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THE KERYGMATIC CENTER OF THE DOGMA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION IN RELATION TO THE PROJECT OF A “NEW EVANGELIZATION”

*Richard H. Bulzacchelli, S.T.D.**

Following the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has turned decisively to ecumenical dialogue and has had to confront the reality that the Marian dogmas appear, to many, as obstacles to, rather than avenues for, the proclamation of the Gospel. The reasons for this assessment are obvious, as it has generally been observed, for example, by Karl Rahner, that the basic presuppositions of a Protestant soteriology preclude Mariology, while the basic presuppositions of a Catholic soteriology clearly require it.¹ But, from an authentically Catholic point of view, if a dogma is really a dogma, it should

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¹ Karl Rahner, “The Fundamental Principle of Marian Theology,” *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000): 86–122 (91, n.8). Catholic soteriology, especially as it has developed in response to the issues raised during the Protestant Reformation and the polemical postures assumed therein, has tended to emphasize the involvement of human agency in the process of salvation. Protestant theory, however, involves, in the main, an emphasis on divine sovereignty to the exclusion of human agency in salvation. Our salvation comes to us entirely as a gift of grace, such that any cooperation we can attribute to the human person must be regarded as an effect only, and in no sense a component of the work of salvation. Mariology involves an exploration precisely of the question of the cooperation of a pure creature in the process of salvation, such that the whole soteriological point of dispute between Protestants and Catholics stands or falls on the Marian question.

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be expected to possess kerygmatic value—its proclamation should elucidate the Gospel, precisely as “good news,” and help people find their way to embracing the truth of Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation. That this truth at times evades even Catholics is symptomatic of a deeper problem that, in its most serious manifestations, has led to a general deadening of the faith even in the hearts of many who claim to believe, and who, thus, profess to be “devout Catholics” while holding views about the universe, about human life and its meaning, about morality, and about God and our relationship with him, that contradict the fundamental truths of revelation. We see ourselves as believers, but, like the dismissive crowds who scoff at the Madman in Nietzsche’s aphorism about the death of God, cannot recognize that our own minds and hearts have long since turned from the faith,² and remain tethered to it today only by the drawn-out thread of our baptismal garment, unraveling but unbreakable, thanks to the infinite mercy of God, who works in the sacraments regardless of our own unworthiness.

But this is the occasion that has inspired a call for a “New Evangelization” of cultures in which Christianity enjoys a long history, but which have become “lukewarm” in their adherence to the faith, or have even begun to enter upon a post-Christian age. In this context, the Gospel must be preached anew; but this means understanding the cultural situation of the present time and place, and identifying the way forward for the Gospel message in this new context. In this paper, we will examine the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in this light, considering how that dogma has the power to arouse in the hearts of human beings living in the contemporary West, a fervent will to believe the Gospel as “good news” for their own lives. And, since our real interlocutor as concerns this point is not merely the agnostic or the atheist, but also the Protestant, Evangelical, or drifting Catholic, our focus in this paper will be to expose the link between the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and the need for a genuinely saving faith as it concerns those

² Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science with a Prelude to Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), III.125.

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who already claim to believe, but who find difficulty in seeing the place of Marian dogma in the message of the Gospel. We will argue that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception provides us with a way of understanding—indeed, with the only truly coherent way of understanding—how it is that the Church can be indefectible while at once being comprised of woefully deficient disciples, weak in faith. It helps us to see how it could have been that Israel could be linked to the New Covenant, and not merely divided from it, and that it could be linked in a way that makes sense given what we have in common even now—our human frailty. But, before we attempt to express the dogmatic content of the Immaculate Conception in theological terms, we should attempt to place the project of the New Evangelization in its appropriate historical context, for that will help us identify the problem the dogma of the Immaculate Conception finally needs to address.

The Project of the New Evangelization

Pope Paul VI associated the New Evangelization with the Pentecost event described in the Acts of the Apostles, because evangelization, he insisted, belongs to the inner logic of the Church from her very beginning.³ In this sense, insofar as the renewal of the world in Christ through grace is the Church's soterionomic mission, evangelization is always new. This same insight lies behind Karol Wojtyła's remark to Henri de Lubac in February of 1968 that, against the secularism that threatens to pulverize the fundamental uniqueness of each human person in the modern world, "we must oppose, rather than sterile polemics, a kind of 'recapitulation' of the inviolable mystery of the person."⁴ Wojtyła wrote that letter to de Lubac while writing *The Acting Person*, not a commentary on the Gospel, but the point remains relevant to an understanding of the project of the New Evangelization, nonetheless. It is true to say that, insofar as the Gospel has to do with the renewal of the world in the order of grace, it must always be,

³ Pope Paul VI, "Regina Coeli Address" for Pentecost Sunday, 17 May 1970.

⁴ Cited from, Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances That Occasioned His Writings*, trans. Anne Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Communio Books/Ignatius Press, 1993), 171-172.

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in a certain sense, “new” to the world if it is to remain, perennially, what it is *for* the world.

The key to understanding the “newness” of the Gospel does not lie, however, in the supposition that the Gospel is constantly changing—constantly evolving along some Hegelian dialectical path, such that what had come before is to be transcended in favor of something else entirely, that the Christians of yesterday would never be able to recognize as their own faith. Rather, the idea is that the Gospel rests in the self-revelation of God, who utterly transcends the dimension of chronological time, and yet, enters into it and shapes it, conforming it to himself. If we think of human history in this way, then Einstein’s insight that time and space are intertwined becomes theologically useful to us. Time is a dimension of the material world, and is, in that sense, itself, matter—it has a certain *shape* and takes a certain *form*, just as it has a kind of *quantity*. In Greek, this idea was represented by the word *χρόνος* (*chronos*). But in God’s self-revelation, that which is beyond time, and thus, beyond matter, enters in and gives matter—and time—an otherwise unattainable shape and form. The use of the Greek word *καιρός* (*kairos*) in the New Testament represents this idea. And it is here that we understand how the Gospel is always *new* and yet always *one* and, from age to age, the same. Another Greek word—*δόγμα* (*dogma*)—is used by the Church to represent this reality.⁵

⁵The word *δόγμα* (*dogma*) does appear in Scripture (Luke 2:1; Acts 16:4, 17:7; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14), where its use is sometimes according to the ancient secular and political meaning of the term, indicating a “decree” promulgated by the competent authority. E.g., “It came to be in those days [that] a decree (*δόγμα*) went out from Caesar Augustus [that] each and every [resident] of the inhabited world should be registered” (Luke 2:1). In this context, the term is employed to indicate a manifestation of authority, and thus represents an assertion of power and a kind of “self revelation.” Actually, that meaning is well-represented in the present passage, because the act of census taking represented a form of political aggrandizement, as the ruler could assert at once, “I am the ruler of all I survey,” and, “In the territories to which I lay claim, I govern a populous of this many.” Tellingly, in the Old Testament, we read about David’s folly in ordering a census of Israel, incurring God’s wrath (2 Sam. 24:1-25, 1 Chron. 21:1-30), and which the Chronicler attributes to a Satanic temptation (1 Chron. 21:1). In the Old Testament, censuses are valid in God’s eyes only when God himself orders them. Thus, in the New Testament, when the word *δόγμα* comes to be used in connection to the

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So, it is *dogma* that remains of the Gospel as it is given and received in every generation and in every place of human habitation. To use a scholastic mode of expression, then, we would say that the “matter” of the Church’s doctrinal articulations across time and cultures is the historicity of the people who must receive the Gospel, while the “form” is the dogma itself that comes to shape that historicity as the Gospel permeates the “soil” of the culture, and of the human heart. The Gospel, in other words, as *dogma*, is preverbal, and apprehended through the eyes of faith as what the New Testament writers described in terms of “vision.”⁶ This metaphor indicates the specific quality of dogma as mystery—*μυστήριον* (*mysterion*)—that which is hidden from view, precisely in its proximity to us, requiring a new mode of awareness to facilitate our perception of it. Theologians would eventually explain that mystery is that which cannot be seen as such, but instead provides the light by which all else can be seen anew. Dogma comes to be perceived more fully, more deeply, and more clearly, over time, because it is mysterious; but it is given, in itself, whole and entire in God’s self-revelation: Jesus Christ.

Now, this brief lesson in the relationship between dogma and doctrine as a correlate to eternity and time may seem somewhat remedial, but it has relevance for the question at hand. There has to be some “newness” in the Gospel’s confrontation with the world, such that the world *can* be confronted—convicted—and renewed by it. And it is here that the early Christians spoke of *κηρύγματος* (*kerygmatos*)—the quality of a truth, or in the presentation of a truth, that opens the heart to receive it. For all the unquestionable benefits the Scholastics left the Church in the high Middle Ages, it must be admitted that theology, to its great detriment, saw a distancing between doctrine and *kerygma*. The task of formulating doctrine to express the dogma received in faith gradually became not only a *distinct* task, but, in fact, a *separate* task

activities of the Church and apostolic judgment, the implication is that these judgments are undertaken at *God’s* command as a manifestation of *his* authority, and thus, an act of God’s self-revelation.

⁶ The word *θεάομαι* (*theaomai*) means “to gaze upon,” “to look upon,” “to contemplate,” “to behold,” or, “to see with the eyes of the mind.”

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from preaching the Gospel to enliven the heart of the hearer so as to awaken in him the desire and will to believe. Truth was seen more and more as belonging to the intellect, not the heart, until, eventually, adherence to the Gospel became, for some, adherence to a set of doctrinal formulas dispassionately affirmed. In time, this separation, relegating the whole of theology to the status of an intellectual exercise, allowed confusion to develop over the important difference between actual doctrinal articulations of the Church and expert theological opinion drawn—again, with increasingly dispassionate consistency—from previously accepted propositions. Sometimes those opinions were deeply disturbing to the average believer, but were still, frequently, mistaken for doctrine by those who affirmed them. On the matter of particular predestination and reprobation, for example, a view widely accepted by the Scholastics, St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, simply advised his priests to avoid the subject in preaching the Gospel. “Although there is much truth in the assertion that no one can save himself without being predestined and without having faith and grace,” he explains, “we must be very cautious in the manner of speaking and communicating with others about these things. . . . We ought not, by way of custom, to speak much of predestination. . . .”⁷

Now, there can be no question that the Gospel does contain “hard sayings” that challenge the hearer’s will to believe. Some of these are directly acknowledged as such in the Bible itself.⁸ So, on this basis, Ignatius’ advice does not immediately appear problematic. The real issue, we suggest, lies in the fact that he thinks he has identified an element of dogma that generally ought not be preached—that he has distilled an aspect of God’s self-revelation that it is imprudent to reveal to others.

⁷ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, §§ 14 and 15, in Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss, S.J., The Classics of Western Spirituality: A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 213.

⁸ E.g., in the Bread of Life Discourse in John’s Gospel (6:24-63), Jesus’ hearers clearly find his words disturbing, asking one another, “How does he have the power of operation (Πῶς δύναται = *Pos dynatai*) to give us his flesh to eat?” (v. 52), and again, “This is the unyielding word (Σκληρός ἐστιν ὁ λόγος οὗτος = *sklēros estin ho logos outos*). Who has the power of operation (Πῶς δύναται) to hear it?” (v. 60).

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Pope Pius XII addressed precisely this sort of error when he said that, "Mysteries revealed by God cannot be harmful to men, nor should they remain as treasures hidden in a field, useless. They have been given from on high precisely to help the spiritual progress of those who study them in a spirit of piety."⁹ Ignatius' error occurs precisely at the point at which we lose sight of this fact and disallow the kerygmatic quality of a proposition to direct our theological opinions, thus, consigning doctrinal development to an artificially academic realm, far removed from the pastoral purpose that ought to stand as its immediate concern.

The project of the New Evangelization, then, understood as the Church's refocused interest in evangelization's prerequisite quality of perpetual newness, represents an effort to place the kerygmatic value of dogmatic truth at the center of doctrinal articulation and pastoral initiative. This effort requires the recognition of the culturo-historical "matter" into which the Gospel is being offered for reception.¹⁰ "Why," we must ask,

⁹ Pope Pius XII, encyclical letter, *Mystici corporis Christi* (29 June 1943), § 10. Vatican translation.

¹⁰ Writing about the Dutch Catechism (*De Nieuwe Katechismus, geloofsverkondiging voor volwassenen*) published by the bishops of the Netherlands in 1966 as the first attempt by a regional synod to produce a Catechism in the post-Vatican II period, for which he had both praise and criticism, Joseph Ratzinger makes exactly this point, describing it as the necessary evangelical mandate of the Church today. He writes, "[T]he fact that the teaching on original sin [in the Dutch Catechism] is unsatisfactory in many respects, like the deficiencies of its teaching on redemption and the Eucharist, is only partly a failure of this book and of the particular path that it has chosen; to a considerable extent it is also simply an expression of the critical state of theology as a whole when faced with these problems, which demand a fundamentally new reflection and a new expression that has not yet been discovered in a convincing manner. Of course, one can repeat the classical formulas. But ultimately that accomplishes little. There has to be a new inquiry into what they mean, into the matter behind these formulas. That appears to be possible only by translating Then into Today, a process that must be carried out within the scholarly reflection of theology; but then that demands a further and separate step of translating what has been grasped through that reflection into the language of preaching. Thus two extremely difficult translation processes are required, in which there is more than one [potential] source of errors. But that does not relieve us of the duty to get to work" (Joseph Ratzinger, "Theology and Preaching in the Dutch Catechism," trans. Michael J. Miller, in Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*, unabridged ed., trans. Michael J. Miller and Matthew J. O'Connell, ed. Michael J. Miller

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“and on what basis, would our interlocutor perceive the news of Jesus Christ, and of any particular dimension of that reality, as ‘good’ and ‘to be embraced,’ even when difficult?”

If we think of the project of a “New Evangelization” as a hermeneutical paradigm, in other words, then it consists in the recognition that every dogmatic assertion must possess a kerygmatic center, which itself must hold essentially positive, rather than negative, kerygmatic value. A theological assertion that, when properly understood in its core, makes reception of the Gospel distasteful in principle—worse than what our interlocutor already believes about reality—cannot be properly dogmatic, for it is not properly “evangelistic”; there is no “Gospel” there. Even the so-called “hard sayings” in the Bible must possess such a center with its positive kerygmatic value, therefore, and it is among the tasks of today’s theologians to find ways of exposing that kerygmatic center in new contexts. The doctrine of original sin provides an excellent example of this issue, and it will lead us, then, directly into the central question for us in the present study, namely, the kerygmatic center of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

Original Sin

The doctrine of original sin clearly involves a kind of “hard saying,” especially in the contemporary context. Today, people approach the world from a sort of neo-Pelagian point of view, imagining children as possessed of an original angelic purity and innocence, and, thus, as totipotent seeds of kindness, compassion, generosity, and hope for a future better than the past.

[San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011], 59-74 (73). These comments were originally made in a lecture “given to the Catholic Student Union at the University of Tübingen on October 28, 1968, then repeated in Passau, Heidelberg, Ulm, and for an ecumenical discussion group in Tübingen” (Ratzinger, “Theology and Preaching in the Dutch Catechism, 59, n.1). The reader will note that Ratzinger is employing the matter-form analogy somewhat differently here than we do in the body of the present article, but that his overall point remains essentially the same. As concerns the Dutch Catechism, we should note, further, that, while enthusiastically embraced upon its initial publication, and quickly translated into several additional languages, numerous significant doctrinal deficiencies were widely noted by theologians and ecclesiastics in the years immediately following its first appearance. While the Dutch hierarchy resisted amendments to the text, today the document no longer bears a canonically valid *imprimatur*.

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The erroneous perception of children as originally pure holds a positive kerygmatic value for the modern western person, because it represents the possibility of cultural salvation in the wake of a history fraught with violence, despair, sloth, and selfish ambition. Each child is a fresh start for humanity, inclusive of the possibility of finally getting it right. People are invested in this neo-Pelagian thesis; they *want* it to be true, and have a will to believe that it is.

At first sight, then, the doctrine of original sin seems unlikely to offer any dogmatic truth. Where would be its kerygmatic center? To the contemporary interlocutor, original sin strikes us as unfair. Given our contemporary atomistic anthropology, we see no justification for the view that a baby should be born, as we say, “in sin” on account of another person’s act. There is no social contract that could rightfully obligate a child, from birth, to the sins of an unknown and archaeologically undiscoverable ancestor. But, more than that, original sin means that our children are born with a tendency to sin and an incapacity to love as they ought. They are not so innocent and compassionate after all, but selfish, just like their parents. Long before birth, it seems, each one of us is already doomed to fail. So the future for our children, our children’s children, and their children’s children, will surely look the same as our past. We hear echoes of Qoheleth explaining that all in the world is futility, and there is nothing really new under the sun.¹¹ If we are to succeed, in the contemporary West, in helping our interlocutor once again to embrace the Gospel, which does involve this “hard saying,” then we will have to recognize the reasons for its initial rejection; for in that recognition lies the key to discovering the “newness” of the dogmatic content of the teaching, with its positive kerygmatic value.

To be sure, we are motivated to reject the idea of original sin because we find too dark to navigate that horizon of existence in which every generation looks essentially the same as our own, with all its faults and failures—that there is no socio-political, economic, or technical vaccine against selfishness, vice, and debauchery, and that each human being born in this

¹¹ Cf. Eccles. 1:2-9.

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history is somehow harmed, both inwardly and outwardly, because of a long-forgotten transgression perpetrated by a person none of us has ever met. It seems unjust, and irreconcilable with our contemporary anthropological presuppositions, juridical expectations, and socio-political aspirations. But what, then, is really the alternative to original sin, given the undeniable failure and suffering we all experience throughout the world, and in our own lives, in every generation?

No one can seriously deny that there is sin in the world, without first denying the concept of sin altogether. Few are really willing to do that in any consistent way, because it flies in the face of the givenness of human experience, as we have already described it. To put it more explicitly, however, denying sin means denying that we are accountable to ourselves and others at this level we call "moral," and that people, including ourselves, often fail to satisfy that accountability in our actions. We may be able to deny the existence of God or of the God of the Bible; we can say that there is no absolute giver of moral norms, and attempt to cast moral normativity within a malleable framework, but we cannot in honesty to ourselves deny that we live in relation to others—to other selves, like us, capable of thinking and acting and determining our own conduct—and that this basic mode of human existence gives rise to the realm of responsibility. Indeed, we may say that living in relation to other selves simply *means* that we live within the realm of responsibility, whether we like it or not, and that, for this reason, all human beings—or nearly all human beings—experience as self-evident the imperative to be "morally good," and the limitations of our own response to that imperative.

Now, in the contemporary world, following Sartre and Nietzsche, we would very much like to deny sin and finally move beyond "good" and "evil," but we cannot really do so; for denying sin, once again, means denying what is given in human experience as the basic mode of our distinctly personal existence. And given, then, that we are unwilling, or philosophically incapable of really doing that, it follows that there is sin in the world, since we do, in fact, fall short in our actions within this realm of responsibility. If, then, we deny *original sin*, while accepting *personal sin*, we are each forced to admit a

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staggering and now incomprehensible proposition: “everyone I have ever met, inclusive, first of all, of myself, whom I know better than anyone else, has sinned, at least venially.” We all “fall short of the mark” of what the moral good really calls us to do and to be in our lives.¹²

But because our starting premise remains fundamentally atomistic, each person’s sins are entirely his own; they remain only with himself, and do not touch others in any direct and necessary way. Our sins are incommunicable. My sin is mine, and mine alone. No one else is implicated in my sin and—this is the darker side—I am definitively alone in my sin, such that no one can take my sin upon himself. Even if we deny a fully biblical sense of sin involving Covenant with the One True God, sin, in some meaningful and serious sense, remains an undeniable fact about the world; and, within a purely atomistic anthropology, we are stuck with it.¹³

It is precisely here, however, that the positive kerygmatic value of the dogmatic core of what we call “original sin” begins to show itself. The dogmatic content of the doctrine of original sin is that human beings are so inescapably bound-up together that one person’s moral character implicates the whole human family, such that sin, though a possibility in all our lives, is, on

¹² The Greek ἀμαρτάνω (*amartano*) is the consistent rendering throughout the New Testament of the word we render in English as “sin.” It means, literally, “to miss the mark.” Its distinctly covenantal implications come from the revelation—fully unfolded in the Incarnation wherein the Old Testament threads of “Son of God” and “Son of Man” become one in the Christ—that the “mark” in question is the unending life of interpersonal Covenant with God. Thus Ratzinger says, on this point, that, “The essence of sin can only be understood in an anthropology of relation, not by looking at an isolated human being. Such an anthropology is even more essential in the case of grace” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church’s Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott, S.J. [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983], 69). Thus the flight to an atomistic worldview seems to find as its first motivation the attempt to avoid the implication, and thus the imposition of the other—namely, the realm of responsibility—with its concomitant implication of sin, by which, should we admit it to consciousness, we find ourselves accused and convicted.

¹³ “We could therefore describe original sin,” says Ratzinger, “as a statement about God’s evaluation of man; evaluation not as something external, but as a revealing of the very depths of his interior being. It is the collapse of what man is, both in his origin from God and in himself, the contradiction between the will of the Creator and man’s empirical being” (Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 70).

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the basis of our interconnectedness, *reversible*, and restoration to purity from a state of sin is also possible for us, at least in theory. We could be restored from sin through the righteousness of another person, provided the right person would come along—an infinitely expansive person, who could communicate righteousness without reserve and remain infinitely righteous in the process, even while receiving to himself all the implications of our own sins as they emerge from the finitude and woeful constriction of our wretchedness. This paradox at the dogmatic core of the doctrine of original sin discloses the dogma's positive kerygmatic value: In Jesus of Nazareth, God has entered into human existence in precisely this way, and has both fully disclosed and fundamentally altered—even across time and space—the anthropological state of affairs that binds us inexorably to the moral limitations imposed on human life and conduct by the presence of sin in the world.

Scotus' Argument for the Immaculate Conception

So, turning at last to the figure of Mary, we may consider the problem of her Immaculate Conception along similar lines. What, we must ask, is the kerygmatic center of this dogma? What is its positive kerygmatic value? Why would we *want* it to be true? What in this dogma cuts to the heart of the “good news” of Jesus Christ and awakens in us the will to believe?

Duns Scotus had answered this question at the end of the thirteenth century when he explained that a Perfect Redeemer would have to be someone who redeems at least some one person perfectly, and that to be perfectly redeemed meant being spared, not only the consequences of sin, but sin itself—for it is worse, according to Scotus, to *be sinful* interiorly than it is even to go to hell. In the classical mode of argument *a fortiori*, Scotus identifies the Virgin Mary as this “perfectly redeemed person,” and, thus, as the evidence that, indeed, we have a Perfect Redeemer after all.¹⁴ A great deal has happened,

¹⁴ In his *Ordinatio*, Scotus writes that “a most perfect mediator has a most perfect act of mediation possible with respect to some person for whom he intercedes,—therefore, Christ had the most perfect degree of mediation possible in regard to some person with respect to whom he was mediator; but with respect to no person did he have a more excellent degree than as regards Mary; therefore etc. But this would only

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philosophically, theologically, and culturally in the intervening centuries, however. What would we say today?

Once again, the Project of the New Evangelization is not only a matter of preaching the Gospel in our own time, but preaching the Gospel in our own culture—a culture once strongly Christian, in which most of us bear the vestigial imprints of the faith into which we were most likely baptized, even if denominational boundaries have become increasingly porous. Most of us, in other words, identify as Christian, but we are poorly catechized, have little sense of dogma, and do not know what makes Christianity really unique among the religions of the world beyond a few purely historical claims and concrete acts, the meaning of which escapes us. Indeed, many of those who identify as Christian today do not even feel confident, as we have already said, that Christianity *is* unique among the religions of the world. So, even if we grant that we have managed to lead our interlocutor into the inner meaning of original sin, our problems in communicating the kerygmatic center of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception do not come to an end. Despite Scotus' penetrating response from the high Middle Ages, however satisfying it may be for one who still thinks, in general, like a Christian to begin with, other difficulties emerge in the contemporary mind that place us in a posture of resistance to the dogma and blind us to what Scotus had seen and tried to show us.

be because he merited to preserve her from original sin (III, dist. 3, q. 1, *contra primum*, taken from, John Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary*, trans. Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M. [Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2000]). In the same place, Scotus says again: "a more perfect mediator merits the removal of all punishment from the person whom he reconciles; but original sin is a greater punishment than the loss of divine vision, . . . since sin is the greatest punishment an intellectual nature can suffer; therefore if Christ has reconciled us most perfectly to God, he has merited this most grave punishment itself be taken from someone—but only in regard to his mother. . ." (III, dist. 3, q. 1, *contra primum*). Still again, he writes, "It is commonly assumed, however, that he [Christ] was so perfect a mediator for some person—say Mary—that he preserved her from all actual sin. Why then should perfect mediation not be from original sin as well?" (III, dist. 3, q. 1, *contra primum*).

Physicalist Thinking as a Contemporary Obstacle to Reception of the Dogma

First among these difficulties is the fact that contemporary human beings are tacitly, if not consciously, materialist or physicalist in their ontology. This view was rare in Scotus' time and, so, was not the source of his interlocutors' resistance to the dogma. Physicalism, however, presents difficulties for communicating the kerygmatic center of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception today. Even if we could transcend the limitations of a purely atomistic anthropology, how could Mary be conceived without original sin if the concept of original sin is rooted in the interconnectedness of all human life? For materialists, the world is a fluctuating sea of energy states all interacting with one another, each influencing the whole. Granting that this fact extends into a materialist anthropology, we would ask whether it must then be the case that, if Mary is immaculately conceived in the midst of a fallen world, she is somehow disconnected from the rest of us entirely, and in no need of salvation? In that event, the Immaculate Conception could still be factual, but it would be irrelevant soteriologically and eschatologically, since, in her separateness from us, Mary's righteousness has no implications in our lives or our world of relations. She belongs to an alternate universe and bleeds through to ours as an anthropological singularity. Ironically, in other words, from a quantum-based model of materialism, which might already avoid the problem of an atomistic anthropology, the Immaculate Conception would seem to introduce atomism in the case of this one person, where before, it existed nowhere in the cosmos.

The argument, in other words, rests upon the premise that Mary would stand over-against the universe as an atom isolated from the system; but we have already seen that the world simply does not work this way. So the theological challenge in the face of a nuanced materialist mode of thought is a difficult one. We are dealing here, not necessarily with a well-thought-out worldview according to which the whole question of Christianity stands as a stark alternative, but a general habit of mind, pre-conscious and unreflective, in spite of which a person may hold on to various theses irreconcilable with it. The "renewal

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of the mind”¹⁵ that reception of the Gospel must finally bring about—what the New Testament authors call *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*)¹⁶—in most cases begins slowly. So the first challenge is to face the question of whether the idea of the Immaculate Conception is, in fact, a singularity, falling outside the structure of this universe and thus irrelevant to it. Might it be possible, instead, to break the law of sin from within this universe, such that the Immaculate Conception does not imply separateness, and thus does have an influence on this universe?

Democratic Egalitarian Sensibilities and the Finitude of Time and Space as Contemporary Obstacles to Reception of the Dogma

Indeed, the perception of Mary’s separateness is a meaningful obstacle to reception of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception today, for it reflects two further issues we will have to address in providing some means of approach to the Gospel in the hearts of the contemporary interlocutor. The first is the prevailing democratic egalitarian sensibility that colors our perceptions of nearly every aspect of social life, and the second is the fact that our materialist presuppositions, however unconsciously adopted, restrict our ability to entertain possibilities concerning time and space. Furthermore, it is important to note that the two problems are actually intertwined from beginning to end.

That said, from the point of view of the prevailing democratic egalitarian sensibility, the privilege of the Immaculate Conception appears unfair. If God could fix the problem of sin and

¹⁵ Rom. 12:2.

¹⁶ Literally, this term means *a moving-beyond-one’s-thought*, and has the implication of *repentance*, whereby one comes to think differently about one’s conduct and life so as to turn to other paths. It thus also implies *conversion*. We should note, of course, that the truly optimistic quality associated with *μετάνοια* (*metanota*) in the New Testament should be seen as a development for this word in its appropriation by Christianity, since Christianity actually provides for the possibility of genuine absolution from sin. Recognizing the error of our ways and desiring to live a different sort of life now meets with a real possibility for such a transformation in the concreteness of our own personal existence.

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fallenness just by willing it away, as (apparently) in the case of Mary, why should the rest of us be subjected to it? From this starting point, the Immaculate Conception makes God seem a capricious sadist who makes us suffer purely for the sake of enacting some grand drama in which one person, no better, otherwise, than the rest of us, becomes a “queen” who stands entirely above the “law” of the human condition. Those of us who, though fallen, wish to be good, cannot help but recognize how difficult a thing it is to achieve, or even to approximate, in our present condition. So Mary, once again, appears removed from our daily lives, unable to relate to us, no matter how much she may think she does, from her celestial throne.

Today’s democratic egalitarian, however, tends to think, as we have already said, with a materialist habit of mind, and thus prefers to think of Mary, instead, as a kind of Cinderella, who began life in a state of marginalization, oppressed by systems of power to which she found herself subject, and from which she was calculatingly disenfranchised. This Mary need not have differed from us in terms of her spiritual condition at the moment of conception, for her significance is understood in sociological, rather than ontological, terms. To even the score, then, the divine justice sets things right for her by elevating her to a status above that from which she had been excluded in the past, and the figure of Mary becomes an image of vindication for the downtrodden. Tendencies in contemporary feminist Mariology sometimes reflect these sensibilities, in particular those modeled on the premises of certain theologies of liberation that take their cue more from Marxist materialism than from the Christic eschatology of the New Testament.¹⁷

Now, the Church has never seen Marian privilege as a form of elitism, but given contemporary sensibilities, we must be cognizant of the fact that people do perceive classical Marian teaching in that way, particularly in light of the excesses in pious expression so forcefully condemned by Hans Urs von Balthasar as deviations from a healthy Marian devotion, that

¹⁷ Cf., e.g., Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006).

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needed to be corrected.¹⁸ No one wants to be, today, as Balthasar described it, Mary's "lackey."¹⁹ People are expected to have a bit more self-esteem.

We will return to this problem later. In the mean time, if our intuition today bids us avoid the problem of Mary in much the same way that Ignatius of Loyola had advised avoiding the topic of predestination—on the grounds that what we have to say will present obstacles to faith—then we should immediately recognize that, somewhere along the way, we have made a mistake. We have once again divorced dogma from kerygma, and formulated our doctrinal articulations along distorted lines. Genuine dogma is, again, "good news" *ipso facto*, so a proper doctrinal articulation of it must possess a kerygmatic center to awaken in the hearer a will to believe.

Indeed, not only is the dogma of the Immaculate Conception a valid theological conclusion to be drawn from prior arguments, but it also stands as an indispensable element in the whole architecture of the faith—in the very logic of the Gospel as "good news." This is what Pope Pius IX meant in his bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, when he said that denying the dogma of the Immaculate Conception makes shipwreck of the faith.²⁰ Nonetheless, what we need to hear in order to see the Gospel as "Gospel" in one generation may not be the same as what we need to hear in another to yield a similar effect. But it is helpful to recognize that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was pronounced as such at a particular moment in history, not unlike our own, and not so very long ago. An understanding of the situation in which this dogma was pronounced will help us to understand the crisis that either threatened the dogma, such that it needed to be defined, or else that the dogma itself was seen to resolve.

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol 3: *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 313-315.

¹⁹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:314.

²⁰ Cf. Pope Pius IX, encyclical letter, *Ineffabilis Deus* (8 December 1854), in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* [*Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*], Latin-English, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), § 2804. [Hereafter referred to as Denzinger.]

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Now, in the middle nineteenth century, the secular democratic revolution out of which today's egalitarian sensibility emerged was in full force throughout the western world, and the Church was under assault on all sides. It is important to understand this—the situation of the United States, in which there existed only an unenforceable bigotry against Catholics, but otherwise broad religious freedom and clear restrictions upon the reach of the secular power into the governance of the Church was unique in this period. Everywhere else, the Church struggled against the same forces of secularization that, in their maturity, would eventually become the regimes of oppression we associate with the atrocities of the twentieth century under the National Socialists in Germany, the Stalinist Marxists in the Soviet Union, and the Maoists in the People's Republic of China. But behind these movements, which, though in seminal form, already covered much of the globe in the time of Pius IX, was an affirmation of a basically materialistic view of the universe, at the time, called "naturalism." As we noted earlier, the contemporary egalitarian sensibility and a materialist or physicalist view of reality are interrelated problems for the task of the New Evangelization. From the materialist perspective, everything important happens in the here and now—within the framework of time and space. There is nothing outside this realm to have its influence, and the Church, in proposing that our conduct should be governed by the recognition of such an influence, deals in what Marx had called, "ideology," and what Freud had called, "delusion,"²¹ such that she is viewed as an apparatus of human oppression, a kind of "opiate," as Marx had described it, "of the people."²²

This was the setting of the papacy of Pius IX, who, against the philosophical underpinnings of these secular materialist movements had published his now infamous *Syllabus of Errors*.²³ And

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*, Vol. XXIII in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1937-1939).

²² Karl Marx, "Introduction to a Contribution to Hegel's Philosophy of Right," *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (7 & 10 February 1844).

²³ Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* (8 December 1862). This syllabus appears as an appendix to Pius IX's encyclical letter *Quanta cura*, in which he would address in greater detail the naturalist and secularist presuppositions associated with the rise of Socialism and totalitarian Statism.

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it is our contention that the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary has everything to do with this state of affairs. The First Vatican Council, we should note by way of the evidence of symbolism, was opened on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December 1869: the fifteenth anniversary of the publication of *Ineffabilis Deus*.²⁴

It should be obvious to any attentive student of history and current affairs what relevance all of this has to the present context, in which very much, indeed, of what Pius IX had confronted is now being relived. We need not rehearse the details. What is more important, though, from a theological point of view, is the relationship between the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and the secularist materialism Pius IX seemed to think it opposed. It was apparently his view that the kerygmatic center of this dogma offered an antidote to modern secular materialism, awakening in modern man, who still remembered being Christian, the will to believe once more, and to taste again with delight what had been left to grow stale in the dark corners of his heart. There can be no question that this very same situation prevails in the world today, and, thus, that the very same key unlocks the very same cage that holds the Gospel in confinement. Let us try to understand it.

Karl Marx had rightly seen human beings as fundamentally relational, not as atomistic. We live in the context of relationship—as interrelated. But Marx, in espousing an exclusively materialist understanding of being, had rejected the whole metaphysical range of reality, and thus, necessarily, the dimension of the infinite in his ontology and, finally, the unbounded in interpersonal relationality. In doing so, he reduced our world of relations to a world framed by structures of power designed, consciously or unconsciously, to secure the privileges of the strong against the legitimate needs of the weak. The ancient Greek notion of *πλεονεξία* (*pleonexia*)—an insatiable appetite for material goods—existed, for Marx, within the neo-pagan framework of irremediable scarcity. There would never be any more material than there is right now, but our desire for what there is can never be satisfied. So by denying the dimension of the infinite—the dimension of

²⁴ Indeed, according to an editorial note in Denzinger (43rd ed., p. 590), Pius' *sylabus* had actually been under compilation for at least ten years. Pius having hoped to include it as an appendix to his bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8.

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God—Marx abandons the Christian and explicitly Augustinian response to the problem of material finitude: the *capax Dei*, on account of which we hunger spiritually for that which only the truly Infinite can provide, namely *God himself*.²⁵

But if the world is framed on this Marxist paradigm, then what we perceive in the Christian context as “fallenness” is accounted for by Marx in terms of the basic mode of material being, and this means that our lives are framed, necessarily, by alienation. We can make alienation worse, or we can diminish it, but we can never finally transcend it, because the fundamental limitedness of the material universe, coupled with human *pleonexia* and the lack of any Infinite good with which it could be satisfied, pits us against one another in a master-slave dynamism framed by systems of power and exploitation. There is, for Marx, no “original sin,” for there was never any truly pristine state; what we have today is not a matter of “fallenness” but of “finitude,” and the *eschaton* is, itself, only an adjustment within these limitations, not a movement beyond them in the proper sense. Within this context, the Immaculate Conception and its correlate dogmas of the Perpetual Virginity, the Divine Maternity, and the Assumption, are simply defined away, while Christianity, if it is to survive in any form whatever, must be cast in terms of materialism.²⁶

A New Approach to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: Finding Its Kerygmatic Center

If, however, the Immaculate Conception has any meaning at all, it must first mean that Mary’s purity is not the product of any action she performs within the limitations of this world, nor of any social situation from which she may have benefitted, but, instead, that it comes from *beyond* the boundaries of time and space. She does not suffer the alienating implications of Marxist finitude at any point in her life, not even in her very conception. Again, the Immaculate Conception presupposes that

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.

²⁶ For a magisterial treatment of this influence in the thinking of Christians, see, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instructio de quibusdam rationibus “Theologiae Liberationis”* (6 August 1984).

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more exists than we can measure or touch—that something truly unbounded exists, and that it somehow intersects with the world of our experience. Finitude is not *mere* finitude, for it stands in relation to the Infinite. If that were not the case, then Mary, in her conception in time and space, would have had to have been conceived within all the limits imposed by material scarcity, destined to take her place in the master-slave dynamic of perpetual and inexorable alienation. But in Christian thought, that subjugation to material limitation, which Marx is partly correct in identifying, is not seen as the inescapable condition of human existence but as “fallenness,” and, in this context, our primal alienation from the first moment of our existence in a world so structured is called “original sin.” Within the assertion of the event of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, thus, lies the assertion that she has completely escaped that alienation, even from the first moment of her existence, and can thus live her whole life transcendent of the limitations of material scarcity. Whatever the seemingly inescapable course of things, the Immaculate Conception means that something else occurred in Mary’s case—something other than a life framed within the bounds of material limitation—and, thus, that something else is truly possible for us as well, precisely because she differs from us in no other way than this.

Mary, in other words, is not a singularity, separate from everyone else in our universe, because she herself belongs to an alternate reality. The Immaculate Conception does not mean that she comes into the world from a parallel dimension and can never really be involved in our lives and our condition. It does not mean that there is something very special about Mary that has nothing to do with the rest of the human race. Instead, the Immaculate Conception means that there exists a Power truly beyond the universe, outside the constraints of the finite—the Infinite itself—which, entering into Mary, enters *through* Mary, into the whole realm of finitude. In this fact, we can see how the Immaculate Conception and the Incarnation belong together inseparably in precisely the way Pius IX would have meant in the assertion of the Immaculate Conception as properly dogmatic.

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The Immaculate Conception, then, points beyond this world to the Infinite and the Eternal. But what would we say to those who already accept as much and, yet, still deny the Immaculate Conception, and think that other facts more universally attested can achieve the same dogmatic goal? We would say that they are correct in this assessment, as far as what we have already said is concerned, but that we have not yet arrived at the real dogmatic content of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Rather, the issue of alienation itself takes us to the central point. By saying that Mary is immaculately conceived, we are saying that she enters into existence, not in a state of alienation, but in a state of harmony, integration, and communion. She lives, always, even from the first moment of her existence in her mother's womb, from-and-to her relationships with others²⁷—with God, herself, her fellow human beings, and the whole created order—as a person made in the image of the Triune God. This is the meaning of the phrase, “Χαίρε κεχαριτωμένη ὁ Κύριος μετὰ σοῦ” (*Chaire kecharitomenē, ho Kyrios meta sou*): “Be Graced, you, who enjoy now the full-fruits of a blessedness that already super-abounds in you! The *Lord*, with-and-beyond *you*!”²⁸

The implications of this quality of the Immaculate Conception reach far, indeed. The Immaculate Conception, we should note, provides the answer to Elizabeth's question in the following scene where she asks, “What is it about me (πόθεν μοι τούτο = *pothen moi touto*) that the mother of my Lord might come to me?”²⁹ At first glance, Mary's canticle may seem to beg Elizabeth's question, as if to say, “Elizabeth, there is nothing about *you* here at all, for it is really all about *me*,” but that reading of the passage misses the essential point of the narrative, which involves the meeting of Old Covenant and New in a single time and place. Elizabeth is the woman of the Old Covenant, who,

²⁷ Here, the Greek word ἐκ or ἐξ, especially as it is used in the Prologue of John's Gospel, communicates this concept. It implies there, not simply the concept of origin, but the concept of a reciprocal movement. Thus, we can translate the familiar passage at John 1:13 as, “who not from-and-to blood, nor from-and-to the will of flesh, nor from-and-to the will of man, but from-and-to God were born.”

²⁸ Luke 1:28.

²⁹ Luke 1:43.

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according to God's established *modus operandi*, conceives a child through normal human intercourse, in spite of her life-long barrenness,³⁰ giving birth to the last great prophet of the Old Covenant, who will usher in the messianic age. Mary, however, is the woman of the New Covenant, who, though not infertile, conceives a child by the power of the Holy Spirit, not through human intercourse, and gives birth to the Messiah and to Redemption. As there is nothing beyond this New Man yet to come, so there will be no subsequent women of the New Covenant. She is the only one—the first and the last of them—for she gives birth to the One who is both First and Last.³¹ Elizabeth, however, is one of many, but the last in that succession.

It is precisely this juxtaposition of facts that brings the mystery of the Visitation clearly into view and binds it to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Both Elizabeth and Mary stand, in their respective roles, as "collective personalities"—as distinct personifications of a communal reality. The communal reality for which each one stands is the same: it is the People Israel. But Elizabeth represents Israel in its present mode of existence in

³⁰ Cf., to give but two examples, the story of the birth of Isaac to Sarah (Gen. 18: 1-15, 21:1-8) and the story of the birth of Samuel to Hannah (1 Sam. 1:1-28).

³¹ The image of "the First and the Last" comes from Isaiah, where God represents his "onliness" by this phrase: "I, only, am God, the First and the Last" (Cf. 41:4, 44:6, 48:12). It then appears as a self-designation for Jesus in the Book of Revelation (1:11, 1:17, 2:8, 22:13), where clearly, in light of its origins in Isaiah, its purpose can only be to evince his divine nature. The phrase indicates not only God's uniqueness—that there are no other true gods; that there has never been, nor ever will be any other like him—but also his total transcendence of the cosmos. He is not bound by any limitations, because he is the source of all being. It is a sign of his providential care, as he holds history in his hands, and is present everywhere and in every moment of every age. But this also means, in the New Testament context to which Revelation bears witness, that Jesus totally encompasses time and space—that he is the Lord of History and the purpose of creation itself. He is the pattern on which the world is constructed, the measure of its success and meaning, and the goal toward which it is directed. At the heart of the Book of Revelation is the hope that knows the nearness of the *ἔσχατον* (*eschaton*), wherein all three aspects of the world's relation to Christ become definitively integrated, such that the trials and tribulations through which we pass in time are lifted beyond time, to be embraced by God's eternal Love. From this perspective, it becomes clear that Mary's motherhood of Christ must be seen as bound up within this eschatological now, and thus that there can never be another, and that it somehow embraces the whole of time and space.

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the fallen world, while Mary represents Israel as she ought to be—believing as she ought, and assenting as she ought. Elizabeth's response to God's call is the best we can muster in our fallen state; it is partial, halting, and incomplete, always pointing to the need for something more, and never fully able to receive the gift God wishes to make of himself. Mary's response, however, is perfect and without reservation: the very "yes" the whole of creation had always yearned to utter in spite of itself. This "yes" was, indeed, a prerequisite for the Incarnation, not on account of what God *needs*, but on account of what God *intends to do*. The God of Love only gives himself where and to the extent that he is welcome; so his perfect presence—his total circumincession with us as expressed in the language of the Chalcedonian confession, where he becomes ὁμοούσιον (*homoousion*) with us according to his manhood, just as he is, from eternity ὁμοούσιον (*homoousion*) with the Father according to his divinity³²—requires a perfect, total, unbounded "yes" to his personal self-offering. Only the Immaculate Conception makes that "yes" possible. But because the Immaculate Conception occurs precisely insofar as the unbounded love of God transcends, in the life of this pure creature, all the limitations of fallenness that would subjugate her to the law of material scarcity and finitude—what the New Testament authors referred to as "the flesh" or "the law of sin"—it is also the case that only the Immaculate Conception makes that "yes" unbounded, both on the vertical and on the horizontal axis, so that Mary's Magnificat *is indeed* a direct answer to the question Elizabeth asks about herself.³³ Elizabeth *is* Mary and Mary *is* Elizabeth, in the sense of *circum-incession* or περιχώρησις (*perichorësis*). Mary holds within herself the aspirations of all those who long to believe, who long to confess, who long to be truly good, who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" and will be satisfied.³⁴ It is precisely

³² See the Creed of the Council of Chalcedon as represented in Denzinger, 43rd ed., § 301.

³³ The reader should note, once again, that Mary's canticle (Luke 1:46-55) comes as a direct reply to Elizabeth's question about herself (Luke 1:43).

³⁴ Cf. Matt. 5:6; Luke 6:21. The reader should note the reference being made in Luke to the canticle, when we read Jesus' sayings at 6:21 and 6:25, which parallel the canticle at 1:53.

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this fact that makes the Magnificat the prayer of a Church, holy and unblemished in herself, but comprised of sinners like ourselves; for we stand in Elizabeth's place as Mary brings Christ into our lives, even as we do not quite know how to accept him.

The kerygmatic center of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, then, finally becomes apparent. We are all aware of our own limitations in righteousness and faith. We are all aware how imperfectly we confess our faith and our sins, how meagerly we reject our sins, pursue our penances, or offer God our love and personal presence. And we are all aware how haltingly we respond to his call to be holy, and to be conformed to his own heart. One possible response to this awareness is despair—to think ourselves reprobate and surely to be lost, or else to disbelieve the Gospel altogether, and restrict ourselves to Marx's purely material horizon of limited hope. But the dogma of the Immaculate Conception means that the Church has the Faith because *someone* believes, and believes in communion with all the rest, and on our behalf. We may live in alienation, but she does not, and in this insight the enigmatic prophecy of Simeon finally seems comprehensible: "a sword will pierce through [her] soul also, so that, in this way, the hearts and deliberations of many might, from their enclosure, be outwardly-turned."³⁵ In her perfect confession and perfect faith, her perfect response and love for God, unbounded because receptive of God's infinite self-outpouring, all of my own halting attempts to make response to God are given voice, and the gift she receives of God's unbounded love becomes a gift I can receive as my own, if only I would take her, with John at the foot of the Cross and Simeon at the Temple, into my intimacy.³⁶

³⁵ Luke 2:35:... διελεύσεται ρομφαία σπῶς ἀν ἀποκαλυφθῶσιν ἐκ καρδιῶν διαλογισμοί
(*dieleysetai bromphata hōpos an apokalypthōsin ek kardion dialogismoi*).

³⁶ John 19:27.