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# The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood: A Modern Reappraisal

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## THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION AND THE DIVINE MOTHERHOOD: A MODERN REAPPRAISAL

An excerpt from Harry Reasoner's *Before the Colors Fade* that appeared in the December 1981 number of *McCall's* records a layman's remarkably accurate discernment:

It is a startling idea, of course. My guess is that the whole story—that a Virgin was selected by God to bear His Son as a way of showing His love and concern for man—is not an idea that has been popular with theologians in spite of all the lip service they have given it. It is a somewhat illogical idea, and theologians love logic almost as much as they love God. It is so revolutionary a thought that it probably could only come from a God who is beyond logic and beyond theology.<sup>1</sup>

Fact has borne out what Reasoner instinctively surmises, particularly in the questioning many Catholic scripture scholars and theologians in the last two decades have directed towards the historicity of the virginal conception of Jesus. A reappraisal of the two fundamental Marian dogmas, the virginal conception and the divine motherhood, could hardly begin elsewhere than with this phenomenon, disconcerting to so many in the Church.

### I. REAPPRAISALS OF THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION

#### A. *The Contemporary Debate: Reappraisal or Change in Meaning?*

So public has the debate been that acquaintance with the is-

<sup>1</sup> Harry Reasoner, "The Truest Thing in the World," in *McCall's Magazine*, December, 1981, p. 115. Cited from *Before the Colors Fade* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 91

sue and the participants can be presumed for the purposes of the present paper. Beginning in the mid-1960s in Holland and less publicly in West Germany, it will be recalled, the discussion has spread to the United States, to France, and most recently to Spain.<sup>2</sup> And the historicity of the virginal conception is not only being called into doubt in discussions among scholars in scripture study and theology but is also being debated within hearing of the popular Christian mind, nourished by the attention the media have paid the whole affair.

The doubt is more difficult to cope with than an overt denial or negation, because for the most part the traditional affirmation "conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary" is maintained but interpreted in a purely symbolic way: Mary is spiritually, not biologically, a virgin. Those who urge the question why the Gospels would have told the simplest of human stories, the coming to be of a child, in terms of a virginal conception, and why the earliest creeds summed up this story in the well-known formula, are given some version of the same answer: Matthew and Luke record their story not as a historical fact received in tradition but as a theologoumenon, "a fiction designed to express a theological idea."<sup>3</sup> They wished thereby to describe the extraordinary gift the Father made to us of his Son and the exclusive relation Christ has to his Father.

This reinterpretation is offered as purifying the faith of archaic ways in which it was expressed—demythologizing it—and reestablishing its religious and spiritual character, freed from biological concerns that would unnecessarily trouble the believing mind. The fullness of Jesus' humanity, thought to be imperiled if he is without a human father, is said to be thus restored. At the same time his transcendence as God's unique and unparalleled gift is safeguarded, thanks to the manner of describing it as a virginal conception.

<sup>2</sup> René Laurentin, "Bulletin sur la Vierge Marie," in *RSPT* 65, No. 2 (1981): 303 f., and "*Conçu de la Vierge Marie . . . à l'heure des révisions dogmatiques*," in *EtM* 38 (Paris: Société Française d'Etudes Mariales, 1981): 36-66.

<sup>3</sup> Laurentin, "*Conçu*," p. 47.

92 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

It goes without saying that the shadow of such a handling of the virginal conception hangs over every reappraisal of the dogma that would preserve its historical truth. Yet to enter on any detailed critique of the proffered thesis would hardly leave time for consideration of more positive meanings of the virginal conception and of its relation to the dogma of the divine motherhood. Even the briefest of critiques, however, would profit from René Laurentin's three-tiered evaluation of the opinion that holds the account of the virginal conception to be a symbolizing theologumenon.<sup>4</sup>

1. The *texts* of Matthew and Luke, he points out, themselves affirm a virginal conception as simple historic fact, and they resist being emptied of their real physical implications. Raymond Brown himself recognizes the intention of both evangelists to assert that Mary conceived her Son virginally—a view Brown early expressed in his well-known address, that was instrumental in bringing the debate to American attention, and later reaffirmed in a response to Joseph Fitzmyer.<sup>5</sup>

2. Hence the contemporary thesis is founded not on the texts but on their *interpretation* as a theologumenon: what Matthew and Luke reported, even if they spoke of it as historical fact, was actually understood by the early Christian community as a symbolic assertion of God's unique gift to mankind and Christ's unique relationship to his Father. But those who propose the thesis must account for the way that not only the texts but also the very religious and social culture in which they arose resist

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-65.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond E. Brown, "The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus," in *TS* 33 (1972): 9, n. 17 and *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), p. 31, n. 37; "Note: Luke's Description of the Virginal Conception," in *TS* 35 (1974): 360-362. In the earlier article Brown notes, "It is lucidly clear that Matthew believed in Mary's bodily virginity before the birth of Jesus (1:25). It is harder to *prove* the case for Luke; but 3:23 indicates that Luke did not think that Joseph begot Jesus after the angel's annunciation to Mary." Reaffirming his view in the last reference given above, Brown offers a "fifth argument that persuades me that Luke did intend to describe a virginal conception."

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 93

such an interpretation. Not only, for example, are antecedents in biblical tradition wanting for an esteem for virginity or for an expectation that the Messiah should be of virginal origin; for Matthew himself, intent on presenting Jesus genealogically as Son of David, virginal conception offered more a difficulty than an attractive symbolic way of describing Jesus' origin. Luke, the only other evangelist to describe Jesus' origin in detail, gives the same extraordinary answer of a virginal conception, and this he did independently of Matthew. There are hints of the virginal origin of Jesus in other New Testament writers—Mark,<sup>6</sup> John,<sup>7</sup> and perhaps even Paul.<sup>8</sup> Yet evidence is wanting that, when Christ's origin was eventually preached as part of the Gospel message, the symbolizing penchant was so widespread in early Christian communities, Jewish and Gentile, and that in communities independent of one another this tendency should have concordantly produced so extraordinary a description of Jesus' origin and, moreover, that the alleged symbolism of this description should have escaped the Christian mind until our day.

3. Thus the contemporary theory has to make texts that seem to say fact speaks of symbol instead, and this by an interpretation that cannot escape sounding artificial. But the theory seems to draw at least the force of its appeal from neither texts nor interpretation so much as from *presuppositions* shared with contemporary culture—three in particular. a) The modern mind prefers a natural to a miraculous explanation of Christ's origin, if such is possible. Miracles are a challenge to the scientific mentality, and for one kind of religious mind they compromise

<sup>6</sup> In connection with the allegation of Jesus' illegitimacy: Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 537-541, and Brown, *Virginal Conception*, pp. 57-59, 66. Negative conclusion on any hint of virginal conception in Mary: Raymond E. Brown, et al. (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1978), pp. 62 f.

<sup>7</sup> Most recent opinions surveyed in Laurentin, "Bulletin," *RSPT* 65, No. 1 (1981): 132 f.

<sup>8</sup> A. Vincent Cernuda, "La genesis humana de Jesucristo segun S. Pablo," in *Estudios biblicos* 36 (1978): 57-77, 267-289, summarized in Laurentin, "Bulletin," *RSPT* 65, No. 1 (1981): 133, and "Conçu," p. 49.

God's transcendence. b) Virginal conception, so often presented as a privilege of Christ and of Mary, is now seen as alien both to Christ's completely sharing the human condition and to Mary's humble character as maidservant of the Lord. c) Rather than virginity with its privations, the value of sexuality and the beauty of marriage, both part of God's handiwork, are seen as more plausible avenues by which God would have sent us his Son. No more is intended in the presentation of such presuppositions than to suggest that the rapid spread of the theory in our day is thus more easily accounted for. It will continue to be necessary to meet the proponents of the theory on the grounds which they have worked over—the texts and the proposed interpretation.

But perhaps one additional consideration may be explored. It is suggested by the many bonds between the mystery of the virginal conception of the Lord and his resurrection—bonds that Raymond Brown has recognized in selecting as companion piece for his first detailed treatment of the virginal conception in book form an equally-sensitive essay on the bodily resurrection of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> The two truths concern respectively the beginning and the end of the Lord's life—moments shrouded in mystery, even in an ordinary human existence. Both truths are accredited the status of dogmas, though they have never been formally declared, since no threat to their acceptance has been serious enough to necessitate that step. Both truths are scientifically unverifiable, for they elude normal processes of observation. Both are due to God's miraculous intervention beyond the course of nature. And, to come to the point at issue in this discussion, in neither case have alternative explanations enduringly commended themselves to Christian discernment.

Alternative explanations to the bodily resurrection suggested themselves already in the pages of the Gospels, came into early history in the minds of Christians and especially of their enemies, yet yielded ground to the simple faith assertion, "He has been raised, the Lord is risen," that lives today in Christian pro-

<sup>9</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973).

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 95

fession concurrent with scholarly efforts to reduce the event to symbolic dimensions.

Similarly, virginal conception as the explanation of the Lord's origin has not been without alternative theories offered early and of late. The alternative most plausibly accepted today is that Jesus was born normally of the beautiful union of Joseph and Mary in marriage. Raymond Brown has done remarkable service with his unrelenting reminder<sup>10</sup> that precisely this most plausible alternative was not envisaged in New Testament times. The clearest datum about Jesus' origin, Brown insists, is that Jesus was born irregularly soon after Joseph and Mary came to live together. This may have given rise to the early Jewish slander that he was an illegitimate child, a charge perhaps hinted at by hostile parties in the Gospels themselves (cf. Mk 6:3, Jn 8:41, and perhaps Jn 9:29). Such is the alternative to virginal conception which the New Testament suggests was in the minds of some in Jesus' day.

Since it is not easy to dismiss such a persistent charge, which may be as old as Christianity itself, those who deny the virginal conception cannot escape the task of explaining how the rumor of illegitimacy and irregularity of birth arose and how they would answer it without accepting a very unpleasant alternative.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately . . . the historical alternative to the virginal conception has not been a conception in wedlock; it has been illegitimacy through adultery by Mary. . . . The only ones who denied the virginal conception and maintained that Jesus was Joseph's natural and legitimate son were the second-century Jewish Christians, but one searches in vain for that suggestion in Jewish and Samaritan literature. This situation should be kept in mind by modern scholars who reject the virginal conception and assume without proof that Jesus was the son of Joseph. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Brown goes on to observe that some "sophisticated Chris-

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *ibid.*, p. 66; *Birth*, pp. 530, 534-542.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Virginal Conception*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Birth*, p. 530.

96 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

tians" could live with the alternative of illegitimacy, seeing it as the ultimate in Jesus' emptying himself (Phil 2:7) and as no reflection on his own sinlessness, though sharply contrasting with the holiness and purity of his origin as related in both Matthew and Luke — and, one might add, with the beauty ever-characteristic of the Christmas mystery.

Thus theologians, in judging the current theory, will continue to ask whether revelation would be enriched or impoverished if virginal conception were not historical fact but interpretative theologumenon, and whether the dogma of virginal conception could still retain its sense simply in terms of symbol. The theory, however understandable as an effort to present truth in terms more assimilable to contemporary minds, seems to be a reductionist explanation rather than a reappraisal of the dogma.

But, however regrettable the repercussions the current debate has produced in minds of many ordinary Christians, some benefit can be recognized as accruing in the areas of Scripture study and theology. No longer can virginal conception be spoken of simply as a fact, a miracle, a biological wonder provided more with apologetic defense than interpretation. Simple reaffirmations of the dogma in formulas, however consecrated by use, will no longer suffice. Simply discussing its Marian aspect is seen to be inadequate.

What has principally emerged is the need to explore the meaning of virginal conception as a fundamental Christian mystery, its relationship to other mysteries, its beauty as a sign used by the Father in giving us his Son, its message for Christian life — to touch on only some aspects of its meaning. Hopefully, this is the terrain where what are properly to be called reappraisals of the dogma can be found. These reappraisals can be grouped according as they show what the virginal conception reveals about Christ, about the divine plan of salvation, and about Mary.

### *B. Virginal Conception as Revelatory of Christ*

#### 1. Christ's Divine Sonship

The Fathers of the Church, both eastern and western, considered the virginal conception the specific sign that Mary's Son is



*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 97

the Son of God. They are not to be understood in some naive sense as if they were oblivious of the possibility that in the miracle of a virginal conception God could send, rather than his Son, some great prophet thus extraordinarily accredited for his mission, as John the Baptist was marked out by the miraculous circumstances of his own origin. But the Fathers were aware that in reality no one else in salvation history had come from God in a virginal conception, and so they saw in the fact that Jesus had no earthly father a sign, not a proof, that his Father is God. In the light of a Johannine christology of preexistence, they thus spontaneously expanded the sense of the annunciation message in Luke 1:35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you. . . . Therefore the child to be born will be called holy—Son of God," where the sense of "therefore" is thought by contemporary scholars to indicate that Luke, for his part, related virginal conception to divine sonship *causally* and not simply as sign.<sup>13</sup>

Karl Barth has rephrased this patristic insight in a dense but illuminating passage:

[Christ] exists as man, not in virtue of a possibility of existence proper to his humanity, but solely in virtue of His divine existence in the eternal mode of being of the Word or Son of God. His existence in time is one and the same as His eternal existence as the begotten of God the Father. Now it is precisely the human father whom a human son has to thank for everything that marks his existence as belonging to him—his name above all, and with it his position, his rights, his character as such and such an individual, his place in history. Thus His begetting by a human father could not be the sign of the existence of the man Jesus alone as the Son begotten of the Father in eternity. This sign would rather describe Him as a man whose existence is different from the existence of God, and is proper to Himself.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, I-IX* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 351; Brown, *Birth*, pp. 291 and 314, n. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik I: Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes 2* (ET: *Church Dogmatics, Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight. Edinburgh: Clark, 1956), p. 193.

98 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

The same sign-relation between divine sonship and virginal conception is explained by two contemporary Catholic theologians. Jean Galot insists on the harmony between divine sonship and its human sign:

It is not enough to affirm Christ's divine sonship. This sonship must be affirmed as inscribed in human flesh by virtue of a generation in which there is no human father. . . . The virginal motherhood by the Holy Spirit constitutes the sign of the divine sonship, its manifestation in human flesh. . . . Thus the divine sonship is manifested in the virginal birth, and it does more than appear there in an exterior symbol; it is expressed there by way of the Incarnation. Or, in another way of putting it, the divine sonship becomes fully human (*prend route sa consistance humaine*) in the conception brought about by the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

Gustave Martelet justly alerts us to the risk of reducing divine sonship to simple adoptionism if the virginal conception is denied:

Were Jesus the fruit of the love of Joseph and Mary (however great and holy that love), this fruit would have been only human. . . . Undoubtedly this human fruit could have been appropriated by God, as immediately as would be desired, in virtue of some astonishing act of adoption that would have been so to say instantaneous. Nonetheless, in this case we would have only a little man become Son of God, adopted as they say, and thus only adoptive. In no way would we be in the presence of the mystery that Scripture reveals and faith confesses—that of the Son of God himself made man by the Incarnation.<sup>16</sup>

What these authors say is that in becoming man the Son of

<sup>15</sup> Jean Galot, "La conception virginale du Christ," in *Gr 49* (1968): 658-659, cited by Laurentin, "Conçu," pp. 56-57.

<sup>16</sup> Gustave Martelet, *L'au-delà retrouvé. Christologie des fins dernières* (Paris: Desclée, 1975), p. 203, n. 8, cited by René Laurentin in "Marie," *Catholicisme*, fasc. 35 (Paris: Letouzey, 1978), p. 574, and also in "Conçu," p. 57.

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 99

God does not become a Son who has no father. And this must be noted, in anticipation of the objection that a birth without a father is less human and thus verges on monophysitism. Avoiding both yesterday's monophysitism and today's Nestorianism (if not Arianism) is a delicate affair, but the balance is preserved in recognizing that the ultimate meaning of virginal conception is not simply privation of a (human) father, any more than the ultimate meaning of the Incarnation is the privation of human personality in the psychological sense of the word.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, there are other dimensions to being father besides physical generation, so that fatherhood, like motherhood for that matter, is a psychological and not merely biological affair. Hence languages do not extend the use of the term "father" below the human species, not according it to animals though they too sire offspring. Now, apart from generation, the Father of Jesus gave a share of his paternal role to Joseph, so that, with that exception, the divine fatherhood was translated into human terms in Joseph's role toward Jesus. It is not correct, therefore, to speak of Jesus being maimed in his humanity for lack of a human progenitor. Indeed, the title "father" that Luke sometimes gives Joseph is not to be withheld from him on the grounds of his not being Jesus' progenitor, any more than, analogously, one would withhold from the human progenitor of a son the title "father" on the grounds that he is not creator of his son's being, as is God who by reason of that creative role is eminently called father. For, in the final analysis, fatherhood is realized fully only in God. "Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven" (Mt 23:9).

## 2. Christ's Pre-existence

The Fathers see the virginal conception as manifesting also the pre-existence of the Son of God. Every new human being is born and begins to exist at a point in time. But the Word who "became flesh" pre-exists in divine nature and, with his coming

<sup>17</sup> Laurentin, "*Conçu*," p. 57.

100 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

to be in time as Mary's Son, begins a human existence that manifests his divine being. The sign of this pre-existence the Fathers see in the virginal conception, wherein he, who from all eternity is God's Son in divine nature, becomes at a moment of time Mary's Son in human nature.

It can be granted here again that it took time for the virginal conception to be recognized as such a sign, and that Luke, the evangelist who recorded it, "does not think of a pre-existent Son of God, as does John," and furthermore that "only in second-century writings do we find the Lucan and Johannine concepts combined into an incarnation of a pre-existent deity (John) in the womb of the virgin Mary (Luke)."<sup>18</sup> The point is that, beginning with post-Apostolic Fathers, the combination is made and thereafter becomes a commonplace in the early Church.

Thus one wonders that, in commenting on "the interest of patristic theology in the virgin birth," Wolfhart Pannenberg should so calmly speak of "the contradiction of preexistence which the patristic church apparently did not notice."<sup>19</sup> But Pannenberg has shut himself off from the ease the Fathers had in combining pre-existence and its sign, the virgin birth, since in his resurrection Christology he arbitrarily limits the development of the concept of pre-existence: the title "Son of God" was "originally used after Jesus' resurrection for the One who was to come again in Messianic Lordship," then "also for the present hidden Lordship in heaven," and "finally for the earthly activity of Jesus in connection with the baptismal tradition, and even for the entirety of his earthly life *from birth onward*."<sup>20</sup> Thus for Pannenberg,

Christologically, the legend of the virgin birth has only the significance of a *preliminary* expression for a fundamental element of the revelatory event, namely, that Jesus was the "Son of God" from the

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Birth*, p. 314, n. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152 (my underlining).

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 101

very beginning. It is preliminary because the *ultimate* expression of this interest is found in the conception of pre-existence, which cannot be connected without *contradiction* conceptually with the original motif of the virgin birth.<sup>21</sup>

It is not clear why "preliminary" and "ultimate" expressions should be "contradictory." They were not so for the Fathers, for whom sign does not contradict the reality it signifies.

With an eye to contemporary taste, René Laurentin genially rephrases this patristic insight of Christ's pre-existent being in terms of love:

In God's plan every new human existence is born of the love of two human beings. But Christ pre-exists. His existence is not contingent nor does it issue from the coming together of human loves. It does not need to begin *to be*, but *to be manifested*. Moreover in Christ it is Love itself, source of all love, that comes to us. The virgin birth therefore attests to the pre-existing transcendence of Love that comes into this world to kindle created love.<sup>22</sup>

C. *Virginal Conception as Revelatory of the Divine Plan of Salvation*

The virginal conception of Christ is the initial act of salvation in the sense that through it the Son of God enters this world. This initial act is typical and exemplary, since through it God manifests the kind of means he has chosen to accomplish his plan of salvation. These means exhibit three characteristics: 1) they stem from his divine initiative; 2) they are humble and poor means that allow his divine power to shine through; 3) they are means effective of a New Creation in harmony with the original creation. As a means chosen by God, the virginal conception sets the pattern for the remainder of his plan of salvation in these three ways.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 146 (my underlining).

<sup>22</sup> Laurentin, "Conçu," p. 58.

102 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

## 1. The Divine Initiative

"Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offering for our sins. . . . We, for our part, love because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:10, 19). Thus the Father did not wait for Joseph and Mary to love each other as husband and wife and thereby become partners with him in bringing his Son into the human family. Rather, with an initiative that characterizes his all-sufficient creative love, he asked the consent only of the mother-to-be, reducing to an indispensable minimum the part of human parenthood and casting its role in terms of pure receptivity.

In a lecture in *Dogmatics in Outline*, Karl Barth traces back to its very roots in Trinitarian life this divine initiative of giving human existence to Jesus virginally:

It is not as when [an ordinary] human existence starts; [rather, Jesus'] human existence starts in the freedom of God Himself, in the freedom in which the Father and Son are one in the bond of love, in the Holy Spirit. So when we look at the beginning of the existence of Jesus, we are meant to be looking into this ultimate depth of the Godhead, in which the Father and Son are one. This is the freedom of the inner life of God, and in this freedom the existence of this man begins.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Humble and Poor Means Used by God

It was not what would have been the rightly-ordered sexual activity of Jesus' parents that God chose in sending us his Son, but the unwonted way of virginal conception. This represents a renunciation of the highest glory of man and woman on the created level, since by procreation they bring their resemblance to the Creator, in whose image and likeness they were made, to the point of sharing even in that creative activity of his that produces his noblest creature, another human being. Yet the laying aside of this human glory fits into the context of the mysterious

<sup>23</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatik im Grundriss* (ET: *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson. New York: Harper, 1959), pp. 98 f.

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 103

poverty of means that characterizes the divine plan of salvation. He does not depend on knowledge, possessions, power, but on love alone, the love of a young girl in Nazareth, one among the poor with whom she so clearly identified herself in her Magnificat (Lk 1:48, 52). She was a woman in Israel at a time when women were not even part of the worshiping assembly except through their husbands, a woman from the derided region of Galilee, a woman who had decided not to know man (Lk 1:34) and had thus foregone marriage and family, thought of then as the only key to fulfillment.

Karl Barth among others points up this radical poverty of Mary's virginity in a relatively new approach:

Every natural generation is the work of willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man. . . . Such an event will point to the mighty and really cosmic power of human creaturely *eros*. If our aim is to discover and set up the sign of this power, the event of sex forces itself upon us as the sign which is unmatched by any other in importance and persuasiveness. [But] the event of sex cannot be considered at all as the sign of the divine *agape* which seeks not its own and never fails. It is the work of willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man, and as such points elsewhere than to the majesty of the divine pity. Therefore the virginity of Mary, and not the wedlock of Joseph and Mary, is the sign of revelation and of the knowledge of the mystery of Christmas.<sup>24</sup>

Treading on ground become yet more delicate than at the time he was writing, Barth goes on:

God alone knows whether the history of humanity, nations and states, art, science, economics, has in fact been and is so predominantly the history of males, the story of all the deeds and works of males, as it appears to be. . . . The historical consciousness of all nations, states and civilizations begins with the patriarchate. Male action is . . . characteristic of the world history with which we are acquainted. . . . It is from this angle that the countersign, the sign

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, p. 192.

104 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

of the mystery of Christmas, the sign of the lack of a human father for Jesus becomes understandable as a sign. Willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man as such cannot be considered as a participator in God's work. . . . A human father and human generation, the whole action of man the male can have no meaning here. Therefore it is the very absence of masculine action that is significant here.<sup>25</sup>

It is in harmony with this pattern that Christ, born of a virgin, himself chose to live as a celibate and thus to bring to yet sharper relief the divine plan of choosing what "the world considers absurd to shame the wise" and singling out "the weak of this world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27).

It is interesting to note the changed emphasis that was suggested to the authors of the "*Dutch Catechism*" in the use of this insight into the meaning of the virginal conception. The original text of the *Catechism* led up to this conclusion:

[The evangelists Matthew and Luke] proclaim that this birth does not depend on what men can do of themselves—ininitely less so than in other human births. That is the deepest meaning of the article of faith, "born of the Virgin Mary." There is nothing in the bosom of mankind, nothing in human fruitfulness that can procreate him, from whom all human fruitfulness, all the begetting of our race depend: for all things were made in him.<sup>26</sup>

Representatives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith seemingly agreed that the insight on the poverty of human means indeed suggests that Jesus is God's gift, climax of all his gifts. And so they left the original text unchanged up to the end of the first sentence above, but they relocated the article of faith involved—which they cite in fuller form, "conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary"—in a new paragraph which begins, "The mystery of this greatest gift of God to man in the person of Jesus can *also* be seen as indicated by another event which

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193 f.

<sup>26</sup> *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults*, trans. from the Dutch by Kevin Smyth (Unrevised edition. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 75.



*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 105

is also mysterious, the virginal conception of Jesus. . . ."<sup>27</sup>

The ecumenically inspired *Common Catechism* also makes good use of this insight which must be principally credited to Barth:

Mary's virginity . . . since the time of the Fathers of the Church has been understood by the Catholic tradition in connection with the mystery of the Incarnation. It is a symbol for the fact that salvation transcends this world, for Jesus Christ's incomparable uniqueness as a human being, and evidence of that grace that chooses the weak things of this world to confound the strong. The virgin birth makes it clear that God does not use the usual means of this world to save mankind: he does not use wealth, power, sexuality, but poverty and weakness.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. New Creation

For Matthew the coming of God's Son is a new creation, and the infancy story a new book of "Genesis," as he hints in twice using the word (Mt 1:1, 15). It was fitting that a sign of this new creation be given at the very moment God's Son becomes Mary's Son. Just as the first Adam was not born of human intercourse but came directly from God's creative hands, so the new Adam would come from God's special intervention outside human ways. Probably another indication of Matthew's intention to highlight this newness is the new and abrupt way he terminates the long series of ancestors in Jesus' genealogy where the forty times-repeated expression "the father of" gives way to "It was of her that Jesus who is called Messiah was born" (Mt 1:16).

Moreover, in the new Adam's generation, woman, and only she on the created level, would play the crucial role. This new woman would have the task of undoing what the first Adam blamed on Eve when he complained, "It was the woman you

<sup>27</sup> Edouard Dhans and Jan Visser, *The Supplement to A New Catechism* (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> *The Common Catechism: A Book of Christian Faith*, ed. Johannes Feiner and Lukas Vischer (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 625.

106 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

put with me; she gave me the fruit, and I ate it" (Gen 3:12).

The Fourth Gospel's use of the new creation theme and the singular importance given the title "Woman," by which alone Jesus addresses his mother, are well known. In that Gospel also these elements would find their complement in the virginal conception, if the possible allusion to it in John 1:13 is verified.

#### *D. Virginal Conception as Revelatory of Mary*

The Marian significance of Christ's virginal conception has received more attention throughout history than have the insights thus far treated, to the point where it had often seemed necessary to recall that the virginal conception is primarily a mystery of Christ. The fluctuations in the name of the feast celebrated on March 25, and its most recent re-designation as the Annunciation *of the Lord*, give liturgical witness to this sensitivity. Given the attention virginal conception has received in connection with Mary, only two of the many Marian aspects of the mystery will be sketched here.

#### 1. The Annunciation—Mary, Type of the Church

The more apposite of these aspects in the light of Vatican II would be that in Mary of the Annunciation the Church in a special way finds herself typified.

In one dense article of *Lumen Gentium*, the Council portrayed the Church, after the pattern of Mary in the mystery of the virginal conception, as herself both mother and virgin—mother "by accepting God's word in faith" and "though preaching and baptism bringing forth to new and immortal life children who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God," and virgin "by keeping the fidelity she has pledged to her Spouse" and by "preserving with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope, and a sincere charity."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975), p. 420: *Lumen Gentium*, chap. 8, art. 64.

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 107

Devoting an entire section of *Marialis Cultus* to "The Blessed Virgin as the Model of the Church in Divine Worship," Paul VI first focuses on Mary of the Annunciation and portrays the Church learning from Mary, the *attentive* Virgin, how to "listen, accept, proclaim, and venerate God's word, distributing it to the faithful"; learning from Mary, the *Virgin in prayer*, how to "present to the Father the needs of her children"; and seeing in Mary, the *Virgin-Mother*, "the type and exemplar of the fruitfulness of the Virgin Church."<sup>30</sup>

Later in his famous apostolic exhortation, Paul VI gives the picture of the Annunciation-Mary an even more extended scope in saying that "through the assent of the humble handmaid of the Lord mankind begins its return to God and sees in the glory of the all-holy Virgin the goal towards which it is journeying."<sup>31</sup>

## 2. Personal Traits of the Virgin Mary

Complementing the sublime portrait of Mary the Virgin as type of the Church would be three marks of the personal beauty that is hers in all its concreteness in the mystery of the virginal conception.

First is her virginal dedication so mysteriously announced in Luke 1:34, "I do not know man."<sup>32</sup> In her total belonging to the Lord, somehow announced in this cryptic verse, is realized the essence of virginity in its deepest spiritual dimension. She here anticipates that celibacy for the sake of the kingdom to which her Son in example and word will invite his disciples, and to its practice in the Church she lends the inspiration of her own example, recognized by Christian instinct in her earliest post-

<sup>30</sup> Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation for the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1974), pp. 16-18; *Marialis Cultus*, arts. 17-19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26; *Marialis Cultus*, art. 28.

<sup>32</sup> René Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I-II* (Paris: Gabalda, 1957), pp. 176-179; *Court traité sur la Vierge Marie* (5th ed., Paris: Lethielleux, 1968); John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 193-199, 446; Brown, *Birth*, pp. 303-309; Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, pp. 348 f.

108 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

New Testament title "ever Virgin."

Particularly attractive in our day will be the courage of her faith-adventure as she trustingly risks everything in total abandon, anticipating again her Son's prayer as she says to the Lord, "Be it done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

Finally, perhaps the most intriguing Marian aspect of the mystery as it affects her personally is the relation that the virginal conception sets up between Mary and Joseph, whom the revised liturgy has accustomed us to identify no longer in circumlocution but simply as "her husband." If even in our day of sometimes exaggerated candor attempted descriptions of this relationship come haltingly, one can only hark back to Luke 1:27 and Luke 2:5 where a consistent rendering of *emnesteumene* has baffled every translator at least as much as Luke 1:34 with its *epei andra ou ginosko*. At the threshold of this unique relationship, of which obviously no one has the right to ask an accounting, wonder may be the only appropriate attitude. What was "the psychological impact upon Mary of the virginal conception?"<sup>33</sup> What was its impact on Joseph? At least of this one could be sure: the virginal pattern of their married life was something they decided upon—Luke and Matthew portray earlier decisions in the life of each as they drew together—and their choice must have been motivated by love for the Child and for each other. "Mary and Joseph, by their embracing of virginity, call attention to the primacy of a greater love . . . deep personal spiritual love of which physical endearments are but the imperfect expression and sign."<sup>34</sup> Perhaps little more can be said.

## II. REAPPRAISALS OF THE DIVINE MOTHERHOOD

### A. Preliminary Considerations

As we turn to the dogma of Mary's divine motherhood, it is

<sup>33</sup> Brown, *Birth*, p. 306, n. 30.

<sup>34</sup> McHugh, *Mother of Jesus*, p. 198.

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 109

first to be noted that in that expression we inherit an abstract formulation of the most concrete and fundamental relation of Mary to Jesus: that she is the human mother of this person who is also God's Son. "Divine motherhood," of course, is a term not found in scripture. "Mother of Jesus" is, as is also the varied witness to Jesus' divinity. Because Mary's Son is divine, theology by about the seventeenth century came to speak of her motherhood as divine.<sup>35</sup>

For some fourteen centuries already Christians had been addressing her as "Mother of God." The title is found earliest with Origen and perhaps Hippolytus, and is rooted in an ancient popular devotion to Mary, the origins of which are lost to history. As is well known, the title served at the time of the Council of Ephesus (431) to identify as erroneous a very subtle Christological opinion couched in the language of Aristotelian metaphysics.

The mind of contemporary Christians has become estranged both from popular Marian devotion and from the metaphysical interests of fifth-century Christians, who found Aristotelian philosophy a help in their discussions about Christ. Hence it is an incontestable fact of history that the endorsement of "Theotokos" by Ephesus and Chalcedon safeguarded belief in the unity of Christ's person for ordinary believers as for theologians in the mid-fifth-century debates. But it is at least open to question whether the Christian of today has an interest capable of sustaining debate over the unity of the two natures in Christ's person, and whether today's Christian understands enough about what is meant by "Mother of God" to be aided in grappling with the question, however phrased, of Christ's personal unity. At most it may be expected that Christian intuition would lead today's believer to see in the traditional title "Mother of God" some unclarified assertion in the faith he has inherited, that Mary's Son is in some sense divine.

All this is certainly not what one would want of the present situation, but the portrayal is unfortunately not a distortion.

<sup>35</sup> Laurentin, *Court traité*, p. 122, n. 7.

110 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

Much of what is being written about Christ today seems to savor of ancient Nestorianism in so emphasizing the human side of Christ as to be rendered incapable of uniting it with the divine dimension of his being in the one person Jesus Christ. Neglect of the divine in Christ may betray an even more radical Arianism. One wonders, however, whether either *Theotokos* or *homoousios* may be expected to bear the weight of correcting these born-again errors. They are indeed the same errors as found in fourth- and fifth-century minds, but they are now errors of twentieth-century minds, speaking differently out of a different cultural and religious ambience with different interests and motivations and so on. The absence of any but casual mention of Mary in the works of Christology, even by Catholic authors presently claiming attention, is not the root cause of their shortcomings, whether bordering on Nestorianism or Arianism. Hence, emphasis on Mary as Mother of God will not suddenly bring light; it probably will not even be granted a hearing.

But this does not at all mean that *Theotokos* must simply be placed with reverence among relics of past battles for the faith, as, say, in a war museum there are to be found weapons once very powerful but now of only antiquarian interest. Rather, as Gerald O'Collins puts it, "A dogma's oblique implications for life may turn out to be more important for an individual than anything it directly denotes."<sup>36</sup> Each of us, he goes on to say, "has taken in a different world before we give these councils a hearing," and our different experience—even our sufferance of so many a modern Christology that strikes us as alien to what is central in the faith—may enable a dogma like that summed up in the title Mother of God "not only to convey meaning but also create moods, evoke various emotional reactions, and frequently to communicate more" by richer connotation than by direct statement.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *The Case Against Dogma* (New York: Paulist, 1975), p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36 f.

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 111

What are some of these connotations that come to mind as "Mother of God" is reassessed today?

*B. Assertion of Christ's Divinity*

There is first the reassertion—not really reappraisal—of the traditional safeguarding role this dogma has always had in reference to Christ's divinity. Those open to considering the interrelationship of mysteries will find reassuring such an unambiguous assertion in the ecumenically-motivated work, *The Common Catechism*:

To deny that Mary is the mother of God is equivalent to denying that God became man, or at the very least to a view of Christ totally different from that portrayed by the New Testament, tradition, and the Church's creeds. But that would involve calling into question the foundations of belief in our redemption.<sup>38</sup>

One may be surprised at the calm assertion, "There are hardly any objections raised against the title 'mother of God'—particularly wherever people adhere to the traditional acknowledgment of Christ as found in the Creeds."<sup>39</sup>

Whereas the "*Dutch Catechism*" was found defective in its vagueness on the virginal conception, little can be faulted in the one paragraph given to *Theotokos*, placing it in proper historical perspective:

To counteract this tendency [of not really seeing in his human life the person of the Son of God] the Council of Ephesus proclaimed in 431 that in spite of the difference between divine and human nature, there is one person in Christ. We find God in the man Jesus. To express forcibly this mystery of Christ, the Council gave Mary the title of *Theotokos*, Mother of God.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *The Common Catechism*, p. 625.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 628.

<sup>40</sup> *A New Catechism*, p. 80.

112 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

A paragraph in John A. Hardon's *The Catholic Catechism* is deemed adequate to say the same:

Unless Mary could be called Mother of God in a true sense, and not by a shift of language; if her divine maternity meant that she gave birth to a mere man and not to the divine Word Incarnate, the hypostatic union is denied and Mary is not the Mother of God because her Son was not also the Son of God.<sup>41</sup>

Monika Hellwig's handling of the dogma shows sensitivity to how it colors a personal relationship to Jesus in all the wealth of his being:

Under the rubric "Mary is the Mother of God" the Council of Ephesus in 431 reasserted that we are speaking of one single subject, one single person, Jesus, the man, the divine Word. To relate to him is to enjoy a human relationship with him who is human, both of Mary, and it is also to be in immediate relationship with God present and acting in our world. . . . We are to pay honor to Jesus Christ and place our faith in him in an unconditional way that is appropriate to the divine. Modern Christians may feel a certain impatience with the endless quibbling over words and the use of words, but the issue behind them is important. It is the issue of our way of seeking and finding salvation.<sup>42</sup>

In a work subtitled *An Essential Catechism*, Andrew M. Greeley accurately gives a "theological note" on the background of the title:

Most Christians have called Mary the mother of God because of an ancient theological custom called the "communication of idioms,"

<sup>41</sup> John A. Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 151. A long footnote on page 578 gives references to the conciliar magisterium with the introductory statement, "Few doctrines of Christianity have been more explicitly taught by the ecumenical councils than Mary's divine maternity."

<sup>42</sup> Monika K. Hellwig, *Understanding Catholicism* (New York: Paulist, 1981), pp. 77 f.



*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 113

which was based on the philosophical terminology used in the third- and fourth-century controversies over Jesus. Jesus was described in these terms as having both a divine and human nature but being only a divine person. Whatever was said of the human nature could also by this custom be predicated of the person. Thus as the mother of the man Jesus (the human nature), Mary could be said to be the mother of God.<sup>43</sup>

One detects an awareness of current efforts to rephrase Ephesus and Chalcedon in Greeley's concluding remark:

. . . It could be said that Mary is the mother of God because she is the mother of the man with whom God is most completely united and in whom He most totally discloses himself to us. Further clarification must await progress in current attempts to restate the nature of the union of "man like us" and "something more than human" in modern philosophical categories.<sup>44</sup>

All the above citations are found in presentations of Catholic faith intended for adults. One reference to an eighth-grade religion book may suffice as a sample of more traditional catechesis on this dogma intended for younger ears:

The Blessed Virgin is truly the Mother of God. . . . Even though your own mother gave you only your body, not your soul (which came directly from God), she is the mother of the person you are. She is *your* mother. In the same way, Mary is the Mother of the Person he is. That Person is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. He is God. Therefore, Mary truly is the Mother of God.<sup>45</sup>

Again, none of the above treatments can be described as a reappraisal of the dogma. But they will enhearten Christians who

<sup>43</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *The Great Mysteries: An Essential Catechism* (New York: Seabury, 1976), p. 124.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Live the Truth, Give the Truth* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1976), pp. 30 f., cited by John A. Hardon, "The Blessed Virgin in Modern Catechetics," article reprinted from *Immaculata* 31 (September 1980): 4.

114 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

are concerned whether the dogma is being taught in its traditional function as an expression of faith in Christ's divinity. Other connotations of the dogma which are now to be discussed may qualify more accurately as reappraisals or at least as points of contact with other mysteries than that of Christ's divinity or the unity of his person.

### C. *The Role of the Mother of God in Christ's Mission*

Contemporary interest often focuses on Christ's work and mission more than on the ontological aspects of his person. This is a new context from that which prevailed at Ephesus and Chalcedon. Nonetheless, in this context also, the title Mother of God is seen as a reminder that Mary's role in Christ's mission is to be dated from the origin of his life, not just, for example, from Calvary where the Fourth Gospel records Christ's words of commission to her. Already as Mother of God, thanks to her role at Christ's conception and birth, she has been given a share in his saving mission. Thus in a study of the divine motherhood as presented in chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium*, Salvatore Meo gives this first conclusion:

The divine maternity is seen in relation not so much to the problems of the Incarnation, as to the whole Marian thematic considered in the broader perspective of the saving mystery of Christ and the Church.<sup>46</sup>

### D. *The Mother of God: Psychological Approaches*

Already in the fifth century an interesting change in terminology was beginning. The term *Theotokos*, rendered in the Latin *Deipara*, means literally "bringer-forth of God." It was not long before Christian intuition felt the need to express better the fact that Mary's function toward her Son was not merely biological but also psychological and spiritual. Hence in the West

<sup>46</sup> Salvatore Meo, "La maternità salvifica di Maria: Sviluppo e precisazioni dottrinali nei concili ecumenici," in *Il Salvatore e la Vergine-Madre* (Atti del 3° Simposio Mariologico Internazionale, Roma, ottobre 1980. Roma: Edizioni "Marianum," 1981), p. 223.

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 115

the usual equivalent of *Theotokos* came to be *Dei Genitrix* and, even more evocative of a fully maternal role, simply *Mater Dei*. It is this developed term, rather than the more primitive *Theotokos*, that is translated into our modern languages as "Mother of God."

This more refined sensitivity regarding a maternal role finds an echo in our own age with its concern to explore the psychological implications of the truth that Mary is Mother of God's Son. Meo, for example, concludes:

The concept of the divine motherhood does not come limited just to the moment of conception and birth, but embraces the entire course of the life of mother and Son, expressing all the continuing process of motherly growth and progressive union with the Son. In this sense the divine maternity has its fundamental root in the Incarnation, but is complete in the whole course of her life and perfected in the glory of the assumption.<sup>47</sup>

When Paul VI in *Marialis Cultus* called for an anthropological approach to the study of Mary, part of what he was envisaging can safely be said to be this awareness of Mary's psychological role as mother: her specifically maternal influence on her Son in his conscious and subconscious life, the changes their relationship underwent as his career unfolded—changes hinted at in several Gospel passages—the "triangular" relationships lived by Mary, her Child, and Joseph; the debt Jesus probably owes his mother for his characteristic kindness and mercy; and so on.<sup>48</sup>

*E. Mary's Divine Motherhood as Shared by the Church*

The final doctrinal consideration found in chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium* expresses the ecclesial dimension of Mary's divine motherhood, type of the Church's apostolic love:

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Theodore Koehler, "Qui est Marie-Théotokos dans la doctrine christologique et ses difficultés actuelles?" in *EtM* 38 (Paris: Société Française d'Etudes Mariales, 1981): 11-32.

116 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

The Church, therefore, in her apostolic work too, rightly looks to her who gave birth to Christ, who was thus conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, in order that through the Church he could be born and increase in the hearts of the faithful. In her life the Virgin has been a model of that motherly love with which all who join in the Church's apostolic mission for the regeneration of mankind should be animated.<sup>49</sup>

Thus Mary's motherhood relates her to the person of Christ her Son not only in his human existence but also in his life as mystically shared by all believers. And since it is the Church's mission to bring Christ to live in the faithful, whoever is involved in this mission shares mystically in Mary's motherhood of Christ. The divine motherhood is not a static event of the past referable only to Mary, but a reality that is constantly being renewed in the history of salvation through the apostolic work of the Church. Mary is the first to live this motherhood in eminent fashion, but not the only one, since Holy Mother Church is called to realize it in another mode throughout history. Mary's virginal motherhood is one of the most fundamental reasons why she is type and figure of the Church.

In both modes of realizing the divine motherhood, however different, the Holy Spirit is the active agent bringing Christ to be, whether in the womb of Mary or in the hearts of the faithful. Tradition has designated these two aspects of the divine motherhood as physical with respect to Christ in his human existence and spiritual with respect to Christ in his existence in the hearts of the faithful. The one is a motherhood of physically conceiving and bearing a Son; the other a motherhood brought about through faith and baptism. It will be remembered that both these aspects are realized in the portrait that the Gospels give of Mary's maternal relation to her Son. She conceives and bears him, in every sense physically his mother, so that the earliest mention of her in the New Testament is a reference to Jesus as "born of woman" (Gal 4:4). But it was in a unique way that she

<sup>49</sup> Flannery, *Vatican*, p. 421: *Lumen Gentium*, chap. 8, art. 65.

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 117

became his mother through believing God's word. This twofold character of her motherhood corresponds to Christ's two titles as Son and as Word—God's Son born of Mary, God's Word made flesh through her faith. The Fathers bound the two aspects together unforgettably in asserting that by faith she conceived Christ in her mind before she did so in her womb: *prius mente quam ventre*. She is Mother of God, therefore, by reason of her faith, the same faith through which, again by the work of the Holy Spirit, the Church herself becomes Holy Mother of the mystical Christ.<sup>50</sup>

*F. Relations of the Mother of God to the Three Divine Persons*

One last aspect of Mary's motherhood leads to the most fundamental mystery of all, the Trinity, and gives some accounting of the relationships Mary has to each of the Divine Persons. Vatican II presents this depth of the mystery in article 53 of *Lumen Gentium*:

Redeemed in a more exalted fashion by reason of the merits of her Son and united to him by a close and indissoluble tie, she is endowed with the high office and dignity of the Mother of the Son of God, and therefore she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>51</sup>

Daughter of the Father, temple of the Holy Spirit—so the fathers of Vatican II preferred to speak. But, to account for Mary's relation to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, the title "spouse" has at different times been suggested.

"Spouse of the Holy Spirit" has a familiar ring to it and has several times been used by John Paul II, in the traces of Blessed Maximilian Kolbe,<sup>52</sup> one of the most recent to use a title dating back to the Middle Ages in the West. Coming very close to the expression in *Marialis Cultus*, Paul VI seems, nevertheless, to have refrained studiously from using it:

<sup>50</sup> Koehler, "Qui est Marie-Théotokos," pp. 29-32.

<sup>51</sup> Flannery, *Vatican*, p. 414: *Lumen Gentium*, chap. 8, art. 53.

<sup>52</sup> Laurentin, "Bulletin," *RSPT* 65, No. 1 (1981): 142.

118 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

Examining more deeply the mystery of the Incarnation, [the Fathers] saw in the mysterious relationship between the Spirit and Mary an aspect redolent of marriage, poetically portrayed by Prudentius: "The unwed Virgin espoused the Spirit," and they called her "the Temple of the Holy Spirit," an expression that emphasizes the sacred character of the Virgin, now the permanent dwelling of the Spirit of God.<sup>53</sup>

As René Laurentin has often remarked, "Spouse of the Holy Spirit" has the disadvantage of suggesting an equality of partners in a divine marriage, something which Scripture deliberately avoids. The transcendent role of the Holy Spirit is not that of a partner like a spouse; rather, from within he stirs Mary to her proper role as Virgin Mother of God's Son:

He acts here as elsewhere from within, *ex intimo*, stirring up the life-giving potentialities of this woman who has opened herself entirely to grace. . . . He does not act as a kind of second cause, along with the maternal causality of Mary; rather, he activates her from within. . . . This is his proper manner of acting. Thus, when according to St. Paul he makes us say "Abba, Father" (Rom 8:15, Gal 4:6), it is not he who says the word, for he is not the Son of the Father; we alone are moved by him to say it, from the depths of our being. In a like way he enables Mary to be Mother of a Son, of whom he is in no sense the Father.<sup>54</sup>

Other authors, equally prone to lyrical and poetic language in their sermons usually, describe Mary as spouse of the Father. Representative of them, St. Lawrence of Brindisi speaks of her as united to God "in a divine marriage."<sup>55</sup> He even amends John 3:16 to read, "God so loved Mary that he gave his only-begotten

<sup>53</sup> Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation*, p. 24: *Marialis Cultus*, art. 26.

<sup>54</sup> Laurentin, *Court traité*, p. 124.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence of Brindisi, "In visionem S. Joannis Evangelistae, Sermo 1, 7 and 2, 4," cited by Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (2 vols.; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 2: 27.

*The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood* 119

Son.”<sup>56</sup> This road has been traveled too far, however, when enthusiasm over Mary as the Beloved Bride of God brings one to the point of saying, “An analogy seems to suggest itself: Mary is to God as the Church is to Christ.”<sup>57</sup> What is remarkable, though, is that the proposal should be made by a contemporary author in the Reform tradition.

If a sponsal relationship of Mary toward any of the Divine Persons is to be spoken of, it becomes necessary to say and then immediately explain—no easy task—how Mary is mystically Spouse of her Son as well as physically his Mother. One recalls the well-known but unavailing effort of Matthias-Joseph Scheeben to commend his notion of bridal motherhood as “the key to all Mariology,”<sup>58</sup> and, much earlier yet, the slow evolution of the Eve-Mary parallel to include by the time of the Middle Ages the notion that Mary was, in some loose sense, *adjutorium simile sibi* with regard to Christ. But at this point probably one humbly realizes anew how inadequate human analogies are to the task of describing mystery; yet one remains convinced that the riches of a mystery must not frighten because of their paradox.

### CONCLUSION

For the Spouse/Mother paradox, of course, is not the only one that contemplation of the full mystery of Mary will uncover. Much earlier to emerge in history and much more fundamental to the faith is the very paradox Virgin/Mother represented by the two dogmas that have been the object of this paper. Juxtaposing them one last time one can observe how they illustrate the mystery of grace, the mystery of God’s communication of himself to his human creature, who freely gives God welcome.

Throughout history the mystery of grace offers the particular

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence of Brindisi, “Sermo super Missus Est, 8, 5,” cited by Graef, *Mary*, 2: 28.

<sup>57</sup> W. Paul Jones, “Mary and Christology: A Protestant View,” in *Ecumenist* 16 (1978): 83.

<sup>58</sup> Matthias-Joseph Scheeben, *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, ed. 1882, cited in Graef, *Mary*, 2: 119.

120 *The Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood*

challenge of recognizing God's unfailing causality and at the same time the role of human freedom. And although in every human act under grace both causalities, God's and man's, are present, one or the other will appear more strikingly in given acts. God's causality, for example, is more evident in an infant baptism, the human person's role more striking in the forgiveness extended an enemy. And so the following comparison suggests itself.

The virginal conception represents God's all-powerful role, which awaits only the Virgin's consent in order to effect the coming of God's Son. Even her consent is expressed in terms of utter receptivity: "Be it done to me. . . ." God's role is in the foreground. The divine motherhood, correspondingly, suggests the depth of Mary's human activity in cooperation. She not only conceives and bears God's Son, she is in the fullest psychological sense his Mother, and he enters the human family totally dependent on her in his human needs.

Again, it is understood that in this simple comparison there is no strict apportionment of roles: in both mysteries God operates mightily, as in both mysteries the role of Mary is present. But the tonality is transposed, the lighting different. In the virginal conception Mary can be heard saying, "He has done great things for me." And in the second mystery, angels shared with shepherds their marvel that God's Son should be found wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, by the loving hands of his Mother.

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