bodily pain, and finally physical death. Then there are *moral* consequences: weakness of will, inability to make any decision at all, doing what we know is wrong when we want to do what is right, moral paralysis. So, on this second level, original sin can lead us to spiritual death, death understood not just as a physical fact, but as separation from God. But the paralysis is never total, unless we make it so by our acts of wrong choice. Thirdly, in some presentations of original sin there are also *juridical* consequences: original sin is understood in terms of inherited guilt. This is done particularly by St Augustine, and he sees this inherited guilt as transmitted through the sexual act. Following out the logic of his position, St Augustine quite reasonably maintained that unbaptized babies go to Hell.

The Christian East has on the whole emphasised the first aspect of original sin, the physical consequences. And here we find no difficulty in saying that the Blessed Virgin Mary was subject to the consequences of original sin. She felt pain, and she was subject to physical death, just as much as anyone else. But in the Christian East, we also accept that there is a certain solidarity in sin, and here we come close to the third aspect of original sin, though Eastern writers in this connection do not stress sexuality in the way that St Augustine does (and certainly few if any have claimed that unbaptised babies go to Hell). Where the Christian East does make use of the idea of an inherited sinfulness, this is spelt out, not so much in strictly juridical terms, but more in terms of responsibility and co-inherence. We are members one of another. St Gregory of Nyssa says in his work on the Lord's Prayer that, when we say the clause 'Forgive us our trespasses', we are not just asking for the forgiveness of our own personal sins, we are also asking for the forgiveness of the sin of Adam, in which we all share. St Mark the Monk (fifth century) writes, 'The saints must needs offer repentance not only on their own behalf, but also on behalf of their neighbour, for without active love they cannot be made perfect. So the whole universe is held together and we are each of us helped providentially by one another'. Thus we are in some sense to repent for other people's sins. As Staretz Zossima says in

Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, 'We are responsible for everyone and everything'.

Now I do not see the Blessed Virgin Mary as an object of God's wrath destined for Hell: I would not ever want to say that of her. Nor would I want to say it of John the Baptist, of the prophet Jeremiah or any of the other righteous men and women of the Old Testament. But I do see the Mother of God as involved in the total solidarity of the human race, in our mutual responsibility. And so I see her as sharing, along with the rest of humankind, in the effects of the Fall.

These, then, are the reasons why most Orthodox reject the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. But in what I have just said, it is not my intention simply to raise objections: I am trying to ask questions. I think it was Thomas Merton who said that a person is known better from his questions than from his answers. We might apply that to ecumenism. Ecumenism is not first of all finding an agreed answer: it is learning to ask together the right questions.

Fr Yarnold. Let us take these two points one by one.

With regard then to your first point, I would like to ask you, Bishop Kallistos, if you would explain rather more fully the problem concerning the unparalleled privilege and grace of the Blessed Virgin Mary. 'Unparalleled' is my own translation of the Latin word *singulari* which occurs in the definition of 1854, and which is sometimes translated as 'unique'. Let me make the obvious point that, as Mary's role in the economy of the redemption was unique or unparalleled, it would seem appropriate that the grace which God gave her for the fulfillment of that role should be unparalleled. I wonder if there is any contradiction in holding that, and at the same time holding very firmly to the point Bishop Kallistos made, namely that one should not see Mary as a comet from outer space, but rather as the highest point of salvation history leading up to the Incarnation. Obviously one should not envisage a completely straight line of development as if her parents were simply one degree below her in grace, just as it would be wrong to think that Mary's parents had a responsibility which was just one degree less than that of Mary herself. There is, it seems to me, a development in salvation history from the beginning up to Mary, but then there is, to use the modern jargon (I'm not quite sure that I understand it) a quantum leap. Something new happens when Mary comes into the world - not because of her, as if God said, 'Let me now try something totally new', but because of her role in the economy of salvation. So I would like straight away to put those points to Bishop Kallistos.

Bishop Kallistos. I accept fully what Father Edward has said about the uniqueness of the Mother of God. In the whole history of the world there is only one God incarnate, and therefore there is only one human person who is the Mother of God. So she certainly had a unique vocation, and therefore we may believe that she received unique grace for that vocation. But then the question arises: Do we need to express that unique grace in such a way as to exclude her from the effects of original sin? What we say of the Mother of God we say also of ourselves, because each of us also has a unique vocation. As you were speaking I thought of two sayings of Martin Buber: 'God never does the same thing twice', and 'God has need of every single person in the universe'. If anybody exactly like

you or me had ever existed before or was ever going to exist afterwards, there would be no need for you or me to exist. We are each of us unrepeatable; we are in that sense each of us unique. So there is a uniqueness of vocation for every one of us. Clearly the Mother of God is unique in a special sense. What we are concerned with, then, is how we express that uniqueness.

I would return to the point that I made earlier about the continuity of sacred history. We are to put the Mother of God close to St John the Baptist, though certainly he stands on a different level from her. These are the two human persons closest to Christ. Now John the Baptist is definitely part of the Old Covenant: he does not remain alive till the crucifixion. But Mary at her conception and birth is also part of the Old Covenant, and so at this stage she is in a position comparable to that of John. In the Orthodox Church we celebrate the feast of the Conception of the Mother of God on December 9th (although we do not call it the feast of the *Immaculate* Conception): but we also celebrate the Conception of John the Baptist on September 23rd, and liturgically the two feasts have the same status.

Fr Yarnold. It is time now to get on to what is probably the more difficult problem, the problem concerning original sin. I say it is more difficult, but not so much in the sense that it is ecumenically more difficult, as if the East and the West had two entrenched incompatible positions. Rather it is difficult because the concept of original sin in any theology is very difficult - certainly in the West, and I think it emerges from Bishop Kallistos' remarks that it is somewhat difficult in the East as well.

Obviously one of the problems connected with original sin is that it is not a scriptural term. It is a term coined by the Fathers, probably by St Augustine. The question is, what do the theologians think they are referring to when they use the term? A second problem is philosophical or semantic. When we ask what original sin is, it is not like asking what Halley's Comet is made of. When we ask what Halley's Comet is made of, we know that we are talking about that thing which we can see up there through a telescope, and that we can focus all our instruments on it to discover what its constitution is. But when we ask what original sin is, we do not know quite what we have to focus our telescope on. We have got a term which has been used in a variety of different ways by different theologians, and which has been applied to the search for an answer to a number of different questions. A few years ago when I was invited to speak in Durham on original sin, I gave my talk the title of 'The Hunting of the Snark', because the people who are hunting the snark do not know exactly what they are hunting, and are not at all clear that they will be able to recognise it when they see it.

What are we hunting when we ask what original sin is? I think of the various distinct though connected problems for the answer of which we invoke original sin. One of these is the question why we baptize babies. The answer given by the Fathers was that baptism is a sacrament of forgiveness, that babies must therefore have something to be forgiven, which is given the name 'original sin'. Another quite distinct question is why, as St Paul saw so clearly in the seventh chapter of Romans, I have difficulty in doing what I want to do, why I have two laws fighting it out within my personality. Answer: original sin - not St Paul's answer; he does not really give the answer; but that is the short answer which theology has given. Again, why is there so evidently, as Cardinal Newman observed, a corruption, a failure, what we may call a dysfunction in the universe? Why do things go

wrong? Newman's answer: there must have been 'some terrible aboriginal calamity' - in other words, original sin. Or again, if we think of God's grace not only as elevating, imparting a share in the divine nature, but also as healing the effects of sin, why did Mary need to receive healing grace? Answer: to save her in advance from original sin.

Thus 'original sin' is invoked in answer to four distinct theological questions. But can we be sure that the term is used in the same sense in each case? May not our telescope be focussed on four different comets? So it is not only because of ecumenical problems, but also as a result of the way theology has developed, that it is very difficult to answer the question: 'What is original sin?'

Bishop Kallistos set out three levels of original sin: the physical, the spiritual and the juridical. He raised the question whether it is appropriate to describe Our Lady as sharing our fallen nature. Some of you may be familiar with Wordsworth's description of her as "Our tainted nature's solitary boast". Does this mean that her nature was in fact tainted, or that she was preserved from the taint? Perhaps we might go through these three headings, which Bishop Kallistos gave us, considering under each of them what I would consider a correct answer to that question for someone in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Let us start with the physical level. Even here it is a complicated matter. I believe there is quite wide agreement among Roman Catholic theologians today that when we speak of death and suffering as the consequences of original sin, we are not necessarily asserting that there ever existed at the beginning of history human beings who would not have died, or who, if they had stuck their finger in the fire, would not have felt pain. Thus even on the physical level we are dealing with death and suffering and hard work in so far as they are moral and spiritual problems. Perhaps what we should say is that, even without a Fall, we would have been liable to suffering and death, but that for fallen nature these inevitable physical liabilities now become spiritual problems. They are not things which we readily and easily accept with serenity from the hand of God. If then we ask whether Mary was liable to death and to suffering as simple physical facts, clearly the answer is 'Yes'. If Mary had stuck her finger in the fire it would have hurt. To that extent, at the merely physical level, the answer must be that Mary shares fallen nature. But for Mary were death and suffering spiritual problems? It seems to me - though this is really another subject - that just as her Son was tempted, though we do not know psychologically speaking what it meant for him to be tempted, even more it must be true that Mary was liable to temptation. Therefore presumably death and suffering could have been sources of temptation to her. To that extent I think we could say that she shared our fallen nature.

Let us pass to the second level, the moral or spiritual level as such. I would put in that compartment Romans 7: the weakness of the will, the tear of our psychology in two different directions. Again it seems to me that once one has accepted that Mary must have been liable to temptation, - because holiness is not a question of an unchanging level of attainment; holiness requires growth and fruitful reaction to a challenge; - one ought to say that for this reason Mary must have experienced what one could call the weakness of the will, or perhaps even the division of the will. If one wants to think of that as a characteristic of fallen nature, then Mary too, it seems to me, should be said to share fallen nature. But let us remember that we are not talking about actual, personal sin; it is not a matter of disagreement between East and West whether Mary personally sinned or not. We are talking about this mysterious entity 'original sin'.

So we arrive at Bishop Kallistos' third level, the juridical, the solidarity in the sin of the human race. I am happiest in speaking of this in terms of the Western tradition, but perhaps I can put my point in such a way that the Bishop will find echoes in the Eastern tradition as well. Many of the classical writers of the Western tradition, like St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas, called original sin 'a lack of original justice'. In other words, God made us, to use the graphic phrase, - though Anselm and Thomas did not use it - with a God-shaped hole in our hearts. God made us with the capability of receiving his grace, of receiving (to speak in Eastern terms now) deification. God made us to receive grace; but all the same grace is always a grace, a free gift. But if that grace is not there, if the Holy Spirit does not dwell within us (which is another way of putting it), then there is a lack in our nature, because that God-shaped hole is not filled, because that dynamism towards him is not in fact activated. What I think the Western tradition is saying is that for reasons which are at the heart of the mystery of original sin, the human race is a unity not only in Christ, in his Mystical Body, but is already a unity for Christ; and that because of this unity the sin of the race causes each individual to come into the world with this God-shaped hole unfilled, with this capability of receiving the Holy Spirit unrealised. So there is something which one might call an inherited spiritual defect. The Roman Catholic teaching is that, because of the work for which God destined Mary, that God-shaped hole was never unfilled: there was never in her a lack of original justice. If one wants to ask what it means in fact for a one-hour-old baby, or even a baby within the mother's womb, to be filled with grace, to have this God-shaped hole filled, obviously the answer is that we don't know. What one would want to say in the Western tradition is that for the Blessed Virgin Mary at every age, whether immediately after conception, or at birth, or at the age of thirty or forty, that hole was filled, and she received grace as God wished and as he was able to give it to a human being of that age.

The method that I am very used to in ecumenical discussion through working with ARCIC consists in laying aside divisive terminology and trying to use non-polemical terms (which often means biblical terms) in the search for agreement. I wonder if I would be doing justice to the Western understanding of original sin if I asked Bishop Kallistos whether he thought that the East could accept that, from the very beginning of her existence, the Blessed Virgin Mary was filled with grace for the task which she had to fulfil in the economy of redemption: and whether, if so, that grace could be seen to be given by God because of his eternal decree to save the world through his Son made man.

Bishop Kallistos. I am attracted by Father Edward's approach to original sin: perhaps it is really a Boojum.

First, on a point of terminology: the Christian East, when speaking of what the West calls original sin, normally uses the phrase *propatorike hamartia*, which is slightly different in its associations from the Western term. It means literally 'the forefatherly sin', the sin of our forefathers, of our first parents. There is a somewhat different flavour there, but perhaps not to be over-emphasised.

I feel much happier when we can talk of the Fall, rather than of original sin, because what Father Edward was saying concerning the great cosmic failure, the dysfunction, surely speaks to the heart of every one of us. We know that we live in a world of great beauty, but we also have constantly a feeling that things are out of joint, things are disrupted in ourselves and in the world around us. This cannot be exactly what God

intended the world and our own human nature to be. And here, surely, the Fall refers to a fact in the experience of every one of us, which is much easier to grasp than the notion of 'original sin'.

It may help us to understand better the Mother of God's relationship to the effects of the Fall if we look at Christ's own relationship in this regard. Do we think that at the Incarnation Christ took fallen human nature or unfallen human nature? If we think that Christ took human nature subject in some measure to the consequences of the Fall, then, so far as I can see, we really cannot find a place for the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of his Mother. If Christ took human nature subject to the consequences of the Fall, then surely his Mother was also subject to these consequences.

In answer to this question, I want to say that Christ took both fallen and unfallen human nature. We need to assume an antinomic, dialectical stance, and to affirm both those things. I think it was Cardinal Newman who said that theology is saying and unsaying to a positive effect. Again and again in theology we cannot make a single statement that embraces the full truth, and so we have to make two statements that seem to contradict each other, and to hold them in balance. I wish to say that Christ at the Incarnation took unfallen human nature, in the sense that looking at Christ we see our humanity as it ought to be, as God intended it to be. Christ is *the Man*, the true mirror of what it means to be human. In a sermon attributed to St Basil it is said that the Incarnation was the birthday of the human race; until Christ was born there had not yet been a real human being. So I want to say therefore that, looking at Christ, I see my humanity as it should be, as God means it to be: unfallen.

But I also want to say the other thing: fallen. The New Testament presents to us a picture of salvation by sharing, salvation by participation. As it says in II Cor 8.9, 'On your account he who is rich became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich'. Or, as St Irenaeus puts it, 'In his unbounded love he became what we are, in order to make us what he is'. The whole meaning of Gethsemane, of the Cross, of the Descent into Hell, is that Christ shares fully and totally in our human experience, and in this way heals it. Salvation is effected by solidarity, by exchange. Now, if we follow out that model of salvation, we will want to say that in some sense Christ took our fallen human nature. If Christ merely shared in an ideal human nature, free from the consequences of sin, he did not become what we are. So if we are to say that Christ became what we are, we have to say that he took human nature subject to the effects of the Fall. And that surely is what is being said in Hebrews 4.15: 'We do not have a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but he was tempted in everything just as we are, only without sinning'. He was free from actual sin, but he was tempted exactly as we are. If that means anything it must mean he was tempted as we are in our fallen condition. And if we are to say that of Christ, we have to say it also of his Mother. She was tempted in everything just as we are.

It is interesting that one person who thought that Christ took fallen human nature was the Lady Julian of Norwich. 'When Adam fell', she says, 'God's son fell. Because of the rightful oneing which had been made in heaven, God's Son might not be disparted from Adam; for by Adam I understand all-man'. And she goes on to say that by virtue of this 'oneing' with 'all-man' Christ took our humanity 'with all the mischief and feebleness that followeth' and our foul, deadly flesh that God's Son took upon him, which was Adam's old kirtle, strait, worn bare, and short, then by our Saviour was made fair, new,

white and bright, and of endless cleanness.' 'Oned' with us, Christ heals and transforms our humanity. But if the 'oneing' is incomplete, then the healing is likewise incomplete.

Let me also invoke Karl Barth. Speaking of Christ, he states: "He was not a sinful man, but inwardly and outwardly his situation was that of a sinful man. He did nothing that Adam did, but he lived life in the form it must take on the basis and assumption of Adam's act. Freely he entered into solidarity and necessary association with our lost existence. Only in this way could God's revelation to us, our reconciliation with him, manifestly become an event in him and by him.' I would agree with what Barth says about Christ there, and I would want to say the same about the Mother of God. She was not a sinful person, but inwardly and outwardly she lived out her life in the form it must take on the basis and assumption of Adam's act, in the same way that we have to live out our lives.

Let us recall the three levels that we distinguished in the effects of the Fall: the moral, the physical, the juridical. Over the first two levels there is no disagreement between Father Edward and myself. He accepts, as I do, that the Virgin Mary was subject on these two levels to the consequences of the Fall. We differ only as regards to the third level, which is much the most difficult to understand and interpret. Augustine presented a clear, systematic view of the third level, upholding a doctrine of original guilt. By comparison, the Greek Fathers are very tentative and hesitant about the notion of any inherited guilt. If the Christian East had adopted a strictly Augustinian view of the Fall and of original guilt, then we would also have been led to affirm the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. We cannot imagine that the Mother of God was subject to the consequences of the Fall as Augustine envisages them. But if we do not take an Augustinian view of original guilt, then perhaps the question can remain open. In fact the Christian East has not thought of the Fall exactly in the way that Augustine does, and therefore for us the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not so much untrue as unnecessary.

That brings me to a further point. We are to apply Ockham's razor to dogmas. Dogmas are not to be multiplied without necessity. In defining dogmas necessary to salvation, the Church keeps to an absolute minimum. And therefore as an Orthodox, I regret the 1854 definition of the Immaculate Conception as a dogma necessary for salvation, because I believe that this is something we should not (and indeed cannot) dogmatise about. The whole subject of original sin and inherited guilt is of such obscurity that we should leave open the question of Mary's relationship to it. Let us not bind men's consciences. Something similar may be said about the 1950 definition of the Bodily Assumption. This is something that, as an Orthodox, I firmly believe, but I do not believe that it can or should be defined as a dogma.

Father Edward has not, however, chosen to expound the third level of original sin in sharply Augustinian terms. He has spoken, not about original guilt, but about the 'God-shaped hole' that in Mary's case was never left unfilled. If the question is posed in these terms, I do not find myself so very far apart from him. So I come to his final question: Do I, as an Orthodox, accept that, from the very beginning of her existence the Blessed Virgin Mary was filled with grace for the task which she had to fulfil? My answer is emphatically, Yes, I do believe that. But I also believe that she was given a fuller measure of grace at the Annunciation.