

Praise for *Redeemer in the Womb*

“Saward combs the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, and later writers, even the icons of various periods, for thoughts hitherto unknown to most readers. This is a most unusual study and a contribution to Mariology of exceptional interest. Even more, it should prove to be an extraordinarily rich guide for meditation. I can see myself pondering it for years to come.”

—**Cardinal John O’Connor**, former Archbishop of New York

“Carefully balancing theology and spirituality, the author takes his argument all the way from the ‘revelation in the womb’ to the ‘revelation of Ethics,’ where the unborn Jesus not only reveals God but also human reality. Saward’s book is a manifesto to life, of divine life in human reality from the very moment of their encounter.”

—**Fr. Johann Roten, SM**, International Marian Research Institute,
University of Dayton

“Drawing on saints and Scripture, Fr. John Saward brings to light what the life of Christ in the womb can teach us. Not one word of Scripture is without its meaning, and not one moment of Christ’s life was superfluous. We ponder, for good reason, the events of Easter and Christmas time, but we can also contemplate with gratitude the prenatal Jesus. Fr. Saward shows us how by drawing upon the meditations of ancient Christian teachers as well as poets who illuminate what happened before the birth of Jesus.”

—**Christopher Kaczor**, St. Thomas Aquinas Fellow for the
Renewal of Catholic Intellectual Life, Word on Fire Institute,
and author of *The Ethics of Abortion*

REDEEMER
in the WOMB

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JESUS LIVING IN MARY

JOHN SAWARD

SECOND EDITION

WORD  on FIRE.

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No single translation has been followed for the Scripture references.
On occasion the author has made his own. The Psalms are cited according
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In memory of John Cardinal O'Connor,
Archbishop of New York,
courageous preacher of the Gospel of Life

For our grandchildren

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Foreword to the First Edition

✠ *John Cardinal O'Connor*

It would be difficult for me, as a priest, to say over a piece of bread the words “This is my Body,” over a cup of wine, “This is my Blood,” without feeling the presence of Mary. For me, the Sacrifice of the Mass is not only a spiritual and mysterious re-presentation of the Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus; it is similarly his conception in the womb of Mary and his Incarnation.

In the divine plan of salvation, Jesus was conceived and born of a woman. We have no way of truly knowing if it could have been otherwise, but since this is the way it was, it seems reasonable to ask if the Redeemer would have come at all had Mary refused the invitation to become his Mother.

What happened in Mary, of course, happened by the power of the Holy Spirit who “came” upon her. What happens in each Mass happens through the power of the Holy Spirit, the “coming” of the Holy Spirit upon the elements of bread and wine. Is Mary somehow present? Does the Holy Spirit continue to work through her? Could the Crucifixion have taken place without the Incarnation, the Incarnation without the conception, any of these salvific acts except through Mary? The potential for theological reflection is fascinating. It is the kind of theological reflection

that marks the provocative writing of John Saward in this book, *Redeemer in the Womb*.

It is a privilege for me periodically to conduct retreats on Mary, including special retreats for the Sisters of Life, a contemplative-apostolic community of women consecrated by vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and the protection of human life. I always speak of the intimacy between Mary and the Redeemer in her womb, as reflected in the Visitation to Elizabeth. We are told that it was when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting that the baby in her own womb, John the Baptist, "leaped for joy" (Luke 1:41–44). Older theologians used to tell us that at that instant, John the Baptist was purified of original sin. If so, could this be except by way of the presence of the unborn Jesus in Mary's womb, radiating his power into the womb of Elizabeth? Yet if the effect on John, whatever it was, came by way of the presence of Jesus, it was Mary's greeting—the word from her lips—that somehow seemed to Elizabeth to channel this effect on the infant in her own womb.

Such simple reflections on my part cannot begin to do justice to the thoughts revealed through Saward's text but are offered here simply to suggest the possibilities in exploring the nature of the relationship between Mary and the unborn infant Jesus. Unlike my own merely pious speculations, however, Saward combs the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, and later writers, even the icons of various periods, for thoughts hitherto unknown to many—almost certainly *most*—readers. My thoughts on the intimacy between Mary and her unborn child will be enlarged in future retreats because of Saward's insights.

This is a most unusual study and a contribution to Mariology of exceptional interest. Even more, it should prove to be an extraordinarily rich guide for meditation. I can see myself pondering it for years to come.

June 6, 1993

Acknowledgments

The first edition of this book was written in England and finally prepared for publication in America. The second edition is also being published by an American publishing house. I have, therefore, transatlantic debts of thankfulness to pay. The original suggestion that I should draw out the pro-life implications of Catholic faith in the Incarnation was made many years ago by Father Michael Kelly, priest of the Diocese of Leeds. I telephoned him the evening the manuscript was completed in 1992 to express my gratitude for the initial spur, but I am glad now to have a further opportunity to thank him in print. This new, thoroughly revised edition would not be appearing without the encouragement and persevering kindness of Mr. Brandon Vogt of Word on Fire. Thank you, Brandon!

The research for the book was pursued while I was teaching dogmatic theology at Ushaw College, Durham. I shall never lose my sense of privilege at sharing the life of a seminary that descended directly from the English College, Douai, and so included among its alumni many of the martyrs of England and Wales and such great men of the Church as Cardinal Merry del Val. I feel a similar sense of gratitude towards St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Overbrook, in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, where I spent six happy years during the 1990s, and the International Theological Institute in Austria, which I served as a member of the faculty until 2004. Among the many colleagues from whom I learned so much in these communities I must particularly mention my dear

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friend the late Fr. Frederick Miller of the Archdiocese of Newark, Mariologist, theologian of the spiritual life, and wise counselor of souls. Finally, and above all, I must thank my family and our parishioners in Oxford for their unwavering love and support. May Jesus living in Mary bring us all to the happiness of God the Father's house in heaven.

Oxford
The Feast of the Holy Innocents
December 28, 2022

Introduction

Jesus Living in Mary

*O Jesu vivens in Maria,
Veni et vive in famulo tuo,
In Spiritu sanctitatis tuae,
In plenitudine virtutis tuae,
In perfectione viarum tuarum,
In veritate virtutum tuarum,
In communione mysteriorum tuorum.
Dominare omni adversae potestati
In Spiritu tuo ad gloriam Patris. Amen.¹*

Jesus that dost in Mary dwell,
Be in thy servants' hearts as well,
In the spirit of thy holiness,
In the fulness of thy force and stress,
In the very ways that thy life goes
And virtues that thy pattern shows,
In the sharing of thy mysteries;
And every power in us that is
Against thy power put under feet
In the Holy Ghost the Paraclete
To the glory of the Father. Amen.²

1. This prayer was composed by Charles de Condren (1588–1641), Pierre de Bérulle's successor as Superior General of the French Oratory. It sums up the dogmatic and spiritual theology of the French School (discussed in ch. 5).

2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Oratio Patris Condren: O Jesu vivens in Maria," in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Robert Bridges, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 187.

God the Son became man at the moment of his conception by the Holy Spirit in the Blessed Virgin's womb. Then, for nine months, he whom the heaven of heavens cannot hold was housed, as a real human baby, within his Mother's body.³ "A woman," said Chesterton, "was his walking home."⁴ The first stage of the divine Word's human life was literally "in Mary," in her womb.⁵ *O Jesu vivens in Maria*. Contemporary Christology has little to say about what John Donne called this "well-beloved imprisonment."⁶ In fact, the historical mysteries of the life of Jesus as a whole do not nowadays receive the attention given them by the theologians of the past, for example, by St. Thomas Aquinas in the third part of his *Summa theologiae*, where twenty-six questions on the hypostatic union and the attributes of Christ's humanity are followed by thirty-two on the course of his human actions and experiences from Virginal Conception to Ascension.⁷

This book is an essay in reclamation. First, with the aid of the Church's Fathers and chief Doctors, drawing on Christian philosophy, liturgy, poetry, and iconography, it seeks to recover and reconsider a forgotten pearl from the treasury of revelation: the nine months of Jesus' life as an unborn child in Mary. Secondly, since the Incarnation of God the Son in the Virgin's womb reveals the greatness of man's dignity,⁸ I am inviting my readers to look

3. Prudentius says: "The Virgin's ready faith drew Christ / Into her womb and safely hid him there till birth" (*Apotheosis*, lines 583–84 [PL 59:970A]).

4. G.K. Chesterton, *The Queen of the Seven Swords* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1926), 37.

5. Exactly where, asks St. Augustine, did the Son of God empty himself and take the form of a servant? "In the Virgin Mary," he replies. (*Sermo [In Natali Domini XIII]*, 196.1 [PL 38:1019]).

6. "Holy Sonnets," in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J.C. Grierson, 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), 319.

7. Among theologians of recent times attempting to reawaken interest in the mysteries of the life of Jesus, we should mention Leo Cardinal Scheffczyk, who edited a valuable collection of essays on the subject: *Die Mysterien des Lebens Jesu und die christliche Existenz* (Aschaffenburg, 1984).

8. When discussing the necessity of the Incarnation, St. Thomas says that it teaches us "how great is the dignity of human nature, lest we defile it by sinning. As Augustine

INTRODUCTION

again, this time in the light of the incarnate Son of God, at the womb-weeks of their own and every human life. I am going to suggest that we re-read this first chapter of the human story and find afresh its beauty, truth, and goodness. It is only our estranged faces that have missed this many-splendored thing.

says: ‘God showed us the high place of human nature among creatures by appearing to men as true man’” (*ST* 3.1.2).

The Moment God Became Man

In the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, there is a plaque with the inscription: *Verbum caro hic factum est*, “the Word was made flesh *here*.” It was *there*, in that particular place, “a city of Galilee” (Luke 1:26), that God became man. We can be even more specific about the location: it was in the womb of a virgin named Mary (v. 27) that God the Son, without ceasing to be true God, assumed a complete human nature into the unity of his divine person and became true man. Moreover, according to the Church’s teaching, we can be precise about the moment of the Incarnation: it took place when the Virgin Mary said to the angel, “Be it done unto me according to thy word” (v. 38). It was exactly then that, by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, a body was fashioned from the Virgin’s flesh and blood, a rational soul created and infused into the body and, in the same instant, the complete human nature united to the divine Word. There were no successive stages in this taking of manhood; the body did not come into being before the soul, nor the soul before the body, nor were either ever other than his, God the Son’s: the flesh was conceived, ensouled, and assumed simultaneously.¹

1. Cf. *ST* 3.6.4; 3.33.3.

The coincidence of the Virginal Conception and the hypostatic union is a defined doctrine of the Catholic faith. In the words of the ‘Formula of Union’ agreed between St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Antiochene bishops in 433 and canonized by the General Council of Chalcedon in 451, “We confess the holy Virgin to be Mother of God, because God the Word was made flesh and became man and from the very moment of conception united to himself the temple he had taken from her.”² Origen’s theory that the soul of Christ pre-existed the creation of his body was condemned by the provincial Synod of Constantinople in 543, as was the opinion that the body was first formed and only later united to the soul and the Word.³ This judgment was later confirmed by Pope Vigilius (d. 555). In 675, the eleventh provincial Council of Toledo declared that it was in his “wonderful conception” that the Word was made flesh. Five years later, the Third General Council of Constantinople officially approved the synodal epistle of St. Sophronius of Jerusalem (c. 560–638), which contains these words:

He truly became man who is ever acknowledged to be God and is shown to be in his Mother’s womb who is in the bosom of the eternal Father, and the timeless accepts a beginning in time. He did not become these things in unreal appearance (as the Manichees and Valentinians think), but in truth and reality he emptied the whole of himself by the will that is his own and the Father’s and assumed the whole mass [of our nature], flesh consubstantial with us, a rational soul of the same kind as ours, a mind like ours. For man is and is known to be all

2. DS 272. On the different opinions of the Fathers about the timing of Christ’s conception (before or after Mary’s *fiat*), see Matthew Kellison (of the English College, Douai), *Commentarii ac Disputationes in Tertiam Partem Summae Theologicae S. Thomae Aquinatis* (Douai, 1633), 309–310.

3. DS 404–405.

these things; and *he was made man in truth at the very instant of his conception in the all-holy Virgin.*⁴

St. John Paul II, in one of his catecheses on the person of Christ, made a similar declaration: “The first moment of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God is identified with the miraculous conception that took place by the power of the Holy Spirit when Mary uttered her Yes.”⁵

These documents of the Magisterium echo the unanimous consensus of the Fathers. As a representative of the Latins, we can invoke St. Fulgentius of Ruspe (468–533), who says simply that the Virginal Conception was the taking of flesh, and that, therefore, “no interval of time can be reckoned between the beginning of the conceived flesh and the arrival of the Majesty being conceived.”⁶ St. John Damascene (c. 675–749) will serve as spokesman for the oriental tradition: “As soon as there was flesh, it was flesh of the Word, animated by a rational and intellectual soul.”⁷

THE ANNUNCIATION: THE FEAST OF THE INCARNATION

God the Son, truly and perfectly God, eternally begotten in the bosom of the Father, became truly and perfectly man at his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary. His human life began at fertilization, which in his case was miraculous, because his Virgin Mother was made fruitful, not by male seed, but by the Holy Spirit. That is why the Annunciation is the chief feast of the Incarnation. The Nativity of our Lord is also a celebration of the Incarnation but in a different sense. The Incarnation was effected in Nazareth and then manifested in Bethlehem. March 25

4. *Epistola synodica* (PG 87:3161A). The relevant passage in the teaching of the eleventh Council of Toledo can be found at DS 534.

5. *L'Osservatore Romano* (July 2, 1987), 1.

6. Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Epistola* 17.7 (CCSL 91A:568).

7. John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* 3.2 (PG 94:985C–988A).

commemorates the moment of the enfleshing of the Word; December 25 commemorates his birth in the flesh that he assumed nine months earlier. Christmas Day is a feast of “theophany,” a celebration, says St. Gregory Nazianzen, of “God manifested to man by birth.”⁸ He comes forth from his Mother, without harm to her virginity: “He, as a bridegroom coming out of his bride chamber, hath rejoiced as a giant to run the way” (Ps. 18:6 Douay-Rheims). In the stable at Bethlehem, Mary can at last hold in her arms and feed at her breast, see with her own eyes, the Child-God who for nine months had been hidden in the hermitage of her womb. In the Byzantine liturgy, the Church sings with the voice of the *Theotokos*:

And she, bending over him like a handmaiden, worshipped him and said to him, as he lay in her arms: “How wast thou sown a seed in me? And how hast thou grown within me, O my Deliverer and my God?”⁹

On Christmas Day, in the company of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, the meaning of the Incarnation seizes the mind and heart of the earthly Church: God, the Creator of the universe, has become a tiny baby. As St. Bernard says, the Word was made “infant flesh, young flesh, helpless flesh.”¹⁰ But the Church also remembers, especially during the last days of Advent, that, before being a newborn baby, God incarnate was an *unborn* baby, what the biologists call a zygote, an embryo, and a fetus. The first stage of human life that God made his own and thereby divinized was zygotic. The adventure of being human began for the eternal Son at the moment of his conception.

8. Gregory Nazianzen, *Oratio* 38.3 (PG 36:313C).

9. Vespers for the Forefeast of the Nativity, in *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 202.

10. *Sermo in nativitate Domini* 3.2, in *Sancti Bernardi opera*, vol. 4, ed. Jean Leclercq and Henri Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1966), 259.

This dogmatic truth is proclaimed in the liturgies of both East and West on March 25. In the Byzantine rite, at Great Compline for ‘The Annunciation of the Most Holy *Theotokos* and Ever-Virgin Mary,’ the Church sings these words:

Let the Heavens be glad and the earth rejoice: for the Son who is coeternal with the Father, having his throne and like him without beginning, in his compassion and merciful love for mankind has submitted himself to emptying (cf. Phil 2:7), according to the good pleasure and the counsel of the Father; and he has gone to dwell in a Virgin’s womb that was sanctified beforehand by the Spirit. O marvel! God is come among men; he who cannot be contained is contained in a womb; the Timeless enters time; and strange wonder! His conception is without seed, his emptying is past telling; so great is this mystery! For God empties himself, takes flesh, and is fashioned as a creature, when the angel tells the pure Virgin of her conception: “Hail, thou who art full of grace; the Lord who has great mercy is with thee.”¹¹

**ST. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR
ON CHRIST’S HUMAN BEGINNING**

For St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662), the coincidence of the eternal Word’s assumption of human nature with his conception by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin’s womb confirmed what he already believed on other grounds—namely, that the rational soul of every man is created immediately by God and infused into the body at the moment of conception. In modern jargon, St. Maximus held the doctrine of ‘immediate animation.’

To assess the authority of this testimony, we must remember who St. Maximus the Confessor was. Thanks to the pioneering work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, he is now generally recognized

11. *The Festal Menaion*, 443–444.

as the theological giant of the seventh century, the author of the crowning synthesis of Greek Patristic theology and spirituality. (St. John Damascene is among his legatees.) He is a second Athanasius, ready to withstand an entire empire in the defense of Christological orthodoxy. He is a Byzantine through and through but also a loyal servant of the pope of the elder Rome, a bridge between West and East. He is scholar but also monk and confessor, living and dying in the faith he preaches. “This is the greatest example of that unity of doctrine and life that marks the whole Patristic age; speculation and mysticism of the greatest subtlety are wedded to a soberly faced and consciously grasped martyrdom.”¹²

The texts that most concern us come from the so-called ‘Second *Ambigua*,’ in which Maximus (in response to the queries of John of Cyzicus) clears up obscurities in the writings of St. Gregory Nazianzen. Origenist monks had given their own perverse reading. Maximus now offers an orthodox exegesis. One of the questions concerns the moment at which soul and body are united. Does the soul exist before the body (as the Origenists teach)? Or does the body exist before the intellectual soul (as Aristotle and the Stoics, in their different ways, teach)? Both hypotheses are to be rejected, says Maximus: the intellectual soul is created by God and infused into the body in the very instant of conception.

Building upon the work of St. Gregory of Nyssa,¹³ Maximus offers a number of arguments, philosophical and theological, but the decisive consideration, as we shall see, is Christological.

12. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unser Auftrag: Bericht und Entwurf* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1984), 36–37. Balthasar here sums up the importance of Maximus in his own life and for the whole Church. In 1941, Balthasar published the first great work of modern Maximian scholarship: *Kosmische Liturgie: Das Weltbild Maximus des Bekenners*. The second edition was published in Einsiedeln in 1961. Balthasar’s interpretation of Maximus is discussed in Werner Löser, *Im Geiste des Origenes: Hans Urs von Balthasar als Interpret der Theologie der Kirchenväter* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1976), 181–212.

13. Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis officio* 28–29 (PG 44:229B–240B).

Maximus insists that man is not a soul using a body but a unity of body and soul, a “synthesis,”¹⁴ a “complete figure” (*eidōs holon*).¹⁵ This “completeness” (*ekplêrôsis*) of the human person enjoys a physical as well as metaphysical priority. If a man is essentially a whole, then he must be a whole from the beginning: the genesis of body and soul must be simultaneous. *This* soul is defined in relation to *this* body; *that* body in relation to *that* soul. Each must, therefore, belong to the other from the outset. After all, even after separation in death, they do not lose their reference to each other. Maximus suggests that, were soul not wedded to body from the beginning, there would be no reason why it should not, so to speak, divorce and remarry at the end: reincarnation would be as reasonable a human destiny as resurrection.

There is a quiet humor about some of Maximus’ reasonings. He says that if the embryo immediately after fertilization is endowed with only a vegetative soul, then men father plants, not men. But in fact, the act of fertilization establishes a human-to-human relationship between father and child: *I* am conceived by my father; he begets *me*. Then again, Maximus says that he suspects that concealed behind the delayed animation theory is a Manichaean distaste for any sort of association of the intellectual soul with the sordidness of sex.¹⁶

In Maximus’ opinion, the strongest proof for the doctrine of immediate animation is the Incarnation.

I regard nature’s very maker, by the mystery of his Incarnation, to be the champion and infallible teacher of this doctrine. He truly became man and confirmed that he possessed the complete nature and existence [of man], subsisting in accordance

14. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 2.42 (PG 91:1324C).

15. *Ambigua* 2.7 (PG 91:1101A). I am indebted to the article by M.-H. Congourdeau, “L’Animation de l’embryon humain chez Maxime le Confesseur,” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 3 (1989): 693–709.

16. *Ambigua* 2.42 (PG 91:1337B–1340B).

with his coming into human existence. He inaugurated the renewal of nature, that is, conception by seed and birth through corruption, which human nature contracted after the transgression, when divine and spiritual increase degenerated into multitude.¹⁷

St. Maximus applies to the Incarnation a distinction first used of the Trinity by the Cappadocians—namely, between “definition of nature” (*logos tês physeôs*) and “manner of existence” (*tropos tês hyparxeôs*).¹⁸ It is the difference between *what* a thing is and does and *how* it is and does it. Maximus applies the distinction to Christ’s conception. Its virginal and miraculous manner (by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit, without seed) does not make his human nature different from ours. In its “definition of nature,” Christ’s humanity is the same as ours; it differs from ours only in the “manner of its coming-to-be” (*tropos tês geneseôs*).

By nature, [Christ’s humanity] is the same [as ours], but, through the conception without seed (*asporia*), it is not the same, since this human nature was not that of a mere man but belonged to the One who for our sakes became man.¹⁹

The miraculous *how* of Christ’s conception reveals *who* he is; it does not make him any the less *what* we are. This is the doctrine of Pope St. Leo the Great (d. 461) in his *Tome*. The Son of God becomes man, he says, “in a new order, generated in a new birth,”

17. *Ambigua* 2.42 (PG 91:1341BC). On St. Gregory of Nyssa’s arguments for ‘immediate animation’ see Mariette Canévet, “L’Humanité de l’embryon selon Grégoire de Nysse,” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 114 (1992): 678–695.

18. On the *logos/tropos* distinction, see Felix Heinzer, *Gottes Sohn als Mensch: Die Struktur des Menschseins Christi bei Maximus Confessor* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1980), 171–181.

19. Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula theologica et polemica* 4 (PG 91:60C).

but this newness—so “singularly wonderful and wonderfully singular”—has not abolished the nature of our race.²⁰

The newness of the Virginal Conception is the sign that here God is doing a new thing (see Isa. 43:19): he is becoming man to make all things new (see Rev. 21:5). In an ordinary conception, a human person is thrown into existence through the “urge of the flesh and the will of the male” (John 1:13). He is one more son of Adam, come to swell the numbers of an aging fallen ‘multitude,’ with no other destiny but death. At the Virginal Conception, however, by the will of the Trinity, an eternally existing divine person, the only Son of the Father, becomes man to gather the scattered children of God into unity and bring them to the unaging newness of eternal life.

The Word’s birth for us in the flesh took place in a superior way to our own. Neither the will nor the thought of the passion-marked flesh preceded it, as happens in our case through the pleasure that has craftily made itself master of our birth. No, only the will of the Godhead preceded [the conception of Christ] through the Son who effected in himself his own Incarnation in fulfilment of the Father’s loving plan and by the co-operation of the Holy Spirit. He thereby made new—in himself and by himself—the mode (*tropos*) of birth introduced into nature and accomplished the seedless conception in the Holy Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary.²¹

Apart from the saving novelty of its virginal manner, the conception of Christ is in all respects like ours. For us, then, as for him, it is the moment from which we are fully and completely human, endowed with rational soul as well as body.

20. DS 292–294.

21. Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula theologica et polemica* 20 (PG 91:240B).

Maximus' argument rests on his firm persuasion that the mystery of the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Christ is the key to understanding man, indeed, the whole created order. As Balthasar has shown, he makes the Chalcedonian principle of "union without confusion" a universal law of being, a fundamental axiom of metaphysics.²² The revealed doctrine of the Incarnation builds upon a naturally known philosophy of man, but it also contributes its own distinctive light and casts out the lingering shadows in man's self-understanding. The radiance of the Virginal Conception sheds its beams on every natural human conception. Through the Incarnation, man learns the truth about his beginnings.

**CHRIST'S HUMAN BEGINNING AND OURS:
ST. THOMAS AQUINAS**

Where Maximus saw a confirmation, Scholasticism found an exception: *unlike* other men's, Christ's body was animated by a rational soul at conception. The Schoolmen (following Aristotle) held the view that the rational soul is not infused at the first moment of conception but at a later time—that is, when the embryo has attained a sufficiently advanced state of bodily development.²³

The philosophers of antiquity were not well up on the biology of modernity, and so they lacked the means, which we now have, of distinguishing an early human embryo from those of other species. To outward inspection, all embryos seemed to be of the same kind. The development, therefore, of a non-specific embryo into a recognizably human one had to be a process of substantial

22. *Kosmische Liturgie: Das Weltbild Maximus des Bekenners*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1961), 57–58.

23. "Where the Scholastics are forced to admit an exception from the law of successive forms—the mystery of Christ's Incarnation—Maximus finds a supreme confirmation of his own view" (*Kosmische Liturgie*, 173). Dante describes the Aristotelian-Scholastic embryology in the *Purgatorio* 25.13–25 (*The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, vol. 2, *Purgatorio*, trans. John D. Sinclair [New York: Oxford University Press, 1978], 326–329).

change, change of nature, change *of soul*. ('Soul' here means the form of the body, that which makes a body to be the sort of body it is, its life principle, the source of its characteristic functions.) For Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, human generation is a drama of transformation, of 'coming to be' and 'passing away.'²⁴ At first, the embryo has a 'vegetative' soul: it is capable of nourishment and growth. The vegetative soul 'passes away' and is succeeded by a soul that is both vegetative and sensitive: the embryo is capable of sensation as well as nourishment. Finally, the sensitive soul is replaced by one created directly by God, a soul that is at once vegetative, sensitive, and rational: the embryo is alive with the life of man.²⁵

St. Thomas stood by this theory, not just because it came to him from Aristotle, but because it corresponded to what was observable in nature, and he was convinced that a sound philosophy must be empirically based: "The judgment that the intellect makes concerning the nature of a thing must conform to what sense perception shows about the thing."²⁶ Now, the ancient world and the Middle Ages knew nothing of ovulation; indeed, the ovum itself was not discovered until 1827.²⁷ As far as St. Thomas was concerned, conception took place through the activation by semen of a special secretion of blood in the womb.²⁸ What is more, though he grasped the truth that matter must be suitably and sufficiently organized in order to be animated by a rational soul, his judgment of what constituted organization was determined by the limitations of current observation. For Aristotle (and so for St. Thomas), the soul is "the primary act of a natural organic body" (*sômatos physikou organikou*)—that is to say, a body with organs, parts serving some

24. "In man, as in other animals, one gets to the final form through many generations and corruptions" (*ST* 1.118.2 ad 2).

25. Cf. *De spiritualibus creaturis* 3, ad 13; *ST* 1.76.3 ad 3; 1.118.2 ad 2.

26. *In librum Boethii de Trinitate expositio* 6.2.

27. The discovery was made by Karl Ernst von Baer. See his *Epistola de ovo mammalium et hominis genesi* (Leipzig, 1827).

28. Cf. *ST* 3.31.5.

essential function.²⁹ Only when the embryonic body was equipped with recognizably human organs and limbs was it deemed to be alive with human life; when completely formed, it was evidently *informed* by a rational soul. Once there was the body of a man, there was a man, a rational animal.

St. Thomas believed that Christ's body did not develop in the normal manner. Having been created directly by the Holy Spirit from the blood of the Virgin, without the involvement of male seed, it was fully formed, perfectly organized, from the first moment of conception, and from that first moment was animated by a rational soul.³⁰ St. Bonaventure held the same opinion: from his conception, Christ's body had "perfection of organization."³¹

There is an obvious difficulty with this opinion. If the incarnate Word is true man, why should he differ from other men with regard to the animation of his human body? In the terminology of St. Maximus, it would seem to imply a difference in the "definition of nature" rather than the "manner of existence." St. Thomas considers this question in an objection quoting St. Leo the Great.³² He replies that the difference between Christ and us in this respect is one of timing, not of nature. Our Lord's animation was essentially the same as other men's in the sense that his rational soul, like all others, was infused as soon as the body was formed—that is, complete in all its parts. What was different was the time of that formation: Christ's body was complete in all its parts at an earlier moment than other men's.

Were he on earth today, St. Thomas would without doubt hold the doctrine of immediate animation. The fundamental principles

29. Aristotle, *De anima* 2.1.412B.

30. *ST* 3.33.1–2.

31. Bonaventure, *Commentarius in librum Sententiarum*, d. 3, p. 2, a. 3, q. 2, in *Opera Omnia Sancti Bonaventurae*, vol. 3 (Quaracchi, 1887), 93.

32. "Christ's flesh was not different in nature from ours, nor was the beginning of his animation. But the soul is not infused into other men at the first moment of their conception. Therefore, Christ's soul, too, should not be infused into his body at the first moment of conception" (*ST* 3.33.2 ad 1).

of his philosophy of man are independent of his obsolete biology; indeed, when applied to modern knowledge, they provide formidable support for immediate animation. Stripping off the shell of the out-of-date science, we find the permanently valid kernel of his thought on the soul. This is not wishful thinking. It is simply the application of the Thomist axiom stated earlier: philosophy must have an empirical base.

**THE ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF THOMIST
ANTHROPOLOGY ARE AS FOLLOWS:**

A. The soul is not the self. A man is not only a soul but something composed of soul and body.³³ The soul separated from the body is not a man.³⁴ The soul on its own can no more be called a person than a hand or foot on its own. The person is the possessor of the complete nature of the species.³⁵

B. It is natural for the soul to be united to the body. That is why the separation of soul from body at death is “against nature” and why the resurrection of the body is in a certain sense “necessary.”³⁶

C. The soul is the form of the body.³⁷ ‘Form’ here means substantial form, the innermost shaping principle of a thing, making it to be what it is. The soul is not a motor in a machine, making it move. No, it is what makes the body what it is, the body of a man. An ensouled body is the body of a living human being.

D. The rational soul, which is not transmitted by the parents, is infused by God as soon as the body is ready to receive it.³⁸ It must be suitably organized. St. Thomas explains how the human body is suitably disposed by the divine Artist for those spiritual acts of which only man among bodily creatures is capable. His senses are

33. *ST* 1.75.4.

34. *ST* 3.50.4.

35. *ST* 1.75.4 ad 2; cf. 1.29.1 ad 5.

36. *ST* 1.118.3; *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.79.

37. *ST* 1.91.3 ad 3.

38. *ST* 1.100.1 ad 2.

not just for the perceiving of food, mates, and danger but as the starting point of intellectual knowledge, and so he does not sniff around on the ground but stands upright and can lift his face to contemplate the heavens.³⁹

Modern biology has proved that the fundamental ‘disposition’ or ‘organization’ of living matter is genetic (cf. D). We can now do what the ancients could not: we can distinguish the human embryo from embryos of other species. The perceptible form of the zygote, its genetic structure, may therefore be regarded as, so to speak, the outward and visible sign of its substantial form, that which makes it to be what it is, a member of the human species (cf. C). “The human zygote as we understand it today with DNA and RNA would in Thomas’ understanding eminently satisfy as having the organized matter required for the infusion of a human spiritual soul.”⁴⁰

Thus, man is a natural and complete whole from his conception (cf. A and B). The embryo is alive with unmistakably human life. For St. Thomas, this is another way of saying that it is ensouled with a human (rational) soul. ‘It’ is already ‘he’ or ‘she,’ a *person* in possession of the complete nature of man.

39. *ST* 1.91.3 ad 3.

40. J.T. Mangan, “The Wonder of Myself: Ethical-Theological Aspects of Direct Abortion,” *Theological Studies* (1970): 129–130. The distinguished German pathologist Franz Büchner has written: “By the equipment of its cell nucleus with a new combination of maternal and paternal DNA, [the fertilized ovum] represents a new creation such as never existed before. . . . Modern biology and pathology just will not allow us to mark off . . . certain sections of embryonic development as pre-human or not yet specifically human stages. We must rather increasingly learn, despite the apparent insignificance and smallness of the first stages of human development, to integrate wholly into our picture of man the potentialities and plenitude of its vital expressions as they gradually unfold and recognize the human embryonic stage as one of the great periods of human existence, with childhood, maturity, and the form of life proper to old age. In other words, we must see human life as a temporal configuration, in Guardini’s sense, in which from conception till death there is neither a ‘not yet’ nor a ‘no longer’” (“Development of the Embryo and Human Ontogenesis,” *International Catholic Review* 1 [1972]: 306). See also Michael Allyn Taylor’s doctoral dissertation, *Human Generation in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas: A Case Study on the Role of Biological Fact in Theological Science* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1982]).

The doctrine of immediate animation makes St. Thomas' Christology shine with even greater power. It resolves tensions and unanswered questions.

1. The Angelic Doctor tells us that, while our Lord's conception was wholly miraculous in the sense that its active principle was the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit (rather than the natural power of male seed), it was wholly natural when we consider the matter furnished by his Mother.⁴¹ Strictly, on St. Thomas' view, we ought to add that the conception was also, if not miraculous, at least extraordinary in the sense that his body was animated at an earlier moment than any other human body. If, however, Christ is like us even in the moment of his animation, then we can appreciate the sense in which, though in its manner it is miraculous, his conception remains completely natural, the beginning of real and complete human life.

2. If the Son of God's embryonic condition is like that of every other human being, we understand better what St. Thomas has to say about his self-emptying and his assumption of our "natural and blameless disabilities."⁴² He emptied himself, not by laying aside his divine greatness, but by taking on our human littleness, and first of all the microscopic infirmity of the embryo. He accepts the limitations of the long, slow womb-way to birth. Apart from the virginal manner of his conception and birth, the Christ Child, unborn as well as newborn, is like every baby.⁴³

3. St. Thomas' doctrine of man is Christocentric. He does not confuse philosophy with theology, truths of natural philosophy with truths of supernatural revelation, but his faith in God-made-man

41. *ST* 3.33.4.

42. On the meaning of Christ's self-emptying, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super epistolam S. Pauli Apostoli ad Philippenses* 2.2. On the "natural and blameless passions," see *ST* 3.14.4.

43. *ST* 3.29.1 ad 3.

does give added weight to what his reason tells him of man-made-by-God. As Josef Pieper says:

Thomas might never have had the courage to defend natural and visible reality, in particular man's corporeality, as an essential part of man and would never have had the courage to draw the ultimate conclusions from this conviction had he not thought in terms of the Incarnation of God. . . . One who believes that the Logos of God has, in Christ, united with the bodily nature of man cannot possibly assume at the same time that the material reality is not good. And how can visible things be evil if the "medicine of salvation" deriving from that prototypical Sacrament be offered to man in the same visible things . . . when the Sacraments are performed.⁴⁴

As a general principle, this is certainly true. In the *Summa theologiae*, anthropology is presented in a Christological (and Trinitarian) frame. Man (at the end of the first part and throughout the second part) is enveloped by the one Lord Jesus Christ: in the mysteries of his divinity (in the first part) and in the mysteries of his humanity (in the third part). St. Thomas looks at the human person in the

44. Josef Pieper, *Introduction to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 13. M.-D. Chenu would appear to challenge our interpretation: "The Incarnation is, however, in point of fact, a contingent event, and it enters in the exitus-reditus cycle only as an absolutely gratuitous work of God's absolutely free will. The predestination of Christ is de facto capital, yet it does not have its place by dint of right in the economy of this cycle. It is impossible to locate it a priori in a dialectical list of divine decrees" (*Toward Understanding St. Thomas*, trans. A.M. Landry and Dominic Hughes [Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964], 314). This statement makes the mistake, so it seems to me, of assuming that the *Summa* could be Christocentric only on the supposition of the absolute predestination of the Incarnation, a view that, of course, St. Thomas does not hold (see *ST* 3.1.3). In fact, another kind of Christ-centeredness is possible and, in my opinion, is to be found in the *Summa*; that is to say, one built upon the actualities of saving history—of the sin of Adam and man's need of redemption. The exitus-reditus movement of the *Summa* is not only philosophical and abstract, but historical and concrete. It corresponds to the drama of saving history: man's creation in the image of God (*prima pars*); his fall (*prima secundae*) and need for redeeming grace (*ibid.*); the Law (*ibid.*) and the Prophets (*secunda secundae*); man's redemption by Jesus Christ, the "way to God" (*tertia pars*).

light of the divine person of the Word-made-flesh. Only with respect to the moment of animation does the principle appear to have been inconsistently applied.