

GATE OF HEAVEN

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REFLECTIONS ON MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD

Edited by Matthew Becklo

WORD^{on}FIRE.

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Notes



Foreword

Sally Read

In the Carmelite church near to where I live, a group prays the Rosary before the start of Mass each day. For a prayer of so many words, the Rosary seems to bring on silence: the church as a whole becomes focused, my own mind becomes quieted and clear. After the Mass, a song is always sung to the Blessed Virgin, and congregants pause at a statue of her before drifting out of the door. Between that Rosary and the prayerful pause at her statue, we often hear little of Mary, and yet her presence, her silence, seems to hold us and all that we participate in: the Liturgy of the Word, the sacrifice at the altar, the reception of our Lord.

Mary's silence, and this sense of being held by her, is mysterious. As a poet, silence is very important to me—which I think is part of my fascination with Mary. Silence, in both poetry and prayer, is the ground needed for growth. Recently in Rome, I came upon a new icon of the Virgin that, for me, captures Mary's contemplative nature: *La Vergine del Silenzio* (The Virgin of Silence).¹ In this icon, the Mother of God, in

1. Commissioned by Fr. Emiliano Antenucci and written by the Benedictine nuns on the Island of San Giulio on Lake Orta in northwestern Italy. A copy of the icon

a crimson mantle, holds her left hand up as though to halt us, and her right index figure to her lips as if to say, “Shh!”

“She’s telling you to keep quiet,” the Roman store owner told me with a cackle when I bought a small copy for my desk. Mary, after so many years of me wondering what her presence really means in the Church, was teaching me to listen.

Already—in this silence—I hear the voices of both believers and nonbelievers crying, “But Mary hardly features in Scripture! Why do you give her so much importance?”

Again, we’re invited by the Virgin of Silence to listen: all through the Bible, Mary is hiding, silently, in plain sight. She is the snake-stomper of Genesis 3:15. She stands, waiting in the shadows, as Ruth says, “Why have I found favor in your sight?” (Ruth 2:10), prefiguring the words of the angel to Mary (Luke 1:30). Mary’s spirit flickers through God’s choice to crush evil “by the hand of a woman” named Judith (9:10), who is “the glory of Jerusalem” blessed “above all other women on earth” (15:9, 13:18), and through Esther’s role as intercessor for the Jewish people (as Mary intercedes for mankind). She echoes Hannah’s song of praise—“My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God” (1 Sam. 2:1)—in her own Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). But Mary isn’t some pale reminder of those who’ve gone before her. She’s their fulfillment: God’s helpmate in the Incarnation of his Son. She is our Mother given to us

was given to Pope Francis, and it hangs on a wall near his private study where everyone who comes to visit him will pass by it.

from the cross (John 19:27), and is at this moment laboring in heaven (Rev. 12:2). Her presence fills the whole of Scripture from beginning to end—and often she is silent.

Mary's few words at the Annunciation are vital. Her Magnificat is joyful. Her words at Cana are weighted with meaning. But as the shepherds came to adore her child, she "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19), and when she found her twelve-year-old teaching in the temple, she did much the same (Luke 2:51).

What does this wordlessness mean? That she's bland? Inoffensive? Submissive? Again, the strength of that hand saying, "Slow down," that finger saying, "Shh." Mary's silence is about the deepest wisdom. It was only when I read a quotation by Theodotus of Ancyra saying that the Annunciation was an act of *hearing* that I began to understand our Mother.² It was the ground of her ceaseless prayer, her fertile attention to God, that allowed her to conceive Christ. It was only when I contemplated Michelangelo's *Pietà* that I felt her *receptivity*: I saw how Mary cradled the Son, received him from the cross, with the silent surrender of prayer. Michelangelo made Mary much larger than Jesus so that she could, physically, cradle him. But anyone who's looked with attention on this sculpture knows that she's holding more than a dead body on her lap: she's holding the will of God. She's there as he's born into the world;

2. Theodotus of Ancyra, homily 4, *In Deiparum et Simeonem*, 2 (Patrologia Graeca 77, 1392CD), quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 72.

she's there as he departs it. She's there now, with him in heaven. It's this lap that we're all in as we attend Mass, connected to the silence of her listening at the Annunciation and the silence of her faith as she took the dead Christ into her arms.

The depth of that silence lends itself to the writings contained in this book. For Catherine of Siena, Mary is "Temple of the Trinity."³ For Gerard Manley Hopkins, she is like "the air we breathe."⁴ Before I discovered that Mary is seen as the shoot that will bring forth Christ (Isa. 11:1) and read Hildegard of Bingen's description of her as a "branch,"⁵ I, too, was writing about Mary as a tree: "the deep roots" beneath her son.⁶ In her school of silence, I began to understand that a tree suggests Mary because she's from the earth and reaches up to heaven—and in the family tree of salvation, she's the branch that sprouts our Savior! This makes her link to God unique—and his to her. The Christ child can hold onto nothing but her face "like a constellated sky," and she has "no lights but [his] eyes."⁷ Which makes her, also, the model of how we should love Christ and let him love us. Without Mary's unsurpassable human witness, without the resounding of Christ's joy and pain in her, his life and death would risk, far more, our indifference and forgetfulness. There is no indifference and forgetfulness in

3. See page 52.

4. See page 21.

5. See page 4.

6. See page 105.

7. See page 59.

Mary: she holds everything in the silence of her heart.

Swallowing the flesh of Christ, of course, brings on the greatest silence of all. It's difficult to think angry or unpleasant thoughts in those moments of Communion. We're caught in the arms of the Beloved, and there's no need for words. Christ in the Eucharist sees us (or lets us see that he sees us) in a remarkable way. He takes us to the inner recesses of ourselves where, in that encounter, there's nothing but him and our own listening. Often, my problems seem to dissolve. I'm reminded that my venial sins are burnt up when I receive his Flesh. For those first few moments—before I go out the door and collide with the world again—I'm straightened out, touched by the divine.

As I leave the church and go for my evening walk by the sea, I think about Mary, and the fact that she was the first to have Christ within her body—not as we do, in the form of the Host, but as a growing child who fed from her, who needed her, who carried his mother's cells within him just as she carried his. What transformation, what divinization, must she have gone through. Thomas Aquinas wrote that things are hotter the nearer they approach what is hottest, and therefore, we become more like God the closer we move to him.⁸ We can only imagine the intensity of the fire that sustains, illuminates, and transforms the Blessed Virgin.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.2.3.

I have long wanted a book like this—not only to remind me and explain to me Marian teaching but also to bring together in one place poetry and reflections about the Mother of God. Mary wrote nothing down. Her words in Scripture are few. But if we're familiar with the richness of Mary's essence—which is what this book so beautifully explicates—we're going to be brought even closer to her son.



I.
Daughter *of* Zion







The New Eve

Poem

St. Hildegard of Bingen

“O Virga ac Diadema”

O branch and diadem,
in royal purple clad,
who in your cloister strong
stand like a shield:

You burst forth blooming
but with buds
quite different than Adam's progeny—
th'entire human race.

Hail, O hail! For from your womb
came forth another life
that had been stripped by Adam from his sons.

O bloom, you did not spring
from dew nor from the drops of rain,
nor has the windy air flown over you; but radiance
divine has brought you forth upon

that noblest bough.
O branch, your blossoming
God had foreseen within the first
day of his own creation.

And by his Word he made
of you a golden matrix,
O Virgin, worthy of our praise.

How great in strength
is that man's side,
from which God brought the form of woman forth,
a mirror made
of his own every ornament,
and an embrace
of his own every creature.

The heavens' symphony resounds,
And all the earth in wonder stares,
O Mary, worthy of our praise,
for God has loved you more than all.

O cry and weep!
How deep the woe!
What sorrow seeped with guilt
into our womanhood

because the serpent hissed his wicked plan!
That woman, whom God made to be
the mother of the world,
had pricked her womb
with the wounds of ignorance,
and offered to her offspring
the full inheritance of grief.

But, O dawn,
forth from your womb has come the sun anew;
the guilt of Eve he's washed away
and through you offered humankind a blessing
even greater than the harm that Eve bestowed.

O Lady Savior,
who offered to the human race a light
anew: together join the members of your Son
into the heavens' harmony.

Scripture

Genesis 3:13–15

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." The LORD God said to the serpent,
"Because you have done this,

cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.
I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

Reflection

Bishop Barron

Catholicism

One day, early in the first century, in a hovel in the little Galilean town of Nazareth, an angel appeared to a young Israelite girl who was perhaps no more than fourteen or fifteen years old, and they had a rather extraordinary conversation. The angel greeted her: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). As is invariably the case when an angel makes an appearance, the girl was afraid. “Do not be afraid,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (Luke 1:30–31). When she wondered how this would be possible, since she had had no sexual experience, the angel explained, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power

of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35). And the girl responded to this overwhelming message with utter simplicity: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). With that the angel departed.

This young Israelite woman has beguiled the finest poets of the West, from Dante to T.S. Eliot; she has been the subject of paintings by the greatest masters, from Fra Angelico and Michelangelo to Rembrandt and El Greco; over the centuries, millions of people have visited her shrines seeking her aid and calling out to her, their mother. She is referred to as the Queen of All Saints, the Queen of Angels, and the Queen of Heaven. And she has been invoked, over and over again, across the centuries, in the words of the simplest and most beautiful prayer in the Catholic tradition: the Hail Mary.

Why has she had this staggering impact? The best answer is found in the angelic encounter, in which the essence of the biblical drama is distilled. We see the nature of God on display in the graceful, nonviolent manner of the invitation. In story after story from the mythological tradition, we note that when the gods intervene in human affairs, they do so violently, interruptively, in the manner of a rape. But in the sweet invitation of the angel at the Annunciation, something altogether different is on display. Mary's freedom and dignity are respected, and her curiosity is encouraged; she is, if I can

put it this way, courted by the heavenly messenger.

We also see a human being in full in the Virgin Mary. The Church Fathers were eager to contrast Mary, the Mother of God, with Eve, the mother of all the living. Barely grasping the full extent of what this surrender would entail, Mary nevertheless says she is “the servant of the Lord.” And in obediently adding, “Let it be with me according to your word,” she reversed the grasping disobedience of Eve. This is why medieval illustrators and commentators—so in love with the parallels, rhymes, and echoes within the Bible—imagined the *Ave* (“Greetings”) of the angel reversing Eva (Eve). On the basis of the angel’s greeting, *Kecharitomene*, Mary has been called “full of grace” (*charis* is the Greek for “grace”), and this means, basically, that she is someone who is profoundly disposed to receive gifts. In this, she becomes the New Eve, the mother of all those who would be reborn by being receptive to God’s life as a gift.

Catechism

487–488

What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ.

“God sent forth his Son,” but to prepare a body for him (Gal. 4:4; Heb. 10:5), he wanted the free co-operation of a creature. For this, from all eternity God chose for the mother

of his Son a daughter of Israel, a young Jewish woman of Nazareth in Galilee, “a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary” (Luke 1:26–27):

The Father of mercies willed that the Incarnation should be preceded by assent on the part of the predestined mother, so that just as a woman had a share in the coming of death, so also should a woman contribute to the coming of life.¹

Throughout the Old Covenant the mission of many holy women *prepared* for that of Mary. At the very beginning there was Eve; despite her disobedience, she receives the promise of a posterity that will be victorious over the evil one, as well as the promise that she will be the mother of all the living (see Gen. 3:15, 20). By virtue of this promise, Sarah conceives a son in spite of her old age (see Gen. 18:10–14, 21:1–2). Against all human expectation God chooses those who were considered powerless and weak to show forth his faithfulness to his promises: Hannah, the mother of Samuel; Deborah; Ruth; Judith and Esther; and many other women (see 1 Cor. 1:17; 1 Sam. 1). Mary “stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently hope for and receive salvation from him. After a long period of waiting the times are fulfilled in her, the exalted Daughter of Sion, and the new plan of salvation is established.”²

1. *Lumen Gentium* 56; see *LG* 61.

2. *LG* 55.

Reflection

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Against Heresies

Mary the Virgin is found obedient, saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). But Eve was disobedient; for she did not obey when as yet she was a virgin. And even as she, having indeed a husband, Adam, but being nevertheless as yet a virgin, . . . having become disobedient, was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race; so also did Mary, having a man betrothed [to her], and being nevertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience, become the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race. . . . The knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.

Prayer

St. Sophronius

Sermon

Hail full of grace, the Lord is with you. On your account joy has not only graced men, but is also granted to the powers of heaven.

Truly, *you are blessed among women.* For you have changed Eve’s curse into a blessing; and Adam, who hitherto lay under a

curse, has been blessed because of you.

Truly, you are blessed among women. Through you the Father's blessing has shone forth on mankind, setting them free of their ancient curse.

Truly, you are blessed among women, because through you your forebears have found salvation. For you were to give birth to the Savior who was to win them salvation.

Truly, you are blessed among women, for without seed you have borne, as your fruit, him who bestows blessings on the whole world and redeems it from the curse that made it sprout thorns.

Truly, you are blessed among women, because, though a woman by nature, you will become, in reality, God's mother.

Amen.



It was fitting then in God's mercy
that, as the woman began the
destruction of the world, so woman
should also begin its *recovery*, and
that, as Eve opened the way for
the fatal deed of the first Adam,
so Mary should open the way for
the great achievement of
the second Adam.

—ST. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN





She Who Is in Labor

Poem

St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein)

From “Conversation at Night”

Before the cross appears again in heaven,
Even before Elijah comes to gather his own,
The good Shepherd goes silently through the lands.
Now and then he gathers from the depths of the abyss
A little lamb, shelters it at his heart.
And then others always follow him.
But there above the throne of grace
The Mother ceaselessly pleads for her people.
She seeks souls to help her pray.
Then only when Israel has found the Lord,
Only then when he has received his own,
Will he come in manifest glory.
And we must pray for this second coming.

Scripture

Micah 5:2–5

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the
LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

Reflection

Bishop Barron

Catholicism

The Cathedral of Chartres is one of the most sumptuous and beautiful enclosed spaces in the world. Like almost all of the

other Gothic cathedrals that sprang up in France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Chartres is dedicated to *Notre Dame* (Our Lady).

All around this building dedicated to the Blessed Mother are depictions of figures from the Old Testament—Adam, Job, David, Moses, Aaron—and this is only appropriate, for Mary, the Mother of God, is the fulfillment of Zion. She recapitulates all of the great figures of the holy people whom God had prepared, in the course of many centuries, to receive his Word and make it flesh. She is, accordingly, the daughter of Abraham, the first one to listen to God in faith; she is like Sarah, Hannah, and the mother of Samson, since she gave birth while trusting in God against all expectations; she is the true Ark of the Covenant and the true Temple, for she bore the divine presence in the most intimate way possible; she is like the authors of the Psalms and the book of Wisdom and Proverbs, for she becomes the very seat of Wisdom. And she is like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—the prophets who longed for the coming of the Messiah.

St. Irenaeus says that throughout the history of salvation God was, as it were, trying on humanity, gradually suiting divinity and humanity to each other—in a word, preparing for the Incarnation. All of that preparation was a prelude to the Israelite girl, full of grace, who would say yes to the invitation to be the Mother of God.

Catechism

64

Through the prophets, God forms his people in the hope of salvation, in the expectation of a new and everlasting Covenant intended for all, to be written on their hearts (see Isa. 2:2–4; Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 10:16). The prophets proclaim a radical redemption of the People of God, purification from all their infidelities, a salvation which will include all the nations (see Ezek. 36; Isa. 49:5–6, 53:11). Above all, the poor and humble of the Lord will bear this hope. Such holy women as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Judith, and Esther kept alive the hope of Israel's salvation. The purest figure among them is Mary (see Zeph. 2:3; Luke 1:38).

Reflection

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Light of the Word

Seen from the perspective of salvation history, Micah's astonishing prophecy . . . glimpses more of the future than the prophet could have possibly realized. In the time of tribulation following the destruction of Samaria, he returns to the origins of David, who had come from Bethlehem and the tribe of Ephraim in the distant past. According to the prophecy, after the tribulation of the exile has passed, the Shepherd

of Israel will come from that place to establish a worldwide peaceable kingdom. Isaiah had spoken of the young woman who would bear the “God-with-us”; here the mother of the Messiah is simply called the “birth-giver.” The prophet reaches back to David, but the “distant past of Jesus” is eternity, and his eschatological peaceable kingdom will far surpass Israel’s expectations. Perhaps the fulfillment in Mary and her son reaches back to the Old Covenant only in order to tower high above it.

Prayer

St. Methodius of Olympus

Oration Concerning Simeon and Anna

Tremendous, truly, is the mystery connected with you, O virgin mother, spiritual throne, glorified and made worthy of God. You have brought forth, before the eyes of those in heaven and earth, a preeminent wonder. And it is a proof of this, and an irrefragable argument, that at the novelty of thy supernatural child-bearing, the angels sang on earth, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors,” by their threefold song bringing in a threefold holiness. Blessed art you among the generations of women, O most blessed of God, for by you the earth has been filled with that divine glory of God; as in the Psalms it is sung: “Blessed be his

glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.”

For if to the ark, which was the image and type of your sanctity, such honor was paid to God that to no one but the priestly order was the access to it open, or ingress allowed to behold it, the veil separating it off, and keeping the vestibule as that of a queen—what sort of veneration is due to you from us who are of creation the least, to you who are indeed a Queen; to you, the living Ark of God, the Lawgiver; to you, the heaven that contains him who can be contained of none? For since you, O holy virgin, have dawned as a bright day upon the world, and have brought forth the Sun of Righteousness, that hateful horror of darkness has been chased away; the power of the tyrant has been broken, death has been destroyed, hell swallowed up, and all enmity dissolved before the face of peace.

Amen.



The Sacred Scriptures of both the
Old and the New Testament, as
well as ancient Tradition, show the
role of the Mother of the Savior
in the economy of salvation in
an ever clearer light and draw
attention to it.

—*LUMEN GENTIUM*





The Virgin Shall Bear a Son

Poem

Gerard Manley Hopkins

From “The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe”

Wild air, world-mothering air,
Nestling me everywhere,
That each eyelash or hair
Girdles; goes home betwixt
The fleeciest, frailest-fixed
Snowflake; that's fairly mixed
With, riddles, and is rife
In every least thing's life;
This needful, never spent,
And nursing element;
My more than meat and drink,
My meal at every wink;
This air, which, by life's law,
My lung must draw and draw
Now but to breathe its praise,
Minds me in many ways
Of her who not only
Gave God's infinity

Dwindled to infancy
Welcome in womb and breast,
Birth, milk, and all the rest
But mothers each new grace
That does now reach our race—
Mary Immaculate,
Merely a woman, yet
Whose presence, power is
Great as no goddess's
Was deemèd, dreamèd; who
This one work has to do—
Let all God's glory through,
God's glory which would go
Through her and from her flow
Off, and no way but so. . . .

Be thou then, thou dear
Mother, my atmosphere;
My happier world, wherein
To wend and meet no sin;
Above me, round me lie
Fronting my froward eye
With sweet and scarless sky;
Stir in my ears, speak there
Of God's love, O live air,
Of patience, penance, prayer:
World-mothering air, air wild,

Wound with thee, in thee isled,
Fold home, fast fold thy child.

Scripture

Isaiah 7:13–14

Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman¹ is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

Reflection

Bishop Barron

Light from Light

Many skeptics across the ages have put the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Jesus forward as an indisputable sign that the Church is retrograde, stuck in a prescientific, superstitious mindset. Is not the birth of Jesus from a virgin, they wonder, just another iteration of a mythic trope found in cultures around the world?

First, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has argued, the story of the birth of Jesus from a virgin and those similar narratives from mythic traditions are only superficially similar. The more intently one studies the Gospel stories, the more unique and

1. Greek: “the virgin.”

distinctive they appear. But the most striking difference is that the myths give themselves away by their very genre: they are, quite obviously, symbolic literature, intended to indicate natural processes or general truths about the rhythms of the seasons. But the Gospel narratives concerning the birth of Jesus are placed very purposely within a recognizable historical and geographical context, grounding them in fact: “A decree went out from Emperor Augustus . . . while Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:1–2). And they are a propaedeutic to what is assuredly the biography of a real, historical figure, clearly unlike the narratives concerning Horus or Mars.

But is this teaching, the critics insist, not simply repugnant to reason, even if we grant that it differs from similar accounts? That skeptical claim is grounded in the meta-assertion that the miraculous, strictly speaking, is impossible. However, once we affirm the existence of God, which can be done on rational grounds, this dismissal of the miraculous appears more or less arbitrary. To be sure, miracles are rare, for if they were not, we would not “wonder” at them, which is the state of mind implied in the word *mirari*. But what would prevent the creative source of all finite existence, who continually makes the world from nothing and sustains it from falling back into nonbeing, from producing a state of affairs outside of the normal course? What would be irrational about saying that God, on rare occasion and for his very particular purposes, might suspend or circumvent the natural regularities that he himself established? If God can

bring something from nothing, he can surely cause a virgin to become pregnant.

Mary the Virgin also carries an extraordinarily powerful symbolic value for those with eyes to see. On the façade of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, there is a statue of Mary the Mother of God, and over her head is a depiction of the ark of the covenant, the holiest artifact in ancient Israel, the ceremonial container for the Ten Commandments and the rod of Aaron. The association is far from accidental, for Mary was seen as the fulfillment *par excellence* of the ark, since she herself bore the presence of God within her womb.

And if we allow our symbolic and associative imaginations even wider play, we can see Mary, as the Church Fathers did, as evocative of the holy people Israel itself, who bore, over long centuries and through much suffering, the word of Yahweh. It is from Mary's womb, and indeed from the womb of Israel, that the Messiah is born.

Catechism

496–498, 506–507

From the first formulations of her faith, the Church has confessed that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, affirming also the corporeal aspect of this event: Jesus was conceived “by the Holy

Spirit without human seed.”² The Fathers see in the virginal conception the sign that it truly was the Son of God who came in a humanity like our own. Thus St. Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century says:

You are firmly convinced about our Lord, who is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, Son of God according to the will and power of God, truly born of a virgin, . . . he was truly nailed to a tree for us in his flesh under Pontius Pilate . . . he truly suffered, as he is also truly risen.³

The gospel accounts understand the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work that surpasses all human understanding and possibility (see Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38): “That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit,” said the angel to Joseph about Mary his fiancée (Matt. 1:20). The Church sees here the fulfillment of the divine promise given through the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Isa. 7:14; see Matt. 1:23).

People are sometimes troubled by the silence of St. Mark’s Gospel and the New Testament Epistles about Jesus’ virginal conception. Some might wonder if we were merely dealing with legends or theological constructs not claiming to be history. To

2. Council of the Lateran (649): Denzinger-Schönmetzner 503; see DS 10-64.

3. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Smyrn.* 1-2: The Apostolic Fathers, ed. J.B. Lightfoot (London: Macmillan, 1889) II/2, 289-293; SCh 10, 154-156; see Rom. 1:3; John 1:13.

this we must respond: Faith in the virginal conception of Jesus met with the lively opposition, mockery, or incomprehension of non-believers, Jews and pagans alike;⁴ so it could hardly have been motivated by pagan mythology or by some adaptation to the ideas of the age. The meaning of this event is accessible only to faith, which understands in it the “connection of these mysteries with one another”⁵ in the totality of Christ’s mysteries, from his Incarnation to his Passover. St. Ignatius of Antioch already bears witness to this connection: “Mary’s virginity and giving birth, and even the Lord’s death escaped the notice of the prince of this world: these three mysteries worthy of proclamation were accomplished in God’s silence.”⁶ . . .

Mary is a virgin because her virginity is *the sign of her faith* “unadulterated by any doubt,” and of her undivided gift of herself to God’s will.⁷ It is her faith that enables her to become the mother of the Savior: “Mary is more blessed because she embraces faith in Christ than because she conceives the flesh of Christ.”⁸

At once virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol and the most perfect realization of the Church: “the Church indeed . . . by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother.

4. See St. Justin, *Dial.*, 99, 7: *Patrologia Graeca* 6, 708–709; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1, 32, 69: PG 11, 720–721; et al.

5. *Dei Filius* 4: DS 3016.

6. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Eph.* 19, 1: *The Apostolic Fathers* II/2, 76–80; SCh 10, 88; see 1 Cor. 2:8.

7. *Lumen Gentium* 63; see 1 Cor. 7:34–35.

8. St. Augustine, *De virg.*, 3: *Patrologia Latina* 40, 398.

By preaching and Baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life. She herself is a virgin, who keeps in its entirety and purity the faith she pledged to her spouse.”⁹

Reflection

St. Thomas Aquinas

Summa theologiae

It is fitting for four reasons that Christ should be born of a virgin. First, in order to maintain the dignity of the Father who sent him. For since Christ is the true and natural Son of God, it was not fitting that he should have another father than God: lest the dignity belonging to God be transferred to another.

Secondly, this was befitting to a property of the Son himself, who is sent. For he is the Word of God: and the word is conceived without any interior corruption: indeed, interior corruption is incompatible with perfect conception of the word. Since therefore flesh was so assumed by the Word of God, as to be the flesh of the Word of God, it was fitting that it also should be conceived without corruption of the mother.

Thirdly, this was befitting to the dignity of Christ’s humanity in which there could be no sin, since by it the sin of the world was taken away, according to John 1:29: “Here is the Lamb of God” (i.e., the Lamb without stain) “who takes away the sin of the world.” Now it was not possible in a nature

9. LG 64; see LG 63.

already corrupt, for flesh to be born from sexual intercourse without incurring the infection of original sin. Whence Augustine says (*De Nup. et Concup.* i): “In that union,” viz. the marriage of Mary and Joseph, “the nuptial intercourse alone was lacking: because in sinful flesh this could not be without fleshly concupiscence which arises from sin, and without which he wished to be conceived, who was to be without sin.”

Fourthly, on account of the very end of Incarnation of Christ, which was that men might be born again as sons of God, “not of . . . the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13), i.e., of the power of God, of which fact the very conception of Christ was to appear as an exemplar. Whence Augustine says (*De Sanct. Virg.*): “It behooved that our Head, by a notable miracle, should be born, after the flesh, of a virgin, that he might thereby signify that his members would be born, after the Spirit, of a virgin Church.”

Prayer

St. Thomas Aquinas
(attributed)

Virgin full of goodness,
Mother of mercy,
I entrust to you my body and my soul,
my thoughts and my actions,
my life and my death.

My Queen,
come to my aid
and deliver me from the snares of the devil.
Obtain for me the grace of loving
my Lord Jesus Christ, your son,
with a true and perfect love,
and after him, O Mary,
of loving you with all my heart
and above all things.
Amen.