

SACRED ART AND THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

BRUNO MONDOR, O.P.



DAITH TEACHES US that all men are conceived in sin. From the very first instant of our existence our souls were stained with the original sin transmitted down through the ages to all of the posterity of Adam. Such was our impure and soiled conception, but not so that of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As a daughter of Adam, she should have been subjected to this common plight of mankind, if it had not pleased Almighty God to preserve her. Mary, the Virgin of Nazareth, was conceived without sin.

It took centuries for this Christian doctrine to blossom forth in all its mysterious beauty; in God's ineffable good time the truth was solemnly sanctioned and "the doctrine, which holds that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary at the first moment of her conception was, by singular grace and privilege of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the Human race, preserved from all stains of original sin,"¹ became a dogma of the Catholic Faith. The great theological dispute centering around this pious belief from the time of St. Bernard, with the greatest theologians lining up on both sides of the question, was finally settled.² During all this time, "the radiant crown of glory, with which the most pure brow of the Virgin Mother was encircled by God,"³ was impassioning the souls of the faithful. The popularity of this wonderful doctrine could not but find its expression in the arts. Witness the notable contributions of the poets and artists to this mystery of the Faith! The Immaculate Virgin is the object of a real tribute of veneration from the XIII century down to our times.

¹ Dogmatic bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, by Pope Pius IX, Dec. 8, 1854.

² For the theological controversy over the Immaculate Conception see, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. VII, the article on the Immaculate Conception.—St. Peter Damian, Peter the Lombard, Alexander of Hales, St. Bonaventure, St. Albert the Great, O.P., are quoted as opposing it. St. Thomas is in favor of it in his treatise on the *Sentences* (I Sent. c. 44, q. 1 ad 3), but he concludes against it in his *Summa Theologica*. Duns Scotus, Petrus Aureolus, Franciscus de Mayronis were the most fervent champions of the doctrine. Cf. also "St. Thomas' Teaching on the Immaculate Conception," by Terence Quinn, O.P., in *Dominicana*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 4, Dec., 1953.

³ Encyclical Letter, *Fulgens Corona*, by Pope Pius XII, issued Sept. 8, 1953.

The Fine Arts made the Immaculate Conception its very own, but in the portrayal of the idea there were many notable differences. The artistic development of the theme was made in stages, as the theology of the doctrine was more clearly unravelled. Christian art of former days was most faithful in rendering all of the nuances of Christian thought. For this reason, art historians have been able to group the representations of this mystery into four categories: 1) The Immaculate Conception *according to Greek legend*; 2) The Immaculate Conception *symbolically represented*; 3) *The dogmatico-historical portrayal* of the Immaculate Conception; 4) *The personal depiction* of the Immaculate Conception. With the art historian as our guide, let us see how this most beautiful doctrine of the stainless conception of Mary has been depicted for us by the great artists down to our day.

1. ACCORDING TO GREEK LEGEND

The Greek legend of *The Book of the Nativity of Mary* was quite widespread in the XIII century. It is found in the works composed in favor of this popular pious belief. Certain breviaries of this period also included it in the lessons. But the legend was really popularized by the public performances of it in the Mystery Plays. The dramatic ensemble included several scenes: the apparition of an angel to St. Joachim on a mountain, and also to St. Ann in her garden; the meeting and embracing of the two spouses in Jerusalem near the Nicanor Gate of the Temple. The apparition of the angel to St. Joachim announced the conception by St. Ann; the second apparition to St. Ann herself, foretold the approaching birth of Mary. The other scene dramatized the joy and congratulation of the spouses at their first meeting since the revelation by the angel.

Some saw in these scenes the representation of a conception completed outside the ordinary laws of nature, and consequently immaculate. Undoubtedly some artists, too, shared this popular misinterpretation, representing the conception of Mary as having taken place at the bronze Gate of Nicanor. No generalizations, however, should be made in thus interpreting all paintings of this scene. Some artists were merely portraying an episode of the Greek legend.

2. SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS

Paintings in this group are so designated because the glorious privilege of Mary is signified or at least insinuated by the objects or symbolic personages surrounding or accompanying Mary. Fifteenth Century manuscripts began to illustrate in this manner. A half-length

figure of the Virgin, radiant as the sun, is shown arising from a crescent moon. This motif became very popular on engravings. One of these engravings is surrounded by the rosary and bears the Latin caption: *Conceived without sin*. This has been taken as conclusive evidence that the Crescent Virgin symbolically represents the Immaculate Conception. The obvious scriptural foundation for this motif is the verse from the Canticle of Canticles 6, 9: *Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun. . . ?* These words have been applied by artists, as well as liturgists, to the conception of Mary.

Toward the end of the same century, in 1492, the Venetian painter Carlo Grivelli offered the world a richer symbolic concept. His Virgin is standing, her hands are joined, and her attitude ecstatic. A jar of roses and carnations, to the left, is balanced by a lily in a slender glass on the right. The tableau is crowned with a bust of God the Father, hands outstretched over the form of a dove, representing the Holy Spirit. The design is made clear by two hovering angels who hold a crown above the head of Mary and a scroll with the inscription: *Conceived from the beginning in the Divine Mind, thus was I made.*⁴ This painting is at the National Gallery in London.

The beginning of the following century brought forth another illustration showing the figure of a very young girl, practically a child, with long flowing hair covering her shoulders. Her hands are joined in adoration in the gesture immortalized by Michelangelo in his 'creation of Eve.' This young virgin seems to be suspended between heaven and earth, like an incipient thought on the threshold of reality. She is yet only an idea in the Divine Intelligence. God is shown over her, and at the sight of such purity, He is uttering the words of the Canticle 4, 7: *Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is not a spot in thee*. The beauty and purity of this chosen spouse of God is further brought out by the artist's selection of the most charming Biblical metaphors. The virgin is in an enclosed garden, around her are arranged the tower of David, a fountain, a lily of the valley, a star, a rose, a spotless mirror. In all, the symbols number fifteen, and each is underlined by its corresponding scriptural text.

Juan Macip, commonly known as Juan de Juanès (c. 1568) substantially reproduced this symbolism in one of his paintings which is preserved in the Jesuit church of Valencia, in Spain. The work, moreover, has this noteworthy peculiarity about it. God the Father does

⁴ All the inscriptions of paintings quoted in this article appear in Latin unless we otherwise noted.

not appear alone above the Virgin. Rather, the three Divine Persons are shown. A crown is being placed upon the head of the Virgin by the Father and the Son, while the Holy Spirit is hovering above in the form of the dove. In the space between, a streamer is unfurling the same inscription: *Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te.* (Canticle 4, 7.)

A more surprising symbolical representation is seen in a book of canonical hours in use at Angers, France, between 1518 and 1530. St. Ann is shown standing and surrounded by all the Biblical symbols which are ordinarily used in connection with her daughter: the rose, the garden, the fountain, the mirror, the star. . . . But St. Ann is spreading her mantle open, thus revealing in her open and radiant bosom the Virgin and Christ Child. From the heights of heaven, God the Father is contemplating, not His deed, but His idea; for this mysterious figure has not yet received being. Beneath the feet of St. Ann we see the awesome words of Sacred Scripture: *The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived* . . . (Prov. 8, 24.)

This unusual composition is readily understood if one bears in mind the extraordinary impetus given the devotion to St. Ann in certain countries, especially in Germany, where John Trithemius' doctrine was very popular.⁵ Since the spouse of Joachim was the mother of Mary, who was the mother of God, Trithemius believed that Ann should be included in the same decree of predestination. He upheld the purity of the conception of Mary, taken integrally, that is, the purity of the active as well as the passive conception.⁶ The author of this strange work of art may have wished to recall and portray the Immaculate Conception such as Trithemius and others understood it, with the idea of purity extending to both the active and passive conceptions, not only at the moment of animation or of the

⁵ John Trithemius, a famous scholar and Benedictine abbot, b. at Tritthenhem, on the Moselle, 1 Feb. 1462, d. at Würzburg, Germany, 13 Dec. 1516.

⁶ Theologians distinguish between the *active* and *passive conception*. Regarding the immunity from original sin of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the term *conception* does not mean the *active* or *generative* conception by her parents. Mary's body was formed in the womb of her mother, like anyone else, the father having had the usual share in its formation. The Immaculate Conception does not concern the immaculateness of the generative activity of her parents. Passive conception means animation, the infusion of the rational soul. The person is truly conceived when the soul is created and infused into the body. Mary's miraculous preservation from the stain of original sin concerns the first moment of her animation, when sanctifying grace was given to her before sin could have taken effect in her soul.—Cf. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. VII, The Immaculate Conception.

union of the soul and the body, but from the very beginning of generation.

Once again we come into contact with the influence of a legend upon the art of the Immaculate Conception. This is the story concerning the legendary animal with one horn, known as the unicorn. This animal was reputed to have a great love for purity. This love irresistably drew the fabulous creature to the side of young virgins, whenever he noticed one. A rare species, the wily unicorn could be caught only with much difficulty. His presence in a neighborhood was the signal for all true sportsmen to devise and use the one stratagem which could take him. They forthwith placed a young virgin in the vicinity of the unicorn's lair. When the unicorn recognized his love he would run immediately to her side. The hunters would then make their kill. From the time of Gregory the Great, Christian symbolism utilized this popular legend to represent the Incarnation of the Word of God in the womb of the Virgin Mary. . . . The XV century developed the imagery and reproduced an elaborate scene. The angel Gabriel appears as the hunter. The Virgin is seated in the middle of an enclosure, the enclosed garden of the Canticle. She is surrounded with the traditional symbols already mentioned above. The Eternal Father is pronouncing His beautiful refrain of the same Canticle: *Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is not a spot in thee.* (Cant. 4, 7.) Gabriel is sounding his horn, and his fanfare repeats the end of his salutation to Mary: *Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.* (Luke 1, 28.) It was some time before art historians arrived at a proper interpretation of the chase of the unicorn, which allegorized more than the perpetual virginity of the Mother of the Incarnate Word, with a profound expression of the Immaculate Conception. The symbolic signification of the enclosed garden, the words of God the Father and those of the angel dissipate all doubts in this matter. This explains the popularity which the concept had at the end of the XV century and the first half of the XVI century, a period of ardent belief in the stainless conception of Mary.

3. THE DOGMATICO-HISTORICAL PORTRAYAL

As in the preceding category, the Virgin occupies the place of honor. She is generally pictured elevated above the ground. Her hands are usually joined and more often than not her eyes are raised toward heaven. Sainly personages, however, replace the symbols. Each saint is a witness to the favor of the Marian privilege. Each corroborates his testimony with a text inscribed on a banderole.

We see such a representation in a painting of the XVI century.

A product of the Florentine school of della Robbia, it displays three holy doctors around the Virgin: Augustine, Ambrose, and Anselm, and their testimonies. A painting of Signorelli, 1515, presents six Old Testament personages: David and Solomon, two Prophets, and Adam and Eve. They witness with the following texts of Sacred Scripture: *The rod of Jesse flourished* (cf. Isaias 11, 1.); *Behold a virgin shall conceive* (Isaias 7, 14.); *A star rose out of Jacob* (cf. Num. 24, 17.); *As the lily among thorns* (Cant. 2, 2.); *From the beginning, and before the world, was I created*, (Ecclus. 24, 14.). Jacopo Chimenti da Empoli, who died in 1640, developed this theme still further. Banner-bearing angels proclaim for him *That those whom the fault of Eve damned, the grace of Mary saved*. Various compositions of other known artists may be included in this category: Girolamo Marchesi da Cotignola, from Ferrara, 1513; Francesco Zaganelli Cotignola, of the same period; the latter decorates his work with the clear saying: *Thou art all fair, O Mary, and the original stain is not in thee*; Dosso Dossi (d. 1560), represents God the Father extending His scepter toward Mary from above. Dossi inscribes his work with a text from the book of Esther, the beautiful Old Testament type of the Blessed Virgin: *For this law is not made for thee, but for all others*. (Esther 15, 13.)

An interesting comparison is made between the triptych of Jean Bellegambe and the tableaux described above. This incomplete work of art dates from about 1521 and is preserved in the Museum of Amien. A grand oecumenical council of the most illustrious Doctors of the Church is in session in the two wings of the painting. Theology meditates upon the Virgin! Three preeminent western Fathers of the Church: St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and St. Jerome, are pronouncing sentence from their works. Each testifies to his belief in the Immaculate Conception. The nobly conceived work now spans the gap of time for us, and we behold the most solemn assembly of Christendom, the University of Paris. Her great doctors are also made to speak in defense of this doctrine: Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus are all presented as bowing before the mystery of the stainless Virgin. Pope Sixtus IV finally appears on the scene. He is seated on a marble throne, and above his head we read from his third constitution on the Immaculate Conception the words: *The Mother of God, that glorious Virgin, was always preserved from original sin*. The grand scope of this work recalls the fresco of the Eucharistic Dispute, by Raphael, but here the subject of *Dispute* is the Virgin Mary.

The value of these dogmatico-historical representations is not to

be found in the alleged authorities. These sometimes lack probative force, for example, the grouping of Peter Lombard and Bonaventure along with Duns Scotus as equally conceding the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (cf. note²). Their real value is derived from the fact that they reveal to us that the artists believed in this mystery of the Faith, or that they are expressing the credence of the milieu in which they lived, of which they felt the influence.

4. THE PERSONAL DEPICTION

Generally speaking, we are most familiar with this category of representations. These especially deserve the epithet of personal because they express the original purity of Mary free of symbols or the guarantee of witnesses. Painters of this type of picture are concerned more with the term of the Immaculate Conception, the very person of Mary, than with the act of being immaculately conceived. The vigorous faith of these sensitive artists emphasizes the traits which characterize, in an esthetically sensible manner, the radiant glory of Mary's exemption from sin. They present to us, first, the *woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars* (Apoc. 12, 1.). The medieval confraternity dedicated to the composition of poetry in honor of the Blessed Virgin—the *Palinods*—used this as its seal, but it placed the Virgin's feet upon a globe in the act of crushing the serpent (Gen. 3, 15.). By thus uniting the Old Testament with the Apocalypse, they manifestly presented Mary as the woman whose mission it would be to conquer Satan, who is completely impotent in her regard. Artists progressively began to adorn their canvases with the Virgin elevated above the ground, with hands joined or extended toward heaven. She is sometimes surrounded and borne up by angels. Most of the great painters of this category succeeded in capturing, in so far as this is possible with paint on a canvas, the brilliant innocence of Mary and her intimate union with God. We sense that this profound intimacy with the Divine is not accidental to her, but, so to speak, a necessary part of her moral being. Mary has been inseparately and eternally joined to the Trinity. Thus has the *Immaculada*, the *Purissima*, been given to us by Christian artists. Italy had her Dominic Brusasorci (d. 1567), Luigi Caracci (d. 1619) and especially Guido Reni (d. 1542). In Spain, Mary was honored by such masters as Ribera called the Spagnoletto (d. 1556), Juan de Roelas (d. 1625), and the Marian artist *par excellence*, Esteban Murillo (d. 1685). Murillo produced no less than 25 paintings of the Immaculate Conception, never once repeating himself completely. These canvases continue to do

Mary homage in such museums as the Prado, in Madrid, and the Louvre, in Paris, where these treasures are proudly preserved.

At the beginning of the Eighteenth Century, the Belgian artist, Antoine Coypel, composed a painting which is often reproduced. We see the Virgin trampling the head of the serpent whose immense coils are wrapped around the world. In vain is this terrible creature trying to bite the woman who is crushing him. Once again God the Father appears from out of a cloud. In a protective gesture He extends His hand over Mary. With hands joined and head modestly lowered, Mary seems to feel the divine influence of grace. Once again the woman promised in the Old Testament is represented as winning a complete victory over the Devil.

Christian artists have indeed been "enraptured by the splendor of (her) Heavenly beauty"⁷, and they have tried to use their talents for the edification of their fellow men in the service of Mary. By lifting up our hearts and souls to the contemplation of the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, they dispose us to a more loving understanding of all of the truths of our Faith, which are all intimately connected. But perhaps their greatest merit is found in the devotion and love which they have stimulated in the minds of men toward our Holy Queen, our Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope, the Mediatrix of mankind, our Portal of salvation.

⁷ Marian Year Prayer by Pope Pius XII.

REFERENCES:

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