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*Natus ex Maria Virgine: Contemporary Controversies Surrounding  
the Virgin Birth of Christ*

*Natus ex Maria Virgine: Współczesne kontrowersje wokół  
dziewiczego zrodzenia Chrystusa*

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## Introduction

The theme of this dissertation is the mystery of Christ's virgin birth which is expressed in the following words of the Apostolic Symbol: "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary." The aim is to analyze the principal contemporary controversies surrounding this mystery of faith in order to demonstrate their strengths and—when applicable—their weaknesses, as well as the fresh insights and interesting perspectives some of these new controversies directly or indirectly offer. Thus, the ultimate goal is to examine these controversies, critically sifting through the various hermeneutical approaches and their implications with the twofold purpose of explaining any exaggerations or mistaken notions as well as presenting fresh perspectives on the mystery of Christ's virgin birth.

The problem, therefore, is not the mystery of faith in question, but rather how the mystery is interpreted based on different philosophical presuppositions, theological viewpoints, cultural influences, and divergent *Weltanschauungen*. Naturally, there is often unity in diversity and so the task here will be to find both that which can be considered fresh and insightful and that which should be approached cautiously as an exaggeration or misguided notion. Consequently, the problem is one of harmonizing all these elements in order to present a coherent picture of the contemporary contribution to a deeper collective understanding of this mystery. The solution will be found in providing an objective consideration of all the data—that is, the controversies themselves, their underlining presuppositions and/or philosophies, the voice of tradition, writings of

Scripture, and the Magisterium—as well as a weaving together of said data into a coherent synthesis.

The methodology employed here will be above all qualitative. In light of any given controversy, three questions will underline the critical analysis of the various positions in question. First, what is being posited in a given position? Second, what is the meaning of what is being posited in that position? Third, how does what is being posited apply to the theme of this work, that is, to Christ's virgin birth and what are its hermeneutical implications? Thus, the various positions will be expounded by reiterating what they state, providing an interpretive meaning of what has been stated, and examining how that meaning applies to the theme in question. The fruits of fresh insights will be highlighted while any exaggerated notions will be logically scrutinized based on a presupposition of the mystery's veracity.

The original contribution of this dissertation should be found fundamentally in its compilation of all these controversies and positions into one work which critically analyzes them in an interdisciplinary manner, that is, in light of various branches of theology, including but not limited to Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Mariology, Ecclesiology, Biblical Theology and Exegesis, Ecumenical Theology, etc. To the author's knowledge, this is the only work existing which seeks to accomplish this.

Finally, compiling the contemporary Magisterium's response to these sundry issues—which will be presented in the final chapter—into one work will further contribute to its originality. By analyzing all these controversies in one place, incorporating different branches of theology, and providing the contemporary Magisterium's response, the ultimate aim will be to offer an original overview of new

and fresh perspectives and insights into the profound mystery of Christ's virgin birth with the dual hope of offering a small contribution to this vast body of knowledge and inspiring further research in this field.

To accomplish the aforementioned, this dissertation will be divided into seven chapters. The first chapter will consider the virgin birth of Christ—included in the Apostles' Creed—in the context of a controversy, which exploded in Germany at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and which questioned the authenticity of the Creed, the meaning of singular articles necessary for Christian belief, and the supernatural circumstances of Christ's coming into the world. This controversy caused a ripple effect like a stone being thrown into a pond. Those ripples made their waves throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many of the arguments posed in the initial controversy, (e.g. A. Harnack), still remain today in popular literature on the topic. One such argument, for example, that the virgin birth of Christ is not found in the majority of New Testament writings and therefore did not constitute an authentic teaching of the apostolic period, still prevails today in different intellectual circles. Thus, this chronologically older controversy will be considered since it is the basis of an existing contemporary controversy which has maintained most of the same arguments.

The second chapter will consider this truth of faith in light of biblical exegesis, which employing the historical-critical methods, has led some authors, (e.g. E. Schillebeeckx), to interpret the Infancy Gospels of Matthew and Luke as *theologoumena*, that is, mere theological opinions which do not express an actual historical reality. Another theory, which is sometimes connected to the idea of the *theologoumenon*, is that the virgin birth of Christ constitutes a myth derived from other ancient Pagan

mythologies which are purported to contain many stories of virgin births. Such authors, (e.g. E. Drewermann), see these events as dubious, mythological, and deny the virginity of Mary.

The third chapter will present certain tensions—as raised by certain authors, (e.g. M. Borg and A. Mitterer)—between the contemporary understanding of the empirical sciences, (biology and medicine), and this truth of faith. The consideration of Christ’s arrival in the flesh from the perspective of contemporary medicine, (obstetrics and gynecology), has led some authors to reject the supernatural circumstances of this event. This chapter will underline a very widespread tendency in modern thought which elevates the empirical sciences above Divine Revelation, that is, which elevates natural knowledge above the gift of faith which procures supernatural knowledge. It is an idea that considers only the empirical sciences as “science” and dismisses other sources of “science.” “Science” is a broader term referring also to knowledge derived from philosophical disciplines, such as Metaphysics and Epistemology, as well as theological disciplines, such as Christology and Mariology, which rely on Divine Revelation. Thus, this chapter will explore what can be termed “scientism,” highlighting the importance of empirical science, but also further underlining the limits of those sciences in relation to Divine Revelation.

The fourth chapter, which will be based on popular publications from American sources, will be dedicated to analyzing the difficulties of contemporary man in accepting the truth of faith regarding the virginal conception and birth of Christ. There will be a consideration of the influence of a prevalent mode of thinking in contemporary culture, a mode which denies the transcendent dimension of reality and human existence and limits

both to a material one, excluding the element of mystery. This exclusion of mystery is widespread and is the culmination of other elements such as the scientism which will be discussed in the chapter preceding this one.

The fifth chapter will consider this truth of faith in the context of ecumenical dialogue. First, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue on this topic will be considered. Second, the contributions of the Dombes Group will be reviewed. Third, ARCIC (The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission), will be examined. Finally, the joint efforts of Protestant and Roman Catholic biblical scholars on the theme of Christ's virgin birth will be analyzed. This will consist primarily in an analysis of an excellent book on this topic entitled, *Mary in the New Testament*. It offers the fruits of contemporary biblical exegesis on the theme in question and that as a joint effort of Protestant and Catholic scholars. The main focus in this chapter will be an analysis of the harmonies among the Christian sects and the fruits of ecumenical dialogue in which the Virgin Mary serves as a powerful bridge.

The sixth chapter will examine different feminist movements, a feminist rendering of Mary's person and pertinence, and some feminist interpretations of Christ's virgin birth as found in the writings of feminist theology. It will be necessary to consider different geographical and cultural contexts, for example, feminism in United States as different from feminism in South America both geographically and culturally. Feminist theology presents various feministic concerns and creates a lens through which natural and supernatural data is viewed. This leads to a unique hermeneutical approach which can tend to be orthodox or more liberal. The critical review in this chapter will demonstrate both the radical arguments proposed by feminist authors, (e.g. M. Daly), as



well as the orthodox ones proposed by other feminist authors, (e.g. Cettina Militello). The positive contributions—direct or indirect—of feminist theology in general and on this topic in particular will be specifically highlighted.

The last chapter will be dedicated to statements of the *Magisterium Ecclesiae* regarding the virgin birth of Christ in itself, exploring some of the new contributions of the contemporary Church, aiding a deeper understanding of the mystery, and in response to different and sometimes contradictory interpretations. Based mainly on the teachings of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, new aspects of interpreting this dogma of faith as well as some remarks, which concern exegesis of the Infancy narratives, will be reviewed. This final chapter—together with the first Chapter—should serve as a fitting conclusion which unites the entire dissertation.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Virginal Conception and Virginal Birth of Christ - Part of the Apostles' Creed**

The Symbol of the Apostles contains the phrase, “conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” These words underline the mystery of Christ’s virgin birth. They have also been the source of controversy surrounding this mystery since the earliest days of the Church. In more recent years, the Apostles’ Creed itself has been questioned regarding its historical authenticity and its linkage to the Apostolic Age. The line concerning the virgin birth of Christ has also met with some scrutiny. This chapter will examine briefly the history of the Apostles’ Creed, the main contemporary controversies surrounding it, and the third article in particular.

#### **A. General Historical Overview of the Apostles’ Creed**

The English word “Creed” comes from the Latin word *credo* which means “I believe.” A Creed is a confession of belief and/or a formal statement of religious faith. The other terms currently used more or less interchangeably with Creed are Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*) and Symbol<sup>1</sup> which comes from the Greek word *symbolon* which means “sign.” A “symbol of faith,” therefore, does refer to a token of faith by which believers could recognize one another. Among all the Creeds of Christendom (the Apostles’ Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Nicene Creed, etc.,) the Apostles’ Creed is the oldest and recognized by most official branches of Christianity as an authoritative doctrinal

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<sup>1</sup> P. Shaff. *The Creeds of Christendom*. vol. I. (Harper and Brothers: New York, 1877), 3.

standard<sup>2</sup> which summarizes the main tenets of the Christian faith. The Eastern Orthodox are the only exception to this since they neither make official use of the Apostles' Creed nor claim it as part of their official heritage. Nevertheless, there is nothing in the Apostles' Creed with which the Orthodox would disagree, especially since the Apostles' Creed is the simplest, the first of all the Creeds, as well as the one which forms the basis for all others, "as all later symbols are only of greater or less development and extension thereof."<sup>3</sup>

The Apostles' Creed, however, did not always exist in the exact same form as it does today. The text of the Apostles' Creed as it now stands in a fixed and exact formula is often referred to as the *textus receptus*, that is, the "received text." It is uncertain when and where the received text was permanently fixed, but, as Skarsaune notes, "there is general agreement among scholars that we should not be very far off the mark if we say that in its present form it was fixed in writing around AD 600 in the southwest of France, and that it was a daughter Creed of the much older Creed used in the Christian community at Rome, probably already in the third century A.D."<sup>4</sup> In his work on the Creed, Swete notes that the present version of the Apostles' Creed is "of composite origin with a long and complicated history"<sup>5</sup> and this history, as Dodds notes, is "not easily traced."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A. C. McGiffert. *The Apostles' Creed, Its Origin, Its Purpose, and Its Historical Interpretation*. (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1902), 14.

<sup>3</sup> N. Gihl. *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass; Dogmatically, Liturgically and Ascetically Explained*. Translated from 6<sup>th</sup> German Edition. (B. Herder: St. Louis, 1902), 484.

<sup>4</sup> O. Skarsaune. "From the Jewish Messiah to the Creeds of the church," *Evangelical Review of Theology*. vol. 32 no. 3 (July, 2008), 226-227.

<sup>5</sup> H. B. Swete. *The Apostles' Creed and Primitive Christianity*. (C.J. Clay and Sons: London, 1894), 15.

<sup>6</sup> J. Dodds. *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*. (BiblioBazaar: Charleston, 2007), 17.

## Possible Legendary Origins

In a story, which was popular in the Middle Ages, the Apostles' Creed was ascribed directly to the Apostles who were believed to have gathered together on the day of Pentecost to compose it. It was further believed that each of the twelve Apostles individually dictated one of the twelve articles. Tyrannius Rufinus (ca. 340/345—410), a monk, historian, and theologian, recounted a version of this story which he stated was handed down to him.<sup>7</sup> In his recounting of the story, he does not declare explicitly that one of the twelve Apostles each dictated an article, but only that they were all responsible for it collectively and he implied that this occurred on Pentecost. Rufinus also posited that the Apostles gave the name *symbol* to this Creed for “many and sufficient reasons” (*multis et justissimis ex causis*), explaining that this Greek term could mean in Latin both *indicium*, that is, a token used for Christians to know one another as such, or *collatio*, namely, something compiled from separate sources. It is true that at the time of Rufinus, the Apostles' Creed was known under various titles including the *Symbolum Apostolorum* (“Symbol of the Apostles”). The earliest known reference to this title is found in a letter from the Council of Milan to Pope Siricius.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars, such as Kattenbusch, even maintain that the term can be traced all the way back to Tertullian (c. 160—c. 200),<sup>9</sup> but one cannot find this exact term to describe the Apostles' Creed prior to that.

Rufinus' story seems improbable for many and sufficient reasons. The term *symbol* for the Creed in question is not found in the New Testament or the Ante-Nicene Fathers directly. Further, the report of Marcus Evegenicus, the Greek Archbishop of Ephesus, who stated at the Council of Ferrara in 1438 that the East knew nothing of

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<sup>7</sup> Migne. P.L., 21, 337.

<sup>8</sup> Migne. P.L., 14, 1213.

<sup>9</sup> F. Kattenbusch. *Das Apostolische Symbolum*. vol. II. (Leipzig: 1894), 80.

either this particular form of the Creed or any stories of its direct Apostolic origins.<sup>10</sup> Naturally, if the Apostles' Creed came directly from the Apostles, it would be very strange for the East to be entirely ignorant of it and its alleged origins. It is also worth noting that only a few years after Marcus Evegenicus' report, the Italian humanist, Lorenzo Valla (1407—1457), offered a refutation of the direct Apostolic origins of the Apostles' Creed<sup>11</sup> and he has been followed by many scholars since. Thus, the evidence seems to suggest quite strongly that Rufinus' story is a popular legend and not a historical reality, but in all honesty that cannot be demonstrated demonstratively. It is highly probable that this story is a myth. Nevertheless, it would be overstating to claim absolute certainty here, since one cannot claim to have absolute certainty about something which is not absolutely certain.

### **The Old Roman Symbol**

It is a considerable factor in viewing Rufinus' story, as well as any earlier ones, as a popular legend and not a historical reality. However, Evegenicus' assertion that the East knew nothing of this particular form of the Creed should be considered more carefully. One of the purposes of the Council of Ferrara in 1438 was to attempt a reunion between the Roman and Greek Churches. In one of the opening addresses, Cardinal Cesarini, who represented the West, mentioned both an Apostles' Council and a Holy Creed which the Apostles had given to the Church.<sup>12</sup> It was to this opening address that Marcus Evegenicus mentioned having no knowledge in the East of either an Apostles' Creed or its direct connection to the Apostles, as well as having no knowledge of the Apostles' Council other than the one in Jerusalem mentioned in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the

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<sup>10</sup> T.Y. Malaty. *Lectures in Patrology: The Apostolic Fathers*. (Alexandria, 1993), 46.

<sup>11</sup> T.Y. Malaty. *Lectures in Patrology: The Apostolic Fathers*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> T. Zahn. *The Apostles' Creed*. tr. C.S. Burn and A.E. Burn. (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1899), 7.

*Acts of the Apostles*. Yet had Marcus Evegenicus inspected the Apostles' Creed possessed by the West along with some writings of the Greek Fathers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, he would have discovered that basically the same Creed had in fact been used in the East as a baptismal confession even if that Eastern Creed did not follow the exact same structure as the Western one and even if it was not referred to as the "Apostles' Creed."<sup>13</sup>

Despite what seems to be a pious legend regarding the direct Apostolic origins of the Apostles' Creed, Rufinus' work is not without value, especially since he is the first known author in the West to provide a Latin text of the Apostles' Creed. He provides the Creed of Aquileia used around the year 400 A.D. and notes the main differences between that Creed and the one used in Rome from which the Aquileian one was derived. While the earliest Latin version is found in the work of Rufinus, the earliest Greek one is found in the writings of Marcellus of Ancyra (died ca. 374). Marcellus was the Bishop of Ancyra and had been exiled from his diocese due to Arian influence and consequently spent around two years in Rome. When he departed Rome around the year 340 A.D., he delivered a statement of belief to Pope Julius I,<sup>14</sup> which was this Greek version of the Creed. This Greek version was most likely a translation of an earlier Latin version and it certainly bears a close resemblance to the Creed as recorded by Rufinus.<sup>15</sup> Prior to these two records, the Creed can only be found in fragmentary bits and pieces as found in earlier writers such as Tertullian (ca. 160 – ca. 220) and Irenaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> century – ca.

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<sup>13</sup> T. Zahn. *The Apostles' Creed*, 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> H. Bettenson, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (Oxford University Press: New York, 1963), 23.

<sup>15</sup> M.A. Canney. "Apostles' Creed," *An Encyclopedia of Religions*. (E.P. Dutton & Co.: New York, 1921), 30.

202).<sup>16</sup> Thus, scholars maintain that the Creeds recorded in Rufinus, Marcellus, and probably the Interrogatory Creed used for baptisms as recorded in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*,<sup>17</sup> which was written around 215 A.D., point to an older version of the Apostles' Creed which they call the Old Roman Symbol or "R" for "Rome" where it is believed to have originated.<sup>18</sup> The exact relation between the Old Roman Symbol and the Interrogatory Creed of Hippolytus is somewhat debated, but at the very least they are close relatives as J.N.D. Kelly highlights in the following passage:

There is no reason to doubt that St. Hippolytus introduces us to one of them [a Creedal summary], but there must have been others as well: the age of liturgical fixity and uniformity had not yet arrived. R may very well have been another. The striking resemblances between R and H [Hippolytus' Interrogatory Creed] are best explained on the hypothesis that, while both were in a sense independent forms, they were close relatives and jostled against each other like members of a family. Thus there must have been considerable mutual influence, especially as on our theory Creeds were still fairly elastic in their verbal expression.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of their exact relation, however, and based on other fragmentary evidence as well as the Creeds as recorded by Rufinus and Marcellus,<sup>20</sup> it is generally accepted that the Old Roman Symbol comes from at least as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, where some scholars use the date of roughly 150 A.D.<sup>21</sup> while others prefer a date a bit later, such as the last quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> Thus the Old Roman Symbol is

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. J.N.D. Kelly. *Early Christian Creeds*. 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 100-130.

<sup>17</sup> J.H. Leith. *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine From Bible to the Present*. 3rd edition. (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1982), 23.

<sup>18</sup> J.L. González. *The Apostles' Creed for Today*. (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, London, 2007), 3.

<sup>19</sup> J.N.D. Kelly. *Early Christian Creeds*, 119.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J.C. Ayer. *A Source Book for Ancient Church History: From the Apostolic Age to the Close of the Conciliar Period*. (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1922), 123.

<sup>21</sup> C. Guignebert. *Le Christianisme antique*. (Imp. Hemmerlé: Paris, 1921), 195; D.P. Scaer. "He did descend to hell: in defense of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. vol. 35, no. 1. (March 1, 1992), 94.

<sup>22</sup> D.L. Holland. "The earliest text of the Old Roman Symbol: a debate with Hans Lietzmann and J N D Kelly," *Church History*. 34, no. 3. (September 1, 1965), 275.

recognized by all as “the most ancient and the most pure”<sup>23</sup> and as arguably the one which was most widespread in the ancient world inasmuch as its general outline can be found from as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century in writers from Rome all the way to Gaul and North Africa.<sup>24</sup>

In order to imagine the exact wording of the Old Roman Symbol, it will be helpful to survey the Interrogatory Creed of Hippolytus as well as the Creeds recorded by Marcellus and Rufinus. The earliest records of Hippolytus’ work are found in six versions which are in four different languages, namely, Arabic, Ethiopic, Coptic, and Latin; languages which practically span the entire Christian world of that time<sup>25</sup> and thereby strongly suggesting the early and widespread presence of this Creed. The different versions admit of some minor discrepancies, but Connolly provided a working Latin text based on his analysis of the data. It reads as follows:

Credis in Deum patrem omnipotentem? Credis in Christum Iesum, filium Dei, qui natus est de Spiritu sancto [sic] ex Maria virgine, et crucifixus sub Pontio Pilato et mortuus est et sepultus, et resurrexit die tertia vivus a mortuis, et ascendit in caelis et sedit ad dexteram patris venturus iudicare vivos et mortuos? Credis in Spiritu sancto, et sanctam ecclesiam, et carnis resurrectionem?<sup>26</sup>

As can be seen here, this Interrogatory Creed is not dramatically different from the Apostles’ Creed as it stands in a fixed formula today. The Creeds of Marcellus and Rufinus will be best surveyed in a comparative chart showing also the Roman Formula as reconstructed from the Aquileian Creed, the *textus*

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<sup>23</sup> H. Leduc. “Les Symboles de Foi,” *Revue du Clergé Français*. XXIII. (Juin, Juillet, Aout, Paris, 1900), 317: Leduc writes that the Old Roman Symbol is recognized by both Catholics and Protestants as “la plus ancienne et la plus pure.”

<sup>24</sup> J.L. González. *The Apostles’ Creed for Today*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> M.B. Yarnell. *The Formation of Christian Doctrine*. (B&H Publishing Group: Nashville, 2007), 191.

<sup>26</sup> R.H. Connolly. “On the Text of the Baptismal Creed of Hippolytus,” *Journal of Theological Studies*. vol. 24. (1924), 135.



*receptus*, and the English translation of the received text. Here is a reformatted version of such a chart as found in Schaff's work:<sup>27</sup>

<b>Formula Marcelli Ancryani</b> (ca. 340)	<b>Formula Romae</b> From the 3rd or 4th Century	<b>Formula Aquileiensis</b> From Rufinus (ca. 400) (Parts unique to Aquileia in brackets)	<b>Formula Recepta</b> Since the 6th or 7th Century (Later additions in brackets)	<b>The Received Text in English</b>
<i>Pisteuō eis theon pantakratora</i>	Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem	Credo in Deo Patre omnipotente, [invisibili et impassibili]	Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem, [Creatorem coeli et terrae]	I believe in God the Father Almighty, [Maker of heaven and earth]
<i>Kai eis Christon Iēsoun, ton huion autou ton monogenē, ton kurion hēmōn</i>	Et in Christum Jesum, Filium ejus unicum, Dominum nostrum	Et in Christo Jesu, unico filio ejus, Domino nostro	Et in Jesum Christum, Filium ejus unicum, Dominum nostrum	And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord
<i>ton gennēthenta ek Pneumatos Hagiou kai Marias tēs Parthenou</i>	qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto et Maria Virgine	qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine	qui [conceptus] est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine	who was [conceived] by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary
<i>ton epi Pontiou Pilatou staupōthenta kai taphenta</i>	cruifixus est sub Pontio Pilato, et sepultus	cruifixus sub Pontio Pilato, et sepultus	[passus] sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus, [mortuus], et sepultus	[suffered] under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, [dead], and buried
		[descendit ad inferna]	[descendit ad inferna]	[He descended into Hades]
<i>kai tē tritē hēmera anastanta ek tōn nekrōn</i>	tertia die resurrexit a mortuis	tertia die resurrexit a mortuis	tertia die resurrexit a mortuis	the third day He rose from the dead
<i>anabanta eis</i>	ascendit in	ascendit in	ascendit in	He ascended

<sup>27</sup> Reformatted here from: P. Shaff. *Ante-Nicene Christianity: History of the Christian Church*. vol. 2. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. (Kessinger Publishing: New York, 1885), 404-408.

<i>tous ouranous</i>	coleus	coelus	coelos	into heaven
<i>kai kathēmenon en dexia tou patros</i>	sedet ad dexteran Patris	sedet ad dexteram Patris	sedet ad dexteram Patris [omnipotentis]	and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father [Almighty]
<i>hothen erchetai krinein dzōntas kai nekrous</i>	inde venturus judicare vivos et mortuos.	inde venturus est judicare vivos et mortuos	inde venturus judicare vivos et mortuos	from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead
<i>Kai eis Hagion Pneuma</i>	Et in Spiritum Sanctum	Et in Spiritu Sancto	[Credo] in Spiritum Sanctum	[I believe] in the Holy Ghost
<i>hagian ekklēsiā</i>	Sanctam Ecclesiam	Sanctam Ecclesiam	Sanctam Ecclesiam [catholicam], [Sanctorum communionem]	the holy [catholic] church, [the communion of saints]
<i>aphesin hamartiōn</i>	remissionem peccatorum	remissionem peccatorum	remissionem peccatorum	the forgiveness of sins
<i>sarkos anastasin dzōēn aiōnion</i>	carnis resurrectionem	[hujus] carnis resurrectionem	carnis resurrectionem; [vitam aeternam. Amen]	the resurrection of the body; [and the life everlasting Amen]

It can be clearly seen from this chart that the Creeds of Rufinus and Marcellus are substantially the same and that the received text is not terribly different. The additions to the *textus receptus* are the following phrases and words: “Maker (Creator) of heaven and earth,” “conceived,” “suffered,” “dead (died),” “He descended into Hades (Hell),” “Almighty,” “I believe,” “catholic,” “the communion of saints,” “and the life everlasting (and life everlasting).” It is very worth noting that the phrase “He descended into Hell” is also found in the Aquileian Creed of Rufinus while the final phrase “and life everlasting” is found in the Creed provided by Marcellus. The Old Roman Creed was, therefore, not extremely different than the Apostles’ Creed as it stands fixed today. According to this comparison, the difference in the received text is the addition of six words and four

phrases and two of those four phrases are already found in the Creeds of Marcellus and Rufinus, respectively. Thus, the current form of the Apostles' Creed is extremely close to its earliest known predecessor from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

## B. Historical Circumstances of the Third Article

This article from the Apostles' Creed as it is known verbatim today probably stems from about the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century. A modified version of Shaff's chart<sup>28</sup> with this particular article will be helpful for highlighting these differences:

Formula Marcelli Ancryani	Formula Romae	Formula Aquileiensis	Formula Recepta	The Received Text in English
<i>ton gennēthenta ek Pneumatos Hagiou kai Marias tēs Parthenou</i>	qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto et Maria Virgine	qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine	qui [conceptus] est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine	who was [conceived] by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary

Marcellus' version of this Creed reads: *ton gennēthenta ek Pneumatos Hagiou kai Marias tēs parthenou*, "who was born (generated) of (or "from") the Holy Spirit *and* the Virgin Mary." The one speaks of generation (*gennaō*) while the other speaks of incarnation (*sarkoō*), but both refer to the modal origins of Christ's person.<sup>29</sup> Marcellus' version is also attested to in the Creeds of the Codex Laudianus and the Athelstan Psalter.<sup>30</sup> The older Roman formula from the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century reads: *qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto et Maria Virgine*, "who was born of (or "from") the Holy Spirit *and* the Virgin Mary," while Rufinus' version of the Aquileian Creed reads: *qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine*, "who was born of (or "from") the Holy Spirit *of* (or *from*) the Virgin

<sup>28</sup> P. Shaff. *Ante-Nicene Christianity: History of the Christian Church*, 404-408.

<sup>29</sup> E. Prinzivalli. "Il Contesto dell'enunciato: 'È stato concepito sì Spirito Santo. È nato dalla Vergine Maria' nel Simbolo, *Concepito di Spirito Santo, Nato dalla Vergine Maria*. (Edizioni Dehoniane: Bologna, 2006), 29.

<sup>30</sup> H.B. Swete. *The Apostles' Creed and Primitive Christianity*. (C.J. Clay and Sons: London, 1894), 42.

Mary.” The main difference between these latter two is obviously the Latin word *et* versus *ex*, that is, “and” versus “from.” Finally, the *textus receptus* reads: *qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine*, “who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” This final version is a bit more specific than the earlier versions. Rather than merely a pronouncement that Christ was born “of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,” the received text clearly delineates that the Holy Spirit was the cause of Christ’s conception whereas the Virgin Mary was the direct instrument of Christ’s birth. Yet it would be exaggerating to make too much of this difference since, as Swete notes, “it adds nothing of importance to the teaching of the fourth century form, and the only question which concerns us now is whether the substance of the article may be safely attributed to the earliest Creed of the Roman Church”—to which he responds—“Of this there seems to be little doubt.”<sup>31</sup> The question still remains: *when* and *where* did the changes occur and *why*? Tracing the development of these minor alterations is no simple task, nor is attempting to deduce the reasons for them. Nevertheless, attempting to give a suitable answer to these questions and considering the main controversy concerning this article will be the purpose of this section.

### ***When and Where this Article Was Written***

It is not possible to determine with absolute certainty *when* these modifications were added. Undoubtedly, the best way to approach this question is to take into account when this article—as it occurs in the *textus receptus*—can first be found in writing. The earliest documentary evidence, which uses this exact phrase, is found in the Council of

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<sup>31</sup> H.B. Swete. *The Apostles’ Creed and Primitive Christianity*, 42.

Arminium in 359 A.D.<sup>32</sup> This Council, also called the Council of Rimini, took place in northern Italy and was called by Constantius II, the then-reigning emperor who sympathized with Arius. There were roughly 400 bishops in attendance and they were addressing Arianism, which denied the divinity of Christ. They clearly had knowledge of both the older versions of what is now known as the Apostles' Creed, as well as the Nicene Creed as it was then formulated. It is further found in a symbol of ambiguous date which is ascribed to Pope Damasus I (ca. 305 - 384),<sup>33</sup> in the symbols of Faustus of Riez (ca. 405—410 - ca. 490—495),<sup>34</sup> and Caesarius of Arles (ca. 468/470 – 542).<sup>35</sup> From the 6<sup>th</sup> century forward, it is commonly found in Gallican Sacramentaries and Missals, but is not found in any of the Spanish Creeds.<sup>36</sup> Thus, this exact formula, which admits of some slight modifications to the one found in the Old Roman Symbol, is itself datable to at least the latter half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It became the standard formulation used in the Apostles' Creed as it exists today, as is first attested to in the oldest written version we have of the *textus receptus*, namely, the one recorded by Pirminius, dating to around 750 A.D.<sup>37</sup> This phrase of the Apostles' Creed might, therefore, present both archaic and innovative elements, as Prinzivalli states,<sup>38</sup> but the innovations are themselves rather old.

It is likewise not possible to determine with absolute certainty *where* these modifications were first added. It would seem that the confession of the bishops of

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<sup>32</sup> A.C. McGiffert. *The Apostles' Creed, Its Origin, Its Purpose, and Its Historical Interpretation*. (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1902), 188-189.

<sup>33</sup> A.C. McGiffert. *The Apostles' Creed, Its Origin, Its Purpose, and Its Historical Interpretation*, 189.

<sup>34</sup> C.A. Swainson. *The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds*. (John Murray: London, 1875), 168.

<sup>35</sup> A.C. McGiffert. *The Apostles' Creed, Its Origin, Its Purpose, and Its Historical Interpretation*, 189.

<sup>36</sup> C.A. Swainson. *The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds*, 168.

<sup>37</sup> C. Callow. *A History of the Origin and Development of the Creeds*. (Elliot Stock: London, 1899), 159.

<sup>38</sup> E. Prinzivalli. "Il contesto dell'enunciato: 'È stato concepito di Spirito Santo. È nato dalla Vergine Maria' nel Simbolo," 40.

Ariminum in 359 A.D.—where this article of the Creed appears in the exact same form as in the *textus receptus*—was the work of Phoebadius of Agen.<sup>39</sup> Agen is in the southwest of France, but whether the exact wording originated with Phoebadius is not certain. If it did originate with Phoebadius, it is further uncertain whether he was borrowing specifically from Gallican sources or from his own reflections. That being the case, the documentary evidence shows, at the very least, that this particular formulation of the article in question was most known in France and thus when considering all the other evidence, it seems highly likely that it also originated there. Thus, authors such as Zahn can readily state: “It must, therefore, have been peculiar, we do not know for how long, to the South-Gallican Church, to which we owe our recension of the Creed.”<sup>40</sup> Zahn also notes that this statement can be further substantiated if indeed Ignatius “may count as a witness for a yet older confession belonging to yet earlier Apostolic times.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, in order to summarize this working answer to the *when* and *where* of the received text’s exact wording, which mildly differs from the wording of the Old Roman Symbol, it can be stated that the formula dates back to at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century and seems to have originated in the south of France where it was in common use since at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It should also be stated, as Kunze notes, that the *textus receptus*—and therefore this article in question—should not “be regarded as an entirely construction but as a slight modification of a symbol already in existence.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> F. Kattenbusch. *Das Apostolische Symbolum*. vol. I. (Leipzig: 1894-1900), 173ff.

<sup>40</sup> T. Zahn. *The Apostles’ Creed*. tr. C.S. Burn and A.E. Burn. (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1899), 117-118.

<sup>41</sup> T. Zahn. *The Apostles’ Creed*, 119.

<sup>42</sup> J. Kunze. *The Apostles’ Creed and the New Testament*. tr. G.W. Gilmore. (Funk & Wagnalls Company: New York and London, 1912), 41.

## Why this Article Was Written

Answering *why* these slight alterations in the *textus receptus* occurred is perhaps more difficult to answer than *when* and *where* they occurred. According to Prinzivalli, the moment in which the older clause was fixed, as first attested to in Hippolytus, there were no reflections of a doctrinal nature on the Holy Spirit and thus His specific role here was not certain.<sup>43</sup> Said in other words, there was no reason to be very specific or clear about the exact role of the Holy Spirit in the early years when the Old Roman Symbol was first constructed. Most likely, the Holy Spirit's role here was assumed and not questioned and so the more general statement, "born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary," sufficed. As time continued, it was often deemed expedient or necessary to specify or clarify particular points of doctrine, for example, the Arian controversy gave rise to the detailed formulations found in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which specified the divinity of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that every specification or clarification stems from a reply to erroneous doctrine. In fact, Kattenbuch did not see any reason to think heresy was the cause of the alterations with regards to this article.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, there is no strict evidence that this article as it remains fixed today was a reply to a particular incorrect teaching, such as the false teachings of Arius to which the Nicene Creed was a meticulous reply in the form of a crystal-clear doctrinal formulation, but it is likewise not entirely possible to determine this completely based on the available data.

It is important to note that this article as it appears in the *textus receptus* is closer conceptually to the biblical accounts. Compare it to Luke 1:35: "And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will

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<sup>43</sup> E. Prinzivalli. "Il contesto dell'enunciato: 'È stato concepito di Spirito Santo. È nato dalla Vergine Maria' nel Simbolo," 41.

<sup>44</sup> F. Kattenbusch. *Das Apostolische Symbolum*. vol. II, 879.

overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” and Matthew 1:18: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit...” Luke refers to the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary as she is overshadowed by the power of the Most High and Matthew refers to the virgin who was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. These passages paint a picture conceptually closer to the formula “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” Naturally, the earlier prototype of the Apostles’ Creed is not incorrect; it is just a bit vaguer than the article as it remains fixed today. However, why the Old Roman Symbol’s formula here was changed to the current formula still remains a point of speculation.

Swainson offers two interesting and possible reasons for this modification. The first assumes that the Greek is the older and original form and that the difficulty could simply be one of translation.<sup>45</sup> The Greek word *gennēthenta*, coming from the verb *gennaō*, refers more to generation and is probably a parallel to the eternal generation of the Son from the Father as represented in the Nicene Creed: *ton ek tou Patros gennēthenta pro pantōn tōn aiōnōn*, “who was born (generated) from the Father before all ages,” or as the official English translation states: “eternally begotten of the Father.” Thus the original Greek of the initial Creed captured this biblical parallel more accurately while the Latin use of *natus*, “born,” did not. Using the Latin phrase, *conceptus de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine*, is an attempt to capture the Greek more accurately and especially to render a Latin phrase more in accord with the biblical accounts which were known in Greek. The second possibility is that this exact phrase

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<sup>45</sup> C.A. Swainson. *The Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds*. (John Murray: London, 1875), 168.



was penned to clarify the intended meaning against erroneous interpretations.<sup>46</sup> In this scenario, one possibility is that this wording was not known until the time of Augustine somewhere in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Augustine's imitators borrowed the phrase and used it in sermons which were attributed to him, i.e., Sermons 115, 131, and 195.<sup>47</sup> The older formulation, "born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary," was prone to misinterpretation since it could be understood to mean that the Holy Spirit was the Father of the Savior, and Augustine wanted to avoid this misreading. This would account for the first known alteration which reads: "born of the Holy Spirit *from* the Virgin Mary." The Manicheans, however, mocked this expression and so Augustine thought it necessary to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in the conception, while ascribing the birth more clearly to the Virgin Mary.<sup>48</sup> This latter possibility is highly speculative and the former is less so. Nevertheless, the scenario is not entirely outlandish and could very well have transpired, but there is no way to determine that definitively one way or the other.

The possibility based on the discrepancies of language is probably connected to the reason or reasons for the changes, while the scenario involving Augustine is likely more interesting than exact. The answer to *why* the Creedal formula was modified is probably somewhere between these two possible solutions considered in a broad sense. Difficulties in translation are always present when dealing with two or more languages and the history of the Apostles' Creed definitely involves a history incorporating the use of multiple languages. There were also false teachings and misinterpretations of apostolic preaching, since the very beginning and so there was always a need to clarify and specify the purity of the apostolic message from day one to the present. Though

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<sup>46</sup> C.A. Swainson. *The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds* 168.

<sup>47</sup> C.A. Swainson. *The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds*, 168.

<sup>48</sup> C.A. Swainson. *The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds*, 168.

these slight alterations are found later than the prototype of the Apostles' Creed, they are closer to the biblical wording which was penned during the Apostolic Age. Consequently, between different translations and various mistakes, the *textus receptus* is a fairly clear rendering of the apostolic message on this topic. Though the precise details of *why* the modifications occurred must remain somewhat obscure, the formula as it now stands is true to apostolic doctrine and stands as a testimony of authentic organic development, that is, it stands as a testimony to a living apostolic faith.

### **C. Controversies Concerning the Apostles' Creed**

An intense controversy involving the Apostles' Creed erupted in Germany in the year 1892. It began with a Protestant pastor named Christopher Schrempf who was eventually deposed. Schrempf provided a history of his own dismissal in a pamphlet he entitled, *Akten zu meiner Entlassung aus dem wurtembergischen Kirchendienst*.<sup>49</sup> Schrempf denied from the pulpit that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, that Christ ascended into Heaven, and that there will be any resurrection of bodies at the end of the world.<sup>50</sup> He further informed the people in attendance that he would no longer follow the established form for baptizing and that he would omit the recital of the Apostles' Creed during all future baptismal services.<sup>51</sup> This incident caused much infuriation throughout the congregation and scandalized many youths. The matter was taken to a higher authority and the consistory reminded Schrempf that he had sworn an oath upon his

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. A. Zahn. "The Conflict in Germany Over the Apostles' Creed," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*. IV. (Philadelphia, 1893), 268.

<sup>50</sup> A. Zahn. "The Conflict in Germany Over the Apostles' Creed," 268.

<sup>51</sup> A. Zahn. "The Conflict in Germany Over the Apostles' Creed," 268.

appointment to uphold evangelical doctrine and not stray from it, especially such doctrine as established in the Augsburg Confession.<sup>52</sup>

Although Schrempf was deposed, the controversy had only just begun. It provided the basis for the explosion of a massive controversy which gave rise to a tremendous outpouring of literature on the topic of the Apostles' Creed. The Creed's historical origin, veracity, and value for professing Christians were all questioned and scrutinized. Assuredly, this led to a deeper understanding of the historical origins of the Apostles' Creed, but it also opened to much attack its otherwise assumed veracity and import for believers. The incident with Schrempf became a major catalyst for many authors either to offer a more radical and rationalist reinterpretation of the articles of faith found in the Apostles' Creed or to call for a complete discarding of some, if not all, of the articles of faith contained therein.

In the midst of this conflict, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) became the most prominent name among those who were questioning the historical origins of the Apostles' Creed, doubting much or all of its veracity, and seeking to rethink its signification for those calling themselves Christians. His 1892 publication on this topic entitled, *Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis*,<sup>53</sup> became a well-known and highly popular work in this field. As early as 1893, the press was already reporting that this work had gone through no fewer than twenty-one editions.<sup>54</sup> In his work, Harnack maintained that the historical origin of the Apostles' Creed was later than the age of the Apostles. According to him, the present form of the Apostles' Creed, that is, the received

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<sup>52</sup> A. Zahn. "The Conflict in Germany Over the Apostles' Creed," 268.

<sup>53</sup> A. Harnack. *Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis: Ein geschichtlicher Bericht nebst einer Einleitung und einem Nachwort.* (Berlin, 1892).

<sup>54</sup> A. Zahn. "The Conflict in Germany Over the Apostles' Creed," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*. IV. (Philadelphia, 1893), 272.

text, was a mere representation of the baptismal confession used in Southern France sometime in the latter part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> Though there is some truth to his analysis, he radically disconnected the Apostles' Creed from the age of the Apostles and thus set the stage for denying much of the Creed's veracity by claiming that the received text contained precious little of the original Apostolic message. Essentially, Harnack argued that what the Apostles believed was radically different from what later Christians believed and thereby leaving the Christian faith in need of thorough rethinking and drastic reinterpretation in order to remain relevant.

Naturally, Harnack's work met with immediate and fierce criticism. In Germany, for example, Hermann Cremer responded in 1892 with a publication entitled, *Zum Kampf um das Apostolicum*,<sup>56</sup> refuting Harnack's work, while in England, for example, Henry Barclay Swete published a work in 1894 entitled, *The Apostles' Creed and Primitive Christianity*,<sup>57</sup> which was fundamentally a refutation of Harnack's positions. The literature on both sides of this debate was enormous, to say the least. This debate in Germany spread like wildfire and contributed greatly to the contemporary controversies surrounding the historical origins, truthfulness, and relevance of Christianity and its very foundations. Harnack, as well as many others, provided the groundwork and a copious supply of fuel for future writers to doubt, thoroughly reinterpret, and/or reject the main tenets of the Christian faith. In 1929, for example, Cecil John Cadoux, who followed the work of Harnack, claimed that those who composed the Nicene Creed, which is not unrelated to the Apostles' Creed, had "made many weighty additions to the simple

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<sup>55</sup> A. Harnack. *Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> H. Cremer. *Zum Kampf um das Apostolicum*. (Berlin, 1892).

<sup>57</sup> H.B. Swete. *The Apostles' Creed and Primitive Christianity*. (C.J. Clay and Sons: London, 1894).

profession of faith in Christ”<sup>58</sup> and that their “cosmology was geocentric, their eschatology in origin Jewish, their philosophy Stoic or Platonic: their views of historical evidence, Scriptural authority, and human personality were of necessity such as cannot be adopted by us today.”<sup>59</sup> More recently in 1976, Randolph Crump Miller followed this same line of thinking when he posited that the ancient Creeds, including the Apostles’ Creed, were based on “bad science, confused theology, and an outmoded view of Scripture.”<sup>60</sup> This led Miller to reinterpret drastically the relevancy of the Creeds for the modern epoch. He argued that when “the Creeds are seen as symbols of a common commitment rather than as a guide for specific beliefs, they serve a liturgical purpose that is effective today.”<sup>61</sup>

Historically speaking, all the Creeds of Christendom—and thus the Apostles’ Creed—were considered to be accurate expressions of biblical truth among the main branches of Christendom.<sup>62</sup> The German controversy reviewed above was somewhat unique with regards to its direct scrutinizing of the Apostles’ Creed and with regards to claims, such as that of Harnack’s, that the received text of the Creed was far removed from the authentic apostolic preaching, but that controversy did not appear from nowhere. There were other factors which contributed to this controversy and which have likewise contributed to the current assaults on the basic tenets of the Christian faith. B.A. Demarest summarizes some of those main factors in the following words:

...radical subjectivism introduced by the theological enlightenment (1650-1800) led to a gradual depreciation of their [the Creeds] validity.

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<sup>58</sup> C.J. Cadoux. *Catholicism and Christianity*. (MacVeagh: New York, 1929), 238.

<sup>59</sup> C.J. Cadoux. *Catholicism and Christianity*, 234.

<sup>60</sup> R.C. Miller. *This We Can Believe*. (Hawthorn Books: New York, 1976), 33.

<sup>61</sup> R.C. Miller. *This We Can Believe*, 170-171.

<sup>62</sup> B.A. Demarest. "Christendom's Creeds: their relevance in the modern world," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. vol. 21, no. 4. (December 1, 1978), 348.

Stimulated by a burgeoning scientism and by man's frenzied quest for "release from his self-incurred tutelage" (Kant), and facilitated by the decay of eighteenth-century Protestant scholasticism, rationalistic religion sought emancipation from every ecclesiastical authority, including the Creeds.<sup>63</sup>

After providing this summary, Demarest continues to give some significant reasons why the devolution of the various Christian Creeds, including the Apostles' Creed, has been so widespread and popular. The top three reasons he gives are: the denial of objective truth, the placing of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, and an appeal to cultural relativism.<sup>64</sup> He states: "In the post-enlightenment world of Kant, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard and the whole twentieth-century existentialist tradition, it is assumed that the reality of God cannot be objectively conceptualized."<sup>65</sup> Truth is not considered to have any objective reality, but rather some version of it can be obtained by analyzing subjective experiences. Creedal statements, especially ones initially penned and professed in the distant past, would have little value in light of mere subjective experience. For a creedal statement of any age to have any relevance, it would have to be reinterpreted to fit one's personal experience, regardless of whether or not that experience corresponded to the original intention of the Creedal statement. Rejection of objective truth almost necessitates devolution of the Creed. The contemporary stress on orthopraxis over and against orthodoxy, which Demarest points out, can be found in men like "Schillebeeckx, Dulles, and Küng,"<sup>66</sup> who "insist that what counts is not a Christian's Creed but his concrete deed,"<sup>67</sup> would ultimately render Creedal statements meaningless or irrelevant. Finally, cultural relativists argue that there is a great distance between the

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<sup>63</sup> B.A. Demarest. "Christendom's Creeds: their relevance in the modern world," 348.

<sup>64</sup> B.A. Demarest. "Christendom's Creeds: their relevance in the modern world," 353.

<sup>65</sup> B.A. Demarest. "Christendom's Creeds: their relevance in the modern world," 353.

<sup>66</sup> B.A. Demarest. "Christendom's Creeds: their relevance in the modern world," 353.

<sup>67</sup> B.A. Demarest. "Christendom's Creeds: their relevance in the modern world," 353.

ancient Creeds and the modern view of reality, which Demarest terms “the modern scientific outlook.”<sup>68</sup>

Though these factors do not comprise an exhaustive list of everything fueling the fire of the Creedal devolution which has been raging in a particular way since the eruption of the initially German controversy discussed above, they are constitutive—albeit not exclusive—elements of the ongoing attempts to deny, discredit, or devalue the Creeds and especially the most fundamental of them all: the Apostles’ Creed. Questions regarding the meaning and value of the Creed were carried from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century into the 20<sup>th</sup><sup>69</sup> and still remain today due to this devolution. In light of this, statements such as Randolph Crump Miller’s that the Creeds were based on “bad science, confused theology, and an outmoded view of Scripture”<sup>70</sup> are not the least bit surprising. His further attempt to reinterpret the value of the Creeds by stating that they “are seen as symbols of a common commitment rather than as a guide for specific beliefs, they serve a liturgical purpose that is effective today”<sup>71</sup> is likewise not surprising. This reinterpretation is extremely subjective, even ignoring the objective meaning of English words such as “creed.” Regardless of any religious convictions or lack thereof, the word “creed,” according to *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, means “1. a brief statement of religious belief, esp. one accepted as authoritative by a church 2. any statement of belief, principles, etc.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, Miller is stating that Creeds are valuable when they are not defined as Creeds and this, based on language alone, is practically unintelligible. Further,

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<sup>68</sup> B.A. Demarest. “Christendom’s Creeds: their relevance in the modern world,” 353.

<sup>69</sup> P. Galbreath. *Doxology and Theology: An Investigation of the Apostles’ Creed in Light of Ludwig Wittgenstein*. (Lang Publishing: New York, 2008), 36.

<sup>70</sup> R.C. Miller. *This We Can Believe*, 33.

<sup>71</sup> R.C. Miller. *This We Can Believe*, 170-171.

<sup>72</sup> V. Neufeldt, ed. “Creed,” *Webster’s New World Dictionary*. (Pocket Books: New York, 1995), 143.

to state that Creeds are a symbol of a “common commitment” devoid of the Creeds’ actual content is rather bizarre, especially when one considers the question, “What is the common commitment then?” Based on the normal use of the English language, the “common commitment” symbolized in the liturgical recital of a Creed is the mutual belief among all the members of the congregation in those articles of faith which are being recited. If the Creed has no intrinsic value or meaning, then what is the common commitment symbolized in reciting it together? Again, such a statement is practically unintelligible. Such statements are a logical consequence of many of the factors mentioned above, i.e., radical subjectivism and denial of objective truth. Ironically, such authors declare for whatever reason or reasons that the Creeds are more or less meaningless in themselves, but it is actually these authors’ reinterpretations which are so.

### **The Main Controversy Concerning the Third Article**

Skarsaune makes the following observation regarding the Apostles’ Creed: “Even an extraordinary human life is characterized by what happens between birth and death, but in Jesus’ case it seems to be exactly the opposite: only his birth and death receive any attention!”<sup>73</sup> Skarsaune’s observation is valuable but it would be more accurate to state that only Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection receive any serious attention in the Creed. The Apostles’ Creed primarily echoes the Bible by declaring that the Son of God entered and departed this world in a supernatural manner.<sup>74</sup> He entered by being born of a virgin, and he departed by rising from the dead and ascending into Heaven. These two Creedal declarations show the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ while the virgin birth declares

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<sup>73</sup> O. Skarsaune. “From the Jewish Messiah to the Creeds of the church,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 32 no. 3 (July, 2008), 228.

<sup>74</sup> J.I. Packer. *Affirming the Apostles’ Creed*. (Crossway Books: Wheaton, 2008), 73.



an indispensable aspect of the very mystery and fundamental dogma of Christianity,<sup>75</sup> namely, the mystery of the Incarnation. It should not be surprising that the article in question here is surrounded by controversy since what is at stake is the very heart of the Christian faith.

There are ultimately three types of positions commentators take regarding the virgin birth as stated in this article of the Creed. There are those who accept it, those who deny it, and those who attempt to reinterpret it in various ways depending on their individual points of view. There are also some variations among individual commentators who hold one of these three positions. Some have ostensibly accepted the virgin birth while rejecting other biblical data. For example, Drown writes: “The presence of legendary elements, such as the detailed accounts of the angelic appearances, may be recognized without thereby overthrowing the evidence for the Virgin Birth itself.”<sup>76</sup> Drown wishes to maintain that there is evidence for the virgin birth while discarding biblical accounts of angels surrounding that birth. Others who have denied the virgin birth have not always viewed such a denial as a complete rejection of the whole Christian economy. Hopkins, for example, writes: “It may be said finally on this question, that the abandonment of the theory of the miraculous birth need have no effect upon views on the nature and mission of Christ.”<sup>77</sup> This last quotation demonstrates a complete disconnect between the supernatural origins of Christ—as declared in this article of the Apostles’ Creed—and Christ’s nature and mission. Others have attempted to draw a dichotomy between early apostolic preaching and history in a modern sense. Some authors, such as

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<sup>75</sup> H. Rolfus. *Explanation of the Apostles’ Creed: A Thorough Exposition of Catholic Faith*. (Benzinger Brothers: New York, Cincinnati, and Chicago, 1902), 135.

<sup>76</sup> E.S. Drown. *The Apostles’ Creed To-day*. (The Macmillan Company: New York, 1917), 91.

<sup>77</sup> A. Hopkins. *The Apostles’ Creed: An Analysis of its Clauses, with Reference to their Credibility*. (American Unitarian Association: Boston, 1902), 45.

Rausch, are thus led to make statements like the following: “Though critical scholarship can recover some of the history that lies behind the gospels, they are not to be considered literal, historical accounts of the Jesus story, his birth, life, and death. They represent early Christian preaching, not history in our modern sense.”<sup>78</sup> Rausch thus posits that the early Church had an understanding of history so drastically different than the modern one that they were able to maintain Jesus’ miraculous origins, for example, with no regard for what now would be considered the historical veracity of that claim. Others have attempted to reinterpret or soften the reality of the virgin birth. Cunningham, for example, states the following:

We could make some similar observations concerning the meaning of the claim that Jesus is “born of a virgin.” For us, this statement seems to be nothing more than the assertion of a medical impossibility...In the ancient world, such claims were rather more common—and their focus was not exclusively medical. They provided a way of making assertions about a person’s ultimate origin and significance. The claim that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary” is an attempt to express the child’s extraordinary relationship to God.<sup>79</sup>

This last quotation is an attempt to downplay and reinterpret the ineffable mystery referenced in the Creed. The article from the Creed here is not an attempt to express the child’s extraordinary relationship to God, but rather a doctrinal declaration concerning the mystery of the Incarnation which is the mystery of God’s Son becoming man. Cunningham’s commentary is not substantiated in any concrete way. Where in the ancient world were claims of virgin births common? Cunningham does not provide any evidence for this and it would be difficult for him to do so, since such ancient claims are not at all common, as will be discussed in Chapter 2. In light of the quotations provided,

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<sup>78</sup> T.P. Rausch. *I Believe in God: a reflection on the Apostles’ Creed*. (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 2008), 79.

<sup>79</sup> D.S. Cunningham. “Explicating those ‘troublesome’ texts of the Creeds: the promise of realistic fiction,” *Dialog*, vol. 42, no. 2. (Summer, 2003), 113.

it is obvious that there is much confusion surrounding this doctrinal statement found in the Apostles' Creed. There are those who ostensibly accept it while rejecting other surrounding truths, those who reject it while trying to maintain some semblance of Christianity and its meaning, and those who wish to downplay and/or reinterpret it and thereby accept a version of the virgin birth which is neither biblical nor supported by tradition. There is consequently much confusion even among many professing Christians and one need not search far to find many such seeming believers who have trouble affirming the virgin birth of Jesus.<sup>80</sup> Though it is neither easy nor natural to do so in light of the actual evidence, there are now multitudes of professing Christians who believe in the Incarnation while rejecting either or both the supernatural entrance or departure of Christ into human history.<sup>81</sup> Many of these different reinterpretations will be examined and addressed more thoroughly later. The purpose here is not the doctrinal controversies and reinterpretations but rather the historical one surrounding this article of the Apostles' Creed.

There is really only one main point of contention regarding the historicity of this article and that is the claim that it was never part of the original apostolic message but rather constitutes a later development. This point of contention stems principally from Harnack but is often restated with minor variations in terminology by many others. The main argument employed against the historical validity of the virgin birth—an argument which attempts to exacerbate the alleged disconnect between the Apostolic Age and the Apostles' Creed and this article in particular—is an *argumentum ex silentio* in which it is noted how the virginal conception is not mentioned in the New Testament outside of the

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<sup>80</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield. *The Apostles' Creed: A Faith to Live by*. (Cromwell Press: Trowbridge, 2004), 26.

<sup>81</sup> J.I. Packer. *Affirming the Apostles' Creed*, 75.

Gospels of Mathew and Luke.<sup>82</sup> Hopkins, who betrays a certain bias by calling Harnack “the greatest authority who has ever written on the subject,”<sup>83</sup> does offer a good summation of Harnack’s position. The summation is divided into the following four points:

(1) it [this line from the Creed] is lacking in all the letters of the Apostle Paul, and in all the other letters of the New Testament: (2) it is neither to be found in the Gospel of Mark nor— with any certainty—in that of John; it was lacking also in the common source of the Luke and Matthew Gospels: (3) The genealogies of Jesus which the two Gospels contain lead up to Joseph, and not to Mary; (4) all four Gospels bear witness, two directly, two indirectly, that the original “preaching” of Jesus Christ began with His baptism.<sup>84</sup>

The last part of the second point presupposes that Luke and Matthew used a common source and that this common source is known to scholars in detail. The question of sources here is anything but conclusive. At best there are hypotheses, such as the Griesbach Hypothesis, but there are certainly no definitive conclusions of which there is a unanimous consensus among scholars. The fourth point really determines nothing. That Jesus began preaching with His baptism in no way excludes His supernatural conception and there are no records of everything Jesus said and did as John notes in his Gospel: “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written,” (John 21:25). There is no way to determine whether Jesus Himself ever mentioned the virgin birth. Recall also that John records Jesus saying: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). So even if Jesus did not preach of His supernatural origins during His public ministry—an impossible point to prove one way or

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<sup>82</sup> R. Gromacki. *The Virgin Birth: A Biblical Study of the Deity of Jesus Christ*. (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, 2002), 216.

<sup>83</sup> A. Hopkins. *The Apostles’ Creed: An Analysis of its Clauses, with Reference to their Credibility*, 45.

<sup>84</sup> A. Hopkins. *The Apostles’ Creed: An Analysis of its Clauses, with Reference to their Credibility*, 45.

the other—it would not injure the possibility of the Apostles learning about this after Pentecost. The third point will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. The remaining points are basically different aspects of this particular *argumentum ex silentio*. It is true that the virgin birth is only referenced clearly in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark, the Pauline corpus, or the rest of the New Testament. Since the virgin birth does not exist outside of Matthew and Luke, it is concluded that the teaching did not constitute part of the original apostolic message and therefore its inclusion in the Apostles' Creed must be viewed as a later addition stemming from roughly the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and not connected to the original, historical Christian faith and proclamation.

## **Conclusion**

As discussed, denying the historicity of the Apostles' Creed, that is, claiming that it—along with much of the New Testament which is seen here to contain interpolations based on later and somewhat arbitrary doctrinal developments—is a byproduct of denying Tradition as a source of divine revelation. It is not a necessary byproduct, but it is a possible one since there is no authoritative guard to prevent one from drawing such mistaken conclusions.

It is fairly clear that the creedal statements found in the Apostolic Symbol are extremely early in date. The early baptismal formulas—such as those found in the writings of Hippolytus—were the forerunners of the formal creedal statements. They demonstrate the early efforts of the Church to defend the teachings of the Apostles, handed down by word and by writing, and to ensure that catechumens understood the basic tenets of the Christian faith. They are easy formulas one could commit to memory and thus be able to express clearly the main mysteries of faith. The third article of the

Apostolic Symbol was included from a very early date for the simple reason that it states unequivocally that Jesus is both truly divine and truly human.

## **Chapter 2**

# **Virginal Conception of Christ – Between Theologoumenon and Mythology**

Some authors argue that the virginal conception of Christ is a mere *theologoumenon*, that is, a theological opinion. (The meaning of this term will be discussed further below.) They claim that those in the early Church, who taught the virginal conception, were not declaring an actual historical reality, but rather were only divulging a theological opinion about Christ's origins. Other authors argue that the virginal conception is just another myth. These authors imagine that tales of virginal conceptions were common in the ancient world and were readily believed by the ancients who were purportedly not as enlightened as modern man. Such commentators normally point to ancient mythological systems—such as those among the Greeks and Romans—and maintain that there were many mythological tales of gods who were virginally conceived. From this apparent evidence, they deduce that the Christian story of the virginal conception is simply another tale derived from the surrounding Pagan myths. This chapter will be dedicated to examining the ideas between theologoumenon and mythology and demonstrating the weakness and implausibility of such ideas.

### **A. The Theologoumenon Theory of the Virginal Conception**

#### **The Meaning of the Word “Theologoumenon”**

Before addressing the question of whether or not the virginal conception is a theologoumenon, it will be necessary to define the word “theologoumenon.” S. De

Fiores defines the word as “the expression of a theology in a narrative form,”<sup>85</sup> but this definition is somewhat deficient, since Ignace De la Potterie notes that the truth of this definition would mean all the Gospels were theologoumena,<sup>86</sup> that is, expressions of theology in narrative form. Technically, the word “theologoumenon” refers to a “theological opinion” as opposed to a theological fact. There are two kinds of theological facts, namely, those which fall under the domain of natural theology and those which fall under the domain of revealed theology. An example of a theological fact, which falls under the domain of natural theology, would be the existence of a supreme being, an existence which can be demonstrated by a number of philosophical arguments, such as, the ontological argument, the argument from design, and the argument of the uncaused cause. An example of a theological fact, which falls under the domain of revealed theology, would be the reality of the Trinity, a reality which is attested to both in Scripture and Tradition.

Theologoumena normally refer to differing theological opinions in a debate in which theological facts, either natural or revealed, cannot be definitively established. Everything which is necessary for salvation has been revealed, but not every mystery has been partially or fully unveiled. All curiosities cannot presently be satisfied since, as Paul notes, “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood,” (1 Corinthians 13:12). When God can be seen face to face, then all curiosities can be satisfied, but now there is some room for discussion and debate even within the confines of orthodoxy. The

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<sup>85</sup> S. De Fiores. *Maria nella teologia contemporanea*. (Centro di Cultura Mariana: Roma, 1991), 444.

<sup>86</sup> I. De la Potterie. “La concezione verginale di Cristo ‘teologumeno’ o dato storico-salvifico rivelato?” *XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di studi Mariologici*. (Roma, 1992), 174.



question now is whether or not the virginal conception is a theologoumenon. If the virginal conception is indeed a theological opinion, then it cannot be definitely established as a theological fact in the either natural or revealed theology, the latter entailing either its absence or dubious nature in both Scripture and Tradition.

As De la Potterie notes, the term has been stretched to include the idea of “theologizing” since the work of Dibelius.<sup>87</sup> “Theologizing” in this sense refers to opining and is deeply connected to the notion of demythologization, as De la Potterie further notes.<sup>88</sup> It is obvious from surveying contemporary literature addressing the theme of the virginal conception that there is much dissatisfaction with the doctrine. De Fiores provides two reasons for this. The first is due to demythologization and the second to the devaluation of virginity.<sup>89</sup> The first of these two reasons is pertinent here. It is not the purpose of this work to thoroughly examine Rudolf Bultmann’s ideas, but an admittedly perfunctory mention of his main idea of demythologization will be indispensable for contextualizing the appeal to a theologoumenon, apropos of the virginal conception, which characterizes some contemporary literature on the topic.

Bultmann’s idea of demythologization entails a fundamental conflict between two opposing worldviews, namely, an ancient and a modern one. According to this thesis, the ancient worldview was riddled with mythical elements while the modern one is scientific and thus more pristine. Bultmann summarizes this idea in the following words:

It is impossible to repristinate a past world picture by sheer resolve, especially a mythical world picture, now that all of our thinking is irrevocably formed by science. A blind acceptance of New Testament

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<sup>87</sup> I. De la Potterie. “La concezione verginale di Cristo ‘teologumeno’ o dato storico-salvifico rivelato,” 175.

<sup>88</sup> I. De la Potterie. “La concezione verginale di Cristo ‘teologumeno’ o dato storico-salvifico rivelato,” 175.

<sup>89</sup> S. De Fiores. *Maria nella teologia contemporanea*. (Centro di Cultura Mariana: Roma, 1991), 446-447.

mythology would be simply arbitrariness; to make such acceptance a demand of faith would be to reduce faith to a work.<sup>90</sup>

Bultmann assumes that the modern worldview is more accurate than the ancient one on account of its scientific outlook. He also conflates this idea of the modern worldview with the protestant teaching on the separation between faith and works. This particular connection is difficult to see and itself seems arbitrary. Unfortunately, Bultmann does not explain the parallel in greater detail. Nevertheless, the main idea is that the opposing worldviews require the modern exegete of Scripture to remove allegedly mythical elements in order to render the ancient texts meaningful and relevant for today.

This is the backdrop for the question of whether or not the virginal conception is a theologoumenon. In light of all the contemporary connections between the underlying notions found in the words “theologoumenon,” “theologizing,” and “demythologization,” the virginal conception, when considered as a theologoumenon, is considered as an ancient opinion. It is thus viewed as ancient theologizing which needs to be demythologized by modern man in order to retain any meaning or relevancy. Angelo Amato gives three attitudes which contemporary authors have regarding the virginal conception. They are one of perplexity, one of refutation, and one of acceptance.<sup>91</sup> Those authors, who consider the virginal birth as a theologoumenon, adopt either an attitude of perplexity or refutation, as will now be seen.

### **The Virginal Conception Considered as a Theologoumenon**

One of the first authors to advance the idea of the virginal conception as a theologoumenon was E. Schillebeeckx. He posited that the stories of the virginal

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<sup>90</sup> R. Bultmann. *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*. ed. S.M. Ogden. (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1984), 3.

<sup>91</sup> A. Amato. “Il concepimento verginale di Gesù: Introduzione a una ‘quaestio disputata,’” *Theotokos: Ricerche interdisciplinari di Mariologia*. (Roma, 1993), 90.

conception were not intended to provide any empirical truth or secret information about the history of the holy family. The stories merely highlight a truth of revelation, namely, that “Jesus is holy and Son of God from the very first moment of his human existence.”<sup>92</sup> Thus, Schillebeeckx denied that the virginal conception was a historical reality. The early writers, who were theologizing about the importance and meaning of Jesus, merely asserted a theological opinion in order to highlight their faith in the uniqueness of Jesus. This faith allows one to see Jesus as holy and as the Son of God from the very first moment of his human existence—the moment of his conception—but does not necessitate the historical or empirical reality of the virginal conception.

According to Schillebeeckx, The conception and birth of Jesus gradually became more elaborated in a “biological-material” sense.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, this elaboration was not based on a historical reality, but rather it was the result of theological reflection which became more and more concretized over time. Schillebeeckx even asserts that the conception of Jesus was the ordinary result of human parents copulating, that is, Christ’s conception was of “human generation.”<sup>94</sup> He excludes even the possibility of the virginal conception as a historical reality and declares that Jesus was conceived in the same manner every other human being is conceived. According to this position, Christ is only unique on account of what can be seen through the eyes of faith, namely, that Jesus is holy and the Son of God from the moment of his conception, while the virginal conception is simply a pious rendering of that uniqueness based on a theological opinion which evolved gradually in the early Church.

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<sup>92</sup> E. Schillebeeckx. *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. tr. H. Hoskins. (Crossroad: New York, 1981), 555.

<sup>93</sup> E. Schillebeeckx. *Gesù, la storia di un vivente*. (Brescia, 1976), 587.

<sup>94</sup> E. Schillebeeckx. *Gesù, la storia di un vivente*, 538.

Hans Küng argues along similar lines. He lists the virginal conception—though he uses the term “virgin birth”—under the category of “pseudomysteries.”<sup>95</sup> It is difficult to paraphrase his ideas and so it will be expedient to quote him at length. He writes:

However, often pseudomysteries—sometimes constructed by theologians or produced by popular piety, but hardly acceptable to scientists (“original sin,” “immaculate conception,” biological “virgin birth,” “two natures” in Christ, “the mystery of Fatima”)—conceal access to the true mystery. What I mean is the mystery in the strict sense, which appears as a great question on the extreme horizon of our experience in time and space, at the beginning as at the end, but also at the center of the world of human beings: that primal mystery of reality that Jews, Christians, Muslims, and believers of some other religions designate with the much misunderstood and much misused name of God.<sup>96</sup>

The virgin birth, or virginal conception, was either constructed by theologians or produced by popular piety—or both—and is a pseudomystery. It apparently blocks access to the true mystery and causes misunderstandings of God and or a misuse of his name.

Küng states in another work that “the virgin birth cannot be understood as a historical-biological event.”<sup>97</sup> He further stipulates that, despite its non-historical nature, the virginal conception “can be regarded as a meaningful symbol at least for that time.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, the virginal conception is not a historical reality, but only a theological opinion. It is a pseudomystery and a mere symbol, which can be meaningful or at least *was* meaningful in the past. Küng does not elaborate here on the meaningfulness of the virginal conception as a symbol for modern man.

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<sup>95</sup> H. Küng. *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion*. tr. J. Bowden. (Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2007), 79.

<sup>96</sup> H. Küng. *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion*, 79.

<sup>97</sup> H. Küng. *On Being a Christian*. (Doubleday: New York, 1984), 486.

<sup>98</sup> H. Küng. *On Being a Christian*, 486.

Knoch, for example, states that the silence of John's Gospel suggests that the virginal conception was not well known in the early Church and that it was not considered fundamental to Christian belief in the early days of Christianity.<sup>99</sup> Other authors, like O.C. Thomas and E.K. Wondra, argue from a similar *argumentum ex silentio* stating that the other passages in the New Testament, which speak of Jesus' birth—such as Galatians 4:4, which states: “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law...” They conclude that the “consensus of nonfundamentalist and non-Roman Catholic historical scholarship is that the birth stories of Matthew and Luke are legendary material deriving from a Palestinian Jewish milieu.”<sup>100</sup>

O. Knoch, who—as mentioned above—considered the virginal conception to be a theological opinion, concluded as a consequence that one can believe in the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ without necessarily believing in the virginal conception.<sup>101</sup> This is a common conclusion for authors who consider the virginal conception as a theologoumenon. R. Cross, for example, states that a final consequence for denying the historical reality of the virginal conception is the “doctrine of the Virgin Birth is wholly extrinsic to the doctrine of the Incarnation” and that in his opinion, “this is the case whichever model of Chalcedonian Christology we accept.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, the position that the virginal conception is merely a theologoumenon has led to the position that the teaching is not a constitutive part of the Christian Creed. The idea is that since

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<sup>99</sup> O. Knoch. “Die Botschaft des Matthäusevangeliums über Empfängnis und Geburt Jesu vor dem Hintergrund der Christusverkündigung des Neuen Testaments,” *Zum Thema Jungfrauengeburt*. (1970), 57.

<sup>100</sup> O.C. Thomas and E.K. Wondra. *Introduction to Theology*, 176.

<sup>101</sup> O. Knoch. “Die Botschaft des Matthäusevangeliums über Empfängnis und Geburt Jesu vor dem Hintergrund der Christusverkündigung des Neuen Testaments,” 58.

<sup>102</sup> R. Cross. *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2002), 324.

the early Church, apparently, was not settled on the question of the virginal conception, it must be seen as a later theological reflection, which has no historical substance and eventually became confused with the authentic Christian message. The theologoumenon hypothesis of the virginal conception consequently allows one to hold that Jesus is truly God and truly man, or special in some way, while disbelieving that the origins of his humanity were unique, miraculous, or special in any way.

Raymond E. Brown's position is a little different. He does not propose that the virginal conception is a theologoumenon, but he does state that the "biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved."<sup>103</sup> This aspect of Brown's position is shared by others like Michl, who argues that the limitations of historico-critical exegesis prevent a definitive biblical solution to whether or not the virginal conception can be properly viewed as a theologoumenon.<sup>104</sup> Brown also states that "the historical alternative to the virginal conception has not been a conception in wedlock; it has been illegitimacy."<sup>105</sup> He does not find the biblical information to be conclusive and argues that the alternative to the virginal conception has not been what Schillebeeckx argued, namely, that the virginal conception was the result of a regular marital union, but rather that it has been conception outside of wedlock.

Inasmuch as the historical reality of the virginal conception is unclear based on biblical grounds, as Brown posits, the alternative of illegitimacy would be easy for some to accept and difficult for others. Brown writes:

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<sup>103</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. (Doubleday: New York, 1977), 527.

<sup>104</sup> J. Michl. "Die Jungfrauengeburt im Neuen Testament," *Mariologische Studien*. vol. 4. (Essen, 1969), 183.

<sup>105</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 530.

Some sophisticated Christians could live with the alternative of illegitimacy; they would see this as the ultimate stage in Jesus' emptying himself and taking on the form of a servant, and would insist, quite rightly, that an irregular begetting involves no sin by Jesus himself. But illegitimacy would destroy the images of sanctity and purity with which Matthew and Luke surround Jesus' origins and would negate the theology that Jesus came from the pious Anawim of Israel. For many less sophisticated believers, illegitimacy would be an offense that would challenge the plausibility of the Christian mystery.<sup>106</sup>

According to Brown, therefore, to bypass what the Gospel of Matthew and Luke have recorded, consider the historicity of the virginal conception a biblically irresolvable question, and entertain the possibility that Jesus was conceived illegitimately constitutes a position acceptable to sophisticated Christians, but offensive to less sophisticated ones.

Two more contemporary writers, Tissa Balasuriya and Gerd Lüdemann should be considered here. Tissa Balasuriya, a Roman Catholic Priest, was excommunicated on January 2, 1997 for his views and for not complying with the signing of a Vatican-issued profession of faith. Balasuriya has been heavily influenced by the notions of the virgin birth as a theologoumenon. Regarding references to Mary in the New Testament, he writes that “some are of a rather imaginative and symbolic nature, such as the infancy narratives, with the stories of angels, stars, Oriental visitors and perhaps even the killing of the innocents, and the flight into Egypt.”<sup>107</sup> Here he already demonstrates his implicit distrust of the New Testament and the information recorded therein.

Regarding the virgin birth of Christ, Balasuriya argues that the theological tradition “has been very much more concerned about trying to find out whether the birth

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<sup>106</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 530.

<sup>107</sup> T. Balasuriya. *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*. ed. H. Stanton. (Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, 1997), 56.

of Our Lord left Mary a virgin or not, though there is no clear evidence about this in the New Testament writings.”<sup>108</sup> He continues:

Preoccupation with such factors has tended to make of the nativity a sort of preternatural phenomenon, in which Mary’s sharing in human suffering and the anguish of childbirth, in the context of social rejection, are neglected or forgotten. What the Gospels present, however, is the story of a mature, adult woman facing some of the most difficult problems of womanhood and motherhood, and thereby sharing their common trials. It is necessary to rediscover these facets of the story in order that the life of Mary may have more meaning for ordinary women who also undergo such trials.<sup>109</sup>

Balasuriya argues that preoccupation with Mary’s virginity at the virginal birth of Christ makes the nativity a sort of preternatural phenomenon. Actually, it considers it as a supernatural and not a preternatural phenomenon. It was unheard of either to men or angels and was wholly singular in all of history. Since the concern with Mary’s virginity is a concern with the direct actions and intentions of God in human history, it is understandable that there has always been this “preoccupation.” Furthermore, since such a feat would have to be the work of God alone, it is supernatural and not merely preternatural, a basic distinction which this theologically trained priest oddly neglected to make in his commentary.

After basically dismissing both the biblical accuracy of the events described and the concerns of the Church and theologians throughout the centuries, Balasuriya interprets the apparently deeper or authentic meaning of Christ’s virgin birth. This deeper meaning is simply that Mary shared in the suffering and anguish of childbirth, like all women, and this in the context of social rejection. According to Balasuriya, the Gospels present a simple story of a mature woman who struggles with the difficulty of

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<sup>108</sup> T. Balasuriya. *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*, 59.

<sup>109</sup> T. Balasuriya. *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*, 59.



being a woman and being a mother like every other woman who struggles with these issues. This is necessary to understand if Mary and Christ's virgin birth is to have and meaning for ordinary women.

It is ironic how Balsuriya dismisses the authenticity of the New Testament accounts by stating that some of the events described are "rather imaginative and symbolic"<sup>110</sup> and cites for examples "the infancy narratives, with the stories of angels, stars, Oriental visitors and perhaps even the killing of the innocents, and the flight into Egypt."<sup>111</sup> Then only a few thoughts later relies on the New Testament accounts to discern the deeper or more important elements of the story. He never reveals how he determines which elements are fictitious and which ones are historically reliable. Further, he removes many of the elements, which the New Testament offers as history, and includes alleged biblical information which the New Testament does not offer, that is, he denies the biblical accounts of the infancy narratives and states that the Gospels present the story of a mature woman struggling with her womanhood, motherhood, and the anguish of childhood.

Gerd Lüdemann, an academic teaching on the Faculty of Theology at the University of Göttingen, has a hermeneutical approach more radical than Balasuriya. Lüdemann arguably represents the most extreme interpretation which can be given to the virgin birth as a theologoumenon. He boldly denies it and states that "Jesus really did have another father than Joseph and was in fact fathered before Mary's marriage, presumably through rape."<sup>112</sup> He explains this position in the following words:

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<sup>110</sup> T. Balasuriya. *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*, 56.

<sup>111</sup> T. Balasuriya. *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*, 56.

<sup>112</sup> G. Lüdemann. *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus*. tr. J. Bowden. (Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, 1998), 138.

Christology develops in parallel to this Jewish anticriticism. Thus we already observe in Paul and Mark that Jesus is called son of God: in the tradition handed down by Paul in connection with his birth, in Mark first at his baptism. Then similar Christological developments lead to the development of the theologoumenon of the virgin birth which Matthew and Luke already had before them and which had possibly been encouraged by the charge of illegitimate birth. This theologoumenon of the virgin birth is found at a secondary level in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Isaiah 7:14), as is so much else, although the Hebrew original does not speak of a virgin but of a young woman. Finally the Protoevangelium of James vividly endorses the virginity of Mary even after the birth of Jesus.<sup>113</sup>

Here there is the recurring argument of the theologoumenon already discussed in a previous chapter. Lüdemann's work is the culmination of many of the contemporary arguments already addressed, but he stands as a solid example of just how far one can take an extreme hermeneutical approach. Oddly, he is a professor of New Testament studies, but he clearly does not accept the virgin birth and even irreverently alleges that Mary was most likely the victim of rape as if he were an eyewitness. If there is any doubt as to where he stands regarding not only Christ's virgin birth, but the Christian faith itself, the following words from his book should clarify that:

Jesus' wretched tomb was full and his glorious manger was empty—that may be said to be the overall conclusion of my work. Despite the beautiful colors of the Bible, after such a prehistory holy night could only have been unholy for Mary. The silent night was cruel, noisy and hard. So it could not relieve the pain which had been inflicted on the young woman by a pregnancy which had been imposed on her in the truest sense of the word. The manger of a son of God born of a virgin, where homage was offered, had no place here, even if verses from the Bible, pious hymns and empty dogmatic formulae say it differently a thousand times. However, no one could guess who would really be born of Mary. For in Jesus there grew up the dream of someone who symbolically was to outdo all power in heaven and earth. He came to grief on the cross. His tomb remained full and was not replaced by the glory of the resurrection. Nevertheless, indeed precisely because of that, he has all my sympathy.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> G. Lüdemann. *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus*, 138.

<sup>114</sup> G. Lüdemann. *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus*, 149.

Lüdemann gives Jesus his sympathy, but not his allegiance. It is an extreme hermeneutical position to take and it is clearly far outside the realm of Scripture and Tradition. The scrutinizing of Christ's virgin birth under the lenses of science, historicity, and other contemporary concerns, has led to interpretations of the virgin birth which are nothing short of outlandish in comparison to the information recorded in the New Testament and the teachings of the Church throughout the ages including the present one. In the most extreme cases, interpreting the entire New Testament—like Lüdemann—as a series of clever or not-so-clever inventions of the early Church, which hopelessly conceal the actual events, likewise leads to a denial and utter dismissal of the virgin birth as such an invention. These interpretations consider all the evidence from a highly biased viewpoint and are sadly devoid of faith, which is a necessary factor in accepting and thus beginning to understand the ineffability and divine beauty of Christ's virgin birth.

### **The Virginal Conception is not a Theologoumenon**

Paul Haffner writes, “Another false opinion is that the account of the virginal conception is a *theologoumenon*, namely a way of expressing a theological doctrine (that of Jesus' divine Sonship) without any real doctrinal underpinning, effectively in a mythological portrayal. The Gospels contain the explicit affirmation of a virginal conception of the biological order, brought about by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>115</sup> He argues that the virginal conception is biological, real, and, therefore, historical.

It is important to realize that Matthew and Luke did not write the information on Christ's origins and infancy without reflection. They had a little time to consider what they would and would not include in their relatively brief Gospels. They did not

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<sup>115</sup> P. Haffner. *The Mystery of Mary*. (Liturgy Training Publications: Chicago, 2004), 141.

haphazardly compile information and sloppily compose their texts. Their two respective works are researched, structured, and meant to promote the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. The inclusion of these infancy narratives demonstrates that both evangelists considered the virginal conception as part of the “good news,” since, as Ocariz observes, the “conception of Jesus is the beginning of the visible mission of the Son.”<sup>116</sup> It is not difficult to determine that Matthew’s and Luke’s motivation for referencing the virginal conception was, as J.R. Porter states, “to make it clear that the birth was a miraculous event, in which God was directly involved.”<sup>117</sup> In recounting the conception of Jesus, Matthew and Luke both simultaneously establish its supernatural character.<sup>118</sup>

It is also important to recall that their intention was not to write mythology, fairy tales, or merely inspirational devotionals. Their intention was to witness to the reality of the good news available to everybody. They were writing history. Arguing that they were writing history from a particular angle does not exclude their works as non-historical. All history is written from a particular angle and modern history books are absolutely no different. That they intended to write real history, and not pretend history, is clear from the opening of Luke’s Gospel. It is worth reproducing here for reference, since it highlights clearly Luke’s intention to write actual history.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed, (Luke 1:1-4).

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<sup>116</sup> F. Ocariz, L.F. Mateo Seco, and J.A. Riestra. *The Mystery of Jesus Christ*. tr. M. Adams and J. Gavigan. (Four Courts Press: Portland, 2004), 53.

<sup>117</sup> J.R. Porter. *The Illustrated Guide to the Bible*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 1998), 154.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. E. Neubert. *Marie dans l'Eglise anténicéenne*. (J. Gabalda: Paris, 1908), 57.

Luke refers to information which had been delivered by “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,” that is, people who saw with their own eyes, heard with their own ears, and were commissioned by Jesus to spread the message they had received. These eyewitnesses were so “from the beginning” and so Luke does not offer his work as the fruit of later speculation. He offers it as an historical account based on his journalistic investigations.

The authors of all the Gospels also “breathe sincerity” without “the slightest evidence on the part of the writers to deceive,”<sup>119</sup> as C.F. Ripley observes. The Gospel writers often depict themselves and Jesus’ followers in unflattering ways. Ripley gives the following list, which shows the unimpressive ways Jesus’ followers are often shown in the Gospels: “lacking in understanding (Matthew 13:36; Mark 4:13, 6:52), as being ambitious and jealous (Mark 9:33, Luke 9:46, 22:24), as wanting in faith and courage (Matthew 26:40, Mark 16:13, Luke 8:25), and as being rebuked by Christ (Matthew 16:23, Mark 16:14).”<sup>120</sup> This shouts of honesty, sincerity, and reliable historical information. Matthew and Luke certainly do not claim to be stating theological opinions, but rather historical realities based on eyewitness accounts and a careful examination of the data. Thus the idea that the virginal conception was a theological opinion contradicts Luke’s stated and Matthew’s understood intention to provide historical information.

To argue that Matthew and Luke either invented the virginal conception or that they were the recipients of a mere theological opinion, which was not widespread and little known throughout the early Church, is not an easily defensible position. The

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<sup>119</sup> C.F. Ripley. *This is the Faith: A Complete Explanation of the Catholic Faith*. (Tan Books: Rockford, 2002), 26.

<sup>120</sup> C.F. Ripley. *This is the Faith: A Complete Explanation of the Catholic Faith*, 26.

evidence available strongly suggests that the opposite position more plausible. As Baker writes, “the belief in the virginal conception of Jesus was current in the time of the Apostles, since it is enshrined in two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke.”<sup>121</sup> Matthew was a Jewish believer writing primarily to Jews, who accepted Jesus, while Luke was a gentile writing primarily to gentiles. This suggests that the early Church, which was an admixture of Jews and gentiles in various geographical locations, was quite familiar with this doctrine in the earliest days of Christianity. That both Matthew and Luke refer to this teaching “emphasizes its wide acceptance throughout the early church,”<sup>122</sup> as Hinson states. Furthermore, as P. Bonnard notes, the verses addressing the virginal conception in Matthew “are not principally destined to describe the miracle of the virginal conception, which is briefly mentioned in passing, as an already known fact.”<sup>123</sup> Matthew treats the virginal conception briefly as something already established.

Furthermore, the teaching of the virginal conception is also found in the works of the earliest Church Fathers from the Apostolic Age to the creedal statements formulated in the second century. As Mark Miravalle notes, the “early Fathers of the Church unanimously expressed their belief that Jesus had no human father and was conceived in Mary in a virginal and miraculous manner by the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>124</sup> He further states that “the birth was taught by St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), St. Justin Martyr (d. 165), St. Irenaeus of Lyon (d. 202), and on and on, down the line of the early Church

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<sup>121</sup> K. Baker. *Fundamentals of Catholicism: God, Trinity, Creation, Christ, Mary*. vol. 2. (Ignatius Press: New York, 1983), 348.

<sup>122</sup> E.E. Hindson. “The Virgin Birth,” *The Fundamentals for the Twenty-First Century: Examining the Crucial Issues of the Christian Faith*. ed. M. Couch. (Kregel Publication: Grand Rapids, 2000), 224.

<sup>123</sup> P. Bonnard. *L’Évangile selon saint Matthieu*. (Editions Labor et Fides: Fribourg, Solfèdis, Montréal, 2002), 18.

<sup>124</sup> M. Miravalle. *Introduction to Mary: The Heart of Marian Doctrine and Devotion*. (Queenship Publishing: Goleta, 2006), 57.

Fathers and continuing in the Church's Tradition."<sup>125</sup> The available evidence also suggests the opposite of the position that the virginal conception was offered as a theological opinion to express Jesus' divine Sonship.<sup>126</sup> As J.G. Machen recounts, "throughout the whole of the second century the Virgin Birth [meaning, virginal conception] is never adduced as an argument for Jesus' divinity, but always for his true humanity."<sup>127</sup> Proponents of the theologoumenon hypothesis for the virginal conception need to explain how the early Church went from allegedly employing the teaching as a defense of Jesus' divinity to a defense of his humanity in an extremely short period of time.

Such authors also need to address another serious difficulty with their position. The allegation of Jesus' illegitimacy was present since the time of Origin.<sup>128</sup> It was even intimated in John's Gospel. Consider John 8:41, "'You do what your father did.' They said to him, 'We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.'" Declaring the virginal conception would only invite such criticism, since such a claim references something entirely outside the norm. As Witherington observes, "It is difficult if not impossible to explain why Christians would create so many problems for themselves and invite the charge of Jesus' illegitimate birth by promulgating such an idea if it had no historical basis."<sup>129</sup> It is not likely that a significant number of persons living in the first century would invent an outlandish tale of virginal conception in order to

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<sup>125</sup> M. Miravalle. *Introduction to Mary: The Heart of Marian Doctrine and Devotion*, 57.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. P. Haffner. *The Mystery of Mary*, 141.

<sup>127</sup> J.G. Machen. *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. (London, 1930), 7.

<sup>128</sup> B. Witherington. "Birth of Jesus," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. eds. J.B. Green, S. McKnight, and H. Marshall. (Inter-Varsity Press: Downers Grove and Nottingham, 1992), 70.

<sup>129</sup> B. Witherington. "Birth of Jesus," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. eds. J.B. Green, S. McKnight, and H. Marshall. (Inter-Varsity Press: Downers Grove and Nottingham, 1992), 70.

promote a person, for whom they personally sacrificed everything, and be successful in winning the hearts and minds of many for 2,000 years.

Finally, there is the attempt to preserve the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ while jettisoning the doctrine of the virginal conception. Crisp summarizes this as follows:

Although, as we have shown, it is possible to set forth a robust two-natures doctrine of the Incarnation that conforms to Chalcedonian Christology in all other particulars apart from its denial of the Virgin Birth, such a doctrine does not reflect the teaching of Scripture or the tradition. Consequently, such a NVB [non-virginal birth] argument is wholly inadequate, indeed, is an unorthodox statement of how the Incarnation took place.<sup>130</sup>

Technically it is possible to deny the virginal conception while maintaining the two-natures doctrine of the Incarnation, but it is not correct because it is not what God has revealed. Matthew and Luke were either cruelly deceived by the greatest hoax the world has ever known, liars, or the recipients and human transmitters of a divine intervention which occurred in human history. The virginal conception is a historical reality, but one that can only be understood and interpreted through the eyes of faith. To paraphrase Amato, the historical reality of the virginal conception is meaningless without Christian faith, while the Christian faith is empty without the event.<sup>131</sup> The only *theologoumenon* here is the belief that the virginal conception is merely a theological opinion.

## **B. The Virginal Conception – A Myth or Symbol?**

### **The Myth and Symbol Hypotheses**

The idea that the virginal conception is borrowed from or somehow connected to different pagan mythologies is nothing new. Thomas Jefferson said, “The day will come

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<sup>130</sup> O.D. Crisp. “On the ‘Fittingness’ of the Virginal Birth,” *Heythrop Journal*. vol. 49, no. 2. (2011), 217.

<sup>131</sup> A. Amato. *Il Salvatore e la Vergine-Madre: La materintà salvifica di Maria e le cristologie contemporanee*. Atti del 3° Simposio Mariologico Internazionale. (Edizioni Marianum: Roma, 1980), 34.



when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.”<sup>132</sup> The idea continues to exist today and is propagated widely on the internet. For example, Peter Joseph made a film entitled, *Zeitgeist: The Movie*, in 2007.<sup>133</sup> The film is conspiratorial in nature and is divided into three parts. The first part, “The Greatest Story Ever Told,” is an elaboration on the idea that Christianity stems directly from pagan mythologies and merely represents another version of the same. This part of the film is largely based on the work of Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold*.<sup>134</sup> The film can be viewed for free on various websites, such as YouTube, where its popularity is evident from the amount of views it has received—over 2.5 million in this case.<sup>135</sup>

The idea can also be found in literature addressing this topic. For example, in 1955, Bundy wrote that the “idea of a supernatural or virgin birth is pagan, and it must have found its way into the story of Jesus through Gentile-Christian channels.”<sup>136</sup> The hypothesis is not unique to the English-speaking world either. For example, in 2005, A. Gaillard, a French author, wrote that “a-corporeal love,” which he claims “profoundly marked Christianity,” is something which “corresponds to myth.”<sup>137</sup> Gaillard presupposes a link between pagan mythologies and Christianity, particularly regarding the virginal conception.

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<sup>132</sup> L.M. Graham. *Deceptions and Myths of the Bible*. (Citadel Press: New York, 1991), 304.

<sup>133</sup> This is the official site for the film: <http://www.zeitgeistmovie.com/>

<sup>134</sup> A.S. *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold*. (Adventures Unlimited Press: Kempton), 1999.

<sup>135</sup> This can be seen here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNf-P\\_5u\\_Hw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNf-P_5u_Hw)

<sup>136</sup> W. Bundy. *Jesus and the First Three Gospels*. (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1955), 11.

<sup>137</sup> A. Gaillard. *Les mythes du christianisme : des héritages juif et grec aux valeurs fondatrices de l'Occident*. (Editions Publibook: Paris, 2005), 134.

There are many pagan myths among the Sumerians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, etc. It would require a book to review each myth which is claimed either to have inspired or to be connected somehow to the virginal conception proclaimed in the Christian faith. On account of its contemporary popularity, it will be useful to review the beginning of the *Zeitgeist* film and the main parallels Joseph offers in his movie. He begins by explaining that the sun, which was necessary to sustain life, was important to humanity since the beginning and thus became the underpinning for various pagan mythologies. He states, “The sun, with its life-giving and saving qualities, was personified as a representative of the unseen creator, or God, God’s Son, the light of the world, the savior of humankind.”<sup>138</sup> He then continues to offer the Egyptian god Horus, the Greek god Attis, the Indian god Krishna, the Greek god Dionysius, and the Persian god Mithra. With the exception of Krishna, Joseph claims that all of these gods were said to have been born on December 25<sup>th</sup>. He further claims that they were all reported as having been born of virgins.

A popular name in this debate is Eugene Drewermann. He mixes this notion of the virginal conception and mythologies with psychology. In an interview with *Guardian Weekly*, Drewermann declared that “Stories of the virgin birth also predate Christianity.”<sup>139</sup> For one example, he gives the story of Buddha. He states that “The Buddhists know that about 500 years before Christ, Prince Gautama, the Buddha, was conceived in a union between a young virgin and a white elephant. He was born out of the side of the virgin who died shortly afterwards. But all Buddhists know that this virgin

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<sup>138</sup> Movie accessed on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNf-P\\_5u\\_Hw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNf-P_5u_Hw)

<sup>139</sup> H. Tincq. “Drewermann-a rebel with a cause,” *Guardian Weekly*. (March, 1992), 15.

conception and virgin birth are pure poetic symbols.”<sup>140</sup> He then argues that the Catholic Church is responsible for giving these symbols an erroneous historical significance.<sup>141</sup> Eugen Drewermann holds that “Jesus...was born of a father and a mother, like everybody else.”<sup>142</sup> He finally ascribes a psychological meaning to the virginal conception. He states that “In psychotherapy, moments of internal renewal are observed, based on images of new birth, free of antecedents, let us say, virgin birth. This is the significance of the biblical story of the miraculous birth of Jesus, the sum total of the fantastic poetical experience of his entire life: people who come close to him could learn to be reborn and live again.”<sup>143</sup>

Connected to the virginal conception is the notion of Jesus Christ as the “Son of God.” When Jesus Christ is called by this title, however, its actual meaning is not an objective definition, according to Drewermann, but rather it is an attempt “to use an archetypal pre-existent expression to describe a domain of experience whose symbolic expression is concentrated in the idea of the virgin birth of the Son of God.”<sup>144</sup> According to Drewermann, focusing on this idea of Jesus as the “Son of God” externally leads to the realization that there is a direct, historical development of this notion. It can be traced from the Egyptian Pharaohs to the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and finally Romans.<sup>145</sup> Focusing on the inner meaning of this idea as a religious symbol, however, shows a direct development from the Egyptians to the dogmas of the early

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<sup>140</sup> H. Tincq. “Drewermann-a rebel with a cause,” 15.

<sup>141</sup> H. Tincq. “Drewermann-a rebel with a cause,” 15.

<sup>142</sup> H. Tincq. “Drewermann-a rebel with a cause,” 15.

<sup>143</sup> H. Tincq. “Drewermann-a rebel with a cause,” 15.

<sup>144</sup> E. Drewermann. *Discovering the God Child Within: A Spiritual Psychology of the Infancy of Jesus*. tr. P. Heinegg. (Crossroad Publishing: New York, 1994), 74.

<sup>145</sup> E. Drewermann. *Discovering the God Child Within: A Spiritual Psychology of the Infancy of Jesus*, 79.

Church.<sup>146</sup> Drewermann summarizes his thoughts on this by writing, “It is the great achievement of Christianity to have grasped the central symbolism of ancient Egypt in its intellectual content and to have elevated it in pure inwardness to the central expression of its own faith.”<sup>147</sup>

Some maintain that the virginal conception is mythological in nature, but that this does not render the teaching irrelevant or meaningless. Silvestri, for example, states that, “The fundamental problem for the Christian theologian is the opening to the proper language of myth and symbol, and an adequate and new anthropological ‘warning.’ The representation of the virginal birth of Mary seems inseparably and happily connected to all the images and representations which are derived from other religions and cultural traditions.”<sup>148</sup> He continues:

Myth—as it is called—is indispensable to religious faith and thus must be an object of particular attention regarding history, anthropology, and theology. Myth is neither a fable nor a legend, even if elements of fables and legends are present in the mythical narrations. Myth is symbolic language, a privileged representation of the human spirit, which reveals, hidden and resolved strong human tensions, be they collective or individual; this therefore has a vital meaning in the life of cultures and peoples and responds from an anthropological point of view to profound and universal exigencies. Its importance cannot, therefore, in any way be underestimated.<sup>149</sup>

G. Silvestri argues that the virginal conception is connected to other religions and traditions, but that this does not render the teaching meaningless. The fundamental problem for the Christian theologian, according to him, is to understand and explicate the proper meaning of mythological language to present the virginal conception, in this case,

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<sup>146</sup> E. Drewermann. *Discovering the God Child Within: A Spiritual Psychology of the Infancy of Jesus*, 79.

<sup>147</sup> E. Drewermann. *Discovering the God Child Within: A Spiritual Psychology of the Infancy of Jesus*, 79.

<sup>148</sup> G. Silvestri. “La partenogenesi nelle religioni e nelle culture,” *Concepito Di Spirito Santo, Nato Dalla Vergine Maria*. (Edizioni Dehoniane: Bologna, 2006), 209.

<sup>149</sup> G. Silvestri. “La partenogenesi nelle religioni e nelle culture,” 209.

in a manner consistent with that proper understanding of such language. Along this line of thought, others, such as Hick, consider the virginal conception to be merely symbolic. He states, “that Jesus was God the Son incarnate is not literally true, since it has no literal meaning, but it is an application to Jesus of a mythical concept...it offers a way of declaring his significance to the world.”<sup>150</sup>

### **The Virgin Birth is not a Myth**

As mentioned, the idea of the virginal conception being a myth connected to pagan mythologies is not a new argument. No matter how many times the position is refuted, however, it always manages to reappear and find new advocates who are eager to dismiss the historical reality and unparalleled uniqueness of the virginal conception, as well as other basic Christian teachings, such as the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even Raymond E. Brown argued against the hypothesis that the virginal conception is intimately connected to pagan mythology. He states that “These ‘parallels’ consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration.”<sup>151</sup> He continues to conclude that “there is no clear example of *virginal* conception in world or pagan religions that plausibly could have given first-century Jewish Christians the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus.”<sup>152</sup> Many others also conclude as Brown does. Witherington, for example, states that the “Gospel story is rather about how Mary conceived without any form of intercourse through the agency of

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<sup>150</sup> J. Hick, ed. *The Myth of God Incarnate*. (SCM Press: London; Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1977), 178.

<sup>151</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 523.

<sup>152</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 523.

the Holy Spirit. As such this story is without precedent either in Jewish or pagan literature.”<sup>153</sup> Strauss even argues that this hypothesis has been abandoned by the majority of scholars.<sup>154</sup>

There are two items which can be easily dismissed. The first are the alleged parallels which actually occurred after the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Drewermann gave the example of the Buddha, stating that “The Buddhists know that about 500 years before Christ, Prince Gautama, the Buddha, was conceived in a union between a young virgin and a white elephant. He was born out of the side of the virgin who died shortly afterwards.”<sup>155</sup> Machen indicates that this story about the Buddha is not found until at least some five to ten centuries after the Buddha’s time on earth.<sup>156</sup> This places the story after the time of Christ’s earthly sojourn. Retorting that virginal conception of Jesus was likewise recorded after his time on earth does not help the alleged parallel. First, nobody gives a date later than the close of the 1<sup>st</sup> century for the writing of the Gospels and so Matthew and Luke recorded the virginal conception relatively shortly after the earthly sojourn of Jesus. Second, the story of Buddha’s unusual birth still comes after the penning of the Gospels.

The second easily dismissible item is the invention of information. As L. McKenzie writes, “there are often modern forgeries of ancient myths by those who hope to win debater’s points in religious arguments.”<sup>157</sup> Joseph is guilty of this in his film. He fabricates information which has nothing to do with the facts. One of his more amusing fabrications is

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<sup>153</sup> B. Witherington. “Birth of Jesus,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. eds. J.B. Green, S. McKnight, and H. Marshall. (Inter-Varsity Press: Downers Grove and Nottingham, 1992), 70. See also, J. Saward. *Cradle of Redeeming Love: The Theology of the Christmas Mystery*. (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2002), 190.

<sup>154</sup> M.L. Strauss. *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2007), 415.

<sup>155</sup> H. Tincq. “Drewermann-a rebel with a cause,” 15.

<sup>156</sup> J.G. Machen. *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. (Harper & Brothers: New York, 1930), 342.

<sup>157</sup> L. McKenzie. “On Pagan Myth and the Virgin Birth,” *The Catholic Answer Book of Mary*. ed. P.M.J. Stravinskias. (Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division: Huntingdon, 2000), 104.

the connection he makes between the word “sun” and the word “son.” As mentioned above, he states, “The sun, with its life-giving and saving qualities, was personified as a representative of the unseen creator, or God, God’s Son, the light of the world, the savior of humankind.”<sup>158</sup> That the words “sun” and “son” are homophonic is a peculiarity of the *English* language. The English words “sun” and “son” are *hēlios* and *huios* in Greek and *sol* and *filius* in Latin. They are quite different in these ancient languages which were used to record the pagan mythologies in question. This is either poor research or deliberate misinformation.

Then there are the pagan mythologies which either predate or are contemporary with the 1<sup>st</sup> century of Christianity. In reality, however, these alleged parallels are more dissimilar than similar. Any two items can be compared and contrasted and some loose parallels can always be found, but this does not necessitate that one of the items is causally connected to the other or that both items stem from a common source. Apples and oranges are both edible fruits. This does not mean that apples come from oranges or vice versa and, though they both come from trees, they do not come from the same type of tree. The two fruits also have very different textures and flavors. Thus, they are only loosely connected to one another. The extremely loose parallels drawn between pagan mythologies and the virginal conception of Jesus Christ ultimately serve to highlight the differences between the two.

The pagan mythologies often admit of many different versions and so it is usually difficult to reconstruct the stories in great detail. McKenzie underlines some of the major differences between the mythological stories of unusual births and the virginal conception. The first major difference he notes is that pagan myths happened “once upon

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<sup>158</sup> Movie accessed on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNf-P\\_5u\\_Hw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNf-P_5u_Hw)

a time” and not historically. He writes, “Myths do not pretend to be anchored definitively in a specific time or place.”<sup>159</sup> Jesus lived in a specific time and in a specific place. The second difference he notes is the difference between the fantastic stories of mythology and the brevity and discretion with which the virginal conception is recounted in Matthew and Luke.<sup>160</sup> He states clearly that “The accounts of these births are more ludicrous than credible, more banal than serious...They are marked with an overwhelming character of absurdity.”<sup>161</sup>

There is also a great difference in the nature and purposes underlying the stories of unusual births found in pagan mythology and the virginal conception recorded in the New Testament. Comfort and Elwell maintain that “the lustful promiscuity of the gods starkly contrasts with the sexual restraint commanded by the New Testament.”<sup>162</sup> They continue to state that “in the pagan stories the concept of ‘virgin’ hardly has any stress. In all the cases, it is simply a physical union between a god and a human, not a spiritual conception, as in the case of Jesus.”<sup>163</sup> The nature differs since, at best, there are only a handful of dubious “virgin” births” among the pagan myths and often those accounts do not agree. The virginal conception, however, is not dubious, but clearly stated in Matthew and Luke. Then there is the question of the purposes underling these mythological births and the virginal conception. Daniélou explains that Jesus became flesh of our flesh in the Incarnation and that this inaugurated the beginning of a new humanity. He states, “This is why there is in the mystery of the virginal Incarnation a

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<sup>159</sup> L. McKenzie. “On Pagan Myth and the Virgin Birth,” 104.

<sup>160</sup> L. McKenzie. “On Pagan Myth and the Virgin Birth,” 104.

<sup>161</sup> L. McKenzie. “On Pagan Myth and the Virgin Birth,” 104.

<sup>162</sup> P.W. Comfort and W.A. Elwell, eds. “Virgin Birth of Jesus,” *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*. (Tyndale House Publishers: Carol Stream, 2001), 1286.

<sup>163</sup> P.W. Comfort and W.A. Elwell, eds. “Virgin Birth of Jesus,” 1286.



creative action of God to the inside itself of the history of our race. And this has no common measure, as I have heard it said, with the myths of pagan religions.”<sup>164</sup>

If adherents of the myth hypothesis wish to ignore the evidence, however, and insist that there is still a causal connection or some drawing from a common source, then the burden of proof rests on them. They would have to demonstrate the direct influence of these myths on the Christian authors<sup>165</sup> or show exactly how both stemmed from a similar source. This has never been accomplished to date.

It is also well worth noting here the work of Joseph Ratzinger on this topic. Prior to his election to the Papacy, Ratzinger addressed the mythological hypotheses regarding the virgin birth in his book *Introduction to Christianity* and gave a unique and excellent analysis of the theme. He notes first and foremost that the mythological stories differ profoundly from the story of Jesus’ birth in both vocabulary and imagery.<sup>166</sup> Ratzinger further notes the main difference between the pagan texts and the biblical account, highlighting that the pagan texts almost always have a divine being fertilizing and exercising procreative power in a more or less sexual way.<sup>167</sup> This means that the father of these divine-human beings was the father in a physical sense. The New Testament admits of nothing like this.

As Ratzinger notes, the conception of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament is not a begetting by God in a physical sense.<sup>168</sup> The conception and birth of Jesus is a new creation. Jesus’ “Divine Sonship,” furthermore, never referred to an idea that Jesus was somehow half God and half man, as in most of the pagan texts involving divine-human

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<sup>164</sup> J. Daniélou. *La foi de toujours et l'homme d'aujourd'hui*. (Editions Beauchesne: Paris, 1991), 98.

<sup>165</sup> G. Madore. *Marie: un nouveau regard*. (Éditions Fides: Québec, 1997), 74.

<sup>166</sup> J. Ratzinger. *Introduction to Christianity*. (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2004), 209.

<sup>167</sup> J. Ratzinger. *Introduction to Christianity*, 209.

<sup>168</sup> J. Ratzinger. *Introduction to Christianity*, 210.

admixtures. The Divine Sonship refers to the Christian mystery that Jesus is completely God and completely man.<sup>169</sup> All of the early Christological controversies were precisely about this confusion regarding the person and nature of Jesus Christ. Whereas some thought Jesus was only divine and appearing as a man, others thought Jesus was only a man. The Church was consistent in understanding Jesus' Divine Sonship—manifested in the sign of the virginal conception and virginal birth—as a great mystery involving Jesus being fully God and fully man in the Incarnation.

Ratzinger further highlights that this Divine Sonship is not meant as a biological fact, but rather an ontological one.<sup>170</sup> This is a much deeper reality since it refers to the very being of Jesus and not merely a biological reality. This Divine Sonship is also not an event in time but rather in the eternity of God.<sup>171</sup> For all of eternity God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and so the conception and birth of Jesus does not refer to a new God-the-Son coming into being, but rather that God as the eternal Son assumes to himself the creature man.<sup>172</sup> This means that the eternal Son becomes and is man.

Thus, Ratzinger handles this topic with astute intellectual and inspiring vigor. He strikes at the heart of the difference between the pagan texts involving some sort of “virgin birth” loosely designated and the virgin birth of Jesus found in the New Testament. Whereas the former almost always refers to a kind of physical—and thus sexual—union wherein the offspring is considered a kind of divine-human conglomeration, the latter refers uniquely to an ontological and not a biological reality. It is a reality which transcends biology and points to a new creation. The eternal Son

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<sup>169</sup> J. Ratzinger. *Introduction to Christianity*, 210.

<sup>170</sup> J. Ratzinger. *Introduction to Christianity*, 210.

<sup>171</sup> J. Ratzinger. *Introduction to Christianity*, 211.

<sup>172</sup> J. Ratzinger. *Introduction to Christianity*, 211.

remains the eternal son and at a specific time in history assumes a human nature, not becoming a divine-human admixture, but rather remaining fully divine and becoming fully human. This is totally different than any pagan myth, as Ratzinger well notes.

Finally, there is the idea that the virginal conception is merely symbolic. As noted, Hick states, “that Jesus was God the Son incarnate is not literally true, since it has no literal meaning, but it is an application to Jesus of a mythical concept...it offers a way of declaring his significance to the world.”<sup>173</sup> Drewermann ascribes a pseudo psychological meaning to the virginal conception. As quoted, he writes, “In psychotherapy, moments of internal renewal are observed, based on images of new birth, free of antecedents, let us say, virgin birth. This is the significance of the biblical story of the miraculous birth of Jesus, the sum total of the fantastic poetical experience of his entire life: people who come close to him could learn to be reborn and live again.”<sup>174</sup> Drewermann is haphazardly scrambling different words and concepts together and then arbitrarily imposing his confused linguistic concoction on the virginal conception of Jesus. In other words, he is basing his pseudo psychological interpretation of the virginal conception on absolutely nothing but his imagination which is filled with terminology from different academic disciplines.

F. Brossier affirms that Luke and Matthew present the virginal conception as a fact and not as a symbol.<sup>175</sup> Their brief accounts, which presuppose the historical reality and unmitigated veracity of the teaching, do not even hint remotely of mythological elements, fantasy, or legend. They do not offer the virginal conception as a symbol for

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<sup>173</sup> J. Hick, ed. *The Myth of God Incarnate*. (SCM Press: London; Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1977), 178.

<sup>174</sup> H. Tincq. “Drewermann-a rebel with a cause,” 15.

<sup>175</sup> F. Brossier. *La Bible dit-elle vrai?* (l’Atelier: Paris, 2007), 126.

the importance of Jesus, his significance to the world, or a catalyst for positive psychological experiences. The evidence does not support any of these hypotheses and interpretations. R.R. Racy summarizes this well. Regarding the virginal conception, he asserts, “It was not the mythical invention of some later writers who thought the best way to serve the God of truth was to lie about how his Son was born, and to lie about their own identities in the process, who had so much faithful confidence the Lord of Glory’s being able to build His Own church that they thought they had to invent neo-pagan fantasies to build up Jesus’ image among the pagans.”<sup>176</sup> The only fantasy here is the notion that the virginal conception is mythological while the unwarranted reinterpretations of its signification are themselves symbolic of poor scholarship coupled with an obvious lack of faith.

### **Demythologization and the Misuse of the Historical-Critical Method**

Bultmann, who popularized the demythologization of Scripture, presupposed that the New Testament was riddled with mythological and legendary elements. For him, therefore, the task of the exegete was to remove those elements in order to preserve the relevance of Christianity in the modern world. The use of the historical-critical method was the means by which this could be accomplished. This attitude is prevalent to this day and has influenced many of the authors mentioned thus far. Their reinterpretations and slants differ, slightly or widely, but the principal mindset of demythologization is basically the same. Consequently, it will be useful to contextualize the historical-critical method, elucidating both its value and its limitations.

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<sup>176</sup> R.R. Racy. *Nativity: The Christmas Story, Which You Have Never Heard Before*. (Author House: Bloomington, 2008), 247.

The historical-critical is a useful tool for better understanding biblical texts. The difficulty arises when the method is given an exaggerated import and/or misused. It is an exaggeration when the method is seen as the sole means of analyzing any and all biblical texts and when it becomes the goal rather than the means of that analysis. If the historical-critical method is indeed the only way one can properly analyze a biblical text, then technically it would follow that nobody understood the actual meaning or purpose of the Old or New Testaments until roughly the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the method was first employed. That would mean that the writings of the New Testament, for instance, circulated for about 1,700 years before anybody knew how to view them accurately while those instructed in the method from roughly the 18<sup>th</sup> century forward have come to an ever better understanding of the same New Testament superior to that of their ancient predecessors. Thus, people who lived only 200 years after these texts were written, for example, had no way of contextualizing or understanding the main purpose of them. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (“PBC”) in recent years has rejected any notions which would glorify the historical-critical method as supreme. The PBC has done this by stating that one cannot “accord to it a sole validity”<sup>177</sup> and that “Catholic exegesis does not claim any particular scientific method as its own,”<sup>178</sup> since “no scientific method for the study of the Bible is adequate to comprehend the biblical texts in all their richness.”<sup>179</sup>

Further, when the historical-critical method is used in such an exclusive manner, the biblical texts become nothing more than dead artifacts. In this way, the books of the Bible are treated merely as ancient texts, such as the Babylonian tale, *Enûma Eliš*, which

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<sup>177</sup> The Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. N.C.W.C. Translation. (St. Paul Books and Media: Massachusetts, 1993), 106.

<sup>178</sup> The Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 88.

<sup>179</sup> The Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 42.

is interesting to the scholar and entertaining to the general public as a documentary on the Discovery Channel, but is not considered to be “inspired” and “profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice, That the man of God may be perfect, furnished to every good work,” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). It is for this reason that the PBC reminds exegetes that their work “is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures. They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God’s word for today.”<sup>180</sup> The New Testament was clearly written by people of faith either to inspire or strengthen faith in others and cannot be properly understood apart from this. It is dishonest to ignore this and an abuse to treat the Bible merely as a series of ancient books in need of scrutinizing by one valuable but limited series of methods.

Finally, there is the misuse of the historical-critical method. The results of such misuse vary depending on the particular ideology and/or worldview of the one misusing it, but the logical form of this specific, general misuse is fundamentally the same. So, for example, one begins by eliminating the possibility of the miraculous based on whatever philosophical arguments or presuppositions, applies some version of the historical-critical method, and concludes with a denial of the miraculous. For example, one presupposes that the miraculous is impossible and proceeds to do an exegetical study of the Gospel of Mark using the historical-critical method. Clearly, according to his presupposition, all the “miracles” recounted in the Gospel of Mark could not have happened, since that is impossible, and so another explanation must be provided as to the purpose and meaning of this text. From here, the possibilities of misusing the historical-critical method are many and such literature abounds, as evidenced from the dismissals and reinterpretations

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<sup>180</sup> The Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 116.

of the virginal conception discussed. These constitute an abuse of the method and not an authentic application of it. As mentioned, the results vary depending on the presuppositions and ideologies assumed, but the abuse basically follows the same pattern and the results often seem more imaginative and ridiculous than anything Matthew or Luke could have invented.

Thus, the problem is not the historical-critical method itself. The problem is the exaggerated importance ascribed to this tool and the abuses and misuses of it; the predominant misuse being the false application of the method to support whatever prejudgments and biases one happens to believe. This misuse of the method has become more or less ubiquitous. Check the syllabus of any course taught on the Bible throughout the western world and you will easily find the works of Rudolph Bultmann in the bibliography, but you will most likely not find the works of somebody like Eta Linnemann. She was a student of Rudolph Bultmann who mastered the historical-critical method, was succeeding as a modern scholar, but who eventually became an Evangelical and thus believed that the Bible was in fact the living word of God. This inspired her to author some books using her expert knowledge to criticize the misuse of the method, for instance: *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology: Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical*.<sup>181</sup> and *Biblical Criticism on Trial: How Scientific Is Scientific Theology?*<sup>182</sup> She is certainly not a lightweight in the field and her works apply all the same tools of the historical-critical method as Bultmann and all those influenced

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<sup>181</sup> E. Linnemann. *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology: Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical*. tr. R. Yarbrough. (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, 2001).

<sup>182</sup> E. Linnemann. *Biblical Criticism on Trial: How Scientific is "Scientific Theology"?* tr. R. Yarbrough. (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, 2001).

by him, though she is anything but popular. This, of course, strongly suggests the incredible bias of the entire contemporary enterprise of biblical studies.

## **Conclusion**

With the rise of the historical-critical method in biblical studies, critical exegesis has become the main means of expounding on the meaning of the biblical texts. In and of itself, the historical-critical method is a valuable hermeneutical tool for shedding much light on the origins and preservations of the texts themselves (lower criticism) and the forms, structures, historical context, etc., (higher criticism) of the same biblical texts. However, it is one tool among many and must be used in unison with other tools, methods, and principles.

It is from this exaggerated historical-critical mentality that the notion of the *theologoumenon* appears. Such authors—many of whom profess to be Christians—are comfortable with an irrational disconnect between the teachings of the Church and the teachings of Scripture. In reality, the teachings of the Church and the teachings of Scripture are incapable of contradicting one another. They are two spouts of the same fountain from which flows divine revelation for the salvation of the world. The virginal conception is clearly taught in Scripture and Tradition, a fact which unquestionably verifies its veracity. Ironically, the real theological opinions are the many exaggerated errors which lead authors to posit that the virginal conception is a theological opinion or a mere myth. The exaggeration here—denying the reality of the virginal conception—is the most potent of these misguided theological opinions.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Biology Versus the Virginal Conception and Virginal Birth of Christ**

The contemporary world has a strong and sometimes exaggerated belief in science. This belief in empirical science often constitutes a kind of faith which such adherents place in opposition to religious faith. This notion, which is prevalent in the modern world, is derived from positivistic philosophy, a philosophy which exerts its influence on both epistemology and humanism. A form of materialism proper, therefore, is presupposed and the realm of spirit is excluded either as inexistent or as peculiar psychological phenomena which result primarily from the workings of the human brain. It is not unusual, consequently, that the two sources of revelation, Scripture and Tradition, are viewed here as the fictitious musings of the human mind analogous to any other myth, fairytale, or urban legend. When the theological fields of Christology and Mariology are considered with the limits of this scientism, the same biased notions are applied. This leads to the *a priori* conclusion that virginal conceptions and virginal births are impossible and thus it is impossible that this man Jesus was virginally conceived or virginally born. This will be the controversy examined in this chapter.

#### **A. Biology and the Virginal Conception**

##### **Does Modern Science Contradict the Virginal Conception?**

The positions of perplexity towards or denial of the virginal conception are often inspired or fueled by an idea that the virginal conception cannot be reconciled to a modern scientific worldview. Bultmann, as quoted above, held that “It is impossible to

repristinate a past world picture by sheer resolve, especially a mythical world picture, now that all of our thinking is irrevocably formed by science.”<sup>183</sup> Some hold that the virginal conception was never intended as a biological statement. Raymond E. Brown is once again in the forefront here, asserting that “The virginal conception under its creedal title of 'virgin birth' is not primarily a biological statement.”<sup>184</sup> This line of thought is also followed by Küng who states that “the virgin birth cannot be understood as a historical-biological event.”<sup>185</sup> Others argue that the virginal conception gradually became understood in a biological sense, but that the original teaching was not meant to be understood as a scientific reality. Schillebeeckx, for example, stated that the virginal conception became gradually understood in a “biological-material” sense.<sup>186</sup>

Other authors offer a slightly nuanced version of the same idea. Borg, for example, argues that “To say ‘What happened in Jesus was of the Spirit’ is not a factual claim dependent upon a biological miracle, but a way of seeing Jesus that immediately involves seeing him as the decisive disclosure of God.”<sup>187</sup> He continues to argue that “The truly important questions about the birth stories are not whether Jesus was born of a virgin...”<sup>188</sup> The story of the virginal conception for Borg is not “a marvel of biology” which “proves that Jesus *really* was the Son of God.” He interprets the virginal

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<sup>183</sup> R. Bultmann. *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, 3.

<sup>184</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 529.

<sup>185</sup> H. Küng. *On Being a Christian*, 486.

<sup>186</sup> E. Schillebeeckx. *Gesù, la storia di un vivente*, 587.

<sup>187</sup> M. Borg and N.T. Wright. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions: The Leading Liberal and Conservative Jesus Scholars Present the Heart of the Historical Jesus Debate*. (HarperCollins Publishers: New York, 2007), 186.

<sup>188</sup> M. Borg and N.T. Wright. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions: The Leading Liberal and Conservative Jesus Scholars Present the Heart of the Historical Jesus Debate*, 186.

conception as a “metaphorical affirmation of Jesus’ identity and significance.”<sup>189</sup> Borg thus holds that the virginal conception was not biological, was not intended to be understood in a biological manner, but still maintains some meaning. The virginal conception, according to him, is a proclamation that Jesus is somehow special—even the “decisive disclosure of God”—and that those who proclaim it are somehow connected to the Jesus whom they are proclaiming.

This argument against an actual virginal conception on the basis of a contemporary scientific understanding is often stated with absolute certainty. Funk, for example, asserts that “We can be certain that Mary did not conceive Jesus without the assistance of human male sperm.”<sup>190</sup> He expresses a milder level of certitude regarding who he believes is the biological father. He writes, “It is unclear whether Joseph or some unnamed male was the biological father of Jesus. It is possible that Jesus was illegitimate.”<sup>191</sup> Funk is perfectly clear that the virginal conception did not occur, but he is less sure about the identity of the biological father.

Some authors reason that modern biology excludes any notions of a virginal conception and that such a notion would also be theologically lacking. For example, Peacocke states, “In the light of our biological knowledge it is then impossible to see how Jesus could be said to share our human nature if he came into existence by a virginal conception of the kind traditionally proposed.”<sup>192</sup> He continues, “This means that the doctrine of the virginal conception is also *theologically* inadequate if Jesus is to be

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<sup>189</sup> M. Borg and N.T. Wright. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions: The Leading Liberal and Conservative Jesus Scholars Present the Heart of the Historical Jesus Debate*, 185-186.

<sup>190</sup> R. W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millenium*. (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1997), 294.

<sup>191</sup> R. W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millenium*, 294.

<sup>192</sup> A. Peacocke. *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human*. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1993), 277.

relevant to human destiny.”<sup>193</sup> Peacocke finds the virginal conception to be impossible in light of modern biological knowledge and likewise finds it theologically insufficient based on his interpretation of the Incarnation’s signification and relevance to the destiny of humanity.

Is it really the results of modern biology which lead some authors to deny the physical reality of the virginal conception? Certainly there are many professional biologists who accept and believe in the virginal conception. This is not the real issue. More often than not, these authors are filled with rationalist presuppositions and only use the idea of contemporary science to justify their *a priori* conclusions. They really are denying the reality or even the possibility of miracles. As Stein notes, “If miracles cannot happen, then by definition there can not be a virginal conception.”<sup>194</sup>

The first person to demonstrate this understanding was Joseph. After receiving word that Mary was pregnant, Joseph “, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly,” (Matthew 1:19). As Wright affirms, Joseph’s difficulty “arose not because he didn’t know the facts of life, but because he did.”<sup>195</sup> An angel clarified the supernatural character of this pregnancy for Joseph in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit,” (Matthew 1:20).

Brown’s statement that “The virginal conception under its creedal title of ‘virgin birth’ is not primarily a biological statement,”<sup>196</sup> is like declaring that Jesus’ calming of

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<sup>193</sup> A. Peacocke. *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human*, 277.

<sup>194</sup> R.H. Stein. *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ*. (Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester and Downers Grove, 1996), 64.

<sup>195</sup> N.T. Wright. *Who Was Jesus?* (SPCK: London, 1992), 78.

<sup>196</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 529.

the storm—as recounted in Mark 4:35-40—is not primarily a meteorological statement or that Jesus’ turning water into wine—as recounted in John 2:1-11—is not primarily an oenological—the study of wine—statement. It is obvious that the authors of the Gospels were not writing scientific treatises just as it is obvious that a scientific treatise is not one of the Gospels. That does not mean that the two have nothing to do with one another. At the very least, Jesus’ calming of the storm certainly entailed some meteorological aspects regardless of *how* he accomplished it. Similarly, the virginal conception certainly entailed some biological aspects regardless of *how* the Spirit accomplished it. Empirical science “in the strict sense describes; it does not make metaphysical judgments,”<sup>197</sup> as Bloesch notes. Those authors, who argue that contemporary science discounts the virginal conception, are making a metaphysical judgment and not a scientific one. As Bloesch further states, “The biblical miracles stand in tension with scientism, but not with science.”<sup>198</sup>

It is obvious that neither Matthew nor Luke primarily intended to write a biological treatise. As Schwarz states, “They simply asserted the virginal conception of Jesus Christ.”<sup>199</sup> He continues, “For the Evangelists it was clear that God could bring it about if he wanted.”<sup>200</sup> This does not mean that they were ignorant of basic biological processes or that they were entirely excluding biological realities when recording the virginal conception. This is especially the case with Luke, whom Paul calls “the beloved physician,” (Colossians 4:14).

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<sup>197</sup> D.G. Bloesch. *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord*. (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1997), 104.

<sup>198</sup> D.G. Bloesch. *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord*, 104.

<sup>199</sup> H. Schwarz. *Christology*. (Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1998), 238.

<sup>200</sup> H. Schwarz. *Christology*, 238.

Luke was a learned medical doctor who was most familiar with the medical practices of his day. Even Adolf von Harnack recognized this and wrote a book entitled, *Luke the Physician*.<sup>201</sup> Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are replete with medical terminology and details which are not found anywhere else in the New Testament. For example, when Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, Luke describes the scene using precise medical language in contrast to Matthew and Mark who employ common language. Luke wrote that "Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever," (Luke 4:38). In the original Greek, Luke writes *sunechomenē puretō megalō*; Mark writes *katekeito puressousa*; and Matthew writes *beblēmenēn kai puressousan*. Luke's phrase, *sunechomenē puretō*, is based on the correct medical terminology of his day. It is found often in Hippocrates, Galen, and ancient Greek medical literature, whereas it is only used in the New Testament by Luke.<sup>202</sup> Luke also describes the fever as *megalō*, that is "great" or high." This is another medical detail absent in the descriptions of Matthew and Mark. There are examples like this throughout his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

Luke was a trained physician whose training is evident based on his use of medical vocabulary throughout his works. When recording the miracle of the virginal conception, Luke did not cease to be a trained medical expert. He understood that he was dealing with a divine intervention. This is most apparent when he recounts the Angel Gabriel's final words to Mary in the Annunciation, namely, "For nothing will be impossible with God," (Luke 1:37). Luke, the physician, never forfeited his medical understanding of reality, but he likewise accepted the miraculous intervention of God

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<sup>201</sup> A. Harnack. *Luke the Physician: The Author of the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles*. tr. J.R. Wilkinson. (G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1907).

<sup>202</sup> W.K. Hobart. *The Medical Language of St. Luke*. (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1956), 3-4.

regardless of his professional ability to understand all the biological aspects of that miracle. Luke and Matthew “contain the explicit affirmation of a virginal conception of the biological order, brought about by the Holy Spirit,”<sup>203</sup> as Haffner notes, regardless of their inability to know all the details of that miracle involving biological elements.

## **B. Biology against the Virginal Birth**

### **The Distinction between Moral and Physical Virginity and its Applications**

The scope of this section is to examine and analyze the position of some modern theologians regarding the *virginitas in partu*. As will be discussed, the beginning of this modern debate can be pinpointed to 1952 with the release of certain scholarly work which will be reviewed. Examining every scholar’s ideas and contributions from 1952 to the present would involve reviewing an immense body of literature resulting in a voluminous analysis. This section, consequently, will be limited to an examination and analysis of some of the more well-known theologians who have addressed the theme of the virginal birth in recent years.

The first person in recent years to offer a new insight into the contemporary discussion regarding the *virginitas in partu* was A. Mitterer in 1952. Mitterer released a book entitled *Dogma und Biologie in der Heiligen Familie*, (Dogma and Biology in the Holy Family), in which he argued that the physical trauma associated with birth did not constitute a violation of virginity. He contended that such physical trauma was no more a violation of virginity than circumcision, which Christ underwent and which had never been a source of prejudice against Christ’s virginity. Mitterer maintained that the violation of virginity is accomplished only by sexual intercourse and does not pertain

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<sup>203</sup> P. Haffner. *The Mystery of Mary*, 141.

merely to the physical trauma associated with birth. It is with this understanding that Mitterer interpreted the virginity of Mary during the birth of Christ.<sup>204</sup> His work had a significant impact in as much as it has served as a catalyst for others to participate in this discussion.

One of the first participants in this particular discussion was C.E.L. Henry. Henry, a medical doctor, wrote an article entitled, “A Doctor Considers the Birth of Jesus,” in which he claimed that it would be possible for Jesus to pass through Mary as light through darkness, if God so willed, but that this was unlikely the case.<sup>205</sup> He reasoned as follows.

To be in harmony with a belief that the intra-uterine life was as a human, it is reasonable to believe that there was no departure from normal channels. Sustaining this conjecture there is the matter of disposal of the secundines incidental to pregnancy; they no doubt passed through normal channels. Mary was as Eve before the judgment; therefore, there was no pain and no destroying of the integrity of the body.<sup>206</sup>

Since the work of Mitterer, insistence that the birth of Christ probably did not depart from normal channels has become a common theme among various authors. The discussion has also become biological and somewhat impudent in certain writings, discussing whether or not the hymen of Mary was ruptured during the birth of Christ. L. Ott, for example, claims that virginity is not destroyed by injury to the hymen and even argues that the rupture of the hymen belongs to the fullness of natural motherhood.<sup>207</sup> Thus, according to Ott, the miraculous character of the birth cannot be intimated merely from the concept of virginity. He notes that the Fathers of the Church, with few

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<sup>204</sup> Cf. A. Mitterer. *Dogma und Biologie der Heiligen Familie*. (Vienna, 1952), 98-130.

<sup>205</sup> Cf. C.E.L. Henry. “A Doctor Considers the Birth of Jesus,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*. vol. LIV, No.3. ed. C.J. Callan. (Joseph F. Wagner: New York, 1953), 222-223.

<sup>206</sup> C.E.L. Henry. “A Doctor Considers the Birth of Jesus,” 223.

<sup>207</sup> L. Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. ed. J.C. Bastible. tr. P. Lynch. (Tan Books: Rockford, 1974), 205.



exceptions, hold to the miraculous character of the birth, but he wonders “whether in so doing they attest a truth of Revelation or whether they wrongly interpret a truth of Revelation, that is, Mary’s virginity, from an inadequate natural scientific point of view.”<sup>208</sup>

Others follow a similar line of reasoning. Bur finds the physical integrity of Mary in giving birth problematical and points to contemporary scientific journals which offer case studies of women who have engaged in sexual intercourse without any damage to their hymens. From these case studies Bur concludes that the sign of physical integrity is no longer part and parcel to the moral definition of virginity.<sup>209</sup> Much like Ott, Bur then questions whether the Fathers of the Church were “attesting a revealed truth, Mary’s virginity, by interpreting it, under this physical aspect, from an accepted scientific point of view of their time, but one which would be dubious today.”<sup>210</sup>

Burke offers a position similar to Henry who declared that “Mary was as Eve before the judgment; therefore, there was no pain and no destroying of the integrity of the body.”<sup>211</sup> Burke refers to the idea of Mary as the New Eve in attempt to reconcile the natural with the miraculous. He claims that the birth of Christ was both “natural” and “miraculous” and that it left the physical seal of virginity, the hymen, intact.<sup>212</sup> He argues that pain in childbirth is the result of the birth canal opening forcefully and that before sin the opening of the channels would not have been forceful. It is most likely then that

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<sup>208</sup> L. Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 205.

<sup>209</sup> J. Bur. *How to Understand the Virgin Mary*. tr. J. Bowden and M. Lydamore. (SCM Press: London, 1994), 30.

<sup>210</sup> J. Bur. *How to Understand the Virgin Mary*, 31.

<sup>211</sup> C.E.L. Henry. “A Doctor Considers the Birth of Jesus,” 223.

<sup>212</sup> A.B. Burke. *Mary: In History, In Faith and In Devotion*. (Scapular Press: New York, 1956), 102.

Mary, who was born without original sin and with grace, enjoyed this privilege that would have belonged to all women.<sup>213</sup>

K. Rahner examines the *virginitas in partu* mainly by following what he calls the “general trend of discussion in Mitterer.”<sup>214</sup> He poses many rhetorical questions regarding the traditional terminology employed in speaking of the virginal birth and wonders what aspects of the dogma are universally binding. Rahner has a unique mode of expression and consequently his position is somewhat difficult to summarize and paraphrase. Therefore it is necessary to provide a somewhat lengthy quote to present his position adequately.

What are we then to think of the other details with which tradition tried to render the difference in Mary's child-bearing? We have already remarked that one is not obliged to accept at once all such elements of tradition as definitely dogmatic and certainly binding. But leaving this consideration aside, the question arises once more: what is really included in the concept of ‘bodily integrity’ and what does it imply? If it is considered as a revealed concept, anterior to the individual details, it will be difficult to say what it really implies and whether the usual conclusions drawn from it really follow. Is, for instance, the normal expansion of the genital passages in a completely healthy birth to be considered a breach of ‘bodily integrity’? Will anyone have the courage to maintain this categorically? Are any of the processes of normal birth to be placed under the rubric of ‘injury’ or ‘damage’ (*corruptio*)? And if so, what has been damaged? The ‘virginity’ or a bodily ‘integrity’, ‘soundness’? All this is very problematical, and can hardly be a pointer to the concrete details which we are looking for, as should be clear from the general trend of the discussion in Mitterer and in these pages.<sup>215</sup>

S.M. Perrella is no stranger to the contemporary commentary on the virginal birth. He understands that some modern commentators find difficulty in maintaining the

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<sup>213</sup> Ibidem, 102-103.

<sup>214</sup> K. Rahner. “Virginitas in Partu,” *Theological Investigations: More Recent Writings*. vol. IV. tr. K. Smyth. (Helicon Press: Baltimore, 1966), 162.

<sup>215</sup> K. Rahner. “Virginitas in Partu,” *Theological Investigations: More Recent Writings*, 161-162.

ecclesiastical doctrine concerning the *virginitas in partu*.<sup>216</sup> Perrella notes that the Church in its authoritative Magisterium has expressed this dogma with conviction in both ancient and recent pronouncements; however, he likewise notes that the Church explains the virginal birth not so much physiologically, but rather theologically.<sup>217</sup> Thus it is clear that the Church, both ancient and modern, expresses in one unanimous voice the veracity of the virginal birth while explaining said birth in a predominantly theological and not physiological manner.

The *virginitas in partu* is not an isolated element in the life of Mary, but rather it is a dynamic reality related to the mystery of Christ in the incarnation, according to Perrella.<sup>218</sup> Perrella states that the virginal birth is in logical and dynamic continuity with the mystery of the incarnation of the Word.<sup>219</sup> Relating the virginal birth to the mystery of the incarnation of the Word, Perrella establishes that the virginal birth is consequently transcendent and bespeaks the total consecration of Mary, the mother, to the person and work of the Son.<sup>220</sup> The Son has consecrated the virginity of the mother and thus the Son has made the mother's virginity a true and virginal maternity.<sup>221</sup> The virginal birth is the second phase of a three-phase mystery in which all the phases mutually integrate and complete one another.<sup>222</sup> The *virginitas in partu* is thus a part of the entire virginal maternity of the *Theotokos*.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*. (Edizioni San Paolo: Cinisello Balsamo, 2003), 199.

<sup>217</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 199-200.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 200.

<sup>219</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 200.

<sup>220</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 200.

<sup>221</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 200.

<sup>222</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 200.

<sup>223</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 200.

## **Mary is both a Moral and a Physical Virgin**

This particular line of the contemporary discussion is based largely on the distinction between the physical-biological and the spiritual-moral. In this sense, it can be seen that the discussion finds its origins in the work of Mitterer. The distinction between the physical-biological and the spiritual-moral is one which considers the concrete details of a material process as distinct from greater non-material realities.

In this example, the woman was faithful to her vow and had no intention of acting in a contrary manner to the virginity she promised to maintain. It would seem that this woman would thus remain a moral-spiritual virgin despite the physical-biological change which would have resulted from the material process which occurred against her will. This seems to be the heart of the distinction that Mitterer makes and which constitutes the main trend of thought with regards to this line of the contemporary discussion.

Mitterer argues that such a material process would not render anybody less a virgin. Christ was circumcised in accord with the Mosaic Law and this circumcision did not render Christ a non-virgin.<sup>224</sup> The circumcision was a similar material process which changed some aspect of the physical-biological composition of Christ's body, since some of the foreskin was removed entirely. This material process which resulted in this physical-biological change, however, did not change any aspect of Christ's moral-spiritual composition and thus it has nothing to do with Christ's virginity in and of itself. That Christ was circumcised has never been a source of contention regarding his virginity and precisely because the circumcision was simply a material process which changed a certain aspect of his physical-biological appearance without changing even the slightest modicum of his moral-spiritual reality. This seems to be the main line of thought

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<sup>224</sup> Cf. A. Mitterer. *Dogma und Biologie der Heiligen Familie*, 98-130.

underpinning Mitterer's input and it is this line of thought which has characterized this particular contour of the modern conversation regarding the *virginitas in partu*.

C.E.L. Henry follows a similar line of thought although he does not make a clear distinction between the physical-biological and the spiritual-moral. Rather, he admits that his commentary is conjectural, but analyzes the birth of Christ based on the assumption that the "intra-uterine life was as a human."<sup>225</sup> To be consistent with this assumption, Henry argues that it is reasonable to believe that the birth of Christ occurred in a normal fashion and that he passed through the birth canal like every other human infant. The birth would have involved afterbirth like every other birth and those too would have passed through the normal channels. The birth of Christ then, was natural and normal like every other birth, since Christ is a true human being. If Christ is considered a true human being, then his birth would be as a true human being and consequently there is no reason to imagine that the birth was completely different than the birth of any human being. Christ shared in humanity as a human being and thus he entered the world as every human being enters the world, that is, in the normal way by passing through the normal channels.

Henry adds, however, that Mary was like Eve was before the original judgment. This would mean that she did not experience any pain in giving birth and that the integrity of her body was not destroyed.<sup>226</sup> It would seem then that Henry would consider the birth of children after the original judgment to include some destruction of the mother's bodily integrity and, naturally, as a painful process. The rules of nature with regards to the normal channels have therefore changed in some way after the original

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<sup>225</sup> C.E.L. Henry. "A Doctor Considers the Birth of Jesus," 223.

<sup>226</sup> C.E.L. Henry. "A Doctor Considers the Birth of Jesus," 223.

judgment. Henry does not explain his position thoroughly, but it would seem that the physical-biological and the moral-spiritual were themselves more in harmony before the original judgment and so the virginity of Mary during the birth of Christ somehow falls under a normal category, but a normal category which followed different natural rules, namely, those rules of nature which were in effect prior to the original judgment. The virginity of Mary during the birth of Christ represents here what every birth should have been ideally, but which has been altered in some way as a result of the original judgment.

Normal birth now clearly involves pain and it seems also to involve some destruction to the mother's bodily integrity. Thus, the birth of Christ was normal and Christ passed through the normal channels, but according to the rules of nature as prior to the original judgment and so the physical-biological and moral-spiritual were ostensibly more in harmony with one another allowing Mary to be free from both pain and from any destruction to her bodily integrity. Consequently, the birth of Christ could not be miraculous in the strict sense according to Henry's commentary, since it was a birth which followed the natural channels and the rules of nature, though nature as it was prior to the original judgment.

L. Ott likewise questions the miraculous character of the birth, at least in the strict sense of the miraculous.<sup>227</sup> He argues that one cannot intimate a miraculous birth simply from the concept of virginity.<sup>228</sup> Ott presupposes the distinction between the physical-biological and the moral-spiritual and holds that virginity is not destroyed simply by injury to the hymen. Further, the rupturing of the hymen is an element which constitutes

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<sup>227</sup> Cf. L. Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. 205.

<sup>228</sup> L. Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. 205.

the fullness of motherhood.<sup>229</sup> If the hymen were not ruptured during the birth of Christ, then it could damage the fullness of Mary's motherhood. Clearly Mary was not just a puppet-mother, but rather she was Christ's real and actual mother and so it would be awkward to assert that her hymen was not ruptured if indeed she enjoys the fullness of motherhood with regards to Christ. This seems to be Ott's line of reasoning.

He concludes by wondering whether the Fathers of the Church, whom he admits attest almost unanimously to the miraculous character of Christ's birth, whether they are attesting to an authentic point of Revelation or whether they are misinterpreting an authentic point of Revelation, namely, Mary's perpetual virginity, based on a misinformed scientific point of view.<sup>230</sup> The Fathers rightly attest to the perpetual virginity of Mary, which includes the *virginitas in partu*, but the miraculous character of the birth might not form an essential part of the deposit of faith. Also, ostensibly based on the distinction between the physical-biological and the moral-spiritual, rupturing the hymen does not necessitate that Mary bore Christ corruptibly. She could have born him incorruptibly and remained a virgin, at least in the moral-spiritual sense. Unlike Henry, Ott does not specify whether the birth of Christ occurred like human birth would have occurred prior to the original judgment and so, with regards to Ott, one can only state that Mary was a virgin at least in the moral-spiritual sense as destruction of the hymen does not entail the full loss of virginity.

Another participant in this particular trend of the contemporary discussion regarding the *virginitas in partu* is Bur. Bur follows the distinction between the physical-

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<sup>229</sup> L. Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. 205.

<sup>230</sup> L. Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. 205.

biological and the moral-spiritual and argues that physical integrity is no longer a constitutive element of moral virginity.

In light of this distinction, the physical integrity of Mary in giving birth is considered problematical and so, much like Ott, Bur wonders if the Fathers of the Church were defending a revealed truth, the perpetual virginity of Mary, which includes the *virginitas in partu*, by interpreting the virginal birth by this physical-biological aspect.<sup>231</sup> This physical-biological aspect of virginity might have been the acceptable scientific viewpoint of that time, though today it would be dubious and so the Fathers of the Church might have correctly understood the virginal birth as a revealed truth, but misunderstood the exact nature of that virginal birth based on a more ancient understanding of biology which did not distinguish clearly between the physical-biological and the moral-spiritual.

Burke follows a particular line of thought which is similar to Henry's in as much as he considers Mary as the new Eve and thus as exempt from the results of the original judgment. Also like Henry, he does not seem to make a clear distinction between the physical-biological and the moral-spiritual, but rather he simply considers the birth of Christ in terms of childbirth before the original judgment. Burke argues that pain in childbirth is the result of the birth canal being forcefully opened.<sup>232</sup> The passing of a child through the birth canal would not have been forceful and consequently no pain would have been experienced in the original state of man and woman. This was the original state of the woman and would have likewise been the state of all women had the original judgment not transpired. Consequently, Mary shared in the original lot of the

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<sup>231</sup> J. Bur. *How to Understand the Virgin Mary*. 31.

<sup>232</sup> A.B. Burke. *Mary: In History, In Faith and In Devotion*, 102-103.



first woman, Eve, and as the new Eve she would have birthed Christ through the birth canal in a non-forceful manner. This non-forceful manner provided for a painless birth and thus Mary gave birth to Christ in a painless fashion.

The main difference in Burke's position in light of the others who follow this particular trend of thought is that Burke maintains that the hymen remained intact, that is, the physical seal of virginity remained intact.<sup>233</sup> Presumably, he holds that childbirth before the original judgment would have left the hymen intact. The rupturing of a hymen requires force and thus it would result in pain, at least in most instances, and thus it would seem to follow that this rupturing along with the forceful opening of the birth canal were not elements of the birth process before the original judgment. Though Burke does not specify this point, it would seem to follow from his discussion of the topic.

In presenting the *virginitas in partu* in this way, Burke posits that the birth of Christ was both natural and miraculous.<sup>234</sup> It was natural in the sense that it applied to the rules of nature prior to the original judgment and it was miraculous in that those original rules of nature were no longer the general rules of a post-original-judgment world at the time Mary gave birth to Christ. It is a matter of the perspective from which one views the virginal birth. If one recognizes Mary as the new Eve and thus subject to the rules of nature as established prior to the original judgment, then one sees that the birth was natural. However, if one recognizes that Mary as the new Eve was living in a post-original-judgment world subject to the rules of nature as established by that original judgment, then one sees the birth as miraculous in as much as the birth occurred in accord with an original set of natural rules but in a world where other births occur according to a

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<sup>233</sup> A.B. Burke. *Mary: In History, In Faith and In Devotion*, 102.

<sup>234</sup> A.B. Burke. *Mary: In History, In Faith and In Devotion*, 102.

different set of natural rules. These two perspectives do not seem to omit each other and therefore Burke states that the virginal birth was both natural and miraculous.

Rahner distinguishes between those aspects of the dogma which are universally binding and those which are not. He maintains that one is not obliged to accept every detail of tradition with regards to the *virginitas in partu* as universally binding and therefore as an absolute tenet of the faith.<sup>235</sup> He states that Church doctrine affirms that the birth of Christ is both unique, miraculous, and “virginal,” (the quotations are Rahner’s), and that this doctrine is accompanied by the real substance of tradition.<sup>236</sup> Rahner notes that the birth of Christ, like the conception of Christ, is an act corresponding to the nature of this mother as a completely human act of this “virgin,” (the quotations are Rahner’s again), and that this is true in itself and not just be reason of the conception, contrary to Mitterer’s claim.<sup>237</sup> However, although this proposition is directly intelligible, it does not provide concrete details of the process, that is, it does not offer concrete details of the actual birth in question which would be absolute and universally binding in a dogmatic sense.

Rahner does not seem preoccupied with the distinction between the physical-biological and the spiritual-moral, but rather he seems interested in the concrete details of the natural process of childbirth and in particular with regards to the unique and miraculous virginal birth. Unlike Burke, for example, Rahner does not seem to distinguish between the processes of natural birth as it occurred in the world prior to the fall and the process of natural birth as it occurs in the fallen world. This is evident in his manner of questioning by comparing the virginal birth to every other birth, i.e., “Are any

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<sup>235</sup> K. Rahner. “Virginitas in Partu,” 161-162.

<sup>236</sup> K. Rahner. “Virginitas in Partu,” 162.

<sup>237</sup> K. Rahner. “Virginitas in Partu,” 162.

of the processes of normal birth to be placed under the rubric of ‘injury’ or ‘damage’ (*corruptio*)?”<sup>238</sup> Here, Rahner implicitly compares the virginal birth to the processes of normal birth without distinguishing between normal birth in a pre-original-judgment world and normal birth in post-original-judgment world.

Rahner’s position is consequently somewhat unique in as much as he does not seem to adhere scrupulously to the distinction between the physical-biological and the spiritual moral, nor does he make any clear distinction between the pre-original-judgment world and the post-original-judgment world. He affirms the unique and miraculous nature of the virginal birth, but finds the traditional renderings of the specific process of that virginal birth problematical in light of a more contemporary understanding of the birth process as such.

Finally, according to Perrella, both the virginal conception and the virginal birth are part of the unequivocal event of the birth in time of the Son of God; this can never be forgotten or underestimated in the theological meetings between the Churches.<sup>239</sup> Thus, the virginal birth also plays an important part in ecumenical dialogue due to its theological meaning and import.

## **Conclusion**

Scientism is a contrary belief system opposed to anything which cannot be weighed, measured, and observed with the physical eyes. It is a result of positivistic philosophy which in essence denies that there are mysteries beyond what the human mind can currently grasp. There is a realm of spirit which is quite real regardless of whether or not it can be seen by human creatures on earth.

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<sup>238</sup> K. Rahner. “Virginitas in Partu,” 161.

<sup>239</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginita feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 212.

This is exactly why such commentators, who presuppose the worldview of scientism, imagine an irresolvable contradiction between science and the virginal conception and virginal birth of Christ. These commentators have unfortunately exalted scientism over God's revelation in Scripture and Tradition. They have exchanged the teachings of men for the teachings of God. Furthermore, the denial of the virginal conception and virginal birth is not actually the result of any scientific study—as if mysteries could be eliminated by the empirical observations of finite creatures—but rather it is the unfortunate result of this scientism which is nothing less than a prejudicial and unproven assumption comprising an opposing teaching based on an opposing faith.

Scientism is incapable of discerning the virginal conception and virginal birth of Christ since it has replaced revealed faith with a manmade one. It is incapable of understanding theological contributions, which enable an imperfect yet better understanding, of this mystery of faith. The Eternal Word is a mystery and so his conception and birth in time must also remain a mystery. The only real fairytale is the one which dismisses a revealed truth for an unfounded, manmade bias.

## Chapter 4

### Difficulty of Contemporary Man to Believe in the Virginal Conception of Christ

As noted, Amato provides three attitudes contemporary commentators have regarding the virginal conception, namely, one of perplexity, one of refutation, and one of acceptance.<sup>240</sup> In most cases, the perplexed directly or indirectly refute the teaching and thereby fall into the second attitude which Amato describes. Much of this has already been addressed, but a few examples, taken from contemporary literature found in books, newspapers, and the internet will help demonstrate these attitudes of perplexity and refutation as they appear in these popular mediums and publications. These examples were published within the last ten years and so they serve as recent representative samples of perplexity toward and refutation of the virginal conception in contemporary culture.

#### Contemporary Attitudes of Perplexity and Refutation

One book, which demonstrates the attitude mentioned, is *Catholicism*.<sup>241</sup> It was written by a priest who is well known in the United States. Father Richard P. McBrien is a popular writer and speaker and often appears on television programs and media interviews. According to McBrien, the original intention of the creedal formulas, which concern the virginal conception, were intended to confirm the divinity and humanity of Jesus and not establish the historicity of the event. He writes, “Given the original setting

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<sup>240</sup> A. Amato. “Il concepimento verginale di Gesù: Introduzione a una ‘quaestio disputata,’” *Theotokos: Ricerche interdisciplinari di Mariologia*. (Roma, 1993), 90.

<sup>241</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*. (HarperCollins: New York, 1994).

and purpose of those creedal and doctrinal formulations, their primary concern would seem to have been with preserving the unity of the divine and the human in Jesus Christ, rather than with affirming the historicity of his virginal conception.”<sup>242</sup> He continues to state that the “Church was teaching, against the Gnostics, Docetists, Monophysites, and others, that Jesus was truly human, that he was truly born of woman. And it was teaching, against the Adoptionists, the Nestorians, and others, that he was truly divine.”<sup>243</sup>

Apparently the early Church was not ultimately interested in the historical reality of the virginal conception, but only in the doctrinal implications relevant to the same Church’s faith in the person of Christ. McBrien declares, “Nowhere, however, did the Church define the ‘how’ of Jesus’ conception.”<sup>244</sup> According to McBrien, the early Church, which produced the creedal formulations, did not clarify “whether the Holy Spirit’s involvement positively excluded the cooperation of Joseph is not *explicitly* defined.”<sup>245</sup> That being stated, McBrien assumes, on the other hand, “that the early Christian theologians and pastoral leaders of the Church themselves believed the virginal conception to be historical.”<sup>246</sup> He further declares that “until the beginning of the nineteenth century the virginal conception of Jesus, even in this biological sense, was universally believed by Christians.”<sup>247</sup>

With these two ostensible realities in mind, McBrien wonders what happened to change this fundamental Christian assumption. He asks, “What happened to change that

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<sup>242</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

<sup>243</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

<sup>244</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

<sup>245</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

<sup>246</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

<sup>247</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

virtual unanimity of belief?”<sup>248</sup> He answers by stating, “Two of the same factors which generated a change in our understanding of Jesus Christ and of Christian faith itself, namely, a newly critical way of reading the New Testament, and a newly evolutionary way of perceiving human existence and human history.”<sup>249</sup> Thus, according to McBrien, though the early Church was primarily concerned with representing the divinity and humanity of Jesus by proclaiming the virginal conception, they nevertheless assumed its historicity. This virtual unanimity of belief in modern times, however, has changed due to critical exegesis of the New Testament and an evolutionary view of humanity in both its existence and in its history. McBrien does not specify if he himself believes in the historicity of the virginal conception or if he views it as merely symbolic of Jesus’ identity. Perhaps he would agree with W.E. Phipps, who states that “The virginal conception stories are poetic expressions, to be interpreted seriously but not literally. Similar to the conception stories of Sarah and Abraham, Hannah and Elkanah, Ruth and Boaz, and Elizabeth and Zechariah, the story of Mary and Joseph highlights the role of God in the biological process.”<sup>250</sup> Nevertheless, McBrien does not clarify his own position in the passage cited.

Another book, which shows this mentality, was written by B. Thiering and is called, *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*.<sup>251</sup> She rejects the virginal conception and birth of Christ and gives a rather unique reason for this lack of acceptance. Thiering writes of the Essenes and argues that they considered

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<sup>248</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

<sup>249</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

<sup>250</sup> W.E. Phipps. *Supernaturalism in Christianity: Its Growth and Cure*. (Mercer University Press: Macon, 2008), 32.

<sup>251</sup> B. Thiering. *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*. (Atria Books: New York, 1992).

celibacy as the supreme way of life.<sup>252</sup> According to her view of the Essenes, “Marriage and sex were considered to be unholy, and the aim of the higher members was to be perfectly holy in order to be pleasing to God...”<sup>253</sup> Thus, the Essenes were somewhat obsessed with celibacy as a way of life perfecting pleasing to God and considered marriage as something inferior and at least indirectly displeasing to God.

Thiering then proposes that the virgin birth of Christ can be explained in connection to the Essenes. She states that “Once it is known that Jesus was connected with the Essenes, an explanation of the virgin birth comes to light; a non-supernatural explanation.”<sup>254</sup> She continues to argue that to some, “it is disturbing to bring his [Jesus’] conception and birth down to an ordinary human level; to others, it can be enlightening.”<sup>255</sup> Thiering’s argument, therefore, is this: it is a matter of fact that Jesus was connected with the Essenes. The Essenes had a negative view of marriage and considered celibacy a perfect and holy way of life which pleased God. Therefore, Jesus and his followers had a negative view of marriage and likewise considered celibacy the best way of life for pleasing God. From this conviction and worldview, the story of the virginal conception and birth of Christ were invented to mask the actual human and natural origins of Jesus. Thiering does not specify whether Jesus, his followers, or both concocted this tale to suit their celibate ideology.

Another book entitled, *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*<sup>256</sup> shows a similar mindset. In this book, Wiebe posits that “The

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<sup>252</sup> B. Thiering. *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*, 44.

<sup>253</sup> B. Thiering. *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*, 44.

<sup>254</sup> B. Thiering. *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*, 43.

<sup>255</sup> B. Thiering. *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*, 43.

<sup>256</sup> P.H. Wiebe. *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 2004), 85.



story of the virginal conception of Jesus probably has a similar level of inherent incredibility, but the strong expressions of belief in it among many adherents of the Christian faith suggest that they fail to sense its dubiousness.”<sup>257</sup> He provides several reasons for this apparent failure on the part of Christians to sense the dubiousness of the virginal conception. First, he writes, “The frequency with which the story of Jesus’ conception is told in many places—at Christmas of each year at least—probably contributes to the impression that the phenomenon might be believable.”<sup>258</sup> Second, he writes, “one who comes to believe that Jesus performed extraordinary acts of healing might be able to believe that a virgin conceived him.”<sup>259</sup> So, according to Wiebe, the virginal conception is dubious and Christians fail to perceive this dubiousness for various reasons, such as the repetition of the story during the Christmas holidays, as well as at other times, and a belief in the miraculous nature of Jesus’ extraordinary acts recorded in the New Testament.

An article entitled, *Why I Deny the Virgin Birth of Jesus*,<sup>260</sup> which appears on webpage called, *Unreasonable Faith*, gives multiple reasons for denying the virgin birth of Christ. In this online article, Florian lists the following five reasons why he denies the virgin birth, (he uses “virgin birth” to refer to the virginal conception): First, there is no reliable evidence. By “reliable evidence” he refers to eyewitness accounts, doctor confirmations, and DNA samples. Second, the earliest references are late and sparse. Florian refers here to the absence of the teaching outside of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, assuming the chronological primacy of Mark. Third, it’s the same old myth. Here

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<sup>257</sup> P.H. Wiebe. *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*, 85.

<sup>258</sup> P.H. Wiebe. *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*, 85.

<sup>259</sup> P.H. Wiebe. *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*, 85-86.

<sup>260</sup> D. Florian. “Why I Deny the Virgin Birth of Jesus,” *Unreasonable Faith*.  
<http://unreasonablefaith.com/2008/06/20/why-i-deny-the-virgin-birth-of-jesus/>

he refers to pagan mythologies and historical figures, like Alexander the Great, who were said to have divine fathers. Fourth, is it more likely to be a lie, or to be true? Florian argues that the account is incredulous because virginal conceptions are not the norm. Nobody would believe it even if Mary herself recounted it. Fifth, we would never, ever, believe this today. This is really an elaboration of the fourth point which argues that the claim is so highly dubious that it is unbelievable. He argues that 2,000 years changes nothing and so the story was just as unbelievable when it was first recounted. Florian further stipulates that Mary would have had ever incentive to lie about it since death was the only alternative.

Another article entitled, "Believe It, Or Not,"<sup>261</sup> which appeared in the *New York Times* in 2003, provides a decent summation of this mentality. In this article, written on the Feast of the Assumption, Kristof uses this feast as "an opportunity to look at perhaps the most fundamental divide between America and the rest of the industrialized world: faith."<sup>262</sup> He posits that "One of the most poisonous divides is the one between intellectual and religious America."<sup>263</sup> Kristof considers the Virgin Mary "an interesting prism through which to examine America's emphasis on faith because most Biblical scholars regard the evidence for the Virgin Birth, and for Mary's assumption into Heaven (which was proclaimed as Catholic dogma only in 1950), as so shaky that it pretty much has to be a leap of faith."<sup>264</sup> He then proceeds to provide some percentages. He states, "Yet despite the lack of scientific or historical evidence, and despite the doubts of Biblical scholars, America is so pious that not only do 91 percent of Christians say they

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<sup>261</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," *New York Times*. (August 15, 2003), 29.

<sup>262</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

<sup>263</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

<sup>264</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

believe in the Virgin Birth, but so do an astonishing 47 percent of U.S. non-Christians.”<sup>265</sup> Kristof states, “I’m not denigrating anyone’s beliefs.”<sup>266</sup> He then expresses the nature of his concern, stating, “I’m troubled by the way the great intellectual traditions of Catholic and Protestant churches alike are withering, leaving the scholarly and religious worlds increasingly antagonistic.”<sup>267</sup> Kristof finally draws a comparison between Christian and Islamic mysticism. He states, “I worry partly because of the time I’ve spent with self-satisfied and unquestioning mullahs and imams, for the Islamic world is in crisis today in large part because of a similar drift away from a rich intellectual tradition and toward the mystical.”<sup>268</sup>

### **Perplexity and Refutation are Unfounded**

Contemporary culture is neither an attitude nor a list of propositions to which everybody living in the modern world ascribes. It is impossible to give an absolute definition of contemporary culture. With regards to contemporary culture, the virginal conception is no exception. The teaching has stark adversaries and stark advocates. While any samples of perplexity and refutation can easily be found, so can many samples of acceptance. Recall that much of Kristof’s concern in 2003 was triggered by the percentages he provided. According to his statistics, the perplexed and the refuters do not constitute the overwhelming majority in the United States nor is the rest of the industrialized world without advocates, as is clear from some of the foreign literature used earlier in this chapter.

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<sup>265</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

<sup>266</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

<sup>267</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

<sup>268</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

It is misleading to state that the early Church presupposed the historicity of the virginal conception but did not explicitly define it, especially in creedal formulations. This type of misleading commentary is in line with McBrien's statement: "Nowhere, however, did the Church define the 'how' of Jesus' conception."<sup>269</sup> The first person to inquire about the "how" of the virginal conception was Mary when she asked, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" (Luke 1:34). For all intents and purposes, the angel, Gabriel, did define the "how" when he answered, "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 called holy, the Son of God," (Luke 1:35). The Apostles' Creed, which stems from the Apostolic Age as already argued, echoes the angel's explanation by stating, "He [Jesus] was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary." Thus, McBrien's commentary ignores the actual evidence.

It is also highly misleading for McBrien to speculate quite arbitrarily that the creedal formulations did not clarify "whether the Holy Spirit's involvement positively excluded the cooperation of Joseph is not *explicitly* defined."<sup>270</sup> It is true that the early creedal statements were not theological treatises, but rather were more or less brief statements where Christians could recognize one another and profess their common faith. Nevertheless, the statements presupposed an already received tradition and thus Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter," (2 Thessalonians 2:15). The creedal statements emerged and developed from these traditions received in the Apostolic Age and must be interpreted in light of the same. Contrary to McBrien's

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<sup>269</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

<sup>270</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

thesis, the virginal conception is in Matthew and Luke, was part of the apostolic tradition, and formed an indispensable tenet of the early creeds.

Furthermore, McBrien fails to mention that the Church did in fact *explicitly* define all aspects of Christ's virginal conception and birth, as well as Mary's perpetual virginity. Under Pope Martin I, the Lateran Synod of 649 A.D. *explicitly* defined that the Holy Spirit's involvement positively excluded the cooperation of Joseph. The synod established the following:

If anyone does not properly and truly confess in accord with the holy Fathers, that the holy Mother of God and ever Virgin and immaculate Mary in the earliest of the ages conceived of the Holy Spirit without seed, namely, God the Word Himself specifically and truly, who was born of God the Father before all ages, and that she incorruptibly bore, her virginity remaining indestructible even after His birth, let him be condemned.<sup>271</sup>

McBrien, therefore, has overlooked the actual evidence of the New Testament, the early Church's creedal formulations, and the solemn definitions of the Church. Richard P. McBrien offers a version of Catholicism here which is not Catholic. In his own words, he does this based on "a newly critical way of reading the New Testament, and a newly evolutionary way of perceiving human existence and human history."<sup>272</sup> Interestingly, the same critical way of reading the New Testament is employed by other scholars who draw very different conclusions as has been seen earlier in this work. In summary, McBrien offers a confusing and misleading view of the virginal conception.

The Essenes have become rather popular since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1946. They seem to have been a group which existed for roughly 300 years; 200 years before Christ and 100 years after him. They apparently lived a communal life

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<sup>271</sup> H. Denzinger. *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 256.

<sup>272</sup> R.P. McBrien. *Catholicism*, 543.

of extreme asceticism and strict observance of the Mosaic Law. Many of them seemed to avoid marriage. It is difficult to determine many details about them. As J. McDowell and B. Wilson note, however, “Because of some marked similarities as well as other differences between Jesus and the Qumran community, it is easy for writers to make wrong inferences.”<sup>273</sup> B. Thiering is such a writer. She tries to make a connection between Jesus and the Essenes by stating, “Once it is known that Jesus was connected with the Essenes, an explanation of the virgin birth comes to light; a non-supernatural explanation.”<sup>274</sup> She does not elaborate on this connection much more than simply asserting it.

The similarities between the Essenes and Jesus can also be made between Jesus and other groups of devout Jews of his day, but in reality the differences outweigh those similarities.<sup>275</sup> There is far too much evidence against establishing actual connections. Regarding the alleged connection made between Jesus and the Essenes, Daniel J. Harrington asserts the following:

Was Jesus an Essene? Again there is a solid consensus (despite some discordant voices) that Jesus was not an Essene, and certainly not one of the Qumran type. Galilee is some distance from Qumran, and according to the Gospels Jesus spent nearly all his life and most of his public ministry in Galilee. If there was any Essene influence on him, it may have come through John the Baptist (though this is by no means certain). Moreover, it is highly unlikely that Jesus read any of the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls. And the proposal that the fragments of Mark’s Gospel and other New Testament texts have been found in Qumran Cave 7 has been refuted many times over, though it has had an unnecessarily long life in some circles. Jesus was not an Essene.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> J. McDowell and B. Wilson. *Evidence for the Historical Jesus: A Compelling Case for His Life and His Claims*. (Harvest House Publishers: Eugene, 1993), 237.

<sup>274</sup> B. Thiering. *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*, 43.

<sup>275</sup> Cf. J. McDowell and B. Wilson. *Evidence for the Historical Jesus: A Compelling Case for His Life and His Claims*, 237.

<sup>276</sup> D.J. Harrington. “Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Jesus: A Colloquium in the Holy Land*. ed. D. Donnelly. (Continuum International Publishing Group: New York, London, 2001), 30.

Yet, as Harrington notes, there are still some “discordant voices,” such as the voice of Thiering. They persist in their efforts to reduce Jesus to some sort of ancient religious zealot, whose followers invented many fictitious legends to support his ideologies and to lend a kind of mystical credence to his person and mission. These authors, however, are missing a crucial ingredient necessary for supporting their claims, namely, concrete evidence.

Thiering does not elaborate on why she connects the Essenes to Jesus, but she has certainly made an erroneous inference based on the evidence. Jesus’ teachings had similarities with various teachings of his day, but they also had many marked differences. She demonstrates her understanding of history in the title of her book, *Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*. What the Christian Church has proclaimed and believed consistently about the virginal conception of Jesus for 2,000 years is apparently irrelevant, since Thiering has allegedly decoded the “real story” of Jesus. Unfortunately, her version of the story does not coincide with facts as discussed.

As referenced, Wiebe states in his book, *God and Other Spirits*, that adherents of the Christian faith fail to sense the dubiousness of the virginal conception, that is, they fail to grasp its “inherent incredibility.”<sup>277</sup> The first reason he gives for this is “The frequency with which the story of Jesus’ conception is told in many places—at Christmas of each year at least...”<sup>278</sup> Apparently, gullible Christians have heard the story of the virginal conception so many times—especially during the Christmas season—that they have actually come to believe it is true. These same Christians, however, are well aware that others deny the doctrine in many places, for example, in Wiebe’s book. Yet, this

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<sup>277</sup> P.H. Wiebe. *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*, 85.

<sup>278</sup> P.H. Wiebe. *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*, 85.

does not convince the same Christians that the virginal conception is dubious. This same argument can be applied to those who deny the virginal conception.

Perhaps it is the frequency with which the virginal conception is denied in many places—and that since the early days of Christianity—which has led many to disbelieve it. The second reason he gives is that belief in the miraculous nature of Jesus' other extraordinary acts of healing facilitate acceptance in the claim that same Jesus was virginally conceived.<sup>279</sup> This can likewise be applied to those who deny the virginal conception. Those who do not believe in the miraculous nature of Jesus' extraordinary acts of healing are less likely to believe in the virginal conception.

Florien's five reasons for denying the virginal conception are in large part a summary of the main arguments already discussed in this chapter. Nevertheless, a brief review of them will be worthwhile. Florian considers eyewitness accounts, doctor confirmations, and DNA as reliable evidence. This assumes the New Testament is riddled with lies. Luke, for example, states in his prologue that he is basing his Gospel narrative on "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1:2). According to Luke, what is recorded in his Gospel is based on eyewitness accounts. Florian assumes that Luke is a liar. Ironically, it is Florian who is lacking eyewitnesses to support his claim that entire New Testament is riddled with lies. Florian has created an impossible and irrelevant series of criterion for what he considers reliable evidence. It seems that he would be willing to consider whether the virginal conception were authentic only if there were ancient affidavits attesting to the virginal conception and signed by 1<sup>st</sup>-century Ob/Gyn medical professionals. This is impossible and irrelevant.

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<sup>279</sup> P.H. Wiebe. *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*, 85-86.



Originally, it would seem that only Joseph knew about it and—like Mary—he learned this from an angel, (Matthew 1:20). For somebody so concerned with evidence, it is interesting that he himself lacks any evidence to support his unfounded presuppositions. His reasoning is circular and based on unproven assumptions. His fifth argument dismisses the New Testament account that “her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly,” (Matthew 1:19). Before an angel informed Joseph of the virginal conception, he clearly assumed that Mary was unfaithful to him and still he resolved to protect her from shame. Florien dismisses this account and assumes that Mary was the one reporting the virginal conception to protect herself from death. He has learned of the virginal conception from the New Testament and yet has entirely dismissed the New Testament as a reliable source of any information. Florien has invented his own version of the facts while accusing those who were there 2,000 years ago of being liars.

In his article, “Believe It, Or Not,” Kristof also reiterates most of the arguments discussed in this chapter. He seems amazed that many people still believe in the virginal conception despite the conclusions of Biblical scholars and the lack of historical and scientific evidence. All Biblical scholars do not doubt the virginal conception and the ones who do have no grounds for so doing, as discussed earlier. The alleged lack of historical and scientific evidence has also been discussed throughout this chapter.

What troubles Kristof the most is “the way the great intellectual traditions of Catholic and Protestant churches alike are withering, leaving the scholarly and religious worlds increasingly antagonistic.”<sup>280</sup> He has created a false dichotomy based on his biased viewpoint and a redefining of words. When alleged believers, Catholic or

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<sup>280</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

Protestant, deny the virginal conception, Kristof considers they are part of “the great intellectual traditions.”<sup>281</sup> However, when believers believe the virginal conception, Kristof claims they are antagonistic to scholarship and thereby insinuates that they are opposed to these great intellectual traditions, which would render them “not intellectual.” Prior to this roundabout insult, he stated, “I’m not denigrating anyone’s beliefs.”<sup>282</sup> Clearly, Kristof does not believe in the virginal conception and inadvertently insults anybody who does. How is this not denigrating? Further, the intellectual traditions of Catholicism and Protestantism overwhelmingly affirm the virginal conception. There have always been deniers, but—when considering the entire history of the Church—the intellectual traditions have vehemently affirmed it.

## Conclusion

One of the biggest reasons contemporary commentators have such a difficult time with mysteries, such as the virgin birth of Christ, is because of a predominant cultural milieu which denies the supernatural altogether. There is a widespread denial of a spiritual realm, transcendence, and metaphysics of any substance. Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy and its proper object of study is “being *qua* being.” General principles are established, such as the metaphysical principle of non-contradiction, namely, that something cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect, and then other items, such as substances and accidents, are studied. Contemporary culture has, in large part, conceptually reduced this authentic philosophical endeavor to a non-scientific realm which considers what magic and fantasy, such as the occult topics mentioned.

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<sup>281</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

<sup>282</sup> N.D. Kristof. "Believe it, Or Not," 29.

Therefore, this is a popular mindset which denies Divine Revelation. It jettisons the obedience of faith required since such revelation is based on the authority of God. By denying this authority and therefore refusing to accept divine mysteries, the minds fallen prey to this error are incapable of knowing or understanding any mysteries, since they lack the necessary light for so doing. As Saint Paul notes, they “exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” (Romans 1:25), and thus they prefer and serve the creature in place of the Creator.

Finally, polls and statistics do not determine truth. No matter how strongly an attitude or mindset pervades in contemporary society, it does not necessarily constitute truth. In other words, mutual consensus never equals truth as popular culture and mistaken attitudes have been proven false many times in the past.

Thus, despite what popular opinion currently holds and despite the misguided mindsets of contemporary culture, the revelation of God remains true. Saint Peter, quoting the prophet Isaiah noted the power of God’s word when he wrote, “The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides for ever,” (1 Peter 1:24-25). Even if the whole world denied the virgin birth of Christ, its veracity would remain since it has been revealed by God.

## Chapter 5

### The Virgin Birth of Christ in Ecumenical Dialogue

Ecumenical dialogue has become an important and fruitful endeavor in which various Christian denominations discuss different points of doctrine in order to approach a more informed and mutual understanding of the tenets of the Christian mystery. This has led to bilateral discussions and joint declarations thanks to an attitude of openness and desire for lasting solidarity. As one of the Christian mysteries, the Virgin Birth of Christ has been discussed in different ecumenical gatherings and these have produced insightful additions to the mystery in question. It would be beyond the scope of this work to include all the literature surrounding this immense topic and so the analysis will be limited to three key documents in order to show the progress which has been made and offer some of the many fruits of these discussions.

#### A. The Importance of Ecumenical Dialogue

The reuniting of all Christians was one of the chief concerns of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>283</sup> This led to a shift in emphasis regarding bilateral dialogue and the importance of ecumenism. Since the time of the council, there has been much progress in ecumenical dialogue, but always with an attempt to balance the mission of the Church to unite by way of dialogue with the mission of the Church to evangelize. Both missions are essential to the overall mission of the Church and so there is always the danger to exaggerate one to the exclusion of the other. In reality, the two missions are two sides of the same coin, so to speak.

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<sup>283</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council. Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 1.

To explain this further, authentic dialogue does not automatically exclude the Church's mission to evangelize. In 1991, the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue released a document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, which distinguished between three meanings of the term "dialogue" and its place within the evangelizing mission of the Church. The document is primarily a guideline for interreligious dialogue and not ecumenical dialogue, that is, conversations between the Church and other non-Christian religious organizations and not conversations between the Church and separated brethren. Nevertheless, the principles established are relevant to both and especially the definitions of "dialogue," which will be helpful to reproduce here.

Dialogue can refer to: (1) a "reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communion."<sup>284</sup> (2) "an attitude of respect and friendship, which permeates or should permeate all those activities constituting the evangelizing mission of the Church."<sup>285</sup> The document refers to this as "the spirit of dialogue."<sup>286</sup> (3) "all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom."<sup>287</sup> This last one includes both witness and exploration of various religious beliefs.<sup>288</sup> This third definition is also the one the Church intends when speaking of dialogue, either ecumenical or interreligious. This sense of the term is furthermore "one of the integral elements of the Church's

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<sup>284</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*. (May, 1991), no. 9.

<sup>285</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*. no. 9.

<sup>286</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*. no. 9.

<sup>287</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*. no. 9.

<sup>288</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*. no. 9.

evangelizing mission,”<sup>289</sup> which demonstrates the other side of the same metaphorical coin in question.

There is no ultimate disconnect between dialogue and evangelization, therefore, since they are both missions of the Church. There is a fine line between the two which Benedict XVI summarized when addressing Protestants at World Youth Day in 2005. He said the following: “And we now ask: What does it mean to restore unity of all the Christians?”<sup>290</sup> He continued by explaining the primacy of the Catholic Church by stating: “This unity, we are convinced, indeed subsists in the Catholic Church, without the possibility of ever being lost, (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, nos. 2, 4, etc.); the Church in fact has not totally disappeared from the world.”<sup>291</sup> That summarized, he explained the nature of ecumenism, declaring: “On the other hand, this unity does not mean what could be called ecumenism of the return: that is, to deny and to reject one’s own faith history. Absolutely not!”<sup>292</sup> Benedict highlights the importance of other Christian faith histories which cannot be denied or rejected while also underscoring the importance of the Catholic Church in which true unity subsists.

These are general considerations of the mission of the Church to engage in dialogue and evangelization. The main concern in this Chapter is the fruits to date of Mary’s virginity in ecumenical dialogue. Mary has all the potential to be a tremendous bridge in uniting Christians of different denominations. In fact, though there are some varying ideas regarding devotions and dogma surrounding Mary and her virginity, “promising progress has been made toward a common understanding of the role of Mary

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<sup>289</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*. no. 9.

<sup>290</sup> Benedict XVI. “Address to Protestants at World Youth Day,” *L’Osservatore Romano*. (August, 24, 2005), 8.

<sup>291</sup> Benedict XVI. “Address to Protestants at World Youth Day,” 8.

<sup>292</sup> Benedict XVI. “Address to Protestants at World Youth Day,” 8.

in salvation history, thanks to the efforts of a number of ecumenical dialogues,”<sup>293</sup> as Cardinal Walter Kasper notes. He further notes that “further dialogue may be required,” however, “the reception of these encouraging developments is one way of fostering spiritual ecumenism.”<sup>294</sup> Mary—and in particular her virginity and the unique role in the history of salvation that implies and highlights—is an enormous stepping stone in fostering Christian unity in the hope that “all of them may be one,” (John 17:21), since “Christ calls all his disciples to unity,”<sup>295</sup> as John Paul II has taught.

S.M. Perrella observes that the *Enchiridion Vaticanum* is an excellent source for highlighting the importance and the amplitude of these official dialogues, especially with regards to Mary.<sup>296</sup> Perrella continues his general commentary on Mary in ecumenical dialogue by making the following pertinent observations. One cannot consider a communion of Trinitarian, sacramental, and ecclesiastical faith without considering the presence and role of Mary in both the life of the individual believer and of the faith community.<sup>297</sup> When one reviews the results of the dialogues between the Orthodox and Anglicans, Catholics and Lutherans, Catholics and Methodists, Chalcedonian Catholics and Old Catholics—as well as other documents—one can touch both the points they have in common as well as the points of contrast.<sup>298</sup> The points of contrast remain occasions for a full meeting between the churches, that is, a meeting based on pondering the biblical data, the ecclesiastical and community traditions, and the theological reflections which

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<sup>293</sup> W. Kasper. *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*. (New City Press: Hyde Park, 2007), 33-34.

<sup>294</sup> W. Kasper. *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*, 33-34.

<sup>295</sup> John Paul II. *Ut unum sint*. Encyclical Letter. (May, 1995), no. 1.

<sup>296</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginità feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 150.

<sup>297</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginità feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 150.

<sup>298</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginità feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 150.

structure and give form to the tradition.<sup>299</sup> Mary, therefore, offers an invaluable resource for dialogue among the Christian churches and communities which hope to be one.

## **B. Ecumenical Documents on Our Lady**

### ***The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary***

This document is the fruit of a dialogue which lasted for seven years. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States of America began in 1983 and concluded in 1990, producing this document. It constitutes the eighth round of theological dialogue between these two denominations. Whereas “Justification by Faith” was the theme of the previous round, this round considered the primary mediatorship of Christ and the participatory mediatorship of Mary and the Saints. The Confessio Augustana’s article on the intercession of the saints and the Roman Catholic dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption formed the foundation of the discussion. The virgin birth of Christ was also discussed, albeit more or less tangentially. The progress made in this joint study will be offered here.

It is worth noting here that the Confessio Augustana was one of the main sources of analysis for at least two reasons. Article 21 of the *Augsburg Confession* was set before the German Imperial Diet of 1530 “as an account of the Lutheran doctrinal positions then being taught in the territories and free cities subscribing to *the-Confession*,”<sup>300</sup> as J. Wicks notes. Wicks also notes the second reason why this is important. The teaching of individual reformers is not the central issue when dialoguing with the Reformation

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<sup>299</sup> S.M. Perrella. *Maria Vergine e Madre: La verginità feconda di Maria tra fede, storia e teologia*, 150.

<sup>300</sup> J. Wicks. “The Virgin Mary in Recent Ecumenical Dialogues,” *Gregorianum*. 81, 1. (2000), 31.



Churches. What is of central importance are the normative confessions of those churches.<sup>301</sup>

The first consideration is that of Matthew's infancy narrative. The document states, "Like other women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus, Mary is seen as an instrument of divine providence in the messianic plan of God."<sup>302</sup> There is already a mutual understanding here that Mary plays an important role in the God's plan to provide the world with a Messiah. The document continues to note that Mary begot Jesus.

As far as the virginal conception is concerned, some source critics find a pre-Matthean source here.<sup>303</sup> This would mean that there was already a tradition of the virginal conception (*virginitas ante partum*) in the early Church. Matthew's Gospel was written at least by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and so a pre-Matthean source would indicate a very early tradition in the Church attesting to the virginal conception of Christ.

The document concludes its short survey of the virginal conception stating, "Matthew's opening presentation of Mary singles her out and sets the tone for presenting a less negative picture of her in her two appearances during Jesus' ministry."<sup>304</sup> This is an interesting insight into Matthew's evangelical design which he employed to report the Gospel from a particular point of view. The virginal conception was not intended merely as an isolated teaching devoid of any context. Among the various reasons for its inclusion in his Gospel, Matthew also used it to pave the way for painting a positive

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<sup>301</sup> J. Wicks. "The Virgin Mary in Recent Ecumenical Dialogues," (2000), 31.

<sup>302</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*. (Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis, 1992), no. 147.

<sup>303</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 147.

<sup>304</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 147.

picture of Mary in subsequent passages. The document, therefore, adds a unique aspect of the virginal conception as included in Matthew's Gospel.

The second consideration is that of Luke's Gospel. Luke's portrait of Mary is "most emphatically painted in the infancy narrative,"<sup>305</sup> as the document states. Luke draws a clear parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus with regards to their respective births, circumcisions, and manifestations. This "antithetical" and "step-parallelism" serves the purpose of enhancing the role of Jesus over John the Baptist.<sup>306</sup> John the Baptist represents the last of the Old Testament prophets who points to the Messiah. He is the greatest of the prophets and yet he is pointing to the Lamb of God who is greater than he. By the intervention of heaven, John is born to barren parents, showing that he is special and has a unique role to play in the history of salvation. Luke juxtaposes this heavenly intervention with the still greater conception of Jesus who is born to Mary, the virgin.<sup>307</sup>

John is also to be great before the Lord and prepare his way in the spirit of Elijah. This is paralleled to Jesus who will be even greater as the heir to David's throne, making Jesus the true king of Israel and the Son of God.<sup>308</sup> Luke further highlights Mary's role in this providential design. Mary herself is *kecharitōmenē*, which the document translates as "highly favored woman."<sup>309</sup> Mary is thus "chosen by God to bear this extraordinary

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<sup>305</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 150.

<sup>306</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 150.

<sup>307</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 150.

<sup>308</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 150.

<sup>309</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 150.

child through ‘the power of the Most High.’”<sup>310</sup> Mary is granted a singular election under the mysterious workings of providence and she responds with “her obedient *fiat*,”<sup>311</sup> as the document declares.

Noting the parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus—and for that matter between Elizabeth and Mary—constitutes an insightful commentary on these accounts as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. The virgin birth of Christ is seen here by both Lutherans and Catholics as an attestation to Jesus’ greatness even over the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist. Mary is likewise shown to have a unique role as the “highly favored daughter” upon whom the Holy Spirit descends and the Most high overshadows. Both Lutherans and Catholics view Mary as an obedient and elevated servant of God, fulfilling a unique role and thus having a unique place in the history of salvation. This agreement demonstrates once again the progress made in ecumenical dialogue and the position of Mary as a bridge between the various denominations.

It is worth noting that this phase of the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic dialogue does not address the question of Jesus’ “brothers” and also the status of Mary’s perpetual virginity with regards to Scripture. They did mention how the perpetual virginity of Mary was held since the time of the Fathers and the study “lays a solid biblical foundation for the doctrine of Mary’s divine motherhood and for her being model and type of discipleship and faith both for individual believers and the church,”<sup>312</sup> as Wicks notes. Jesus’ conception and birth are seen as virginal by both denominations and Mary is seen as a

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<sup>310</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 150.

<sup>311</sup> H.G. Anderson, J.F. Stafford, and J.A. Burgess, eds. *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, no. 150.

<sup>312</sup> J. Wicks. “The Virgin Mary in Recent Ecumenical Dialogues,” (2000), 36.

model of faith and as divine mother. This positive progress inspires much hope for deeper and further union in a common understanding of the mystery of Jesus and Mary.

### ***Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints***

The Dombes Group began in 1937 by a French priest named Paul Couturier. It is a group of 40 theologians, 20 Catholic and 20 Protestant, which has met in the Abbey of Dombes, France, Taizé, and the Abbey of Pradines. The meetings consist of common prayer and doctrinal discussions and thus can be considered a spiritual approach to ecumenism. The group studies a given topic, considers its scriptural and historical underpinnings, determine the points of agreement and disagreement among the theologians gathered, suggest ways to agree, and then remember the need for constant conversion in all areas for every believer. They have published multiple works since the 1970s and between 1997 and 1998 released a work on the Virgin Mary entitled, *Mary in the plan of God and the Communion of Saints*.<sup>313</sup> Their works are initially published in French, but often translated into other languages. This Marian work will now be examined briefly.

According to the investigations of the Dombes Group, the Fathers of the Church did not find an enormous gap between the letters of the scriptures and their beliefs, such as Mary's perpetual virginity.<sup>314</sup> Like the phrase "consubstantial with the Father," perpetual virginity is an interpretation of the scriptures, even among the so-called "literalists" among the Fathers.<sup>315</sup> In reality, the Fathers drew no gap between these

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<sup>313</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*. (Paulist Press: Mahwah, 1999).

<sup>314</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 28.

<sup>315</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 28.

interpretations and the scriptures themselves. Modern authors, who create these gaps, are not in complete accord with the scriptures or the early Church. The early Church admitted of no such distance between the age of the Apostles and their own age. What was recorded in the New Testament was constantly being interpreted by the Church and that interpretation was ultimately correct on all points of faith and morals. Even in its earliest phases, the Church safeguarded and properly expounded upon the deposit of faith contained in both the scriptures and tradition. The perpetual virginity of Mary, therefore, which was clearly a part of the Father's vocabulary and belief, was in scripture—at least in seed—and validated by tradition of which those Fathers formed the earliest phase.

The Dombes Group furthermore explains the uniqueness of Mary as a virgin and as a mother. Mary is not merely another pious woman with a special task, like certain women highlighted in the Old Testament.<sup>316</sup> She is different than they are by her virginal conception and this conception changes the significance of both her virginity and her motherhood.<sup>317</sup> Mary's virginity was a condition for marrying Joseph, but she remains a virgin even after she has conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>318</sup> Further, Mary's motherhood is not simply a barren woman, who gives birth, but a miraculous conception which transforms her motherhood.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 151.

<sup>317</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 151.

<sup>318</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 151.

<sup>319</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 151.

Yet Mary experienced both virginity and motherhood as a woman of her people.<sup>320</sup> Mary is another woman from among her people. She comes in a line of pious woman who received special favors from God for the benefit of others. She is not someone who fell from Heaven without any historical reality or familial lineage. She is an Israelite chosen by God for a particular purpose and role. However, as mentioned, she is more than one of the special Israelite women from the Old Testament. The Evangelist Luke highlights this by placing Elizabeth's conceiving of John the Baptist directly before Mary's virginal conceiving of Jesus. Elizabeth was barren and Gabriel appeared to her husband, Zechariah, to tell of her pregnancy, (Luke 1:5-25). Immediately after this story concludes, "in the sixth month," Gabriel appears in Nazareth to tell Mary of the Incarnation and Mary virginally conceives, (Luke 1:26-38). In a sense, Elizabeth closes the period of the Old Testament as the last of the barren women to conceive by a favor of God, while Mary opens the New Testament to be the first and only woman to conceive virginally the very Savior of the new covenant.

Mary, furthermore, witnesses to the mystery of the incarnation by reason of her virginity.<sup>321</sup> In neither the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed is Mary presented as a type of ornament to the Incarnation.<sup>322</sup> She is a constitutive part of it and intimately connected to the mystery of God becoming man. The Dombes Group concludes that "If the apostolic faith focuses on the death and resurrection of the Lord, the concomitant implication is that the same faith has reached a decision on the birth of the same Lord in

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<sup>320</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 127.

<sup>321</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 14.

<sup>322</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 14.

the light of his resurrection.”<sup>323</sup> The same apostolic faith, which has focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus, has likewise focused on the virginal conception and birth of Jesus in light of his rising from the dead.

The virgin birth of Christ involves Mary who is made most fecund by this divine initiative with which she freely cooperated. This was accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit and was done primarily to bring about the Incarnation. The virgin birth of Christ, however, also entailed the divine maternity of Mary which did not accomplish a barren motherhood, but rather the most life-giving one possible. Her motherhood was transformed from a natural to a supernatural status and thereby demonstrating again the divine nature of Christ’s virgin birth. The Dombes Group in this document has done a great service in bring the Christian denominations closer in mind and heart in general and in contemplating Christ’s virgin birth.

Mary here is seen as a real bridge in ecumenism. The Dombes Group stresses the reality of Mary as a person which has a common appeal to all. She stands as a real human person chosen by God for a unique role as evidenced by the virgin birth of Christ. When Mary is examined in a spirit of cooperation and openness, it becomes clearer that she is not a point of division, but rather a point of unity. The Dombes Group demonstrates the common thinking of Catholics and Protestants regarding Mary and demonstrates an aspect of how she serves as a bridge.

### ***Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ***

The Anglican—Roman Catholic International Commission, (“ARCIC”), is the official group which seeks to make ecumenical progress between the Anglican and the

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<sup>323</sup> A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, and the Dombes Group. *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 14.

Roman Catholic Churches. It is a meeting under the sponsorships of the Anglican Consultative Council for the Anglicans and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity for the Roman Catholics. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity was formerly known as the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. ARCIC searches for common ground among the two groups and has currently entered the third phase of its progress. The first phase lasted from 1970-1981, the second phase from 1981-2011, and the third phase began in 2011, starting from May 17<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup>. What follows here is a critical summary of the mutual understanding regarding the mystery of the virgin birth and the ecumenical fruits to which this document points. The purpose is to present the positive progress which has been made and to demonstrate the insightful renderings which have been produced based on a joint reflection on the mystery in question.

It is true that various parts of the New Testament refer to the birth of Christ, but only Matthew and Luke, each from an individual point of view, have proper birth narratives and specifically reference Mary.<sup>324</sup> Matthew calls his work “the Genesis of Jesus Christ,” (Matthew 1:1), which draws a parallel between his Gospel and the opening of the entire Bible in the book of Genesis.<sup>325</sup> The original creation was tainted by sin and was in need of salvation. This was promised in the same book of Genesis, (cf. Genesis 3:15). The fulfillment of this promise is the Incarnation of the Word; his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The original creation, which was made subject to the law of sin, is being re-created and transformed into the new creation which Jesus Christ ushers in and will finalize when he returns. Thus, Matthew undoubtedly begins with this

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<sup>324</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 12.

<sup>325</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 12.



parallel to demonstrate that the original creation, which was tainted, has entered the new creation in Jesus Christ.

Matthew then traces Jesus' genealogy through the Exile to David and finally to Abraham, noting the role of four women who stretched the limits of the Covenant.<sup>326</sup> Matthew shows Jesus' Davidic roots through the fatherhood—albeit legal—of Joseph and his actual birth through the Virgin as a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14.<sup>327</sup> Matthew refers to Mary and/or Jesus by using such phrases as “Mary his mother” or “the child and his mother,” (Matthew 2:11, 13, 20, 21), and shows the Magi, whose job it was to know the appointed time of the Messiah's arrival, kneeling in homage to both the baby King and his royal mother.<sup>328</sup> Matthew highlights the connection between Israel's messianic expectations and the new creation which begins with the arrival of the Savior; the first being shown by Davidic descent and birth in the royal city and the second being shown by the virginal conception.<sup>329</sup> Jesus is both the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and the fulfillment of God's promise to humanity for a Savior to accomplish a new creation.

Mary plays an important part of Luke's infancy narratives right from the beginning.<sup>330</sup> The miraculous conceptions of John the Baptist and Jesus are clearly linked in a deliberate parallel.<sup>331</sup> The parallel demonstrates the conclusion of the Old Testament, or old covenant, and the dawn of the New Testament, or new covenant. The miraculous conception of John the Baptist is in line with such births from the Old

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<sup>326</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 12.

<sup>327</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 12.

<sup>328</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 13.

<sup>329</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 13.

<sup>330</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 14.

<sup>331</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 14.

Testament, such as the conception of Isaac which God had promised to Abraham, (Cf. Genesis 21:1-3). The parallel shows how the Old Testament was a preparation for the New Testament and, by the uniqueness of the virginal conception, the parallel further demonstrates the superiority of the new covenant. Mary furthermore “represents the inwardness of faith and suffering,”<sup>332</sup>

The Greek word, *episkiasei*, which is usually translated “overshadow” in English, describes the work of the Holy Spirit in the virginal conception.<sup>333</sup> This work recalls the cherubim which “overshadow” the Ark of the Covenant, (Exodus 25:20), God’s presence “overshadowing” the Tabernacle, (Exodus 40:35), and even the beginning of creation where the Spirit was over the many waters, (Genesis 1:2). In this event, Mary is called the “favored one” of the Lord, coming from a perfect participle in Greek, *kecharitōmene*, meaning literally, “one who has been and remains endowed with grace.”<sup>334</sup> This suggests an action of divine grace, which accomplished a prior sanctification, and was established in view of her vocation.<sup>335</sup> Furthermore, the message of the angel, Gabriel, joined two realities about Jesus with his conception by the Holy Spirit. The first reality is that Jesus is “holy” and the second is that he is the “Son of God.”<sup>336</sup>

The divine sonship is also highlighted by the virginal conception and the virginal birth.<sup>337</sup> This is further exemplified by the description Elizabeth provides when Mary visits her, namely, that she refers to Mary as the mother of her Lord, (Luke 1:43). These scenes manifest a striking Trinitarian dimension. The Father’s election of the Virgin

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<sup>332</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 14.

<sup>333</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 15.

<sup>334</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 16.

<sup>335</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 16.

<sup>336</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 16.

<sup>337</sup> Cf. ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 16.

Mary begins the Incarnation of his Son which the Holy Spirit mediates.<sup>338</sup> To this, Mary gives her “fiat,” that is her “Amen,” to God’s powerful Word at the message of the angel and this is also striking.<sup>339</sup>

It is debated whether or not John’s Gospel references the virginal conception or birth. Certainly, Mary is not mentioned by name or in any explicit manner in the Prologue of John’s Gospel. Nevertheless, there are certain theological truths, which—when considering the signification of Mary’s role in the history of salvation—the evangelist expresses in his unfolding of the good news of the Incarnation.<sup>340</sup> Matthew and Luke emphasize the theological significance of the divine initiative in the Incarnation and this is paralleled in John’s Prologue where he highlights the grace of God and his will whereby Christians are brought to the new birth.<sup>341</sup> It is this new birth where Christians are said to be born “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God,” (John 1:13). These words can be applied to Christians as well as the birth of Jesus himself.<sup>342</sup>

The virginal conception by the action of the Holy Spirit proclaims the divine initiative in human history.<sup>343</sup> Although the virginal conception may appear as merely constituting the absence of an earthly, human father, it is actually a sign of both the presence and the action of the Holy Spirit.<sup>344</sup> Matthew and Luke, as stated in this work by ARCIC, have adopted and developed an earlier Christian tradition of belief in the

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<sup>338</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 16.

<sup>339</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 16.

<sup>340</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 22.

<sup>341</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 22.

<sup>342</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 22.

<sup>343</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 18.

<sup>344</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 18.

virginal conception.<sup>345</sup> It is both a sign of Christ's divine sonship and of the Spirit's provision of new life for believers.<sup>346</sup> Furthermore, each Christian is an adopted child of God and the virginal conception points to this adoption which is accomplished at Baptism, that is, when the Christian partakes in a new birth. Each is born anew "by water and the Spirit," (John 3:3-5), and this birth is from above.<sup>347</sup> In light of all these considerations, the virginal conception, as well as the virginal birth which flows from it, is not an isolated event and miracle. It is "a powerful expression of what the Church believes about her Lord, and about our salvation."<sup>348</sup>

There is much agreement between Anglicans and Catholics as evidenced in and thanks to this document. It demonstrates much of the fruits of this particular branch (ARCIC) of bilateral ecumenical dialogue. The document here reviewed offers some interesting scriptural analyses on which both ecclesiastical bodies have agreed. They both note that the virgin birth of Christ is connected to the very beginning of creation and so Matthew refers to "the Genesis of Jesus Christ" in order to refer to the first book of the Old Testament which bears the name "Genesis." Whereas the original creation was made subject to the law of sin and death, the new creation provides grace and life both of which come from Jesus Christ who entered humanity by means of the virgin birth.

Another interesting interpretation of the biblical data found in this document is the analysis of the Greek word *episkiasei*, that is, "overshadow." This emphasizes the Trinitarian—and in particular the pneumatological—elements of Christ's virgin birth. Further explicating this meaningful terminology, the document relies on the integrity of

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<sup>345</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 18.

<sup>346</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 18.

<sup>347</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 18.

<sup>348</sup> ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 18.

Scripture to explain how this overshadowing of the Holy Spirit is found in the Old Testament with the Ark of the Covenant, (Exodus 25:20), the Tabernacle, (Exodus 40:35), and the creation, (Genesis 1:2). This presence of the Holy Spirit at the creation is most significant in light of the parallel mentioned between the book of Genesis and the beginning of Matthew's Gospel which refers to "the Genesis of Jesus Christ." Just as the Holy Spirit was present in the creation, so the Holy Spirit is present in the new creation which begins with the virgin birth of Christ.

Another important discovery in this document is the explanation of the Greek term, *kecharitōmene*, which refers to one who has been endowed with and who remains filled with grace. This is an extremely important contribution and ecumenical accomplishment, since mainline Protestantism normally denies the Immaculate Conception as a Roman farce. Further, mainline Protestantism explains that the virgin birth was necessary to establish the sinlessness of Jesus, since they often do not consider that Mary was without sin. Jesus is not sinless in his humanity due to the virgin birth, but rather because Mary had been and remained endowed with grace, *kecharitōmene*, as the angel Gabriel announced. That Mary is without grace and that Jesus was virginally conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit underlines that Jesus is holy and the true Son of God. This is no small insight and joint declaration with regards to the Anglican and Catholic communions. It is an excellent fruit of these dialogues.

### **C. Biblical Exegesis and Ecumenism: *Mary in the New Testament***

*Mary in the New Testament* is the title of an important ecumenical study. It grew out of the National Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, which was sponsored by the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation (now called the Lutheran World

Ministries) and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. It began in 1975 as a cooperative study among Lutheran and Catholic scholars, who were interested in employing the fruits of modern biblical exegesis and ecumenical dialogue in order to present a common biblical portrait of Mary. Many sessions were held, different parts being assigned to different scholars, until finally the drafting of their efforts into a book commenced in 1976 until completion in 1978. It is an extremely valuable work for assessing the fruits of modern biblical exegesis and bilateral dialogue for forming a coherent and joint picture of the Virgin Mary. This section will examine those passages pertinent to Christ's virgin birth.

The first relevant passage is Galatians 4:4 which states, "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law." At face value, the description emphasizes Jesus' human condition. According to this study, there is "no convincing argument for Paul's awareness of the virginal conception"<sup>349</sup> here. Paul's use of *genomenon* instead of *gennōmenon*, as well as his failure to mention any human father here, are also not indicative of his awareness of or intention to teach the virginal conception.<sup>350</sup>

Moreover, according to this joint study, the argument that Paul should have said "begotten of man" is unfounded. This is because there is no evidence that there existed an alternative idiom to *yelud issah*.<sup>351</sup> It would seem more likely that Paul was simply employing a common literary expression without attempting to explain how the Son

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<sup>349</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*. (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1978), 43.

<sup>350</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 43.

<sup>351</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 43.

became man.<sup>352</sup> Mary, on the other hand, is simply referenced as Jesus' mother here in her maternal role and not as a virgin. There is no hint that she was a virgin or that Jesus was her "first born."<sup>353</sup>

Thus, there is no explicit mention of a virginal conception in this passage. There is also no reason to conclude that Paul even knew of this teaching according to this study.<sup>354</sup> This does not mean, however, that the passage contradicts the virginal conception. It merely means that the passage is not an absolute affirmation of it. As the study concludes on this point, "a Christological affirmation such as Paul makes here is not at all incompatible with the Christology of other and later NT writers who maintain the virginal conception."<sup>355</sup>

Next the study considers the virginal conception as it appears in the Gospel of Matthew. It begins by stating that it is not thinkable that Matthew personally introduced the theme of the virginal conception.<sup>356</sup> The study states that "the likelihood that Matthew himself added Isa 7:14 to the scene does not necessarily mean that the idea of the virginal conception came from Matthew."<sup>357</sup> Thus, these scholars consider it most likely that Matthew employed the use of Isaiah 7:14—probably by way of an appropriation—to underline the earlier apostolic teaching he was recording in his narrative. Regardless, this would not demonstrate that the notion of the virginal conception originated with Matthew.

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<sup>352</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 43.

<sup>353</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 43.

<sup>354</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 43.

<sup>355</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 43.

<sup>356</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 91.

<sup>357</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 91.

The study continues by stating that knowledge of both the original Hebrew and the Greek of the Septuagint with regards to Isaiah 7:14, provides no clear reference to a virginal conception.<sup>358</sup> The Hebrew—according to this study—only references the conception of a child which will occur with a young girl.<sup>359</sup> The Septuagint, on the other hand, does use the more technical Greek word for virgin, (*parthenos*), but it refers to a future conception. This means that a possible reading of the text would be that the girl is a virgin at the time of Isaiah’s utterance, but will cease to be one when the child is conceived in a presumably natural way.<sup>360</sup>

With regards to determining the literal and original sense of this passage, the context is crucial. This study argues that—contextually speaking—Isaiah was referring to a girl who lived during his own day and not to a conception that would occur 700 years later.<sup>361</sup> The study further argues that there is no indication that any Jew had ever viewed this passage as a prophetic one, indicating that the Messiah would be virginally conceived.<sup>362</sup> Thus, these scholars deemed it unlikely that Matthew invented the virginal conception based on this passage from Isaiah.<sup>363</sup> What is most likely is that Matthew “had probably added the quotation to an existing narrative which contained the virginal conception.”<sup>364</sup>

Based merely on exegetical endeavors, the study concludes here that there is no way a modern scientific approach to Matthew (and the Gospels in general) can prove or

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<sup>358</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 92.

<sup>359</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 92.

<sup>360</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 92.

<sup>361</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 92.

<sup>362</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 92.

<sup>363</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 92.

<sup>364</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 122.



disprove the historical reality of the virginal conception.<sup>365</sup> This is not to say that such is not worthy of belief, but rather only to state that it cannot be strictly proved or disproved based on an application of the historical-critical method to the Gospels. This is about the limits of the historical-critical method which “does not detract from the clear Christological purpose of the evangelists that has shaped the creedal affirmation known from early centuries: ‘born of the Virgin Mary,’”<sup>366</sup> as the study concludes regarding the information found in Matthew.

Finally, this ecumenical work considers the virginal conception with regards to the Gospel of Luke. The task force, which was assigned to this question, almost unanimously agreed that Luke intended to describe a virginal conception despite the fact that he did not make this point as clearly as did Matthew.<sup>367</sup> Thus, the majority of the scholars, who considered Luke’s narrative, concluded that Luke might not have been as clear as Matthew, but he definitely intended to write of Jesus’ virginal conception.

Luke draws a clear parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus. This parallel is meant to demonstrate that Jesus is greater.<sup>368</sup> Elizabeth is older and thus assumed to be barren. Like others in the Old Testament—Sarah conceiving Isaac, for example—God overcomes this obstacle of Elizabeth’s age and she conceives John the Baptist. In light of this parallel, one expects an even greater intervention wrought by God in the conception of Jesus. The virginal conception is an admirable fulfillment of this expectation.<sup>369</sup> It is

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<sup>365</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 96.

<sup>366</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 96.

<sup>367</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 120.

<sup>368</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 120.

<sup>369</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 120.

also notable that Luke refers to Jesus as the “supposed” (Luke 3:23) son of Joseph which would make very little sense if Luke imagined Jesus to be Joseph’s natural son.<sup>370</sup>

In light of all this research, the members of this study agreed—albeit with various emphases—that there is a strong possibility and even a probability that the virginal conception was largely accepted prior to the writing of the Gospels.<sup>371</sup> They traced this pre-Gospel acceptance of the virginal conception to *Stage One* of their schema, but were not able to trace it to *Stage Two*.

This schema was defined earlier in their work. *Stage One* refers to the actual historic deeds and saying on which the Gospel texts rely while *Stage Two* refers to the developments of faith-inspired traditions surrounding those deeds and sayings.<sup>372</sup> The study explained *Stage Two* by stating that members of the ancient Church, “according to their different situations and concerns, selected deeds and sayings, narrated them, and reflected on them theologically.”<sup>373</sup> These faith-filled interpretations of actual sayings and deeds were the work of individuals and communities alike and especially of apostolic preachers.<sup>374</sup> The members of this study, however, emphasize that tracing the virginal conception to *Stage Two* and not to *Stage One* demonstrates the limits of scientific investigation and “in no way constitutes a negation of historicity.”<sup>375</sup>

The question here, therefore, has been what modern biblical exegesis conducted objectively among members of different Christian denominations can determine about the virginal conception. This is not a dogmatic undertaking, but rather a scientific one based

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<sup>370</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 120.

<sup>371</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 125.

<sup>372</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 10.

<sup>373</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 10.

<sup>374</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 10.

<sup>375</sup> R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, J.A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 125.

on the fruits of exegetical research. It was determined that the limits of the historical-critical method allow for a certain rendering of the biblical data, but cannot determine the historicity of an event such as the virginal conception. There is no evidence that Paul taught or even knew of the virginal conception at the time of his preaching, while it is clear that Matthew and Luke accepted and wrote of the virginal conception and this most probably based on an earlier apostolic tradition.

Finally, it should be noted here that the question of the literal sense of Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew's use of it is still a widely debated topic among all denominations. Though this study concluded that the literal sense of the Old Testament text most likely does not refer to a virginally conceived Messiah and that Matthew is probably appropriating the passage to emphasize an ancient apostolic tradition, there are other scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, who argue otherwise.

For example, Bowman, Komoszewski, and Bock—Protestant scholars—have more recently argued that “Matthew’s interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 holds up very well.”<sup>376</sup> They argue that the Hebrew word *almah* always refers to a young woman, who is assumed to be a virgin, and that context of the passage suggests that Isaiah meant to provide a truly miraculous sign.<sup>377</sup> Thus, according to their study, merely stating that a young girl would conceive a child would fail to correspond to the miraculous sign intended by the passage. For another example, the authors of the *Navarre Bible*—Catholic scholars—have argued that “Jesus is in fact the God-with-us foretold by the

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<sup>376</sup> R.M. Bowman, Jr., J. Ed Komoszewski, and D.L. Bock. *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ*. (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, 2007), 137.

<sup>377</sup> R.M. Bowman, Jr., J. Ed Komoszewski, and D.L. Bock. *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ*, 136.

prophet,”<sup>378</sup> and thus it is a true prophecy in its original context. They also argue that the prophecy is likewise fulfilled in Mary who “was a virgin before and during the birth itself.”<sup>379</sup> The crux of their argument is based on the weight of the time-honored interpretation of this text.

Thus, it is important to realize that among Catholic and Protestant scholars alike, based on the results of biblical exegesis, there is no final resolution or consensus regarding Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew’s use of it. It remains an open and debated question with differing arguments on both sides and from all denominations. It is not clear, therefore, whether the issue can be solved on the grounds of biblical exegesis alone.

That being stated, *Mary in the New Testament* demonstrates the overwhelming consensus among scholars of different denominations regarding the fruits of modern biblical exegesis. The members of this study have humbly admitted the limits of objective, scientific research while, at the same time, offering some excellent insights and scientific renderings of the biblical data.

The study represents a great fruit of joint ecumenical endeavors and demonstrates what can be accomplished when scholars work together in a spirit which seeks unity in diversity. This study has concluded that—based on the efforts of contemporary biblical exegesis—the virginal conception of Christ can be found in Matthew and Luke clearly. Furthermore, both these renditions of this mystery can be traced to an earlier apostolic tradition. This is something upon which all can readily agree based on objective and scientific methods.

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<sup>378</sup> Casciaro, J.M., ed. *The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew*. tr. M. Adams. (Colour Books: Dublin, 1993), 31.

<sup>379</sup> Casciaro, J.M., ed. *The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew*, 32.

## **Conclusion**

As was seen in this chapter, the Catholic Church has prudently entered into bilateral dialogue with other denominations. This does not impede her mission to evangelize, but rather compliments it. The goal that all might be one comes closer and closer to a full realization thanks to the good wills of many and the openness of the various denominations to dialogue with one another.

The Lutherans and the Catholics have come to understand various aspects of Jesus' unique entrance into humanity as well as Mary's unique role in the history of salvation. A possible pre-Matthean tradition accounts for an early belief in the virgin birth whereas Luke's parallelism highlights the greatness of Jesus and indirectly of Mary. The Dombes Group highlighted the virginity and motherhood of Mary. This, however, is a virginity and motherhood established among a particular, historical people. The Dombes Group emphasized the authentic humanity of Mary as seen by Protestants and Catholics. ARCIC emphasized the ancient roots of the virgin birth. It is a birth which demonstrates the divine initiative in human history. The Virgin Mother of God and of Jesus' disciples has proven to be a real bridge for unity as the churches grow in their common appreciation of her role in the history of salvation and in the lives of individual believers. Finally, the results of joint endeavors in biblical research have led to a common understanding of the virginal conception as it appears in Matthew and Luke.

## Chapter 6

### The Virgin Birth of Christ in Feminist Theology

“Feminism” is a very broad word which can refer to different ideas. As a general movement, it has naturally reached the realm of theology. This chapter will consider Feminism, Feminist Theology, and some of the trends in Feminist Theology regarding the person of Mary and the virgin birth. It is important to note that Feminist Theology includes everything from traditional orthodoxy to more liberal thinking with regards to theological topics. Both types of Feminist Theology contribute to a deeper understanding of Mary and the virgin birth, albeit directly or indirectly. This will be discussed in this chapter.

#### A. Feminism and Feminist Theology

The word “feminism” is very broad in its scope and covers many positions. In the broadest sense of the term, “feminism” can be divided into three types: (1) the liberal tradition, (2) Marxist feminism, and (3) romantic feminism.<sup>380</sup> According to A. Loades, who in this author’s opinion offers the best overview of feminism, the liberal tradition “has been concerned with equality of civil rights for women as for men, with access to educational and professional opportunities, reproductive self-determination, and equal pay for comparable work.”<sup>381</sup> Marxist feminism has been concerned with “economic autonomy”<sup>382</sup> while romantic feminism has been concerned with a celebration of the emotional and natural in order “to counteract the prevailing emphasis on the rational and the technical; this includes the radicals who want to reject the male world altogether, as

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<sup>380</sup> A. Loades, ed. *Feminist Theology: A Reader*. (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1990), 1.

<sup>381</sup> A. Loades, ed. *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, 1.

<sup>382</sup> A. Loades, ed. *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, 1.

well as those who want mutuality between women and men, and a balance of the masculine and feminine in everyone.”<sup>383</sup> This third division, therefore, admits of a further subdivision between those who desire mutuality between men and women, including a balance of masculine and feminine elements in every person, and those who desire a complete removal of the masculine.

Feminism, in the broadest sense of the term, consequently covers all the main areas of human existence, i.e. reproduction, economy, and so forth. The domain of theology has also incorporated many of feminist concerns. One can even speak of “feminist theology” in a broad sense, but certain authors—such as A. Loades—caution that “There is no one thing meant by ‘feminism,’ ‘theology,’ or ‘Christian,’ and within feminism there is increasing sensitivity to complexities of race and class, to ‘grass roots’ and ‘lay’ as well as ‘academic’ feminism.”<sup>384</sup> Furthermore, according to Loades, “Feminist theology continues to flourish as a diverse field of enterprises, both context-dependent and crossing boundaries of ecclesiastical allegiance and cultures.”<sup>385</sup> In her estimation, “Feminist theology” is “a convenient way of referring to the movement as a whole, so long as these sensitivities are constantly held in mind.”<sup>386</sup> Finally, as she summarizes the point, “No one group presumes to speak for another, but what is held in common is the central conviction that women’s perspectives are to be taken seriously in theology.”<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> A. Loades, ed. *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, 1.

<sup>384</sup> A. Loades. “Feminist Theology,” *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*. ed. D.F. Ford. (Blackwell Publishing: Vitoria, 2004), 575.

<sup>385</sup> A. Loades. “Feminist Theology,” *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 575.

<sup>386</sup> A. Loades. “Feminist Theology,” *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 575.

<sup>387</sup> A. Loades. “Feminist Theology,” *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 575.

This is a useful overview of “feminist theology” as a whole. Although it is a broad term, it is not without a historical context. With regards to the term “feminist theology,” it is—as J.L. González observes—the name “commonly given to a variety of theologies that came to the foreground during the second half of the twentieth century, whose common characteristic is to reflect theologically while taking into account the experience of women—particularly, their experience of oppression in male-dominated societies and churches.”<sup>388</sup> Although this is a wide phrase, which includes many diverse aspects and particularities, feminist theology initiated in the occidental world in the later part of the twentieth century and has a traceable history in its diverse aspects. Feminist theologies arose contextually in union with the other emerging theologies of that time.<sup>389</sup> These theologies “have developed in various parts of the world, as an expression of the worldwide feminist movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,”<sup>390</sup> as González notes.

Feminist theology has gone in different directions and incorporated the concerns of different realities in various parts of the world—as will be discussed—but there is still an underlying drive from which the main movement sprang. A. Loades provides a summary of the main thrust of feminist theology in the following words:

Feminist theologians want to eliminate the androcentric [sic] fallacy, and rely on themselves for understanding the God they have found to be theirs, though mediated to them by a religious tradition which causes them profound problems as one powerful form of mediating that fallacy. It is arguable that as Christianity has been understood, it has had some disastrous consequences for women’s self-understanding and self-esteem, and at the high price of neglecting important elements in men’s lives too. What has been thought to be “universal” theology has excluded women

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<sup>388</sup> J.L. . González. “Feminist Theology,” *Essential Theological Terms*. (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2005), 63.

<sup>389</sup> Cf. J.L. . González. “Feminist Theology,” *Essential Theological Terms*, 63.s

<sup>390</sup> J.L. . González. “Feminist Theology,” *Essential Theological Terms*, 63.



and their insights, and there is no reason to suppose that either sex can monopolize alleged truths about God and what it is to be human in our many different ways.<sup>391</sup>

This is a very general overview of the main drive underlying feminist theology. The androcentric fallacy would refer to an error which makes man the center of everything rather than both man and woman or just women, depending on the feminist author in question.

When considering some different movements within “feminist theology,” the discussion will be limited to Christian theology. Naturally, such feminist theologians belong to different Christian traditions and confessions and this will reflect in their works. Protestant feminist theologians, for example, are chiefly concerned with the recovery and reinterpretation of Scripture—even though they consider some texts hopelessly androcentric.<sup>392</sup> Roman Catholic feminist theologians, for another example, do not necessarily lay the same emphasis on Scripture. For some of these authors, it is Scripture itself which is part of the problem,<sup>393</sup> while their main focus is on the teachings of the Church. Nevertheless, there has been some dissatisfaction among other groups of feminist theology as a whole, since they argue that it has been more or less dominated by middle-class, North Atlantic, white women.<sup>394</sup> Women theologians do not all fit neatly into this category and, in fact, many of them are part of other subgroups in society.<sup>395</sup> For example, there are also African American and Latina theologians with different cultural, ethnic, and societal concerns.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> A. Loades, ed. *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, 2-3.

<sup>392</sup> J.L. . González. “Feminist Theology,” *Essential Theological Terms*, 63.

<sup>393</sup> J.L. . González. “Feminist Theology,” *Essential Theological Terms*, 63.

<sup>394</sup> J.L. . González. “Feminist Theology,” *Essential Theological Terms*, 63.

<sup>395</sup> J.L. . González. “Feminist Theology,” *Essential Theological Terms*, 63.

<sup>396</sup> Cf. J.L. . González. “Feminist Theology,” *Essential Theological Terms*, 63.

In order to highlight the reality of these other movements within what is broadly called “feminist theology,” it will be useful to consider briefly at least two such movements. These two movements will be Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology and Asian Feminist Theology. These two movements involve women, who are outside of the white, middle-class, North Atlantic genre, and thus who are concerned with other societal and cultural issues than those confronted by North Atlantic women.

Two authors from the movement of feminist liberation theology, I. Gebara and M.C. Bingemer, write, “God the Creator, who does not cease to perform wonders on behalf of the poor, overthrowing the powerful and filling the hungry...shines a new hope for all the oppressed of Latin America, downtrodden by dire poverty and oppression.”<sup>397</sup> They continue, “this hope bears the face of Mary: the servant on whom the Most High has looked<sup>398</sup> with favor.” God is seen as being with the people through the person of Mary here and the people find a sister in Mary with whom they “make her song their own, and with their lungs and lips express their love for Mary and her presence with them.”<sup>399</sup>

It is in light of this understanding that they state, “our exploration of Marian theology does not highlight the qualities of Mary/woman, qualities idealized and projected from different needs and cultures, but rather aims at a re-reading of Mary from the needs of our age, and especially from the insights provided by the awakening of women’s historical consciousness.”<sup>400</sup> This movement focuses very much on the person

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<sup>397</sup> I. Gebara and M.C. Bingemer. *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*. (Wipf & Stock Publishers: Eugene, 1989), 175.

<sup>398</sup> I. Gebara and M.C. Bingemer. *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 175.

<sup>399</sup> I. Gebara and M.C. Bingemer. *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 175.

<sup>400</sup> I. Gebara and M.C. Bingemer. *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 16.

of Mary and couples the ideals of liberation from poverty and oppression with what is seen as the “awakening of women’s historical consciousness.”<sup>401</sup>

Asian Feminist Theology is another movement within the broader domain of feminist theology. As far as Mary is concerned, such theology attempts “to reinterpret the figure of Mary,”<sup>402</sup> which will naturally entail a reinterpretation of Jesus and the entire economy of salvation as taught in traditional theology. Such reinterpretations seek to jettison the idea of Mary as a gentle, docile, and sanctified mothering place of a strong and self-determined woman. Some Asian feminist theologians “have reclaimed her [Mary] as a model of the full liberated human being.”<sup>403</sup> They retain the notion of her virginity, but see it as a “self-defining,” that is, “she is a self-defining woman, not subject to other human beings.”<sup>404</sup> They also retain the notion of her motherhood, but see it to mean that “she is the giver of life.”<sup>405</sup> Finally, Mary is seen as a sister who “stands in solidarity with other oppressed women.”<sup>406</sup>

This movement, however, much like the Latin American Feminist Liberation movement, recognize Mary as a model of true discipleship and as one who “accepts the challenge of God, lives in faith and helps to found the earliest community of faith.”<sup>407</sup> K. Pui-Ian further notes that “Mapa,” the dark-skinned Madonna in the Philippines, “is believed to be the mother of the poor and protector of the people in their struggle against colonialism.”<sup>408</sup> Thus, this branch of Asian Feminist Theology is not entirely different from Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology in this respect. As Pui-Ian notes that

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<sup>401</sup> I. Gebara and M.C. Bingemer. *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 16.

<sup>402</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*. (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 2000), 74.

<sup>403</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 74.

<sup>404</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 74.

<sup>405</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 74.

<sup>406</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 74.

<sup>407</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 74.

<sup>408</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 74.

some Latin American feminist theologians “have rediscovered the liberating potential of the figure of Mary.”<sup>409</sup> This rediscovery, as she calls it, is similar to the rediscovery of some Asian Christian women, especially those in the Roman Catholic tradition, who “have reclaimed her [Mary] as a patron of their persistent fight for dignity and equality.”<sup>410</sup>

These two views of Mary in light of feminist concerns coupled with a cultural realization of political and economic oppression offer an interesting perspective on Mary and her role as a real person in the history of salvation and as a model for others, especially women living in countries where the poor are oppressed in various ways. It would be unfair to call their position unorthodox in the traditional sense. Rather, they draw from certain realities and truths about Mary and adopt them to the current situation in which women find themselves in these parts of the world. In one sense, this is really an excellent appropriation and an important adaptation of a perennial mystery to a living reality. The person of Mary here has a very human appeal which can be considered a fruit of her unique role. She stands as a model for women and mothers who find themselves in positions of struggle and hardship. Mary offers them hope as a female who accomplished the designs of God while remaining an independent and autonomous agent who freely chose to cooperate.

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<sup>409</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 74.

<sup>410</sup> K. Pui-Ian. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 74.

## B. The Figure of Mary in Feminist Theology

C. Militello notes that Mary represents a possible “symbolic figure of identification”<sup>411</sup> which is easily linked to a commonality with the “female gender.” For the feminist theologian—in general terms—she notes five reasons which justify the attention feminist theologians give to Mary and the role she plays as a symbolic figure of identification. The first is the attempt of feminist theologians to liberate Mary from the image assigned to her by a hierarchy of ecclesiastical men.<sup>412</sup> The second is the necessity of leaving an image of Mary which dominates and subjugates women.<sup>413</sup> The third is the importance of relating Mary to the theological experience of women.<sup>414</sup> The fourth is that feminist discourse enables a new approach to Mary as an ecumenical problem.<sup>415</sup> The fifth is that of critically examining the model of Mary which the church and theologians expound. This is a model which conveys an ambivalent attitude and approach toward human sexuality, especially involving women.<sup>416</sup>

Thus, as Militello highlights, the task of feminist theology regarding Mary is to formulate a coherent approach to an alternative paradigm, a paradigm of Mary which frees women from the patriarchal one-sidedness which conditioned the model.<sup>417</sup> The popular image of Mary is one stemming from a hierarchal structure of men. It presents a one-sided picture which fails to relate to the full reality of women. The patriarchal portrait of Mary is not necessarily incorrect, according to this new paradigm, but rather it

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<sup>411</sup> C. Militello. “Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni,” *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di studi Mariologici*. a cura di G. Liccardo, F. Ruotolo, e S. Tanzarella. (Capua 19-24 Maggio, 1992), 366.

<sup>412</sup> C. Militello. “Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni,” 366.

<sup>413</sup> C. Militello. “Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni,” 366.

<sup>414</sup> C. Militello. “Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni,” 366.

<sup>415</sup> C. Militello. “Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni,” 366.

<sup>416</sup> C. Militello. “Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni,” 366.

<sup>417</sup> C. Militello. “Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni,” 366.

is incomplete and fails to incorporate a fuller picture of humanity which consists of men and women.

L. Isherwood and D. McEwan state that “Women today seek personal power to run their own lives and corporate strength to engage with other men and women in improving their lot.”<sup>418</sup> This state of affairs—as these authors argue—means that “Mary as a passive icon of obedience can no longer function as a role model, women want to take their talents and creativity seriously.”<sup>419</sup> This “passive icon of obedience” is in large part a product of the one-sided picture mentioned by Militello. This particular portrayal of Mary is unsatisfying to modern women who have unique concerns for which they seek a model of Mary which speaks to them and their personal experience.

Isherwood and McEwan further note that “there is a growing resentment at the harm being done to women in the name of Christianity when Mary is held up as a role model, for women are told that any suffering is natural and that their ‘meek and mild’ acceptance of all the world throws at them is holy and reflects the example of the Virgin.”<sup>420</sup> There are some, therefore, who are discontented with a merely meek and obedient Mary and prefer a picture of Mary as strong and self-determining in cooperation with God’s designs. Thus, they wish Mary “to be ‘dis-endowed’ [sic] from all the stereotypes and attributes cluttering up a healthy understanding of her role.”<sup>421</sup> They want to focus on a strong Mary with whom they can relate. For example, “As a mother,

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<sup>418</sup> L. Isherwood and D. McEwan. *Introducing Feminist Theology*. Second Edition. (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 2001), 70.

<sup>419</sup> L. Isherwood and D. McEwan. *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 70.

<sup>420</sup> L. Isherwood and D. McEwan. *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 70.

<sup>421</sup> L. Isherwood and D. McEwan. *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 70.

whose son is sentenced and executed, many women who share her fate, can empathize with her.”<sup>422</sup>

The basic one-sidedness that these authors lament is that “Patriarchy has made Mary a victim.”<sup>423</sup> Thus, much like that which Militello highlighted as the objectives and goals of feminist Mariology, Isherwood and McEwan posit that “it is part of the task of feminist theology to empower her [Mary] once again by seeing her as the unmarried mother who through courage brought divinity to birth.”<sup>424</sup> Feminist Mariology seeks ultimately, therefore, to free Mary from a one-sided patriarchal model and present her as a strong woman who cooperated with God’s plans in a spirit of strength and self-determination. Establishing this fresh paradigm and fuller model by their academic efforts, the feminist theologian seeks to reach the needs and concerns of women today.

The concerns of Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology and Asian Feminist Theology are not very radical with their reinterpretations of the figure of Mary. As mentioned, it would be unfair to view these two movements as unorthodox in the traditional sense. They retain the basic Christian tenets regarding Mary. They do not reject the virginity or motherhood of Mary, for example, but rather seek to understand those realities as pointing to Mary’s true freedom as a woman as well as theologically underpinning God’s love for the poor and their desire for liberating the same. The white, North Atlantic feminists, on the other hand, have been somewhat more ambitious in their reinterpretations of Mary’s person and signification, theological or otherwise. Their approaches may vary and their works may admit of subtle nuances, but there is certainly

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<sup>422</sup> L. Isherwood and D. McEwan. *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 70.

<sup>423</sup> L. Isherwood and D. McEwan. *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 70.

<sup>424</sup> L. Isherwood and D. McEwan. *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 70.

a common thrust in their reasoning. It is this commonality which is here being considered.

Regarding this group with Roman Catholic origins, J. Robinson explains that they are faced with a paradox regarding the Church's teaching about Mary. He states that in a Church, which, "without exception, they berate as essentially 'sexist', by which they mean one that discriminates against women in its structures, its acceptance of a male Redeemer, and its use of male imagery to describe the Godhead, the Blessed Virgin Mary has such an important place."<sup>425</sup> He continues, "Why is it that a Church, allegedly so dismissive of women pays Mary such honour and acknowledges her as the highest being in all creation?"<sup>426</sup> This is not an easily reconcilable difficulty for the feminists who want to claim that Christianity is a male-dominated and sexist religion which has oppressed women over the ages.

Robinson further explains that Rosemary Ruether, for example, sees Mary as the "wrong sort of woman—with little to say to the women of today"<sup>427</sup> and Mary Daly describes her as "virtually catatonic."<sup>428</sup> Robinson recounts that Daly sees Mary as "drained of divinity, which in fact Mary never claimed for herself, any more than the Church claimed for her"<sup>429</sup> while the reward for her "perpetual virginity" is "patriarchal paradise," to which Robinson states that Daly's "taste for alliteration, irresistibly reminiscent of Old Time Music Hall, does little to enhance the seriousness of her case."<sup>430</sup> He has some strong words about this particular type of feminist theology and—

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<sup>425</sup> J. Robinson. *The Inner Goddess: Feminist Theology in Light of Catholic Teaching*. (Redwood Books: Trowbridge, 1998), 60.

<sup>426</sup> J. Robinson. *The Inner Goddess: Feminist Theology in Light of Catholic Teaching*, 60.

<sup>427</sup> J. Robinson. *The Inner Goddess: Feminist Theology in Light of Catholic Teaching*, 60.

<sup>428</sup> J. Robinson. *The Inner Goddess: Feminist Theology in Light of Catholic Teaching*, 60.

<sup>429</sup> J. Robinson. *The Inner Goddess: Feminist Theology in Light of Catholic Teaching*, 60.

<sup>430</sup> J. Robinson. *The Inner Goddess: Feminist Theology in Light of Catholic Teaching*, 60.



regardless of whether or not he should soften his presentation—he does highlight that this brand of feminism uses very strong language and is often at odds with what can be considered traditional orthodoxy.

T. Beattie and M. Kassel summarize the feminist criticism of Mariology in both Roman Catholic and Reformation theology as follows:

Feminist theologians criticize Mariology for its patriarchal bias in Roman Catholic theology, and for the exclusion of the maternal feminine dimension of the Christian faith associated with Mary from Reformation theology. Some reject her as a hopelessly androcentric figure. The traditional Mary is seen by feminists as an idealized and asexual virgin who is passively related to God, who has no significance of her own, and who, as a projection of male fears and fantasies, defines the role of Christian womanhood as that of the servile, sexually passive, and sacrificing wife and mother with a subordinate role in both church and society.<sup>431</sup>

The idea of Mary as a virgin and a mother is considered “a theology constructed by celibate male clergy,” as N.K. Watson states. This theology “has turned her [Mary] into the ideal pure woman who is unlike other women.”<sup>432</sup> Following the curse of Eve—as Watson claims—are seen as “defiled through menstruation and childbirth,”<sup>433</sup> while “Mary is pure.”<sup>434</sup> Thus, the traditional Christian teachings about Mary are viewed by this form of feminist theology as male-concocted doctrines intended for various purposes, i.e. subjecting women to male domination, glorifying celibacy, etc.

M.D. Hampson further highlights this trend of thought by jettisoning the virgin birth as impossible then declaring that “symbolically the figure of Mary is surely of little

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<sup>431</sup> T. Beattie and M. Kassel. “Feminist Theology,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*. vol. 3. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2003), 441.

<sup>432</sup> N.K. Watson. *Feminist Theology*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2003), 42.

<sup>433</sup> N.K. Watson. *Feminist Theology*, 42.

<sup>434</sup> N.K. Watson. *Feminist Theology*, 42.

avail.”<sup>435</sup> According to Hampson, biblical religion is not about Mary, who is peripheral, but about Christ.<sup>436</sup> Thus, “Mary is scarcely a woman whom women today might be expected to find to be a symbol who represents them,”<sup>437</sup> as Hampson argues. Biblically speaking, Mary is just a woman who receives from God and conceives a male child. This is seen as merely conforming to “the masculinist [sic] construction of femininity.”<sup>438</sup> Apparently, the only reason Mary is even mentioned is so that she can give birth to a male child.<sup>439</sup> According to Hampson, even Mary’s ancient title of *theotokos*, the God-bearer, “conceives of her simply in relation to him to whom she gave birth.”<sup>440</sup>

As mentioned, there are some other nuances among the various positions regarding the figure of Mary in feminist theology, but the samples given here provide an overall taste of the main ideas underlying the movement. Although feminist theology admits of different movements, trends, camps, and ideas, there are ultimately only one of three positions which can be taken *a propos* of the Virgin Mary and of her figure and significance. Either the traditional orthodox understanding of Mary is accepted as is, appropriated to meet the particular concerns of women with varying concerns, or the traditional orthodox position is seen as obsolete and unable to appeal to modern women.

The Latin American Feminist Liberation theologians, for example, accept the traditional teachings on Mary. They wish not so much to remove or reinvent Mary as to make the traditional teachings relevant to their preoccupations which include a chief concern for the poor and oppressed. Others, such as the Asian feminist theologians, have

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<sup>435</sup> M.D. Hampson. *Theology and Feminism*. (Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, Cambridge, 1996), 74.

<sup>436</sup> M.D. Hampson. *Theology and Feminism*, 74.

<sup>437</sup> M.D. Hampson. *Theology and Feminism*, 74.

<sup>438</sup> M.D. Hampson. *Theology and Feminism*, 74.

<sup>439</sup> M.D. Hampson. *Theology and Feminism*, 74.

<sup>440</sup> M.D. Hampson. *Theology and Feminism*, 74.

appropriated the traditional understanding of Mary in such a way that they assign a significance to her virginity, for example, which coincides with the traditional understanding while giving it further meaning in light of their unique concerns. Here, Mary's virginity is not merely a sign of her female autonomy, but rather of her total consecration to God as both the mother of the Incarnate Word and as his first and most perfect disciple. Finally, there is the rejection of the traditional understanding of Mary's person and significance. This rejection is prevalent among white, North Atlantic authors who are unable of reconciling the traditional orthodox interpretation with their understanding of today's needs, especially regarding women in the modern world.

### **C. Christ's Virgin Birth in Feminist Theology**

L. Schottroff has distinguished two different approaches to the virgin birth of Christ have surfaced in feminist theology. The first is "rejection of the virgin birth as an androcentric Christian myth that supports patriarchy and denigrates women,"<sup>441</sup> and the second—quoting the Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyan Kyung—is a "feminist reinterpretation of the virgin birth as the 'beginning of the end of the patriarchal order' (Chung)."<sup>442</sup> The feminist rejection of Christ's virgin birth, according to Schottroff, "is based primarily on the contrast, inimical to sexuality and women, between sinful Eve and virginal Mary."<sup>443</sup> She continues, "In this contrast, sexuality is negative and women are defined and degraded as seductresses and seducible (by Satan)."<sup>444</sup> Reinterpretations of the virgin birth, however, do not entirely dismiss the doctrine of Christ's virgin birth, though they vary depending on the context and particular interests of the feminist in

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<sup>441</sup> L. Schottroff. "Virgin Birth," *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*. eds. L.M. Russell and J.S. Clarkson. (Westminster Knox Press: Louisville, 1996), 311.

<sup>442</sup> L. Schottroff. "Virgin Birth," *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, 311.

<sup>443</sup> L. Schottroff. "Virgin Birth," *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, 311.

<sup>444</sup> L. Schottroff. "Virgin Birth," *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, 311.

question. Schottroff states that for some feminists, for example, “virginity represents independence from patriarchal role assignments and thus women’s freedom from marriage; it does not necessarily mean sexual asceticism.”<sup>445</sup> It will be useful to examine the positions of some popular feminist theologians in order to highlight the overall attitudes towards the virgin birth of Christ. As will be seen, their attitudes and arguments fall between rejection of the traditional doctrine and a reinterpretation of it. The reinterpretations, or appropriations, often add a positive contribution which fosters a deeper understanding this mystery of faith. Naturally, it will be impossible to examine all the literature and so only some samples are intended here. The most popular Feminist Theologians will be considered.

The first position considered here is that of M. Daly. Her mode of expression is unique and thus it will be more advantageous to quote her directly than to attempt a paraphrase of her stance. Daly states:

Mary was said to have been a virgin “before, during, and after” the birth of Jesus. This can be heard in such a way that by its very absurdity it literally screams that biology and abstinence from sexual activity are *not* the essential dimensions of the symbol of Mary as virgin. Sprung free of its Christolatrous context, it says something about female autonomy. The message of *independence* in the Virgin symbol can itself be understood apart from the matter of sexual relationships with men. When this aspect of the symbol is sifted out from the patriarchal setting, then “Virgin Mother” can be heard to say something about female autonomy within the context of sexual and parental relationships.<sup>446</sup>

Daly does not accept the traditional understanding of the virgin birth, but she does grant it a symbolic meaning. In stating that “Mary was said to have been a virgin,” for example, Daly implicitly denies the veracity of the claim. She does state, however, that Mary’s

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<sup>445</sup> L. Schottroff. “Virgin Birth,” *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, 311.

<sup>446</sup> M. Daly. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*. (Beacon Press: Boston, 1985), 85.

virginity can say something about female autonomy if it is sprung free from its Christolatrous context.<sup>447</sup>

This word, “Christolatrous,” is a neologism used to describe that context from which the virginity of Mary can be sprung free in order to say something about female autonomy. It seems the word is a combination of the word “Christ” with the word “idolatrous.” Presumably, this word is intended to highlight an idolatrous treatment of Christ, that is, a worshipping of Christ in an idolatrous manner. Idolatry is the worship of false gods, whatever they may be, but it is not the worship of the true God and so Daly’s meaning is difficult to grasp. It is not clear if she is rejecting the worship of Christ altogether or simply the traditional understanding of the virgin birth.

Further, freeing the virginity of Mary from a context in which Christ is worshipped as God made man is difficult to reconcile with the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Daly has removed the virginity of Mary from its traditional Christian context and so it is difficult to see how this is not a rejection of the mystery altogether.

U. Ranke-Heineman recognizes that the virginity of Mary in childbirth cannot be abandoned without Mary’s perpetual virginity collapsing.<sup>448</sup> However, she refers to the Mary’s perpetual virginity as an “artificial structure”<sup>449</sup> and to the virginal birth as “an especially crass example of the fantastic lengths people will go in order to make Mary over into a virgin.”<sup>450</sup> Ranke-Heineman’s language is consequently revelatory of her underlying thoughts about the virgin birth which establishes the context in which she will argue against the veracity of it. She wishes to jettison the dogma altogether.

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<sup>447</sup> M. Daly. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, 85.

<sup>448</sup> U. Ranke-Heineman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*. tr. P. Heinegg. (Doublday: New York, 1990), 342.

<sup>449</sup> U. Ranke-Heineman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

<sup>450</sup> U. Ranke-Heineman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

Ranke-Heineman begins her analysis of the virgin birth by highlighting that Mary is “supposed to have borne Jesus as if he were a ray of light or transfigured, as he was after his resurrection, or like the burning bush, which was not consumed, or ‘the way spirits pass through bodies without resistance.’”<sup>451</sup> Using the phrase “supposed to have borne Jesus as if”, decries at least the traditional analogies employed to explain the manner in which the virginal birth occurred. This is a rejection of one of the traditional manners in which the dogma has been explained.

Ranke-Heinman’s disapproval of the traditional analogies used to explain the manner in which the virginal birth occurred is a natural extension of what she has already established in her dismissal of Mary’s virginity. She does not give any strict arguments for disapproving of the traditional analogies mentioned, but rather brackets the question of the virginal birth: “Putting aside the question of whether Christ, if he was born like a sort of ray, nevertheless became man...”<sup>452</sup> She does not elaborate.

The reason Ranke-Heinman offers for rejecting the virginal birth and the traditional analogies used for explaining that birth is based on her understanding of the dignity of woman. She states that “the dignity of a woman cannot be manifested by making her into the mother of a beam of light.”<sup>453</sup> Ranke-Heinman sees this “making her [Mary] into the mother of a beam of light”<sup>454</sup> as removing Mary from the realm of other women who have borne children.<sup>455</sup> She continues:

By separating Mary so radically from other women who have borne children, one may have given her, from the Mariological standpoint, something crucially important. But from the human standpoint one has

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<sup>451</sup> U. Ranke-Heineman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

<sup>452</sup> U. Ranke-Heineman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

<sup>453</sup> U. Ranke-Heineman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

<sup>454</sup> U. Ranke-Heineman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

<sup>455</sup> U. Ranke-Heineman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

taken something just as crucial away. Anyone who claims that Mary maintained her biological virginity in childbirth - like the birth of an idea of a pure spirit - has to realize that he is robbing her of her motherhood.<sup>456</sup>

Ranke-Heinman's ultimate reason for denying the virgin birth is, therefore, based on her understanding of natural motherhood. She maintains that positing the biological virginity of Mary robs Mary of her motherhood and far removes her from the domain of all other women who have experienced the fullness of natural motherhood. According to Ranke-Heinman, natural motherhood manifests the dignity of woman, whereas belief in the virginity of Mary would deny Mary of a woman's natural dignity.

It should be noted that Ranke Heinman's statement that "the dignity of a woman cannot be manifested by making her into the mother of a beam of light"<sup>457</sup> is not entirely contextual. There is no official theological claim that Christ is a beam of light nor has it ever been claimed that Mary is the mother of a beam of light. The "beam of light" is only an *analogy* some have offered to attempt an explanation at the manner in which Mary birthed Christ. Mary is the mother of God made man and the analogies used to attempt to explain the virginal birth are not exact replicas of that birth. If they were exact replicas, they would cease to be analogies.

Second, Ranke-Heinman's stance is correct on the natural level but fails to consider the supernatural level on which the mystery of Mary's virginity is based. Mary was not robbed of her natural dignity as a woman but rather she was elevated to the supernatural dignity of the Mother of God. That she does not share the natural dignity of all other mothers is not the least surprising when considering Elizabeth's greeting to Mary: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and

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<sup>456</sup> U. Ranke-Heinman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

<sup>457</sup> U. Ranke-Heinman. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 342.

Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, ‘Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’” (Luke 1:41-42). Elizabeth was “filled with the holy Spirit” (Luke 1:41) when she declared “Most blessed are you among women...” (Luke 1:42). From this spirit-inspired greeting one can safely deduce that Mary is not like other women based on this source of faith. Ranke-Heinman’s analysis of the virgin birth, therefore, fails to consider Mary’s unique role in the history of salvation in which Mary has been blessed among women and raised to the supernatural dignity of Divine Motherhood.

E.A. Johnson does not reject the virgin birth but rather she reconsiders it in light of feminist concerns. She acknowledges the dogma of the virginal birth, but she maintains that the dogma is open to various interpretations.<sup>458</sup> Johnson considers the traditional analogies used to explain the manner in which the birth of Christ occurred, i.e. as light passing through glass, like the burning bush, etc., as a particular “religious interpretation”<sup>459</sup> which cannot be found in Luke. She states:

For Luke this religious interpretation [the *virginitas in partu*] does not counteract the idea that Mary traveled deep into the experience common to women who bring forth a new person out of their own bodies, even at risk of their own death. Biblical scholars point out that otherwise the scene that comes next in Luke’s gospel, where Mary offers sacrifice after childbirth, would make no sense. She would not need to be purified from uncleanness if this were a miraculous birth.<sup>460</sup>

Johnson is correct that some biblical scholars point out a difficulty between Luke’s account of Mary’s purification and the virginal birth proper. R.E. Brown was such a biblical scholar who pointed out that the virginity of Mary during the birth of Jesus probably never occurred to Luke and that the use of this expression would be incredible if

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<sup>458</sup> E.A. Johnson. *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 276.

<sup>459</sup> E.A. Johnson. *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 276.

<sup>460</sup> E.A. Johnson. *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 276.



Luke considered the actual birth of Jesus, as opposed to the conception, to be virginal.<sup>461</sup> Brown stated explicitly that ““if the birth were conceived as miraculous, no purification should have been needed.”<sup>462</sup> Johnson follows Brown’s conclusion and consequently finds the traditional “religious interpretation.”<sup>463</sup> However, the traditional understanding of the virginity of Mary is not disproved by the Mosaic legal expression or Mary’s fulfillment of the legal precepts of purification.<sup>464</sup> There is certainly nothing in Luke that definitely denounces the virginal birth proper and so this particular question remains open to interpretation.

Unlike Ranke-Heineman Johnson does not jettison the virgin birth altogether, but like Ranke-Heineman Johnson maintains that Mary “traveled deep into the experience common to women who bring forth a new person out of their own bodies...”<sup>465</sup> Johnson’s terminology is not identical to Ranke-Heinman’s, but the manner of thought is similar. Johnson interprets the birth of Christ as a birth like any other. Mary experienced what all women experience in childbearing.

#### **D. Contributions of Feminist Theology**

In light of all that has been discussed, it should be noted that feminist theology has contributed to the field of theology and Mariology in positive ways, albeit directly or indirectly. Not every position can be neatly reconciled with the traditional teaching on Mary and the virgin birth of Christ. Within feminist theology there are liberal and orthodox tendencies which cannot be ignored. Yet, even the more liberal interpretations

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<sup>461</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 437.

<sup>462</sup> R.E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 437.

<sup>463</sup> E.A. Johnson. *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 276.

<sup>464</sup> This will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

<sup>465</sup> E.A. Johnson. *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 276.

have something to offer for a better understanding of Mary's role and the meaning of the virgin birth. The more liberal positions remind theologians of certain aspects of a patriarchal rendering which must be reexamined and freshly explicated to appeal to men and women of today.

Militello observes that feminist Mariology has a destroying (*destruens*) purpose, but this is nevertheless necessary and even providential.<sup>466</sup> The concerns have forced a view of Mary as a person and not just as a body.<sup>467</sup> It is correct that women cannot be defined merely by their sex and by their gender and understanding Mary's virginity only in this light would be materialistic and offensive.<sup>468</sup> Authors, like Militello, offer a fresh insight and positive contribution by freeing Mary's virginity from a one-sided view that is offensive and materialistic.

Manfred Hauke gives an excellent overview of the positive elements which can be found in feminist Mariology. It will be expedient to list those five points here. The first is that of the determinative significance of the symbolism of the sexes.<sup>469</sup> It is important to realize that men are not women and that women are not men. Feminist theology rightfully insists on this distinction and its application when conducting theological research.

The second is the importance of Jesus' maleness and Mary's femaleness.<sup>470</sup> For Mary to be a model for women in particular, it is important that her femininity is respected and that her divine motherhood is seen in light of this femininity. Mary is

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<sup>466</sup> C. Militello. "Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni," *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di studi Mariologici*. a cura di G. Liccardo, F. Ruotolo, e S. Tanzarella. (Capua 19-24 Maggio, 1992), 367.

<sup>467</sup> C. Militello. "Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni," 391.

<sup>468</sup> C. Militello. "Riflessione femminile e verginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni," 391.

<sup>469</sup> M. Hauke. *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: What is it? Where does it Lead?* (Ignatius: San Francisco, 1995). 193.

<sup>470</sup> M. Hauke. *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: What is it? Where does it Lead?*, 194.

strong and freely chooses to cooperate with God's plans as a woman. Just as Jesus must be understood as a male, so Mary must be understood as a female. Whatever the theological reasons for the title, Jesus recognizes this distinctness of sex when referring to Mary by calling her "woman," (John 2:4; John 19:26).

The third is Mary as "revelatory" of the feminine attributes of God.<sup>471</sup> The Bible is not without female images for God and indications of his features which can be considered feminine. When Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, for example, he states, "how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings," (Matthew 23:37). Jesus compares himself to a mother hen caring for her young and thus indicates what can be considered a feminine attribute in the love of God. Mary, as a woman with a unique role in the plan of salvation, manifests many of God's "feminine" attributes and this cannot be ignored but rather must be gladly embraced.

The fourth is Mary as receptive of human longings.<sup>472</sup> Pagans were drawn to secret goddesses because they were positive psychological forces in man which drew them to such goddesses. Though Mary is not a secret goddess, she does attract these same forces which are an aspect of the human heart's longings. Mary is the totality of a holy woman who does not confirm humanity where it is, but rather, as the totality of a holy woman draws humanity higher. She is a firm historical anchor for the many longings and strivings of humanity.

The fifth is the "emancipatory" significance of Mary.<sup>473</sup> Mary's virginity does not simply point to an "autonomy."<sup>474</sup> It points beyond itself and to a larger order. The

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<sup>471</sup> M. Hauke. *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: What is it? Where does it Lead?*, 194.

<sup>472</sup> M. Hauke. *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: What is it? Where does it Lead?*, 194.

<sup>473</sup> M. Hauke. *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: What is it? Where does it Lead?*, 195.

<sup>474</sup> M. Hauke. *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: What is it? Where does it Lead?*, 195.

feminine participates in much more than just its own individuality and this virginity is also a symbol of this *par excellence*. Mary participates with God's designs freely and not as a slave. She dialogues with God and gives her active consent. This virginity of Mary also shows the importance of the person, male or female, in his or her relation to God alone. Mary's virginity shows the freedom of participating in God's designs and the value of the person in relation to the supreme person, the *ipsum esse subistens*.

## **Conclusion**

As was discussed, feminism has affected all areas of life including theology. Feminist theology admits of different movements based on different cultures, demographics, and socio-political movements. Thus, the feminist theology of North America is not the same as that of South America which is connected tightly to the concerns of liberation theology.

Mary is a powerful symbolic figure of identification in feminist theology while feminist theologians—overall—see their task as freeing Mary from a one-sided image of her, an image fostered by the commentary of predominately ecclesiastical men over the centuries. They want to offer a new model of Mary based on a paradigm shift in which the focus is on her femininity and strength as an individual who participates in God's plans with self-determination.

With regards to the virgin birth of Christ, there are naturally more liberal and more orthodox views within feminist theology. Some, like Daly, deny Mary's virginity altogether, while others, like Johnson, accept it with some hermeneutical variances as far as its signification is concerned. Mary's virginity is often reinterpreted to meet the concerns of today's women who wish to be strong and self-determining in their following

God, realizing their full potential *qua* women. Providing a fuller model of Mary, which represents her in all her femininity as a responsible and creative woman, is the main goal of feminist theology and can be seen most acutely in such an interpretation of the virgin birth.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Virgin Birth of Christ: Response of the Contemporary**

#### **Magisterium Ecclesiae**

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the study of the Blessed Virgin was conducted more or less as a kind of isolated Mariology. This changed and subsequent ecclesiastical literature has favored considering Mary's privileges in a historical-salvific perspective, which includes other branches of theology, especially Christology, ecclesiology, ecumenism, and biblical exegesis. By way of a very real hermeneutic of continuity, Mary's exalted privileges are now examined in unison with other branches of theology.

This approach has an interdisciplinary and fundamentally Christological signification. The approach offers a deeper understanding of the mystery of Mary which is intimately and inseparably bound to the mystery of Christ. This chapter will provide an overview of the contemporary Magisterium's commentary on the Christ's virgin birth and its response to the modern controversies addressed in this work.

#### **A. Christ's Virgin Birth in the Contemporary Magisterium**

##### **The Virgin Birth of Christ in the Documents of the Second Vatican Council**

The most direct statement regarding the virginal birth in the documents of the Second Vatican Council occurs in *Lumen Gentium*. This section of *Lumen Gentium* is an explication of the union of Mary with Christ in the work of salvation. The section explains that this union of Mary with the Son can be seen from the moment of Christ's virginal conception until Christ's death. The union is manifestly visible at various

moments, such as, when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and Elizabeth greets Mary as blessed because Mary believed in the promise of salvation. The union is manifestly visible also at the very birth of Christ and so the document states: “This union is manifest also at the birth of Our Lord, who did not diminish His mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it...”<sup>475</sup>

In *Lumen Gentium*, therefore, provision is made not just for the “what” of the virginal birth of Christ, but also for the “why” of that birth. Christ’s birth did not simply leave Mary’s virginal integrity intact, but rather “sanctified it.”<sup>476</sup> Mary’s virginal integrity was made holy by the birth of Christ and Christ was brought into the world by the virginal birth. This sanctifying event is one among many concrete examples of the intimate union between Christ and the Blessed Virgin and shows the Christological dimension of the Marian privilege. The virginal birth, consequently, is not just an outdated dogmatic formula, but rather a vibrant truth attesting to the sanctifying mission of Christ and his close union with his mother. These two truths are themselves intimately connected since the virginal birth is both a concrete manifestation of Christ’s sanctifying mission as well as a concrete manifestation of that close union between Son and Mother.

It is worth noting here that the Pastoral Letter of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Behold Your Mother: Women of Faith*, reiterated this truth as expounded by the Council. The letter confirmed and equally taught this aspect of the mystery. The document states, “Her motherly intercession, the Council made clear, in no

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<sup>475</sup> Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 57. The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II. (Pauline Books and Media: Boston, 1999).

<sup>476</sup> Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 57.

way diminished the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power.”<sup>477</sup> The mediation of Mary, which results from her unique role in the history of salvation as the virginal mother of God and believers, is based entirely on the mediatorship of Christ. Mary’s participation in this mediatorship even shows the power of Christ’s supreme mediatorship, as this pastoral letter highlights, following the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

There is another implicit reference to the virginal birth in *Gaudium et Spes* from the Second Vatican Council. It is not as significant as the explication in *Lumen Gentium*, but it is worth mentioning. In explaining that the mystery of man only begins to make sense in light of the mystery of the Word made flesh<sup>478</sup>, *Gaudium et Spes* explains the meaning of Christ as the New Adam. Christ was united to every man by virtue of the incarnation which allowed the Son of God to work with human hands, think with a human mind, and love with a human heart. The document states: “Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.”<sup>479</sup> This implicit reference to Christ’s birth “of the Virgin Mary” demonstrates that Christ was truly made a man in all things except sin while at the same time being born of a virgin. This implicit reference to the virginal birth demonstrates both the divine and human natures of Christ. The virginal birth shows Christ as the Son of God while the same birth shows him to be the New Adam, that is, a true man in every way except sin. This is primarily an implicit

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<sup>477</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Behold Your Mother: Women of Faith*. Pastoral Letter. (November 21, 1973), no. 6.

<sup>478</sup> Second Vatican Council. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22. The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II. (Pauline Books and Media: Boston, 1999).

<sup>479</sup> Second Vatican Council. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.



reference, unlike the reference in *Lumen Gentium*, but it is a noteworthy reference nonetheless.

The Second Vatican Council both faithfully proclaimed what the Church has proclaimed in the past regarding the virgin birth of Christ and in no way deviated from the truth of this dogma. The Council reiterated the language of “virginal integrity” which is found also in the Council of Trent. The Second Vatican Council, however, went a bit farther by explaining the soteriological signification of the dogma rather than providing a mere reiteration of the dogmatic statement as such. The Council did not simply establish the “what” of the dogma, but likewise provided information as to the “why” of the dogma.

### **Paul VI on Christ’s Virgin Birth**

On May 13 of 1967, Paul VI released an Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Signum Magnum* in which (in Part I) he restated that the Catholic Church has always “believed and professed” that Mary remained a virgin “during childbirth and after childbirth.”<sup>480</sup> The rest of this sentence states: “as was fitting for her who was raised to the incomparable dignity of divine motherhood – was a life of such perfect union with the Son that she shared in His joys, sorrows and triumphs.”<sup>481</sup> Here Mary’s virginity is linked to her divine motherhood. Her virginity, especially during and after the birth of Christ, was fitting for Mary who was raised to the dignity of divine motherhood. The virginity of Mary, which includes the virgin birth of Christ, is connected to the divine motherhood and the divine motherhood is linked to Mary’s perfect union with the Son.

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<sup>480</sup> Paul VI. Apostolic Exhortation. *Signum Magnum*. (May 13, 1967), Part I. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/index.htm).

<sup>481</sup> Paul VI. Apostolic Exhortation. *Signum Magnum*, Part I.

Consequently, the virginity of Mary is likewise connected to Mary's perfect union with the Son.

This understanding of Mary's virginity flows from the "why" of the virgin birth of Christ which the Second Vatican Council explicated in *Lumen Gentium*. The statement regarding Christ's virgin birth in *Lumen Gentium* is a statement given as a concrete example of the intimate union between Christ and his mother. It forms a part of the "why" of the virginal birth which Paul VI likewise connects to the union of Son and mother. Paul VI's magisterial commentary here is similar to that of the second Vatican Council, therefore, in linking the union of Christ and his mother with Mary's virginity. Paul VI, however, also explicitly connects Mary's virginity to her divine motherhood and her divine motherhood to the union between Son and mother. Thus, adding to the elucidation of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI inserts the notion of the divine motherhood with the virginal birth and the union between Christ and Mary thereby showing the Christological nature of Mary's virginity here.

On February 2 of 1974, Paul VI released another Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Marialis Cultus* in which he commented on the Christmas season. He referred to the season as "a prolonged commemoration of the divine, virginal and salvific motherhood of her whose 'inviolable virginity brought the Savior into the world.'" The latter quotation in Paul VI's commentary comes from the *Communicantes* from Christmas in Eucharistic Prayer I from the Roman Missal.<sup>482</sup> This later reference of Paul VI to the virgin birth of Christ is in harmony with his statement in *Signum Magnum*. In *Marialis Cultus*, Paul VI once again connects the virginity of Mary with her divine motherhood by referring to the

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<sup>482</sup> Paul VI. Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*. (February 2, 1974), no. 5. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/index.htm).

Christmas season as a prolonged commemoration of the “divine, virginal and salvific motherhood.”<sup>483</sup> Mary’s motherhood is seen as divine and virginal, a connection which Paul VI made in *Signum Magnum*, with the addition of the term “salvific.” Paul VI also quotes Eucharistic Prayer I from the Roman Canon and by so doing reaffirms the term “inviolable” which was used by the Council of Toledo in 675 in a section called “Exposition of faith” as mentioned in section one of this thesis. Technically, this use of the word “inviolable” by the Council of Toledo refers to Mary’s virginity in conception, but Paul VI uses it here in relation to her virginity in parturition. Since Mary’s virginity remained always the same before, during, and after the birth of Christ, then the adjectives used to describe that virginity cannot change since the virginity of Mary is perpetual and unchanging. Consequently, Paul VI uses the traditional term “inviolable” to the virginal birth per se by quoting Eucharist Prayer I.

Paul VI’s commentary on the virginal birth flows naturally from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. The Council provided the “why” of the virginal birth and offered as a concrete example of the intimate union between Son and mother and Paul VI connected the virginal birth with the divine motherhood which established in perpetuity that intimate union between Son and mother. The Christological foundation of Mary’s divine motherhood and all her privileges is clear.

### **Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Virgin Birth of Christ**

It would be beneficial to consider a few points found in the current Catechism. It places the virgin birth in light of the mystery of Christ. Everything the Catholic faith believes concerning the virgin birth and Mary’s role in it is founded on what the Church

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<sup>483</sup> Paul VI. Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, no. 5.

believes concerning Christ.<sup>484</sup> What the Catholic faith “teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ.”<sup>485</sup> It is in light of this profound reality which the Catechism explicates the virgin birth.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that the “deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary’s real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man.”<sup>486</sup> The Catechism quotes the well-known phrase from *Lumen Gentium* that Christ’s birth “did not diminish his mother’s virginal integrity but sanctified it.” It is also noted that in the liturgy, the Church recognizes and celebrates Mary as *Aeiparthenos* and this is related to the mystery of Christ.

As far as Mary is concerned, the Catechism explains Mary’s virginity in relation to her belief and this belief is once again connected to the Gospel, that is, the good news of Jesus Christ. Her virginity is “the sign of her faith.”<sup>487</sup> It is in light of her faith that she is truly a virgin and her faith is in God’s salvation of which Jesus is the full reality. It is in her response to the plan of God in salvation that Mary is most fully seen as “ever-virgin.” The Catechism highlights that Mary is “the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38) and that she is so “with her whole being.”<sup>488</sup> It is in this vein that the Catechism quotes the following words from Saint Augustine, “[Mary] remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him, a virgin in carrying him, a virgin in nursing him at her

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<sup>484</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. English Edition. (St. Paul Books and Media, 1994), no. 487.

<sup>485</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 487.

<sup>486</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 487.

<sup>487</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 506.

<sup>488</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 510.

breast, always a virgin.”<sup>489</sup> Mary’s entire perpetual virginity is related, therefore, to the mystery of Christ.

The virgin birth also shows Jesus, who was conceived in Mary’s virginal womb, was conceived as “holy.”<sup>490</sup> Mary is left to the care of Joseph so that Christ “should be born of Joseph’s spouse into the messianic lineage of David.”<sup>491</sup> Naturally, the virgin birth of Christ was accomplished as a sign that Jesus is totally human and totally divine without confusion or admixture of either nature. This, however, also references a holiness unlike that of any other holiness known in the history of the world and so the Catechism notes this in expounding upon the virgin birth. Furthermore, Joseph takes Mary as his spouse in order to preserve the messianic lineage of David foretold in the prophets, demonstrating once again that all these mysteries center around Christ.

The virgin birth of Christ, which was made known to Mary at the Annunciation, also inaugurated the fullness of time, that is, “the time of the fulfillment of God’s promises and preparations.”<sup>492</sup> It was in Mary that the fullness of the deity would dwell “bodily.”<sup>493</sup> This was accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit and so the virgin birth of Christ also involved a pneumatological act which occurred at the fullness of time. God was fulfilling his promises for salvation and making preparations for fully realizing them in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Catechism also notes that this pneumatological activity, that is, the mission of the Holy Spirit in this case and in general, is always “conjoined and ordered to that of the

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<sup>489</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 510.

<sup>490</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 437.

<sup>491</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 437.

<sup>492</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 484.

<sup>493</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 484.

Son.”<sup>494</sup> The Holy Spirit divinely fecundated the womb of Mary, but also sanctified it.<sup>495</sup> This is reminiscent of the popular idea from *Lumen Gentium* already mentioned. This activity of the Holy Spirit in the virginal conception caused Mary “to conceive the eternal Son of the Father in a humanity drawn from her own.”<sup>496</sup> Thus, the “Father’s only son, conceived as man in the womb of the Virgin Mary, is ‘Christ,’ that is to say, anointed by the Holy Spirit, from the beginning of his human existence, through the manifestation of this fact takes place only progressively.” This shows also the Trinitarian dimension of the virgin birth of Christ.

The current Catechism of the Catholic Church echoes the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent popes, such as John Paul II, as well as observing a hermeneutic of continuity with Scripture and Tradition as understood through the centuries. The virgin birth of Christ is viewed in light of Mary’s unique privileges in the history of salvation while those privileges are constantly understood as a constituent part of the Christ event. This Christological dimension, which is both the source and the summit of all theological mysteries, entails other theological realities. The virgin birth entails Trinitarian, Christological, Pneumatological, and also Ecclesiological elements all of which come together to form a unified whole. The virgin birth of Christ is not an isolated reality, but rather it is the beginning of all the realities surrounding the salvation of men. Thus, it incorporates even a Soteriological element and is intimately connected with the other disciplines mentioned.

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<sup>494</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 485.

<sup>495</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 485.

<sup>496</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 485.

## **B. Response of the Magisterium Ecclesiae to Contemporary Controversies**

### **John Paul II's Discourse in Capua**

John Paul II gave addressed many items concerning the role of the theologian in expounding the mystery of Christ's virginal conception and virginal birth in a discourse from 1992 given in Capua. It is a very important source for establishing the contemporary Magisterium's response to the controversies raised in this work and will provide the main overview of the contemporary Magesterium's response to all the issues raised in this work. In other words, the discourse establishes an excellent overview of the modern Church's approach to and exposition of the mystery in question and that in response to the contemporary controversies which have arisen in modern times.

It is interesting to note here that Capua is a significant place in the history of Marian concerns as the late Pontiff noted the occasion for his own talk in 1992. In 392, Capua celebrated an important council where various Bishops from the West were gathered to consider different difficulties which were affecting Pope Siricius at the time.<sup>497</sup> Among these difficulties was the doctrine of Bonosus, who denied the perpetual virginity of Mary. Pope Siricius followed the council closely and thus presented John Paul II with an opportunity to reflect with his listeners on some indispensable preconditions of the theologian for deepening, with reason enlightened by faith, the meaning of the humble and glorious virginity of Mary, the mother of Christ.<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, (Maggio, 1992), no. 2.

<sup>498</sup> Cf. John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 2.

John Paul II begins by giving both the objective and the subjective conditions for interpreting the mystery in question.<sup>499</sup> With regards to this truth of faith—considering the objective conditions—it is necessary that the interpretation is conducted in a correct and proper mode. Thus, any interpretation, which departs from the person of Mary in “the culture of her people and from the social conditions of her epoch,”<sup>500</sup> must be rejected.

Furthermore, based on the Fathers of the Church, it is important to note that the virginity of Mary is not primarily a Mariological question, but rather is a “Christological theme.”<sup>501</sup> The Pope offers a dogmatic argument here stating that Mary’s virginity derives from the divine nature of Christ. The virginal womb of Mary is a sign for fostering the recognition that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God.<sup>502</sup> The Pope references the teaching of the Church at the Council of Constantinople I, affirming that the hermeneutic rule regarding this mystery must be a Christological one.<sup>503</sup>

Regarding the subjective conditions for confronting this mystery, Wojtyla requires that the theologian exhibit an interior faith and veneration.<sup>504</sup> The theologian must also recognize the free activity of God in history. The mystery of the Incarnation is not simply a fact to which the intellect must assent, but rather it is a truth which must be

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<sup>499</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 3.

<sup>500</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 3.

<sup>501</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 3.

<sup>502</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 3.

<sup>503</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 3.

<sup>504</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 4.



accepted by the whole human person.<sup>505</sup> Recognizing this free activity of God in human history, the theologian can easily see—in unison with the Fathers of the Church—that the Fathers “have not doubted to apply to Mary”<sup>506</sup> the Old Testament passages about her, (i.e., Isaiah 7:14).

What is crucial here, as a subjective condition, is that the theologian remains mindful that he stands in front of a mystery of faith. He can improve and interpret the data of Revelation, but always as in front of a great mystery.<sup>507</sup> He must continue his research and understanding of this mystery following the known adage, “*fides quaerens intellectum*.”<sup>508</sup> This is to say that the theologian cannot seek to believe by means of his understanding, but rather he must seek to understand by means of his believing.

Next, the Holy Father addresses the Christological reinterpretation of Mary’s virginity. Based on the Fathers of the Church, the Pope reminds theologians of the *nexus mysteriorum*.<sup>509</sup> He juxtaposes the Incarnation of Christ with Christ’s Resurrection, showing how both of these mysteries emphasize the divinity of Christ.<sup>510</sup> Wojtyla further notes that both these mysteries belong to the *depositum fidei* and are profess by the entire Church as well as included in the Creeds.<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 4.

<sup>506</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 4.

<sup>507</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 4.

<sup>508</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 4.

<sup>509</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 5.

<sup>510</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 5.

<sup>511</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 5.

These two mysteries of faith also admit of a strong reciprocity.<sup>512</sup> In other words, doubting one of these truths makes it easier to doubt the other one and vice versa. The converse could also be stated as true, namely, believing one of these truths aides in accepting the other. This reciprocity can be found in the Fathers as well.

Irenaeus, Ephrem, Proclus of Constantinople, and Peter Chrysologus, for example, find an interesting parallel between the virgin birth of Christ and the Resurrection. Whereas Christ emerged from the intact virginal womb, so Christ emerged from the intact virginal tomb.<sup>513</sup> Thus, among the Fathers of the Church there is an emphasis which connects Christ's virgin birth with Christ's Resurrection and the Pope calls for a deeper reflection on Mary's virginity, interpreting it in light of this Nativity-Paschal mystery in such a way where Mary stands as a witness who unites both these mysteries.<sup>514</sup>

From here, Wojtyla makes a very important distinction between a fact and its meaning. He states that the theologian must "maintain an indispensable equilibrium between the affirmation of the fact and the illustration of its significance,"<sup>515</sup> with regards to Mary's virginity and its Christological underpinnings. Both the fact and its meanings belong to the same mystery of faith.

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<sup>512</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 5.

<sup>513</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 5.

<sup>514</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 5.

<sup>515</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 6.

The Pope indirectly responds to all those who deny or reject the historical dimension of this mystery, noting that the meaning is derived from the fact.<sup>516</sup> This is to say that the real, historical event is the foundation of the significance acquired from it. From here, Wojtyla offers an excellent magisterial explanation of Mary's virginity.

Mary truly conceived Jesus by the word of the Holy Spirit and without the intervention of any man. She also gave birth to Jesus in a virginal manner and thus she remained a virgin.<sup>517</sup> The Church further confesses that both of these aspects of Mary's virginity—at both the conception and the birth of Christ—include a corporal dimension. As proof of this ecclesiastical confession, the Pope quotes the teaching of the Lateran Council and the Council of Toledo,<sup>518</sup> both of which confirm this teaching. This responds indirectly both to those who deny or reject the historicity of the events and to those who deny or reject the physical reality of the same.

Next the Pope turns his attention to the biblical accounts of Matthew and Luke. Wojtyla reminds commentators that these accounts “cannot be reduced to simple etiological stories”<sup>519</sup> which were written to aide belief in the divinity of Christ. The narratives go beyond the literary genre which Matthew and Luke adopted and both of them express a biblical tradition of apostolic origin.<sup>520</sup>

This context allows the Pope to remind theologians that the virginal conception of Christ is a truth revealed by God. As a divinely revealed truth, man is required to accept

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<sup>516</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 6.

<sup>517</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 6.

<sup>518</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 6.

<sup>519</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 7.

<sup>520</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 7.

it by an act in accord with the obedience of faith.<sup>521</sup> In making such an act of faith, one accepts that nothing is impossible with God.<sup>522</sup>

The theologian is then invited to discover, illustrate, and improve the symbolic values of this salvific event.<sup>523</sup> Wojtyla continues that the theologian must explain what God desired to reveal through these historical facts, namely, the virginal conception and virginal nativity of Christ. In other words, the theologian must explain the meaning of these events.<sup>524</sup>

Further, if the one contemplates the Trinity in the mystery of the Incarnation, so the theologian should ask what the Triune God wanted to reveal about himself in this mystery of faith.<sup>525</sup> In other words, Wojtyla invites theologians to reflect on this mystery from a Trinitarian perspective.

The Holy Father also invites theologians to consider the ecclesiological perspective of this mystery. He seeks of increasing one's "knowledge of the Church, both in the Old and the New Testament."<sup>526</sup> Reflecting on this perspective, the theologian discovers that the Annunciation is an event in the history of the people of the

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<sup>521</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 7.

<sup>522</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 7.

<sup>523</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 8.

<sup>524</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 8.

<sup>525</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 8.

<sup>526</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 8.

Old Covenant and it is also a prototype of the New Covenant.<sup>527</sup> Mary is both a virgin, spouse, and disciple and all of these are elements present in the Church.<sup>528</sup>

Finally, in this section, Wojtyla emphasizes the anthropological perspective when interpreting this mystery of faith. He invites theologians to reflect on what this mystery adds to “the understanding of man—male and female—and his destiny of grace and glory.”<sup>529</sup> As the Holy Father notes, “Mary of Nazareth, in her concrete condition of ‘virgin betrothed to a man’ (Luke 1:27), is found at the center of story which totally commits her in body, in her spirit, in her freedom and in her obedience, in her humility and in her exaltation, in her charity and in her service, and in her fidelity to God and solidarity with men.”<sup>530</sup> This provides an indirect answer of the contemporary Magisterium to the concerns of feminist theology.

Wojtyla calls the theologian to fidelity to this truth of faith when conducting research and offering reflections on Mary’s virginity.<sup>531</sup> They must be faithful both to the Word of God and to Tradition, as well as the Magisterium Ecclesiae and the liturgy.<sup>532</sup> In light of the Old Testament, Mary’s fiat recalls the faith of Abraham while the extraordinary births found in sterile women recalls Christ’s virgin birth.<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 8.

<sup>528</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 8.

<sup>529</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 8.

<sup>530</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 8.

<sup>531</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 9.

<sup>532</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 9.

<sup>533</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 9.

The Pope then reminds theologians that Mary's virginity is a total virginity which must be explained as such and as being completely in tact.<sup>534</sup> He makes an important distinction between *virginitas cordis* (virginity of heart) and *virginitas carnis* (virginity of body—or more accurately—virginity of the flesh). Wojtyla affirms that Mary's is a total virginity incorporating both virginity of heart and virginity of body.<sup>535</sup> They are both valuable, since the virginity of the body has no importance if the heart is filled with pride and hypocrisy.<sup>536</sup> This provides a clear response of the contemporary Magisterium to those controversies surrounding the *virginitas in partu* where a moral virginity is highlighted to the exclusion of a physical one, while at the same time explaining the importance of both aspects of virginity.

Finally, the Pope addresses the important question of contemporary culture. He notes that the cultural climate of today is not sensitive to the value of Christian virginity.<sup>537</sup> Virginity is a gift of grace and it is good for the Church. The theologian should find reasons for contemporary men and women to discover the sense and value of virginity. The commentator must do this “animated by the serene confidence that authentic evangelical values are valid for contemporary man and woman, even if they ignore or neglect them”<sup>538</sup> as the Holy Father teaches.

Wojtyla also considers the virginity of Mary and the Church from the perspective of the contemporary ecological movements which criticize violence done to creation and

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<sup>534</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 10.

<sup>535</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 10.

<sup>536</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 10.

<sup>537</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 12.

<sup>538</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 12.

the degradation of nature.<sup>539</sup> Christ's virgin birth is the beginning of the new creation and thus is related to proper stewardship and the renovation of creation and nature. The theologian should be mindful of this dimension. At last, in Christ—the Pope declares—“the anthropological project of God has reached perfection.”<sup>540</sup> This is found only in Christ from his virginal conception in Mary's womb to his final birth to life from the untouched tomb.<sup>541</sup>

### **The Virgin Birth of Christ is not a Theologoumenon**

In 1964, the Pontifical Biblical Commission released a document, *De Historica Evangeliorum Veritate*, in which they noted that there is much labor required among exegetes today.<sup>542</sup> One of the chief reasons for this is due to the many writings which are being spread abroad in which the truth of both the deeds and words found in the Gospels are questioned.<sup>543</sup> This was made manifest when examining the position of theologians and exegetes who denied the historical reality of Christ's virgin birth, reducing to a mere theological opinion. Thus, the Magisterium has called for much labor among exegetes to highlight the truth of both the deeds and words found in the Gospels, such as the truth of Christ's virgin birth.

Restated, the argument that the virgin birth of Christ is merely a theologoumenon posits that Matthew and Luke were only expressing a theological opinion and not a historical reality. John Paul II notes that the very first mystery of the Rosary, however, the Annunciation, reminds everybody that the “whole of salvation history, in some sense

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<sup>539</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 12.

<sup>540</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 12.

<sup>541</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 12.

<sup>542</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *De Historica Evangeliorum Veritate*. (April 21, 1964), intro.

<sup>543</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *De Historica Evangeliorum Veritate*, intro.

the entire history of the world, has led up to this greeting.”<sup>544</sup> He sees this as the plan of the Father from all eternity, stating that “the Father looks upon Mary and makes her the Mother of his Son.”<sup>545</sup>

This is not an imaginary idea invented by Matthew or Luke, but rather a historical event in which the Father begins to realize concretely the mystery of salvation. John Paul II concludes that “The whole of humanity, in turn, is embraced by the *fiat* with which she readily agrees to the will of God.”<sup>546</sup> It is presupposed in his explication here that this all refers to an authentic historical event.

It is a historical event foretold in the Old Testament and thus the person of Christ, especially as he is portrayed in the infancy gospels—according to a declaration of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1984—enlighten and fulfill that First Testament.<sup>547</sup> In these infancy gospels, Matthew and Luke teach the virginal conception of Jesus clearly,<sup>548</sup> and the Church has always sanctioned this teaching. The historicity of the event has always been presupposed unless brought into question and in need of a definitive response. In this document, the Pontifical Biblical Commission further elaborates that the high point of revelation “is the Son of God, true man born of the Virgin Mary.”<sup>549</sup> It is a historical reality which was promised by the patriarchs, received and magnified by the prophets, and finally realized in the Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God becoming Incarnate.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>544</sup> John Paul II. *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*. Apostolic Letter. (October 16, 2002), no. 20.

<sup>545</sup> John Paul II. *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, no. 20.

<sup>546</sup> John Paul II. *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, no. 20.

<sup>547</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *De Sacra Scriptura et Christologia*. (1984), no. 2.2.2.2, b.

<sup>548</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *De Sacra Scriptura et Christologia*, no. 2.2.2.2, b.

<sup>549</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *De Sacra Scriptura et Christologia*, 1.3.2.

<sup>550</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *De Sacra Scriptura et Christologia*, 1.3.2.



Lest there be any doubt regarding any of this, however, the teachings of John Paul II regarding the historical reality of the birth of Christ were made abundantly clear in that talk he gave in Capua in 1992. John Paul II teaches that the meaning of the virgin birth of Christ, or the symbolism of the event, finds its foundation in the reality of the event, that is, the fact of the event, and this same factual reality only demonstrates its richness if these symbolic meanings are employed.<sup>551</sup> John Paul II noted the following three facts about Mary of Nazareth; facts which are confirmed by the Church's faith in the virginity of God's mother. These three facts are as follows:

- (1) Mary really conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit without any human intervention.<sup>552</sup>
- (2) Mary gave birth to Jesus truly and virginally, remaining a virgin even after giving birth according to the Holy Fathers and Councils that dealt with this issue.<sup>553</sup>
- (3) After the birth of Jesus, Mary lived in total and perpetual virginity with Saint Joseph, who was likewise called to fulfill a unique role in the initial events of our salvation.<sup>554</sup>

Thus, with regards to the "theologoumenon theory," John Paul II reminded his hearers in Capua—and thus everybody—that the reality of Christ's virginal conception recorded in Luke and Matthew cannot be reduced to mere etiological narratives meant to foster belief in the divinity of Christ.<sup>555</sup> The recording of the virginal conception of Christ goes beyond the literary genres employed by both Matthew and Luke and they are

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<sup>551</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 6.

<sup>552</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 6.

<sup>553</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 6.

<sup>554</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 6.

<sup>555</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 7.

the expression of a biblical tradition of apostolic origin.<sup>556</sup> The virginal conception of Christ is not a reality which can be obtained by unaided reason, but rather is a truth revealed by God; a truth which man receives in virtue of the obedience of faith.<sup>557</sup> It is a truth only accessible to those willing to believe that God acts in the world and that nothing is impossible for him.<sup>558</sup>

### **The Virgin Birth of Christ is not a Myth**

The contemporary Magisterium Ecclesiae is clear that the entire reality of the Gospel, and thus of the virgin birth of Christ, is not mythological but actual. In a General Audience given on September 24, 2008, Benedict XVI stated unequivocally that “The more we try to trace the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth on the roads of Galilee, the better we shall be able to understand that he took on our humanity, sharing it in all things except sin,”<sup>559</sup> and finally that “Our faith is not born from a myth or from an idea, but from the encounter with the Risen One in the life of the Church.”<sup>560</sup> Here the Holy Father states clearly that the entire Christian faith is based on belief in the Resurrection and that Christian faith is not based on a myth. The parallel between the virgin birth of Christ and his emergence from the tomb at the Resurrection was discussed earlier and is easily applicable here to the words of Benedict XVI.

In another General Audience given on April 15, 2009, the Holy Father also made a similar statement when he said, “it is fundamental for our faith and for our Christian witness to proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as a real, historical event,

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<sup>556</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 7.

<sup>557</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 7.

<sup>558</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 7.

<sup>559</sup> Benedict XVI. *General Audience*. (September 24, 2008).

<sup>560</sup> Benedict XVI. *General Audience*. (September 24, 2008).

attested by many authoritative witnesses.”<sup>561</sup> He then restated his words with greater vigor and linked them to the entirety of the Gospel. He said, “We assert this forcefully because, in our day too, there are plenty of people who seek to deny its historicity, reducing the Gospel narrative to a myth...”<sup>562</sup> Benedict XVI rejects forcefully that the Gospel is a myth and makes it clear that it is a historical reality and thus the virgin birth of Christ is likewise not a myth and a historical reality.

John Paul II taught this same truth about the Resurrection which is intimately bound to the virgin birth of Christ. He said that “it is clear that faith in the resurrection is, from the very beginning, a conviction based on a fact, a real event.”<sup>563</sup> He continued that “It is not based on a myth or on a conception.”<sup>564</sup> This, naturally, refers to the Gospel as a whole since the Resurrection and Ascension are the fruits of everything God accomplished in the Incarnation of the Word. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is, therefore, not a myth and not related to any mythology. The contemporary teaching of the Church has made this evident.

### **Modern Biology does not Exclude the Virgin Birth**

There is no doubt that—as John Paul II notes in *Redemptoris Mater*—that “Mankind has made wonderful discoveries and achieved extraordinary results in the fields of science and technology.”<sup>565</sup> He continues to acknowledge the importance of these great results. “It has made great advances along the path of progress and civilization, and in recent times one could say that it has succeeded in speeding up the

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<sup>561</sup> Benedict XVI. *General Audience*. (April 15, 2009).

<sup>562</sup> Benedict XVI. *General Audience*. (April 15, 2009).

<sup>563</sup> John Paul II. *General Audience*. (February 1, 1989).

<sup>564</sup> John Paul II. *General Audience*. (February 1, 1989).

<sup>565</sup> John Paul II. *Redemptoris Mater*. Encyclical Letter. (March 25, 1987), no. 52.

pace of history,”<sup>566</sup> as the late Holy Father stated. Thus, science and technology have their proper place. The achievements of the two have bettered humanity in many ways and deserve respect and gratitude towards God for allowing such progress. Nevertheless, science and technology are neither the beginning nor the end of man’s existence and so they must be viewed as subservient to God’s revelation, albeit not in true tension with it. The tension only occurs when some elevate science over revelation and thus claim its supremacy over what God has taught and accomplished in human history. In reality, there is no actual tension between science and faith. There is only the tension created by those who wish to make faith subservient to science.

Even when considering normal scientific processes, such as natural human generation, science does not override every aspect of these processes. In a Letter to Families written in 1994, John Paul II stated that “Human fatherhood and motherhood are rooted in biology, yet at the same time transcend it.”<sup>567</sup> Even natural generation, therefore, which is rooted in biology, is not limited to the confines of biology. Biology is a useful discipline for understanding many of the physical aspects of natural human generation, but there is also a transcendent element which surpasses the various biological considerations. If this is so of natural biological processes, such as human generation, then how much more so would this be true about supernatural processes, such as supernatural divine-human generation in the womb of the Virgin Mary? Whereas natural human generation is the norm for human procreation—and yet admits of a transcendent dimension—the supernatural virgin birth of Christ only occurred once in all of history and thus its transcendent dimension is far beyond the natural realm.

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<sup>566</sup> John Paul II. *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 52.

<sup>567</sup> John Paul II. *Gratissimam Sane*. Letter to Families. (1994), no. 9.

In a General Audience of July 10, 1996, John Paul II stated that the “uniform testimony of the Gospels attest that faith in the virginal conception of Jesus is firmly rooted in various circles of the early Church.”<sup>568</sup> The late Pontiff continued that this dismissed any recent interpretations which viewed the virginal conception “in a non-physical or biological, but only symbolic or metaphorical.”<sup>569</sup> Thus, John Paul II insisted that the virginal conception of Christ was physical and biological, albeit in a supernatural manner beyond the competency of contemporary biological knowledge and understanding. This does not mean that it does not have some kind of symbolic value—for lack of a better word—for example, the parallel between the virginal conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary and the virginal reception of him by the power of the Holy Spirit at Baptism. This, however, is not the exclusive reality of the virginal conception which is also historical, physical, and biological in some manner.

It is important to reiterate and note here that among the approach, which can best be labeled “scientism” and not “scientific,” the attitude incorporates the idea that if empirical science cannot observe and/or understand something, then it cannot be true. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops inadvertently addressed this in the document referenced above, *Behold Your Mother*.

The document wisely notes that Mary was the first to ask the question regarding the *how* of a virginal conception.<sup>570</sup> Regardless of how much modern biology one knows, it is no mystery to anybody that children are not conceived virginally as evidenced by

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<sup>568</sup> John Paul II. *Udienza Generale*. (10 Luglio, 1996), no. 3.

<sup>569</sup> John Paul II. *Udienza Generale*. (10 Luglio, 1996), no. 3.

<sup>570</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Behold Your Mother: Women of Faith*, no. 24.

Mary's question posed 2,000 years ago. Her question shows evidences "the belief of the early Church that Jesus was virginally conceived."<sup>571</sup>

Furthermore, the angel explains that the virginal conception of Jesus is due to the power of God<sup>572</sup> and thus not to any known scientific principles, ancient or modern. The document states that God "has chosen this unique way to send his Son among men as their true brother and Savior."<sup>573</sup> The key word here is "unique." This refers to something which has hitherto never been done and something which would cease to be "unique" if it were repeated later.

Thus, the Bishops taught directly that the virginal conception of Jesus was the first occurrence of such a mystery in history and indirectly that it would be the only such occurrence throughout all history. This necessarily excludes it from direct empirical observation, rendering an attitude of scientism obsolete in light of the obedience of faith required for probing such a mystery. As the document concludes, "The conception of the Son of Mary without a human father is the sign that the Incarnation is the new creation, independent of the will of man or urge of the flesh."<sup>574</sup> The virginal conception is not a result of "man" or an "urge of the flesh" and so it necessarily falls outside the realm of nature and thus outside the realm of empirical investigation.

Finally—referring to the virginal birth of Christ proper—in the 1992 talk given in Capua, John Paul II noted that it is important to present the virginity of Mary intact, that is, her virginity of heart and her virginity of flesh must not be disconnected.<sup>575</sup> John Paul

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<sup>571</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Behold Your Mother: Women of Faith*, no. 24.

<sup>572</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Behold Your Mother: Women of Faith*, no. 24.

<sup>573</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Behold Your Mother: Women of Faith*, no. 24.

<sup>574</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Behold Your Mother: Women of Faith*, no. 24.

<sup>575</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 10.

II implicitly recognized the distinction between moral and physical virginity and underlines the crucial importance of maintaining both regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary. The theologian must present Mary in such a way where her total virginity of heart and body remain intact. Mary is neither a mere moral virgin nor is she a mere body God used for his purposes. Mary's virginity must also not be presented in any exaggerated or distorted way. For example, the value and dignity of marriage cannot be downplayed, but must be recognized as a sacrament of Christ and a way of holiness and perfection.<sup>576</sup> Finally, the theologian must give reasons which are helpful to people of our time. They must give reasons which help others discover or rediscover the value of virginity, especially as a sign of inner freedom, respect for others, and providing an ability to concentrate on spiritual values and the confines of the temporal world.<sup>577</sup> Virginity, as lived totally and unreservedly by Mary, has its origins and final end in Christ, and is one way to live radically for the kingdom.<sup>578</sup> The virgin birth of Christ—including the virginal conception and virginal birth—are thus biological realities presupposing Mary's moral and physical virginity and pointing to the supernatural nature of Christ's entrance into humanity, according to the contemporary Magisterium Ecclesiae.

### **The Virgin Birth of Christ and Feminist Theology**

The document, *Gaudium et Spes*, from the Second Vatican Council well noted that “discord results from population, economic and social pressures, or from difficulties which arise between succeeding generations, or from new social relationships between

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<sup>576</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 11.

<sup>577</sup> John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 12.

<sup>578</sup> Cf. John Paul II. *Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua*, no. 12.

men and women.”<sup>579</sup> It is this last one which is relevant here, namely, discord which results from new social relationships between men and women. What results from this discord—as the document highlights—is “mutual distrust, enmities, conflicts and hardships.”<sup>580</sup> Of these discords, the document finally notes that men (and women) are “at once the cause and the victim.”<sup>581</sup>

John Paul II himself called for a “new feminism” which sought equality among the sexes in light of their complimentary nature. In a 1989 letter to the Bishops of the United States, he opposed “a radical feminism which seeks the rights of women by attacking and denying fundamental, clear and constant moral teaching does not reflect or promote the full reality and true dignity of women, who have not only a temporal worth but also an eternal destiny in the Divine Plan.”<sup>582</sup> Thus, one must distinguish between authentic feminism, that is, the “new feminism,” and radical feminism which does not really seek equality as much as it seeks domination. In that same letter, the late Pontiff declared that “Mary, Mother of Jesus, Mother of the Church, woman par excellence, embodies that radical dignity of women.”<sup>583</sup> He continued, stating that Mary, “played a pivotal part as all history was changed; she continues to touch our lives today.”<sup>584</sup>

The question remains how Mary embodied the radical dignity of women apropos of the virgin birth of Christ. The late Pontiff answered this question in his Apostolic Letter of 1998 entitled, *Mulieris Dignitatem*. John Paul II focused his meditation on “virginity and motherhood as two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the female

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<sup>579</sup> Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes*. (December 7, 1965), no. 8.

<sup>580</sup> Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 8.

<sup>581</sup> Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 8.

<sup>582</sup> John Paul II. *Letter of the Holy Father to the Bishop of the United States*. (February 22, 1989).

<sup>583</sup> John Paul II. *Letter of the Holy Father to the Bishop of the United States*. (February 22, 1989).

<sup>584</sup> John Paul II. *Letter of the Holy Father to the Bishop of the United States*. (February 22, 1989).



personality.”<sup>585</sup> These two dimensions acquired “their full meaning and value in Mary, who as a Virgin became the Mother of the Son of God.”<sup>586</sup> The late Holy Father explained this by stating that “These *two dimensions of the female vocation* were united in her in an exceptional manner, in such a way that one did not exclude the other but wonderfully complemented it.”<sup>587</sup> This seemed impossible even to the Virgin Mary, as the description of the Annunciation in the Gospel of Luke demonstrates clearly when Mary asked, “How can this be, since I have no husband?” (Luke 1:34). Yet it was so by the power of the Holy Spirit and the overshadowing of the Most High which occurred at the virginal conception of Christ. Thus, in Mary virginity and motherhood co-exist and—as the late Pontiff stated—“they do not mutually exclude each other or place limits on each other.”<sup>588</sup> This being the case, “the person of the Mother of God helps everyone—especially women—to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other.”<sup>589</sup>

Thus, the radical dignity of woman is found in the vocation of motherhood or virginity and both of these are exemplified superlatively in the Virgin Mother of God. At the Annunciation, John Paul II noted in *Redemptoris Mater* that Mary responded to the angel “with all her human and feminine ‘I,’ and this response of faith included both perfect cooperation with the grace of God that precedes and assists and perfect openness to the action of the Holy Spirit...”<sup>590</sup> As far as the question of feminism is concerned, therefore, the virgin birth of Christ offers the highest example of a woman’s dignity in

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<sup>585</sup> John Paul II. *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Apostolic Letter. (August 15, 1988), no. 17.

<sup>586</sup> John Paul II. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 17.

<sup>587</sup> John Paul II. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 17.

<sup>588</sup> John Paul II. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 17.

<sup>589</sup> John Paul II. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 17.

<sup>590</sup> John Paul II. *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 13.

Mary, the Virgin Mother of God. As the late Pontiff noted, Mary cooperated with the virginal conception with her fully human and feminine “I” and thereby perfectly and mysteriously embodied the two dimensions of the female vocation, namely, virginity and motherhood. The virgin birth of Christ, consequently, provides the perfection of a woman and the flawless model for all other women with proper and not radical feminist concerns.

### **Faith and Reason**

The controversies considered in this work are fundamentally based on a perceived tension between human reason and a mystery of faith. Thus, the question of the relation between faith and reason has undermined this entire treatise dealing with the different controversies surrounding Christ’s virgin birth. It will be appropriate, therefore, to explicate the proper interaction between faith and reason based on the commentary of the contemporary Magisterium. This commentary can be found clearly articulated in the encyclical letter of John Paul II entitled, *Fides et Ratio*.<sup>591</sup>

Philosophy is the study of truth based on the natural light of the human intellect, namely, reason. Theology is the study of the faith based on revelation. It is “faith seeking understanding” as classically defined. So the question is what the proper relationship between the search for truth based on unaided reason and the search for understanding based on divine revelation. John Paul II notes that reason supports faith, that is, philosophy supports theology and faith supports reason, that is, theology supports philosophy. These tenets of the late Pontiff will be treated here in that order.

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<sup>591</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*. Encyclical Letter. (September 14, 1998).

Reason supports faith since it prepares the way for faith. Saint Justin and the apologists used philosophy as a “preamble” to the faith.<sup>592</sup> Since philosophical knowledge even shows how the faith does not contradict reason and even highlight errors against the faith, Saint Clement of Alexandria referred to philosophy as a “stepping stone to the faith.”<sup>593</sup> Furthermore, unaided reason can determine that there is a God and even provide some of God’s primary attributes. Reason is actually the common ground between both believers and unbelievers.

Naturally, faith without reason becomes nothing more than superstition or myth. Faith without reason is left with only experiences and emotional input and thus loses its universality.<sup>594</sup> Thus, the common ground of reason presupposes faith if faith is not to lapse into superstition and a purely individual experience. As reason is universal, so is faith when it employs the aid of reason for further understanding its tenets.

Philosophy also provides a language for use in theology. The logical structures and concepts established in theology allow theology to be a true science.<sup>595</sup> An excellent example of this is found in the Real Presence. Whereas faith indicates that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, philosophy has provided the language of transubstantiation to better grasp this mystery. This has made the mystery of the Eucharist somewhat more understandable by using ideas from philosophy, such as substance, accident, and finally transubstantiation which indicates that the substance changes without the accidents changing.

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<sup>592</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 38.

<sup>593</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 38.

<sup>594</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 48.

<sup>595</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 65.

The language of philosophy also allows theology to present a more coherent picture of God both immanently and transcendentally. Theology is able to employ philosophical language and ideas in order to explain the immanent and economic Trinity, for example. Theology can furthermore explicate God's creative and salvific activity in the world and finally better expound upon the mystery of Jesus Christ who is true God and true man.<sup>596</sup> It can be stated that theology presupposes philosophy or that faith presupposes reason. Though certain knowledge cannot be known if God does not reveal it, the same knowledge once revealed would be meaningless without a knowing mind to receive it. That knowing mind relies on reason and philosophic thought which in turn enhances its understanding of revealed truth. Unaided reason could never posit certain mysteries, but revealed truth could not be grasped without the use of reason. Theology relies on philosophy to better grasp what God has revealed.

John Paul II also explains that theology support philosophy, that is, that faith supports reason. Human reason is prone to error and even inherently weak. Thus, without divine revelation, reason is eminently capable of straying and missing the goal.<sup>597</sup> Faith serves as a warning to reason, showing the roads of thought which will lead it astray<sup>598</sup> while illuminating the true roads.<sup>599</sup> Faith also encourages reason to consider avenues it would otherwise not have taken.<sup>600</sup> This is to say that faith offers truths that would not have considered by reason alone. For example, the Christian teachings on human dignity and freedom can be seen in modern philosophical thought.<sup>601</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 66.

<sup>597</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 48.

<sup>598</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 73.

<sup>599</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 79.

<sup>600</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 56.

<sup>601</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 76.

Faith also provides the philosopher with conviction which cannot be obtained by reason alone. Due to the truths of faith, the philosopher has a certain confidence that there are definite answers to the riddles of life.<sup>602</sup> Finally, both faith and a spiritual life can serve as a safeguard against intellectual pride for the philosopher. Intellectual pride often blinds one to the truth and faith can serve as a protection against this, allowing the philosopher to search for truth honestly and see what is rather than what he might wish to see. Faith when strengthened by love makes the philosopher humble and thus it easier to grasp the truth about man and mans' real needs.<sup>603</sup>

The harmony between faith and reason has been explicated clearly here by John Paul II. Faith uses reason to better understand its object and reason humbly considers paths which faith has made evident. Both reason and faith come from God and thus there can be no real contradiction between them. A mystery of faith can be supra-rational, but it can never be irrational nor contradict the rules of logic and reason. However, due to the advent of rationalism, faith and reason have become disconnected in the minds of many and this has led to the final result of nihilism in many cases.

Nihilism claims that there is no objective truth and there is no hope for meaning.<sup>604</sup> It ultimately only admits of utilitarian ends which are usually summarized as power and pleasure.<sup>605</sup> This inevitably reduces the value and dignity of the individual human person and men and women are seen as objects rather than persons. This nihilism can be seen in contemporary culture in all of its many facets and avenues. It is based on

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<sup>602</sup> Cf. John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 76.

<sup>603</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 76.

<sup>604</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 46.

<sup>605</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 47.

an exaggerated use of reason divorced from faith and has given rise to a struggle between a culture of death and a culture of life.

To combat this trend philosophy needs to reclaim its sapiential dimension. Philosophy is the love of wisdom and must rekindle its love and search for wisdom and the ultimate meaning of life. Philosophy must go beyond the merely empirical data in order to contemplate spiritual realities such as truth, beauty, and moral values.<sup>606</sup> Theology must use the language of modern man in order to proclaim the Gospel anew to a world in conflict between life and death.

John Paul II's commentary on faith and reason and their proper relationship and interdependence on one another underlies the controversies surrounding Christ's virgin birth as discussed throughout this work. The various controversies center around history, biology, medicine, and so forth, are controversies involving human reason based on philosophical presuppositions and conclusions regarding empirical observations. Thus, at the heart of the issue regarding Christ's virgin birth is often an improper understanding of the relationship between faith and reason where the two are erroneously viewed as diametrically opposed.

The Church uses philosophical language to declare and explicate the mystery of Christ's virginal conception and virginal birth. Reason is presupposed in this article of revelation and reason has aided much progress in the contemporary understanding of this profound mystery of faith. Furthermore, this mystery of faith has opened new avenues of thought for all the sciences, both philosophical and empirical, which would otherwise not have been considered had God not revealed this mystery to man. The relationship and

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<sup>606</sup> John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*, no. 83.

interdependency between faith and reason can thus be clearly seen in the mystery of Christ's virgin birth.

## **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the most important element of the teaching of the Magisterium Ecclesiae on the virgin birth of Christ is the Christological nature of the mystery. The contemporary teaching authority of the Church rightly insists on the centrality of Christ in relation to all the mysteries of faith. There are, naturally, other elements and factors to consider inasmuch as the faith in its entirety and in its parts is richly profound beyond anything naturally experienced by the physical senses. The virgin birth of Christ is based on the mystery of the Incarnation. Consequently, the virgin birth admits of Trinitarian, Pneumatological, Christological, Soteriological, Mariological, Ecclesiastical, and Ecumenical factors. They are all woven together in the mystery of Christ upon which the contemporary Magisterium has not ceased to expound.

In conclusion, the contemporary Magisterium has responded that the virgin birth is not a theologoumenon, but a historical event wrought by God's power. The virgin birth is neither a myth nor a borrowed mythology, but a real event accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. The virgin birth of Christ is not rendered impossible by the limited understandings of contemporary biology, but rather surpasses those understandings in a transcendent manner. Finally, the feminist reinterpretations offer fruit, directly or indirectly. It should be noted, however, that the radically liberal interpretations cannot be ultimately reconciled with the traditional and contemporary teachings of the Church in a strict sense while the orthodox teachings shed much new light on this ancient mystery.

## Conclusion

The theme of this dissertation has been the mystery of Christ's virgin birth. The aim has been to analyze the principal contemporary controversies surrounding this mystery and to demonstrate their strengths—and when applicable—their weaknesses, while presenting new and fresh perspectives—directly or indirectly—and insights into this mystery by considering an interdisciplinary array of data in relation to these controversies. The ultimate goal was, consequently, to consider all the various hermeneutical approaches and their implications in order both to explain any misguided notions and to present new and interesting perspectives on the mystery in question.

The problem was one of harmonizing all the various elements mentioned into a unified picture of the contemporary contribution to the mystery of Christ's virgin birth. Covered in this work were various positions which presupposed different theological viewpoints, philosophical presuppositions, cultural influences, and varying worldviews. The solution was found in analyzing all these controversies in relation to various theological disciplines, the voice of tradition, words of Scripture, and teaching of the Magisterium in order to provide a coherent synthesis. This was achieved throughout the work by constructing its various parts into a unified whole, as will be seen in the final recapitulation here.

For each controversy, the qualitative methodological approach was to answer the three questions provided in the Introduction. Thus, the positions themselves were offered, an interpretation of their meaning was given, and their hermeneutical implications regarding the main theme of the dissertation were analyzed. In this final phase of analysis, the given positions' strengths and possible weaknesses were discussed.



Exaggerated notions were highlighted, explaining where such notions were misguided, while the fresh insights were extracted. How the main theme was covered and how the ultimate goal of this dissertation was achieved should be evident from the following, final summary of the seven chapters.

The first chapter analyzed a controversy which began in Germany at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From this, a position, which is still prevalent today, emerged in which the apostolic origins of the Apostles' Creed were questioned along with the veracity of the creeds postulations. Harnack was the champion of this position, the arguments of which can still be found in present intellectual circles, albeit with some of the developments and modifications which were examined in said chapter. This position was shown to be misguided and not in full adherence with the historical evidence available. It was argued that the tenets of the Apostles' Creed do in fact date back to the age of the Apostles, even if the Apostles did not directly teach the Apostolic Symbol as it stands today.

The article, "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary," has undergone some alterations over the ages and this has led some to doubt its ancient origins. This was likewise shown to be an exaggeration. This article was shown indeed to be very ancient and stemming from the age of the Apostles. It has likewise been uttered from the earliest days of the Church—initially in a question-answer format for the receiving of Baptism—to the present day in which it is still used by the majority of Christian denominations for liturgical services and as a rule of faith. Thus, these controversies have inspired much research to be done in the dating of the Apostles' Creed and in establishing the ancient origins of this article in particular. It has been established,

therefore, that the theme of this dissertation is an ancient theme tracing back to the original *kerygma* of the Apostles.

The second chapter considered the argument that the virginal conception of Christ, as found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, is a *theologoumenon*, that is, a theological opinion and not a historical reality. As was explained, the historical-critical method is a valuable tool for elucidating biblical texts. However, sometimes exaggerated conclusions are drawn from its application. The *theologoumenon* theory was shown to be such an exaggerated conclusion. It was shown to be based on several factors, but mainly on an inherent disconnect made between the New Testament and tradition. The inclusion of Christ's virgin birth in the Apostolic Symbol demonstrated that it is a part of apostolic tradition whereas its inclusion in Matthew and Luke demonstrated that it is biblical. Thus, this mystery of faith is found in both sources of divine revelation. Its historicity is implied in both of these sources.

Another exaggeration here was the notion that the virgin birth of Christ is a myth related to other ancient pagan mythologies. This was likewise shown to be untenable for multiple reasons. Mainly, it is a misguided notion because it assumes that between various pagan myths and this Christian mystery there is an authentic parallel where in reality there is none. The ancient pagan myths involve a *hieros gamos* sometimes and other times recount unusual tales of gods becoming snakes to mate with women, for example, but never mention an actual virginal conception of any kind. Thus, it was shown that Christianity is singularly unique in claiming a true virginal conception without a *hieros gamos* or any mating whatsoever. Both the *theologoumenon* theory and

the mythology one have served to highlight the uniqueness of this mystery of faith while inadvertently suggesting its historical character.

Chapter three considered the controversy involving the empirical sciences (biology and medicine) and the virginal conception as well as the virginal birth. It was shown that the empirical sciences are wonderful endeavors, which have contributed greatly to progress in both understanding and quality of life. However, it was likewise shown that the empirical sciences are not the only sources of knowledge, since there are others such as Philosophy and Divine Revelation. It was noted that there is, therefore, a difference between the empirical sciences—objectively speaking—and “scientism,” which is a result of positivistic philosophy in which anything beyond the immediate grasp of the human mind is rejected.

It was argued that this misguided notion has led to a misunderstanding of the virginal conception and virginal birth, since these two aspects of the mystery are a matter of revealed faith and not the conclusions of reason unaided by faith. Nevertheless, this controversy has inadvertently contributed to a better understanding of both the virginal conception and virginal birth *qua* mysteries. The limitations of biology and medicine do not contradict the virgin birth, but only magnify the limits of human reason in the presence of such an exalted mystery.

The fourth chapter considered the difficulty of modern man to accept the virgin birth of Christ. It was highlighted how a predominant cultural milieu pervades the thinking of many. It is an idea which denies that there is a transcendent, supernatural realm and conceptually reduces authentic metaphysics to an esoteric fantasy. Inherent in this mindset is an intellectual denial of Divine Revelation and even its possibility. Thus,

it was argued that such a mindset rejects the very realities necessary for pondering a mystery of faith and can only result in a rational denial of the same. This, however, unintentionally underpins the necessity of a supernatural realm and highlights the profundity of Christ's virgin birth as a divinely revealed truth, the depths of which the human mind can only begin to ponder when acting in accord with the obedience of faith.

The fifth chapter considered the fruits of ecumenical dialogue and contemporary biblical exegesis conducted in an ecumenical manner. It was shown that Lutherans and Catholics agree on many aspects of Jesus' unique entrance into humanity as well as Mary's special role in the history of salvation. The virgin birth of Christ is agreed to be of apostolic origin while Luke's parallelism shows the greatness of Jesus and at least implies the greatness of Mary. The Dombes Group showed that Protestants and Catholics understand Mary's virginity in relation to her motherhood and that motherhood as one stemming from a particular, historic people, establishing a focus on Mary's true humanity. ARCIC also emphasized the apostolic origins of the virgin birth and views it as a divine initiative in human history.

Contemporary biblical exegesis conducted in an ecumenical manner was shown to trace the virgin birth to the Church's early *kerygma*. The accounts in Matthew and Luke are most likely the result of the early Church's reflection on the deeds and sayings of the initial events. Thus, based on biblical exegesis alone, it is not possible to determine the historicity of the virgin birth. This, of course, is not a denial of the historicity, but rather an admission that other factors must be considered since the contemporary scientific methods of exegesis are limited in their ability to determine certain items definitively.

Finally, Mary has served to bring the churches closer and stands as a great and hopeful bridge for even deeper, future unity.

Chapter six considered the direct and indirect contributions of feminist theology. It was important to note various factors in accounting for different movements within feminist theology as well as distinguish between orthodox and more radical hermeneutical approaches within such a broad field. The person of Mary is a powerful figure of identification and feminist theologians—in general—were seen to view their objective as freeing Mary from a one-sided image of her.

Regarding the virgin birth of Christ in particular, it was demonstrated that there are more orthodox and more liberal views within feminist theology. Some authors deny Mary's virginity entirely while others accept it and simply wish to relate it to various feminist concerns. Overall, feminist theology was shown to offer a great contribution to the virginity of Mary by providing a fuller model which represents her in all her femininity and as one who accomplished God's designs as a responsible woman.

Chapter seven ended this work where chapter one began it, namely, with the Church. As the ancient Church first received and proclaimed the virgin birth of Christ, the modern Church has likewise received and proclaimed the same mystery with a hermeneutic of continuity. The contemporary Church has, however, addressed the concerns of the modern age and contributed greatly to a deeper understanding of this mystery.

As was shown, the contemporary Magisterium has affirmed the historical, physical, and non-mythological character of the virgin birth. However, its greatest contribution has not been in responding to misguided notions, but rather in offering fresh

insight into the Christological character of Mary's virginity. Whereas past generations placed greater emphasis on Mary with regards to her virginity, the contemporary Magisterium has rediscovered and expounded upon the Christological centrality of this tremendous mystery.

The uniqueness and originality of this dissertation can be found in its interdisciplinary character coupled with the analysis of all the contemporary controversies which have been compiled into one work. Furthermore, doing this in the context of the Church, beginning with the ancient Church and ending with the contemporary Magisterium, has added to the uniqueness of this work. What has been presented throughout is a picture of the various controversies which have directly or indirectly contributed to a deeper understanding of Christ's virgin birth in light of different disciplines, Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium.

It has been the author's hope that this work will serve as a catalyst for future research. There is still much which will be able to be written regarding the various controversies discussed as knowledge progresses and undoubtedly new controversies will emerge. The world is constantly changing and evolving and so new concerns and emphases will continually arise, requiring further research and analysis. This being stated, it is hoped that more research will be conducted especially in the field of ecumenism. With constant dialogue and joint research in biblical and historical matters, a common understanding of these issues can grow ever deeper. In light of such efforts, Mary will continue to fulfill her role as a bridge and—with great hope—bring all the churches together into full communion.

Christ's virgin birth has been expounded upon for 2,000 years and has yet to be exhausted as a mystery for pondering, reflection, research, and articulation. As new issues arise, new responses will be required. Since, indeed, one stands in the presence of a great mystery here, it is impossible to exhaust an ever-deepening understanding of that mystery. It is without end that the finite human mind can ponder those mysteries revealed by the infinite divine mind. This dissertation has been an original work intended to make a small contribution to the vast body of theological knowledge regarding the theme in question, and a work which will hopefully serve as a reference for future endeavors in this field.

## Streszczenie

Praca zatytułowana *Natus ex Maria Virgine. Współczesne kontrowersje wokół dziewiczego porodu Chrystusa* została poświęcona teologicznym debatom, które pojawiły się na łamach współczesnych czasopism, które dotyczyły jednej z fundamentalnych prawd wiary. Dysertacja ma na celu rzetelne przedstawienie wspomnianej kontrowersji w oparciu o analizę dostępnych źródeł, lecz również uwzględnienie tych dyscyplin, w których jest ona obecna (egzegeza, teologia dogmatyczna, historia teologii, teologia feministyczna, ekumenizm). Wieloaspektowe ujęcie powoduje, że praca nabiera charakteru interdyscyplinarnego. Autor nie tylko prezentuje różne opinie na temat dziewiczego zrodzenia Jezusa, lecz również krytycznie ustosunkowuje się do wielu z nich, uznając je za błędne bądź przesadzone. Zagadnienie, które zostało podjęte w pracy jest tematem do tej pory nieopracowanym zarówno w literaturze polskiej jak i w angielskojęzycznej.

Ponieważ praca podejmuje refleksję nad jednym z fundamentalnych prawd naszej wiary, dysertacja przedstawia na początku process formowania się Credo oraz analizuje pierwsze wyznania wiary, aby następnie skoncentrować się na trzecim artykule zawartym w Credo. Po zarysowaniu historyczno-teologicznych okoliczności jego powstania i włączenia do wyznania wiary, Doktorant przechodzi do przedstawienia kontrowersji wokół „natus ex Maria Virgine” wywołanej przez Adolfa Harnacka, który stwierdził, że Credo ukształtowało się znacznie później niż wiara Apostołów, stąd jego wniosek, iż to, w co wierzyli Apostołowie było czymś innym od wiary późniejszych chrześcijan. Jako argument przemawiający za postawioną przez siebie hipotezą, miałby być nieobecność



kwestii dziewiczego poczęcia i porodzenia Chrystusa w pierwszych świadectwach, tzn. w listach św. Pawła Apostoła. Doktorant, przeciwstawiając się wspomnianej tezie, wykazał słabość argumentu *ex silentio*, krytykując argumentację Harnacka..

W rozdziale drugim praca porusza zagadnienie interpretacji opowiadań Ewangelii Dzieciństwa, opisujących okoliczności przyjścia Chrystusa na świat. Jak zauważył Autor dysertacji, niektórzy współcześni egzegeci, skoncentrowali swoją uwagę na narracji, interpretując ją jako *theologoumenon*, a co za tym idzie, podważając historyczny wymiar wydarzenia. Jak zauważa Doktorant, wspomniana interpretacja wyrasta z idei demitologizacji, zainicjowanej przez R. Bultmanna. Konsekwencją tej metody na gruncie teologii było zanegowanie wymiaru biologiczno-historycznego dziewiczego porodzenia Chrystusa. Przykładem jej zastosowania są kontrowersyjne wyniki badań Hansa Kunga i Edwarda Schillebeckxa, redukujących wydarzenie poczęcia do naturalnego aktu. Jeszcze bardziej radykalne stanowisko zajęli Tissa Balasuryia i Gerd Ludemann, dochodząc do stwierdzenia, że Jezus był synem innego innego ojca, z którego został poczęty przed zaślubinami Maryi z Józefem.

Obok wspomnianej, kontrowersyjnej opinii przedstawiono jeszcze inną, która uważa, że opowiadania zawarte w Dzieciństwie Jezusa stanowią mit zaczerpnięty z mitologii pogańskiej Egiptu, Persji lub Indii (E. Drewermann, G. Silvestri).

Doktorant, polemizuje z przedstawioną hipotezą, ukazując stanowisko katolickie, podkreślając, że o ile opowiadania o cudownych narodzinach bóstw, które zostały zaczerpnięte z pogańskich mitologii koncentrują się na samym akcie seksualnym, o tyle opowiadania ewangeliczne przedstawiają dziewicze poczęcie Chrystusa jako nowe stworzenie (J. Ratzinger).

Kolejny rozdział pracy ukazuje rozdzźwięk pomiędzy nauką (biologia i medycyna) a wiarą, głoszącą prawdę o nadzwyczajnych okolicznościach przyjścia na świat Chrystusa. Niektórzy z teologów, opierając się na prawach rządzących biologią wykluczyli możliwość poczęcia Jezusa bez udziału ludzkiego nasienia. Inni z kolei, prezentując opinię bardziej umiarkowaną, uważali, że chociaż wydarzenie to dokonało według praw biologii, to jednak jego ewangeliczny opis podkreśla prawdę o Bóstwie Chrystusa. Doktorant, polemizując z przytoczonymi opiniami zauważył, że Łukasz był lekarzem i z całą pewnością musiał dokonać nad nim refleksji w oparciu o swoją medyczną wiedzę. Stąd też, nie można go posądzać o wolę wykluczenia biologicznego wymiaru dziewiczego poczęcia i porodzenia Jezusa.

Jak zauważył Doktorant, empiryczno-pozytywistyczna koncepcja nauki, a co za tym idzie również i używanych przez nią metod, spowodowała zawężenie obszaru badań do tego co wymierne i materialne, redukując w ten sposób przedmiot badań oraz uniemożliwiając akceptację danych Bożego Objawienia oraz jego wiarygodności.

Kolejny rozdział pracy opisuje trudności współczesnego człowieka w przyjęciu tej prawdy wiary. Jak zauważa Doktorant, wiążą się one z mentalnością, którą można określić mianem zakłopotania i odrzucenia. Dysertacja przytacza szereg wątpliwości sformułowanych przeciw dziewiczemu poczęciu Chrystusa, które zostały sformułowane na łamach amerykańskich gazet oraz forach internetowych. Odnoszą się one zarówno do kwestii medycznych (np. DNA) jak i do hipotetycznych opinii o rzekomym powiązaniu Jezusa z sektą Eseneńczyków. Doktorant ukazuje bazpodstawność zarzutów, zauważając, iż kultura, która neguje możliwość otwarcia się człowieka na to, co nadprzyrodzone, neguje również dziewicze poczęcie Chrystusa.

Rozdział piąty ukazuje interesującą nas kwestię w kontekście dialogu ekumenicznego. Praca analizuje trzy podstawowe dokumenty poświęcone Matce Jezusa, będące wspólnym stanowiskiem grup teologów katolicko-luterańskich i katolicko-anglikańskich. Dokumenty te, stają się przesłanką do spoglądania z nadzieją na dalsze nowe uzgodnienia i wspólne interpretacje prawd maryjnych. Wspomniane porozumienia, oprócz proponowanych rozwiązań kwestii, które do tej pory były uważane za sporne, ukazują te elementy doktryny o Matce Bożej, które nadal dzielą chrześcijan.

Należy zauważyć, że w nastarszym uzgodnieniu katolicko-luterańskim (“The One Mediator, The Saints and Mary”) prawda o nadzwyczajnych okolicznościach przyjścia na świat Chrystusa Pana została przedstawiona w perspektywie historio-zbawczej. Nadprzyrodzony character tego wydarzenia nie tylko potwierdził Boską naturę Chrystusa, lecz również ukazał uprzywilejowaną rolę Służebnicy Pańskiej w zbawczej ekonomii. Dokument, jak zauważa Doktorant, nie podejmuje kwestii barci Pańskich czy też dziewictwa Maryi po narodzeniu Jezusa.

Dokument ekumenicznej grupy z Dombes: “Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints” zwraca uwagę na aktywność Ducha Świętego podczas poczęcia oraz akcentuje żydowskie pochodzenie Matki Jezusa. Wymienia prawdy o Matce Bożej, które są wspólne dla luteranów i katolików, jak również wymienia także te, które do tej pory dzielą wyznawców Chrystusa.

Trzeci z dokumentów (“Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ”), oierając się na ewangelii św. Łukasza, zestawia obok siebie poczęcia Jana Chrzciciela oraz Jezusa. Zwraca uwagę, że o ile poczęcie Jana dokonało się w ekonomii Starego Przymierza, o tyle poczęcie Jezusa zainauguowało nowy porządek zbawczy. Wspólne stanowisko anglikanów i katolików

zwraca uwagę, że poczęcie za sprawą Ducha Świętego akcentuje inicjatywę Boga w historii ludzkości. Zauważa, że zarówno Mateusz jak i Łukasz, redagując ewangelie, przejęli wcześniejszą tradycję dotyczącą dziewiczego poczęcia Chrystusa. Zostało ono zinterpretowane jako nowe stworzenie.

Kolejnym owocem ekumenicznej współpracy na polu egzegezy biblijnej jest książka „Mary in the New Testament”. W niniejszej pozycji protestancy i katolicy bibliści zajęli krytyczne stanowisko wobec tekstów dotyczących dziewiczego poczęcia Chrystusa. Stwierdzili, że Paweł Apostoł, redagując list do Galatów (Gal 4,4), nie wiedział o dziewiczym poczęciu Chrystusa, natomiast odniesienie do Iz 7,14 w Ewangelii według sw. Mateusza nie może być uznane za przekonujący argument. Zdaniem autorów książki, Izajasz w powyższym tekście odniósł się do czasów jemu współczesnych, a nie do wydarzenia które dokonało się blisko 700 lat później. Pomimo krytycznego stanowiska protestancy i katolicy egzegeci podkreślili, że ich interpretacja nie ma zamiaru negować wymiaru historycznego dziewiczego poczęcia.

Rozdział szósty ukazuje interesujący nas artykuł wiary w interpretacji teologii feministycznej. Dysertacja, oprócz charakterystyki głównych nurtów tej teologii, przedstawia krytykę modelu Maryi jako pokornej i posłusznej służebnicy. Według Cettiny Militello Maryja jest niewiastą, która wyzwala kobietę z modelu patriarchalnego społeczeństwa, aby decydować o własnym życiu i rozwijać otrzymane od Boga talenty. Maryja, według tej teologii, jawi się jako kobieta silna, niezależna, która współpracuje z planem Boga.

W specyficznej perspektywie interpretacyjnej tej teologii, niektóre jej nurty odrzucają dziewicze porodenie Chrystusa, uważając je za androcentryczny mit chrześcijański,

podtrzymywany przez patriarchalny system społeczny. Jednocześnie reprezentantki tego typu teologii zgodnie twierdzą, że Błogosławiona Dziewica doświadczyła tego, co jest wspólne kobietom-macierzyństwa. W swoich badaniach dostrzegły niebezpieczeństwo redukcji refleksji nad Służebnicą Pańską do kategorii płciowości, cielesności i materii. Zwróciły uwagę, że Maryja, uczestnicząc w Bożym planie, zrealizowała samą siebie, ukazując dynamizm i kreatywność.

Ostatni rozdział pracy przedstawia odpowiedź Nauczycielskiego Urzędu Kościoła na różne stanowiska i opinie dotyczące dziewiczego przyjścia na świat Chrystusa. Dysertacja nie tylko zestawia najważniejsze współczesne wypowiedzi Kościoła na temat tej kwestii (Sobór Watykański II, wypowiedzi Pawła VI, Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego, pisma Jana Pawła II), dostrzegając stopniowy rozwój teologicznej refleksji (aspekty trynitarny, pneumatologiczny, eklezjologiczny), lecz również wskazuje na te spośród wypowiedzi, które są reakcją *Magisterium Ecclesiae* na niepokojące opinie, hipotezy i twierdzenia. Podkreślone zostało niezwykle ważne przemówienie Jana Pawła II na zakończenie kongresu mariologicznego w Capua, w którym papież przypomniał, że dziewicze poczęcie i poród Chrystusa nie jest przede wszystkim kwestią mariologiczną lecz chrystologiczną. W tej właśnie perspektywie winno być rozważane. Teolog w swojej refleksji powinien zaakceptować działanie Boga w historii. Zarówno dziewicze poród jak i Zmartwychwstanie, są manifestacją, epifanią Bóstwa. Zwrócili na to uwagę Ojcowie Kościoła.

Doktorant w swojej pracy dochodzi do wniosku, że kontrowersyjne wyniki badań nad nadprzyrodzonym charakterem nardzin Chrystusa, są wynikiem nieadekwatnych metod zastosowanych do refleksji teologicznej. Metody empiryczne, zastosowane do

badania wydarzenia Wcielenia, spowodowały zredukowanie tajemnicy dziewiczego poczęcia do zwykłego aktu małżeńskiego, a tajemnicy Chrystusa do Jego człowieczeństwa. Odczytane w świetle racjonalistyczno-historycznym wydarzenia Wcielenia, spowodowało jego zawężenie do wymiaru naturalnego.

Wśród przedstawionych kontrowersyjnych opinii można dostrzec pewną nieufność, niewiarę w działanie Boga w historii człowieka. Niewiara w możliwość dokonywania przez Boga cudownych interwencji w życiu człowieka, uniemożliwiło autentyczną refleksję i osiągnięcie prawdziwych wniosków. Analiza ujawniła, że niektóre błędne twierdzenia nie uwzględniają stałej obecności Ducha Świętego, który naucza Kościół poprzez wieki, gwarantując ciągłość i stałość wiary wspólnoty Apostolskiej oraz kolejnych pokoleń chrześcijan. Praca, powołując się na document Papieskiej Komisji Biblijnej ukazuje niewystarczalność metody historyczno-krytycznej w egzegezie. Przeciwwstawia się tym samym próbom reinterpretacji dziewiczego porodzenia Chrystusa jako theologoumenonu, mitu i symbolu.

W konkluzji zwrócono uwagę na najważniejszą przyczynę współczesnej kontrowersji wokół dziewiczego poczęcia i porodzenia Chrystusa, która tkwi w samym człowieku. Jest nią rozdarcie pomiędzy wiarą a rozumem. Niniejsza dysertacja usiłuje zniwelować ową rozbieżność.

Wielką wartością niniejszej dysertacji jest przedstawienie zagadnienia w perspektywie wielu dyscyplin. Oprócz mariologii i chrystologii, uwzględniono pneumatologię, soteriologię, egzegezę biblijną, dialog ekumeniczny czy teologię feministyczną. Wielostronność ujęcia tematu sprawia, że praca posiada charakter interdyscyplinarny.

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