

The Virgin Birth

By BRO. MARTIN SHEA, O. P.

NEW YORK is described as a city of hard worldly facts, with a keen eye for the things of this world and little care for the niceties of God. Yet above the rumblings of its blasé subways has risen within the past winter a type of conversation quite unconventional for our day and certainly so for such a place. Stocks, sports, styles and other tempting topics of the metropolitan life have been relegated to respectful silence while New York awaits a decision in the Virgin Birth controversy which has been so hotly agitated in its midst. It all came about because the Rev. Lee W. Heaton of Forth Worth delivered a sermon last Palm Sunday in which he said: "There are amongst us who believe that Jesus was in all things and in every way both God and man; the incarnation of God and the son of Joseph. This is my opinion. . . ."

One of the members of his audience took down the talk and reported it to the Rt. Rev. Harry T. Moore, the coadjutor of the Diocese of Dallas, who summoned the Rev. Heaton to Dallas. Most probably Bishop Moore was not satisfied with the interview, for he set in motion the machinery of the ecclesiastical court and is said to have asked the Church's Standing Committee to try the Rev. Heaton for heresy shortly after January the first.

Troubled by this disturbance some of the more prominent Episcopalian laymen in this country, among whom Senator George Wharton Pepper of Pennsylvania is said to be the moving spirit, made a formal plea to the Episcopal House of Bishops for a dogmatic decision on the Virgin Birth. The Bishops responded on the fourteenth of November with a pastoral letter which they ordered to be read in all the churches subject to their jurisdiction. The gist of the declaration is a confirmation of the Virgin Birth in all its strictness:

To explain away the statement "Conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of Virgin Mary," as if it referred to a birth in the ordinary way, of

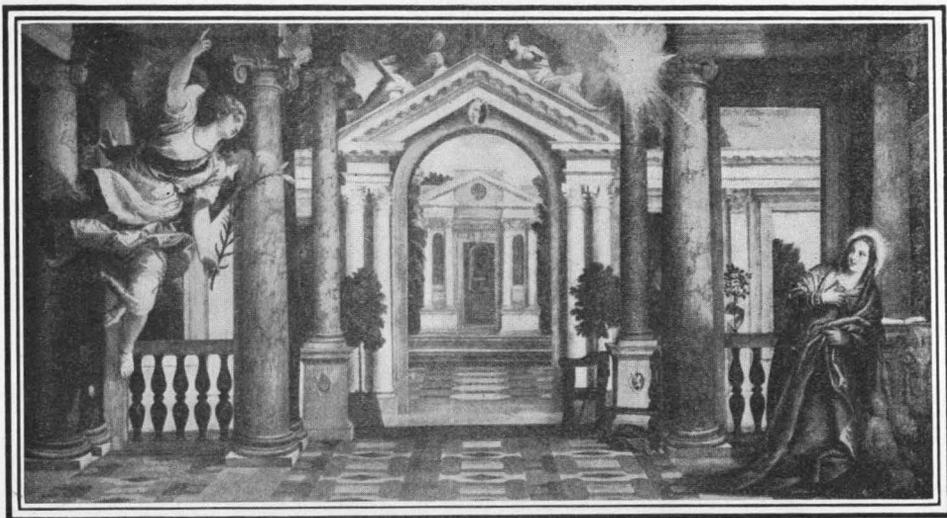
two human parents, under, perhaps, exceptionally holy conditions, is plainly an abuse of language. An ordinary birth could not have been so described, nor can the words of the Creed fairly be so understood.

This pastoral met fierce criticism and on Sunday, Dec. 16, a general insurrection broke out in the New York pulpits of the Episcopal churches. Rev. Dr. Leighton Parks, rector of St. Bartholomew's, appeared in his pulpit shorn of his priestly vestments and clad in the gown of a doctor of theology, and as a theologian he boldly challenged the belief in the Virgin Birth and the resurrection of the body. The Rev. Dr. Karl Reiland, rector of St. George's, seconded him with a dare to Bishop Manning to bring Dr. Parks to trial. The next day Bishop Manning asked Bishop Moore, who had taken the first action in the question, to drop the heresy trial against the Rev. Heaton. At present not only among the Episcopalians but among the Baptists, Presbyterians and Methodists as well, the Fundamentalists, who hold for the Virgin Birth, and the Modernists, who deny it, have taken the occasion of the controversy to belabor one another both with abuse and argument. The authorities are watching and waiting. The Fundamentalists claim that they are defending an ancient truth of Christianity; but Dr. Percy Stickney Grant says they are "reactionary" and Dr. Karl Reiland charges the Bishops with an "utter lack of intelligent appreciation of the great advance in modern knowledge which these latter years have brought us."

The Modernists seem to assume that the denial of the Virgin Birth is something very modern and up-to-date. But there are no new mistakes and vices among men. The world has to wait a long time to find some one to work a good work, but never must it tarry for the tool for its mischief or the mouthpiece for its folly. Long, long before the world enjoyed the advancing wisdom of Dr. Grant and Dr. Reiland it had found the wit to deny the Virgin Birth of Christ. Before the first century had passed away the Cerinthians and Ebionites had denied the Virgin Birth. Cerinthus said Jesus was born of the seed of Joseph and the Ebionites were divided amongst believers and unbelievers in the virginity of Mary. Fifteen centuries later this same error appeared among the Socinianites who were condemned by Paul IV¹ in 1555, and Clement VIII² in 1603. Almost in our own

¹ Aug. 7, 1555, "Cum quorundam."

² Feb. 3, 1603, "Dominici gregis."



Annunciation. By Paul Veronese

"Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son . . ."

"How shalt this be done, because I know not man?"

"The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee" (Luke I, 31-35).

day Strauss in Germany, and Renan and the pseudo-Herzog in France have repeated the falsehood.

Tertullian accidentally fell into a slightly different form of the same error in his endeavors to refute the Docetae who denied the reality of the flesh of Christ. Tertullian held firm to the truth that Mary remained a virgin during her conception but conceded that she lost her virginity in giving birth to the Child Jesus. Jovinianus, who was condemned in Rome in 390, and Pelagius held the same opinion. Helvidius, reading the text of St. Matthew where it is written "And he knew her not till she brought forth her first-born son" inferred that Mary did not remain a virgin after the birth of Christ. Jovinianus and Apollinarius joined Helvidius at this point and the three of them went a step further and added that Mary had other children besides Jesus. Farrar, a modern writer, in his work, "The Early Days of Christianity" (c. XIX) has revived these errors and says that Mary abandoned her virginity for the reason that it is better to bear children than to preserve virginity.

Such in brief has been the way in which heretics of different ages have taught practically the same doctrine which is being so loudly heralded today as if it were a product of the twentieth century. The denial of the Virgin Birth is old, but old without that air of venerableness which virtue acquires when it ages honorably and modestly. Amidst all this confusion of thought the family of the Catholic Church has preserved its divine unity and has maintained one single doctrine through all the ages and changes which have fallen around the lives of others.

The Church teaches as a part of her indisputable doctrine that Mary was a virgin all her life and in every moment of her life; she was a virgin when she conceived, she was a virgin when she bore, she was a virgin when she died. Thus in the fifth General Council (553) it is said: "The Virginity of Mary is without end, before the birth, during the birth and after the birth." And the Council of the Lateran held under Martin I in the year 649 issued this canon:³ "If one does not duly and truly acknowledge with the Holy Fathers the ever immaculate Virgin Mary the Mother of God, that she especially and truly conceived without seed God the Word, that she bore Him without corrup-

³ Denzinger, 256.

tion of her flesh, remaining after the birth an unravished virgin, let him be anathema."

Strictly speaking the doctrine of the Virgin Birth only declares that Mary was a virgin in the very act of bringing forth her son. Of course, the dogma and fact of the Virgin Birth presuppose that Mary conceived as a virgin; but nevertheless the dogma and fact of the Virgin Birth are quite distinct from the manner in which Mary conceived Jesus Christ, whether through the power of the Holy Ghost or the seed of Joseph. Now the Rev. Lee Heaton in his Palm Sunday sermon claimed that Jesus Christ was the son of Joseph, and thus he directly denied the virginal conception of Mary and only indirectly, and by way of a natural conclusion excluded the Virgin Birth. But what's in a name, says Juliet, and since we have at hand only a faded flower of nineteen centuries it will not smell so sweet by whatsoever name.

When one settles to the task of proving the doctrine of the virginal Conception and Virgin Birth he cannot hope to establish it to the perfect satisfaction of those who reject the divine truth of the Scriptures and of Tradition or who wish to exercise private judgment on the Scriptures and treat the consensus of the Fathers, as Bishop Lawrence would do, as a "tradition which must be re-examined." It is impossible to prove with mathematical certainty the truth of the virginal Conception or Virgin Birth of Christ. We cannot prove even His divinity with mathematical certitude; we can establish no truth of faith with mathematical precision because it is impossible. The ninth Council of Toledo held in 675 expressly stated that the Virgin Birth cannot be proved by reason or demonstration:⁴ "The Virgin Birth is not discovered by reason and neither is it demonstrated by example."

Since the Virgin Birth is a miracle which took place once and long ago at that, its manner cannot be demonstrated over and over again before expert physicians; and the fact of its single occurrence can be gathered only from those who witnessed it on its one and only appearance. The witnesses in this case are God, Gabriel and Mary. Their testimony is preserved in the Sacred Text and he who rejects their words or repudiates the evident meaning of those words locks himself in a vault

⁴ *Expositio fidei contra Priscillianistas.* Denzinger, 282.



Virgin and Child. By Van Loo

that is as difficult of attack as it is impervious to the light of truth.

Nevertheless the Church has not embraced this dogma of faith without having plenty of proof to show for its truth. Outside the divine infallibility which the Church enjoys, the Church can have recourse to many and sufficient arguments that the mother of Christ was and always remained a virgin. Of course, the principle source of doctrine on this point must be the Scriptures and Tradition. Whether Mary was or was not a virgin depends altogether upon the free will of God, since her virginity meant a miracle on His part; and by the same token it is only from His free revelation that we can come by this information. Thus an inquiry concerning the Virgin Birth must busy itself principally with the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers. Besides Scripture and Tradition there are, it is true, other reasons, or rather persuasions, which incline us to believe that the Virgin Birth is the only fitting entrance for the Son of God into the world; but these persuasions remain persuasions and never become such reasons as are found in the Bible and Fathers.

First of all, it is evident that a virgin birth is not impossible with God. The omnipotence of God can do all things which do not involve a contradiction or a sin; and neither a contradiction nor a sin is found in the Virgin Birth of Christ. The Virgin Birth as now discussed means that Christ was both conceived without the seed of man, and born without injury to Mary's virginity; that "the power of the Most High" overshadowed Mary and the omnipotence of God which gave man the gift of reproduction impregnated Mary and permitted her to bear in a miraculous manner. The mere possibility of the Virgin Birth should offer no difficulty to him who believes that "The Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth: and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul."⁵ The possibility is granted by all, but the fittingness is no less reasonable.

When God the Father sent His Son into the world to redeem man, He in no wise abandoned His jealous paternity over the Christ of whom the voice from heaven was to say: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And yet unless His

⁵ Gen. ii, 7.

eternal Son was conceived by a virgin, it would have been necessary for the Father of all to share His dignity of father with one of His creatures. Moreover Christ Himself had to be considered. Since He came to purify the world, it hardly seems proper that He should make His entrance into the world amidst an ordinary birth's corruption and blood. As St. Augustine says in his sermon on the Nativity: "It was not right that He Who came to heal corruption, should by His advent violate integrity." And as St. Thomas observes:⁶ "Christ was born of woman to show His real humanity, of a virgin to show His divinity."

Moreover, if Christ had become man in the ordinary course, He would not only have come in a manner little beseeing His mission but also in a way apparently contradicting the teaching of Himself and His Church. He Himself praised virginity and celibacy and told those who could take it to take it, and the Council of Trent in its twenty-fourth session decreed that:⁷ "Whoever says that marriage is preferable to virginity or celibacy, and that it is not better and holier to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be wedded, let him be anathema." Yet if either the conception or the birth of Christ destroyed the virginity of Mary, He would have diminished thereby the glory of her whom He loved so much. All this, however, does not suffice to prove that the Virgin Birth of Christ really took place. It shows the possibility of a Virgin Birth, it suggests its appropriateness, but it does not establish the fact that Mary gave birth to Jesus Christ in the state of virginity.

On the fact of the Virgin Birth the Church does not deign to argue with her children, but distinctly teaches them according to her divine mission. She has many arguments; she has an abundance of reasons for her belief in the Virgin Birth; but she insists that the Virgin Birth ultimately demands faith in God's word as spoken through the Bible, Tradition and the Church.

God tells us of the Virgin Birth in the seventh chapter of the book of Isaias. There we find a prophecy which has been fulfilled long ago or else the Messiah has never come. The Lord sent the prophet Isaias to meet King Achaz and to instruct him to seek a sign from God. The king refused and God rebuked

⁶ Summa Theol. III, XXVIII, 2, 2m.

⁷ Denzinger, 981.

him for his stubbornness but did not withhold the sign: "Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." That a virgin was to conceive and bear a son was the sign of the coming of the Messiah, the portentous token which God promised either in the depths of hell or the height above.

Two things in this prophecy demand special attention. First, the exact meaning God attached to the word "alma" which is found in the Hebrew text and which is translated in the Vulgate by "virgin"; and secondly, that "a virgin shall conceive" was given as "a sign." The opponents of the Virgin Birth attempts to set at naught the value of this prophecy by asserting that "bethula" means virgin and "alma" means nothing more than a young marriageable or young married woman. However the translators of the Septuagint who turned the Hebrew text into Greek three centuries before the coming of Christ, interpreted the Hebrew word "alma" by the Greek word "parthenos" or virgin. Further, the Syriac version of the Bible and St. Jerome's translation allow no room for equivocation on the meaning of "alma." A comparison of the uses of the two terms, "bethula" and "alma," develops that practically all the difference between the meaning of "bethula" and "alma" consists in this that "bethula" means a virgin whether old or young, and "alma" is more definite and specifies a young maiden.⁸ It is, therefore, logical to conclude that the word bears the same sense in this verse and that "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son" means that a maiden will bring forth a son outside the ordinary course of nature and without the assistance of a husband.

Further, as Justin the Martyr argued in the second century against the Jews, if "alma" meant any young girl at all, whether virgin or not, how would a "alma" bearing a child be the wonderful sign God told Achaz to ask "either unto the depth of hell, or unto the height above," thereby implying his willingness to give some remarkable indication of His will? By God's words we are logically led to expect some striking and distinctly individual mother who would immediately set off the mystery of the redemption. St. Matthew seems to have thought that way in the first chapter of his gospel where he recorded that while

⁸ Knabenbauer. Comm. in Isa. vii, 14.

Joseph was considering dismissing Mary because she was big with child an angel appeared and told him that the child in her womb was conceived of the Holy Ghost. Then St. Matthew comments: "Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying: Behold a virgin shall be with child, and bring forth a son."

The supposition of the Virgin Birth seems to run all through the story of the Annunciation and Conception as told by St. Luke who had received it, most probably, from Mary herself. After the angel told Mary that she would conceive and bear a son, she asked him: "How shall this be done, because I know not man?" And the angel answering said to her: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the most High shall overshadow thee." We immediately ask, what did Mary mean when she seemed to confess her inability to become a mother by saying: "I know not man"?

We exclude with indignation that Mary considered it even most remotely necessary to state that she had never been guilty of fornication. Besides the whole tenor of the speech of the angel refers not to the past but to the future: "Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son." And yet Mary pleads her incapacity to become a mother with these words: "I know not man." Plainly she, too, is speaking of the future. She could not have meant that she had no idea of a likely husband, for she was already espoused to Joseph. She could only have meant that she had made a vow of virginity and that because of that vow of virginity she could not become a mother and thereby violate her virginity.⁹ But the angel goes on to explain that according to his message she will become a mother without any injury to her vow of virginity: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the most High shall overshadow thee." Not the corrupting touch of man, O Mary, but the most pure grace of God!

We find the same idea supposed in the speech of the angel with Joseph who was contemplating rejecting Mary on the suspicion of infidelity or of breaking her virginity. The angel cautions him that his suspicions are groundless; that though she is a mother she has not sacrificed her virginity:¹⁰ "Joseph, son of

⁹ S. Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate*, c. 4.

¹⁰ *Matt. i*, 20.

David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost." Not of man but of the Holy Ghost, and the Spirit cleanses, not pollutes that which it touches! And St. Luke, who conversed with Mary, patently pauses in his description of the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan in order to insert a phrase reminding us that Jesus was not the son of Joseph but, consequently, of a virgin mother.¹¹ "And Jesus Himself was beginning about the age of thirty years: being (as it was supposed) the son of Joseph."

The Tradition of the Church on the Virgin Birth is full and complete. As we have already seen, the errors and heresies which have arisen against the Virgin Birth extend back to the first century. Consequently the promulgation and general belief of the doctrine must have been in vogue before any one could rise up to deny it. The Cerinthians and Ebionites who denied this dogma towards the end of the first century met vigorous resistance from the defenders of the faith. Justin in his "Dialogues" in the second century adduces the prophecy of Isaias telling of the virgin who shall conceive and bear a son to convince the Jews of the Virgin Birth. About the same time Irenaeus confuted the doctrine of Cerinthus. Aristides, an Athenian apologist of the second century, confessed that Christ was born of the Virgin Mary without the intervention of human seed or without the corruption of Mary's flesh.

In Milan of the fourth century St. Ambrose wrote this sentence in the fourth chapter of his "De Institutione Virginum": "A goodly door was Mary, who was closed and was not opened; Christ passed through this door, but did not open it." St. Jerome in the same century wrote a book, "Concerning the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary against Helvidius" to overcome that heretic in his teaching that Mary had other sons than Jesus, sons of the flesh. And so we might continue citing writers of the succeeding ages, Augustine, Anselm, Bede, Hugh of St. Victor, St. Thomas, who have taught the same permanent and pure truth. But these will suffice to show that the constant tradition of the Fathers has upheld the Virgin Birth of Christ from Mary of Nazareth.

So spoke the days of old and so the majority of the present age; but some of our generation prefer to renounce or to call

¹¹ Luke iii, 23.

in question the time-honored belief in the Virgin Birth. Yet, it seems that these men can hardly do what they will; for time has made true the remark of Epiphanius (403) that "the name of Mary means but virgin." Whatever the result of the present turmoil, good men must weep over this calamity which has befallen, not the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, but the souls of our contemporaries who abuse it. On the other hand, there is a fairer side to be viewed in this controversy which has sprung up so rapidly and furiously about this most peaceful of the articles of faith. Competition and strife always encourage scholarship and research and this battle of minds which has already begun will spread abroad far better than years of peace the real truth about the conception and nativity of Christ.

Perhaps, also, it may arouse phantoms of doubts in minds which have been dormant in their false security and turn honest hearts to that source which now defends and which has always preserved the honors of Mary and the truth of God. "The Freeman," of New York, has spoken very optimistically if not very exactly when it says there is "no particular reason why the Protestant Episcopal Church, or at least so much of it as is disposed to follow its bishops, should not go over to Rome and be done with it. After all, there are advantages in being logical, even in religion; and where there appears to be essential unity of belief, there might as well be unity of organization." May we indeed expect another Romeward Trend?

