

Meditation for Mary Immaculate

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“Why only for Mary?” asks the thoughtful and devout mind. It is not that we are jealous of Mary’s prerogative. And of course it was completely fitting that the Mother of God, the source of the flesh of the Word made Flesh, should be all pure and holy even from the first instant of her conception. Rather, it is that in the things of God we look for an order of coherent and consistent wisdom, for a principle of ‘reason why’ intrinsic to the unity which is the mind of God.

It does not convince men and women, in an age when ancient spiritual claims are considered myths, if the decrees of God appear arbitrary and His works a matter of wand-waving. Yet the argument of Duns Scotus does seem rather arbitrary and in the best tradition of *The Lord of The Rings*! Concerning the mind and power of God in the matter of Mary’s Immaculate Conception he proclaimed, “Decuit, potuit, ergo et fecit.” (It was fitting, He had power to do it, therefore He did it.)¹ It seems, then, that divine power does not include us! But all of us live now in the salvation of Christ risen. It is a new order, a new creation, the restoration of what was lost in Adam. Why then are we not conceived without original sin and without that concupiscence of disordered desire which is the penalty of original sin in the flesh? Even if people lost such a ‘justice restored’ afterwards by personal sin, it would appear fitting that, as Mary was conceived Immaculate by the merits of Christ foreseen, so we should now be conceived immaculate by the merits of Christ directly applied. This would solve all the problems about unbaptised babies, would manifest convincingly the will of God to save all men, and would vindicate beyond doubt the complete victory of Christ over sin and death. Why, then, only Mary, much as we love and honour her?

“Wretched man that I am”!

It would indeed be hard to explain this issue in terms of God’s wisdom and love and the will of Christ to save unbaptised and aborted babies, if the speculative explanation of original sin of some post-Reformation Catholic theologians were to be followed. These theologians make the grace of original holiness and freedom from disorder within our nature to be simply an extrinsic and incidental gift of God, super-added to a basic state. Once this grace was lost, human nature, although deeply bereft of its historic condition of nobility and happiness, simply fell back into its basic condition of ‘a state of pure nature’, in which condition it was basically as good as new. Indeed, if God had so willed, He could have made man from the beginning in that condition, without any call or vocation to possess God in the fullest degree, which is the state of the beatific possession of God, the order which alone is truly a supernatural order and state.

If original holiness were simply an *accidental* (i.e., in modern English, *incidental*) gift, added onto human nature from outside, then it becomes incomprehensible why that which was lost in Adam is not added back on again after the Resurrection of Christ. Again, if so naïve an explanation of the loss to man’s nature were true, then it is just as hard to explain the state of human nature which we find within our being, wounded and divided within itself, and far from the harmony of any sort of purely natural goodness. This is the state magnificently depicted with pathos by St Paul, when he speaks for himself and for all of fallen mankind: “Wretched man that I am! For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do

¹ III Sent., dist. iii.

not want is what I do. I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin.” (Rom 7:24,19,23) This self-division, by which “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other,” (Gal 5:17) is not the work of God.

These theologians say the state of basic nature is simply that the flesh seeks blindly any natural pleasure or desire, and that the soul must *impose* the law of reason upon the flesh. They presume that this is the order of nature below mankind, the law of the jungle and the field. They show their ignorance of natural science. In nature below mankind pleasures and desires are linked to functions, and are *naturally subordinate* to a law in the environment, which gives a life-law of times and seasons to all living things. There is no anarchy in nature, no self-division, and no resistance in the individual to the law of God. God could not make man one being, a unity of matter and soul, and have one element in his being, the material one, indifferent to or hostile to the rule of the soul, which itself must be harmoniously orientated in natural obedience to the wisdom of God and the natural law of God within man’s order of life. This would be true even if God had created man in a lower order of excellence and gift than the one which is actually given us, namely to be co-sharers through Christ in God’s own divine nature.

The Law of Disorder

It makes better sense, along with the Fathers of the Church and especially St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, to recognise in original sin a true, inner wounding of man’s very nature: a wounding in the order of the soul and its supernatural destiny, a wounding too in the order of nature itself and its natural obedience to whatever is its final joy in God. Through this Fall and loss we can no longer grow towards God in a straight line, and we are no longer a true reflection of the image of God in the order either of grace or of nature.

From God comes the ‘law of my mind’, that perfect truth concerning right and wrong and holiness in living, which is made a spoken word in the Incarnation of Christ, who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) of God for men. The ‘law in my members’ is the urge of disordered desire, inherited only through the flesh, but communicated to the soul in the moment of its conception. That ‘law’ comes from the evil power of the soul over the body, and comes originally from the will of Adam. So God-like is the relationship of the soul to the body in man, making one living person, that the power of the disobedient will of the spiritual order can now introduce, for the first time in all creation, a principle of selfish disobedience to the law of God, the will of God, and the law both natural and divine that governs the true life and happiness of man.

The processes by which this ‘law of disorder’ can be inherited through the natural laws of generation do not concern us here. That would be too intricate a theme. It is a fact that it is so inherited, and that the evidence is indisputable in all human history and in the life and struggles of every individual man or woman. Of all things God created, we alone are not harmoniously related to our law of life and happiness, and we alone of all beings admit within our conscience a law of truth and goodness which we fail to achieve because of the drives and desires that tear us apart.

Original sin does not *destroy* within human nature all yearning for God or all tendency to seek God’s law. That is why Luther was wrong to say that human nature since the Fall was intrinsically corrupt. The ‘law of my mind’ is still there, but weakened in its response to God. It is also overlaid by a secondary, sin-induced ‘law of my members’, a disobedience to the harmony and balance within which human nature was originally constituted by God and orientated to God in the communion of grace and love. This principle of selfishness is the basis of the coarseness, dullness of conscience, inner confusions, and

addictive drives of human nature. To it we so often add by our own personal sins and bad habits in life.

God Himself cannot wipe out this condition in our material inheritance because the laws of natural, physical inheritance are deterministic, material laws. They pass on what they are given. They are meant to pass on the good, but they can also pass on loss and disease. As spiritual, the soul can turn to God in perfect contrition and perfect love. Such an urge of goodness and love has a healing effect also on the body, but not a total and perfect healing. Even in great and holy souls, whose nobility of spirit shines in their faces, the basic tendency, the flaw in the inheritance, will remain. A young man in a moment of silly bravado may deeply burn his leg with a cigarette. The wound may fester, there may be danger of gangrene and loss of the limb. By that time, in his spirit he may be deeply sorry, much more noble of soul, much closer to God in mind and heart. This however will not equally heal the flesh, because the change in the body is subject to more physical, more mathematical, and more deterministic laws of life. The wound in the flesh may heal, but may never perfectly heal. So with original sin.

Even in the order of redemption God cannot simply ‘add on’ what we lost before, because the wound is intrinsic to human nature and the very laws of the material creation. Man redeemed is capable of true, interior growth in holiness and goodness; but even in the saints, he is not capable of such a perfect holiness as would have been possible if men had never sinned at all. That is why St Paul tells us that even we, who have through Christ “the first fruits of the Spirit”, must yet “groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom 8:23) The flesh, basically imperfect, must pay the penalty of death and sin within its own now natural inheritance. The full restitution of man must await the second coming of Christ, an order which does away with marrying and giving in marriage (cf. Matt 22:30) and with the present order of the inheritance of the flesh.

The Predestination of Christ

“Now”, all those thoughtful and devout minds will say, “you are hoist with your own petard, dear Father! In the case of Mary, born of the seed of Adam and the line of David, you, and Holy Mother Church with you, have made an exception to these deterministic laws, and in just one singular case.” One would think that for St Thomas Aquinas this was one of the problems in admitting that Our Lady was conceived Immaculate *in the very first instant of her conception*. Therefore he considered that he had to concede that the shadow of original sin did fall across her created being, only at once to be redeemed and taken away.

It looks very different if we take at face value those many texts in which it is taught—quite clearly, one suggests—that Christ predestined our eternal glory in *Himself*, not just the Word but the *Incarnate* Word, before the foundation of the world, and therefore before the Fall of man (e.g. Col 1:15-20, Eph 1:3-10, Heb 1:1-3). St John too (John 1:1-18) presents Christ as one who is coming as the Heir of the Ages: “all things were made through Him.” He comes into “His own things” by inheritance of divine right, to give man the fullness of that life, the gift of which He intended in man’s very creation. But instead of acclamation He meets the tragedy of an ignorant rejection. This view of the Incarnation would mean that God did not become the Son of Man simply because men had sinned and needed redemption, but rather that He was to come as King of the universe and Lord of all by the decree of creation itself. Sin however changed that glorious Kingship into a work of painful redemption, a winning back of the usurped vineyard (cf. Mark 12:1-12), and the sacrifice of a perfect reconciliation. Christ is always salvation—even to the angels who did not sin—because He is the principle of life and life to its fulfilment (cf. John 10:10) in the beatific vision of God. In our case the salvation is also a redemption.

Concerning the motivation of the Incarnation, whether it was decreed independently of sin or only because of the Fall, both views are allowed by the Church and both views find saints and doctors to speak for them. The view which makes Christ King of all creation, visible and invisible, in the supernatural order, by Primacy from the beginning seems a more noble and truer vision of Christ. It gives a total unity to all His works in Himself. It seems more coherent to the wisdom of God. It seems, too, more in harmony with the theology of the Greek Fathers of the Church, and to be the only logical development of the titles they give to Christ. It is significant that Duns Scotus, that great and holy Franciscan who was in some ways a rival to Aquinas, both held this view of Christ and was one of the foremost protagonists of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Did his perspective on the Incarnation make it any easier for him to see the necessity and coherence of the special privilege of Mary? One thinks that it did.

If the Incarnation is decreed from the foundation of the universe, you meditate it this way: God communicated Himself directly to the angels as pure Spirit upon pure spirits. There was no let or hindrance. It is natural for pure spirits to learn of God and love God by total contemplation. God made them through His *Logos*, through that *Word* who later became for us the Christ. He loved and fulfilled them in His Holy Spirit. They were perfected in all that they had and were through the Word in the Holy Spirit.

If this cannot also be done for *man*, it is hard to see why God made matter at all. It is at best an irrelevance to the spiritual order, and at worst a drag upon it. Matter, *in its own order* and without incorporation into the being of man, cannot even know God directly at all. Clearly God cannot perfectly commune and unite our nature to Himself—perfectly in our way, and perfectly in His way—by the same means as He does for the angels. This is because matter is an obstacle: it learns, loves, and enters into communion perfectly only through the spoken word and through the word enacted as deed. But it is quite different if man can be saved and, in the sense of the Greek Fathers, *divinised* in all his nature, matter and spirit, by predestination to the divine life through the Incarnation of Christ. This gives us as much as the angels of God. Then that Word, through whom all things were made, becomes the Son of Man, not because of sin, but in the most perfect possible ordering of the Wisdom of God: He becomes the root of our stock and the One upon whose coming as Messiah all the laws of the universe, all the slow ascent of being through space and time, were aligned for His perfect birth on earth. In Christ, coming for man, both earth and heaven are joined in the one Person but two natures of Jesus Christ.

If it is viewed that way, sin plays no part in the gift of Christ, for sin is not of God but only of the creature, and of the evil and disobedient creature at that. Sin as such plays no part in the creative initiatives of God because sin belongs to loss and imperfection. Sin does not condition the majesty of God's creative largesse in the decree of creation. Once sin enters creation through the creature's free will, it can damage and frustrate the good works of God and the design of God. Yet it cannot wholly do so, for the mind of God does not change because of sin. God overcomes and triumphs in the creature in spite of sin, although His salvation becomes now a winning back and a painful redemption of what the creature has wantonly lost.

The Predestination of Mary

Looked at in this way, Mary is *before Eve*. She is willed before Eve because she is willed in the decree of the Incarnation of Christ, which also decrees the universe of matter, crowned with man, as the Kingdom of the Son of God and Son of Man.

When non-Catholics are scandalised at our and the Greeks' devotion to Mary, they must bear in mind that Mary, in her relationship to Christ, is *always* "per ipsum, et cum ipso,

et in ipso” (to borrow a thought from the doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer in the Mass). Mary, with all her prerogatives, exists and is defined into being only *through* Christ, and *with* Christ, and *in* Christ. She is in fact only *for* Christ. She is creation’s first *minister* and first *member* for the Incarnation of God. She has no imperious, independent role. To the roots of her being, she is defined in the divine Wisdom and in the divine Mind as “handmaid of the Lord”, as her *Magnificat* acknowledges and proclaims (Luke 1:48, cf. 1:38). This is true also of any role of intercession and care the Church attributes to Mary. She is always *for Him* whose human flesh defined both her being and our own creation in the Son of Man. If Christ was to come into “His own things” by the decree of creation, then the womb of woman, the womb of Mary, had to have been present in the very first laws of creation and the movement of the first dynamic explosion of creative energy. There is no independent honour for Mary. She is defined for Him, and after her all things materially created are willed for Christ, through her as the vehicle of life, the woman of the vision of St John in the Book of Revelation (Rev 12:1-6). How then can we possibly deny her the title *Mother of the Church*, who, in the intentions of God, is the first member taken up into the Body of Christ in the decree of the Incarnation, as the minister of His personal flesh?

In this way, though *we* are all willed into being as sons and daughters of Eve, in the mind and predestination of God, Mary is willed *before* Eve, and her status in heaven and earth as Queen of men and of angels is decreed in her vocation as minister of the flesh of the Word made Flesh. Even in the first instant of her creation, in the divine mind and will she does not come under the law of the inheritance of sin through Eve, because her being and her destiny precede the intention of creating Eve in the mind of God. When the Father creates matter through the Son, *the Son willed Incarnate*, Mary is predestined with Christ, because His human flesh is not intelligible as an event in time except it be ministered through her flesh.

The Incursion of Sin

Mary then, as God knows her being as part of His divine providence for us all, does not come under the law of natural inheritance from Eve in the first instant of her conception. What we are saying is this: Eve is conceived in the mind of God through Christ, and through Mary, because Mary is the earth’s minister of material being to its Maker in the flesh of Jesus Christ. The liability to the stain of sin in Mary is therefore *extrinsic* only. She derives in time and in the actual created scene after Eve and by natural descent from Eve; she is not however, like us, *willed* through Eve as *child* in the order of nature and in the order of grace. Indeed, Mary’s relation to Eve is rather that of exemplar and Mother: Eve is made feminine for Mary’s vocation. In the mind and will of God Eve is ‘thought of’ and ‘loved’ because of Mary. It is exactly the opposite for the rest of us: we are ‘thought of’ and ‘loved’ through Eve.

Mary, Virgin and Mother, is only for Christ, uniquely for Christ, and uniquely ‘spouse of the Holy Spirit’ for the ministry of manhood to God in Jesus Christ. The impact of original sin comes upon Mary not as an intrinsic liability but as an external invasion and threat to her predestined integrity. It is in a secondary and not a primary relationship to our first parents that Mary is liable to the stain of original sin. In our case original sin is a natural inheritance from the stock, Adam and Eve, in whom we are willed and from whom we are descended. Mary does not incur liability by law of entire descent, by *intrinsic* connection of being, but only in the manner that a man or woman may incur any sickness or contagion by the actual accidental contact of their own flesh with that of another. It is then not by law of inheritance from her origins in our first parents that Mary could incur liability to sin, in either the order of God’s predestination or the order of descent according to the will of God. *God*

wills us in Adam and Eve, but He willed Adam for the sake of Christ, and Mary as the vehicle of life through which He was to come. God then, willed Eve through Mary.

The theme cannot be dwelt on now, but we have argued in more than one place² that God would not have divided human life into male and female except through His need for the womb of Mary as the vehicle of His human life. He was not to be born as a *person created* in time, but as a *Person* was to enter into His Tabernacle on earth, the womb of Mary, and take flesh from her immaculate seed. Because in her ministry as Mother of God Mary was predestined with Christ before the world was made, therefore she had a *right to be defended and preserved* from the incidental incursion of evil upon her status that occurred through her birth in time through the fallen flesh of Adam. She is preserved and redeemed from original sin then only in a secondary sense, inasmuch as through descent from a fallen stock in space and time she would have been tainted ‘from outside’, whereas in the primary sense she was willed for Christ before other men and women were conceived in the mind of God through Adam and Eve.

This vision of Mary is possible only through the vision of Christ as predestined from the beginning of the material creation, Lord Incarnate of the material universe and of the spirit of man; predestined independently of sin and before the ill-will of the creature brought sin and its defilement into the beautiful works of God. So viewed, Mary’s predestination as minister of His flesh must be one with Christ’s will to be Incarnate as Son of Man. If Christ is literally the “first-born of all creation” (Col 1:15) because the material universe is willed through His Incarnate being, then Mary is the second-born as minister of His flesh. In that vocation she is also second-born of all creation as the first *material creature* willed in Christ, as the first member of the Church through Jesus Christ, and as Mother of the Church in that ministry of motherhood to Him and to all mankind for Him. This vision of Mary unfolds *logically* from the Greek and Scotist perspectives of the Incarnation. Had St Thomas Aquinas been able to see the scriptural and doctrinal evidence for this view more clearly, one thinks it would have solved his problem over the Immaculate Conception of Mary. For it was because of her status as *willed through Adam and Eve* that he found her liable to the inheritance of sin, at least in the first brief moment of her initial conception. Had he, with Duns Scotus, been able to see that she was willed *before sin could be* as “ministra carnis Unigeniti” (minister of the body of the Only-Begotten) in the decree of the Incarnation itself, he would have realised that even as a creature she had no intrinsic liability by descent from Eve.

The Love that Heals and Creates

All the same, are we not in the end forced to agree that God does work one direct miracle, other than the miracle of making man into the supernatural order of His own divine life: just one very defensible and direct ‘sign’ in the positive ‘healing’ of the living matter that was to form the Holy Mother of God in the womb of St Anne? If it were so, it would be in no way incoherent, in no way arbitrary, and altogether defensible.

Nevertheless this writer suggests—with, of course, some diffidence in so speculative a subject—that the reality of what God did in the making of Mary was even more wonderful, and was a work which did not require any direct intervention of God to offset the incursion of Adam’s sin upon her. It required no miracle except inasmuch as her vocation itself is in a sense a ‘miracle’. I am suggesting that in the first instant of her conception the Holy Spirit hovered over the living seed, male and female, that was to be the body of the Virgin Mother of God: the same Spirit who was later to overshadow Mary for the completion of her work. In that love of the Father, mediated through the Son, and personally expressed in the Holy

² E. Holloway, *Catholicism: A New Synthesis*, Faith-Keyway, second edition 1976, p. 148-151; *Sexual Order and Holy Order*, Faith Pamphlets, 1978.

Spirit, there was breathed out upon Mary in time, existentially, and in the order of her creation, *the one same love* with which she had been loved in Christ as His minister in the decree of the Incarnation. This love—a love in which the whole universe and every rational creature was loved and wanted, was made and fulfilled—is so great and so total that, of its very force and power and its nearness to the Divinity of Christ made man, it must form the matter of Mary into a unity of total perfection. It does so not by a decree to heal but by sheer, primary, creative love, and love unto perfection. That was the love with which Mary was loved in the first instant of her conception. And in the presence of that love all presence of sin or sickness of any sort is made laughable and irrelevant.

The love of God is *hierarchical* in its order. On the view of creation which we suggest, mankind is loved and made only for God Incarnate as Christ, and through Christ human nature is given as high a status as the angels of God, and in as perfect a way. Then Mary is first loved and willed, that the order of the Incarnation may come to be. In that order, from the beginning God makes the womb and creates man male and female so that, as the Determiner of the womb of Mary, He may come into His own inheritance. Through Mary, the one who exercises the ministry of the cooperation of the material universe unto Christ, all the rest of us are willed and loved in our order. We, however, are truly children of Eve and are not made uniquely and specially for the purposes of God as Our Lady was. Upon this basis we can erect a theology in which the Immaculate Conception of our Lady is utterly coherent, decreed from the beginning, and caused in the first moment of her being by the totality and perfection of that love by which she is loved for the work of her person in the economy of salvation. This, we suggest, is the magnificence and the majesty of Mary.

The Revelation to St John

Surely it is all summed up so well in the great revelation given to St John.

“And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. ... She brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne.” (Rev 12:1-2,5)

The vision is cosmic. It extends from the first moment of the explosive energies of the universe’s beginning to now. Earth, our planet, is rightly shown as ‘woman’, teeming with life and fertility. The earth is clothed with the sun and has the moon, the lesser luminary subject, under its feet, “for signs and for seasons and for days and years.” (Gen 1:14) The earth is made for God in the womb of Mary, for whose vocation every womb, human and below the human order, exists and is made. It is Mary who brings forth a male child, *the Son of Man*, for all creation in her virginal body.

The vision unfolds, giving its fuller sense. The crown of twelve stars is first of all the whole galactic background of the earth itself, the laws of nature that have worked for this end: the birth of Christ. Then, too, as all material things are for man, and man is for Christ, the twelve stars are the twelve tribes of Israel, the order of trusteeship for the Messianic “fullness of time” (Eph 1:10, cf. Gal 4:4). After that they are the twelve apostles of the Lord. The woman is first the earth itself, then the holy Mother of God, and finally the Church, shown through Mary personally as Mother of the Church. These are not different senses but the one full sense of a vision which embraces the total economy of God, the predestination of creation and salvation in all its parts.

When Christ was entering Jerusalem and the leaders of the people told Him arrogantly to rebuke the children who acclaimed Him Messiah and Son of David, He replied: “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” (Luke 19:40) All creation was made for Him, was aligned upon His Incarnation, and was awaiting His coming. So also with the Blessed Virgin: one could say with pious folly—for it is folly—that if God had not made her Immaculate, the stones and the trees and the beasts of the field would have cried out in protest. For Mary is part of *their* gift to God, their meaning, and their vocation: the gift to God of the *flesh* of an earth which had never sinned save only in man! But all nature holds its peace because the love with which the Father loves the Son Incarnate is in her, and such a love can create only the Immaculate. She is, in all things and on behalf of all God’s creatures, “our tainted nature’s solitary boast”. (Wordsworth)