

ST. THOMAS' TEACHING ON THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

TERENCE QUINN, O.P.



IT IS USUALLY about the time of his second year in High School that the student's belief in Papal Infallibility meets head on with the celebrated Galileo episode. Not many years later, a newly acquired appreciation of St. Thomas' eminent position in Theology is put to a similar test with the question "How about his denial of the Immaculate Conception?" Once a clear idea of the true meaning of Papal Infallibility is had and Galileo's difficulty with the Inquisitors is put into its proper historical framework, the first problem is easily settled. The second one, however, is not dispelled so readily. Yet a consideration of these same points, the exact meaning of the doctrine and its historical background, will help to remove many of the false notions about the Angelic Doctor's teachings on the Immaculate Conception.

THE DOCTRINE

Immaculate Conception means a conception in which the offspring is exempt from original sin. A child first exists at the moment the soul, created by God, enters the body, the product of parental generation. Except for Mary, who was miraculously preserved, every human is conceived with the stain of original sin on his soul. This is a consequence of the first sin of Adam.

Though original sin is transmitted from Adam to his descendants, this sin can only be in a human person, that is, in one made up of body and soul. It is not properly in the seed or flesh. These as such do not incur sin. It is only when this corporeal receptacle has a soul breathed into it that a human being, or *person*, begins to live. And only a person can be guilty of sin. Yet, we truly say the sin comes from Adam. Throughout the ages his nature has been transmitted; the seed always coming from a body suffering the consequences of sin. Such a seed makes necessary the infusion of a soul which will share this corruption of the flesh. This soul, therefore, has the blemish of original sin, insofar as at the moment life begins, the body makes up with the soul a person unworthy of God's grace.

He can become worthy again only through Christ's merits, for

Sacred Scripture tells us Christ "is the Saviour of all men."¹ Since Our Blessed Mother also is included here, no consideration of her Immaculate Conception can be so understood as to place her beyond the need for a redemption by the merits of her Son. And this poses the very problem which faced the theologians of St. Thomas' thirteenth century.

If someone were free from all sin from the very first moment of her existence, it would seem she would have no need for a redeemer, since sin alone deprives the soul of sanctifying grace. Yet, these theologians also knew that all men were subject to the universal need for redemption. This doctrine they were to defend, and rightly so, at all cost. But in this defense many of them either denied or seemed to deny, the possibility of an Immaculate Conception.

That such a Conception is not only possible, but actually and really did take place in the person of Mary, we know. Unlike the schoolmen of the Middle Ages we enjoy the knowledge that Mary's Conception free from the stain of original sin is a revealed truth. It was solemnly defined by Pope Pius IX in the bull "*Ineffabilis Deus*" of Dec. 8, 1854. In it, we see how the doctrine is in harmony with the fact that Christ is the Saviour of all men.

The definition reads: "We define that God has revealed the doctrine holding that, from the first instant of her conception, the most Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved immune from all stain of original sin by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race."²

To see the full import of this brief but most precise statement, we must note five important points: 1st—"God has revealed." That is, it is contained at least implicitly in Scripture or Tradition. The doctrine is not expressly enunciated in the Bible, but there is an abundance of evidence from Tradition.

2nd—"From the first instant of her conception." This refers to the very instant her soul was created and united to her body, so that we can not say her soul was ever without grace. No pronouncement was made, however, on the time of the soul's entering the body. This was left undecided.

3rd—"The Blessed Virgin Mary" is named the recipient of this privilege. It has nothing to do with her progenitors, nor with the seed or flesh which, when united to the soul, would constitute the *person*. It is the person of Mary who is preserved.

¹ I Tim. 4, 10.

² Denziger, *Ench. Symb.* n. 1641.

4th—She was “preserved immune from all stain of original sin.” As has been said, every human needs to be redeemed by Christ. Therefore an immaculate conception does not free the one so honored from the *debt* of contracting sin, but only from the fulfillment of this debt. That is, she ought to contract the sin, but actually she does not. Thus the two apparently conflicting doctrines are reconciled. Mary was not exempt from the debt of contracting original sin, since she descended from Adam by natural generation, but she was preserved from all stain of original sin.

5th—This preservation took place “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ.” Other men, born in the state of original sin, are also redeemed by the merits of Christ; but she is redeemed before any sin stains her soul. With Mary it is a *preservative* redemption. As the collect for the Mass of Dec. 8 says, “through the death of Thy Son, forseen by Thee, Thou didst preserve His mother from all sin.”

Like all men, she had need of a redemption, though the mode was a unique privilege. Such a redemption does not lessen the august honor which the Immaculate Conception conferred upon Mary; for, “even in human affairs we look on one as more a savior if he wards off a blow, than if he merely heals the wound it inflicts.”³

THE HISTORY

Having discussed the meaning of the doctrine, the second consideration, its historical background, must be considered so that we might fully appreciate St. Thomas' teaching.

The historical development of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is, in itself, an ideal model for the study of all dogmatic development. It must be insisted, however, that in the transmission of the teachings of the faith, any notion of an evolution of dogmas, implying a change from one sense to another alien to that which the Church held from the start is heretical.⁴ However, the dogmas do develope inasmuch as that which was had in the deposit of faith only implicitly, becomes manifest and explicit in the course of time.

Such a development has three stages. The first is characterized by an implicit belief in a truth which does not yet enjoy distinct and autonomous recognition. Discussion and controversy are the burden of the second period. Here scholars inquire into the pro and con arguments. The final stage is the explicit definition and acceptance by the universal Church.

³ R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Mother of the Savior*, transl. by B. Kelly, Dublin, 1948, p. 53.

⁴ *Oath against Modernism*, “Fourthly . . .”

In the development of the Immaculate Conception, the separation of the first and second periods can be placed at an exact date, 1140, when St. Bernard sent a letter to the Canons of Lyons and thereby opened the period of controversy. Out of this there came a gradual clarification which ultimately led to the dogmatic definition in 1854. St. Thomas, it should be noted, lived during the second period. Theologians could then take either side in an issue which was still open to debate. In doing so, they by no means gave rise to scandal, for the doctrine was not yet defined.

Since it is not certain that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is contained, even implicitly, in Sacred Scripture, it is in divine tradition that we must seek the unquestionable basis for the implicit acceptance of the doctrine in its early stage of development. It was a common belief of both the East and the West—yet, the Eastern Churches give richer and more sublime evidence.⁵ It speaks well for its popularity that even such a bizarre witness as Mohammed mentions it in the Koran.⁶

Gradually a feast of the Immaculate Conception began to be celebrated in various churches. When the Canons of Lyons supported this innovation, St. Bernard wrote his letter. Though the celebration of the feast today is entirely orthodox, St. Bernard had ample justification for his censure. The purpose for the feast of his day was not precisely determined. Some held that it was the seed in her mother's womb, and before the infusion of the soul, which was so honored. Others thought the carnal act of Mary's parents was the object of the feast. Since it is only the *person* of Mary which enjoys the privilege of the Immaculate Conception, such devotions should have been opposed.

However, his letter went on to say, "Hence, if Mary could not be sanctified before her conception . . . it follows that she was sanctified in the womb after conception, which, since she was cleansed from sin, made her nativity holy, not her conception."⁷ This is the first appearance of a line of reasoning, followed throughout the Middle Ages, which obscured the issue greatly. If Mary could not have been sanctified before her soul entered her body, it must have been sanctified, thought St. Bernard, after its entrance. He ignores the only possibility which could explain the doctrine, namely, that the sancti-

⁵ In particular: St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, Tertullian, St. Ephrem and St. John of Damascus. Cf. Pohle-Preuss, *Mariology*, St. Louis, 1914, pp. 47-55.

⁶ Cf. M. J. Scheeben, *Mariology*, Vol. II, transl. by T. Geukers, St. Louis, 1948, p. 75.

⁷ Ep. ad Canonicos Lugd., n. 5 sqq., ML, CLXXXII, 333.

fication of Mary's soul was *in the instant* of its creation and union with the body.

When it is said, however, that her soul was sanctified in the very instant of its creation, the problem arises of how it can then be concluded that she incurred the debt of original sin. Remembering that Mary never actually incurred sin, it has been shown that she necessarily must have incurred the debt. It would seem that the instantaneous sanctification of her soul makes this impossible. Before its creation the person of Mary did not exist, so there was no debt; once it was created, it was sanctified in that very instant, so again there apparently is no debt. This difficulty is resolved through still another distinction.

Although animation (the creation of her soul and its union with the body) and sanctification are in the same instant *in the order of time*, yet, the animation precedes the sanctification *in the order of nature*.

A common example can be used to clarify the distinction between these two orders. If someone stands in a dark room on a bright day, at the same moment that he raises the window shade the room becomes filled with light. *In the order of time* the raising of the shade and the lighting of the room happen together. The lighting of the room, however, follows the raising of the shade *in the order of nature*, for it depends upon the latter. Likewise, Mary's sanctification follows her animation in the order of nature, since only a person and, therefore, only something with animation can be sanctified. Nevertheless, the two are in the one instant of time.

This consideration of the instant of animation, and the previously discussed distinction between debt and guilt, with the concomitant notion of a preservative redemption were arrived at only after years of speculation and discussion. It must be admitted that all the great theologians between the time of St. Bernard and St. Thomas at least did not openly concede the privilege of the Immaculate Conception to Mary, since they did not consider these very points. Shortly after St. Thomas' time, the clouds of obscurity began to disperse. But to determine just what Aquinas' own thoughts were is very difficult, and the opinions have been, and still are, widely divergent.

Some say outright that he opposed what in his day was not a defined dogma, but add that in the principles he laid down he virtually admitted it. A few claim he expressly defended the doctrine. Between these two extreme opinions there are those who say he was undecided; and others who merely maintain it is impossible to prove that he opposed the doctrine. A final thesis contends

that he changed his position twice in the course of his writings.⁸

At this point we can safely say that the student who at the start of our investigation was asked, "How about his denial of the Immaculate Conception?" has a handsome piece of work before him if he wants to give an adequate answer!

However, two of the above-mentioned opinions have been set forth strongly in recent times and, though opposed, do shed much light on the difficulty.

One is that of the late Fr. Norbert Del Prado, O.P. In a lengthy and profound work he stoutly maintains St. Thomas defended the doctrine in his very words and in the principles he laid down.⁹ Fr. Peter Lumbreras, O.P., followed this opinion in a brief pamphlet of a much lighter treatment.¹⁰ The latter shows there are nine possible ways the term "Immaculate Conception" may be employed. St. Thomas denies eight of these, all of which are out of harmony with the subsequent definition of Pope Pius IX. The only one he does not deny is the only one possible to reconcile with the definition.

In their opinion St. Thomas taught that a personal sanctification by the merits of Christ is required; that Mary should have all the purity possible to be granted by God; and that a priority of nature within a single instant of time is sufficient to safeguard the doctrine.

They refrain from giving the noted Franciscan, Scotus, the praise he customarily receives for his espousal of the Immaculate Conception. Scotus did first popularize the important notion of a preservative redemption, but these two Dominicans disparage this since his conclusion to the appropriateness of the Immaculate Conception is based upon faulty principles. That this is not a unanimous persuasion among Dominicans we learn from another's observation that, "Thomists should consider it a point of honor to admit that their adversary was right in this matter."¹¹

In those passages where it would seem St. Thomas does expressly oppose the doctrine, they maintain that his statements

⁸ First opinion: Scheeben; second: Valesquez and Palmieri; third: Malou and Tepe; fourth: Carnoldi and Hurtur. Cf. *Pohle-Preuss*, *op. cit.*, p. 67. The fifth opinion: Garrigou-Lagrange and Voste. Cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-71.

⁹ *Divus Thomas et Bulla Dogmatica "Ineffabilis Deus,"* Fribourg, 1919.

¹⁰ *St. Thomas and the Immaculate Conception*, Notre Dame, 1923.

¹¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

such as "she incurred original sin" and "incurred the infection" mean only that she "incurred the debt."

Such a brief presentation of their position makes it sound arbitrary and high-handed, which is untrue. Del Prado's thesis, in particular, is logical and well-documented. The points upon which he founds his position are acknowledged by another eminent theologian, Fr. Hugon; though he is content to say "it has not been demonstrated . . . that the Angelic Doctor erred expressly,"¹² and doesn't go so far as to indicate that he actually upheld the doctrine as defined.

The other prominent opinion has Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., as its leading spokesman.¹³ He maintains that St. Thomas originally supported the privilege out of admiration for the perfect holiness of Mary. Later, seeing the difficulties better, he hesitated and appears to deny it. Theologians of his time who upheld the doctrine said she was immaculate, independent of Christ's merits. Thus Aquinas' temporary apparent denial flowed from his insistence that all creatures, including the Blessed Virgin, had to be redeemed through Christ. In his last years, however, he returned to his original opinion and wrote, "She incurred neither original nor mortal nor venial sin."¹⁴

Both of these opinions, as indeed do all on this subject, have difficulties which must be explained before they can demand assent. Yet, even those least prone to accept such theories must admit that if, according to their understanding of St. Thomas, he did deny this privilege to Mary, it was not because he overlooked her dignity and holiness; but simply because he deemed it derogatory to the universal mediatorship of Christ that any creature should not be redeemed by Him. All must agree also, that "he laid down the principles which, after they had been drawn together, and worked out through a longer course of thought, enabled other minds to furnish the solution of this difficulty from his own premises."¹⁵

Since St. Thomas himself said, "We ought to abide by the authority of the Church, more than that . . . of any doctor," whatever was the true mind of the Angelic Doctor is now merely an historical problem; for the Church has declared in infallible language that Mary was indeed Immaculate.

¹² De Verbo Incarnato, Paris, 1920, p. 444.

¹³ *op. cit.*, pp. 66-71.

¹⁴ *Expositio super salutatione angelica*, c. 1.

¹⁵ Archbishop Ullathorne, *The Immaculate Conception*, London, 1905, p. 137.