

Letter, on the Immaculate Conception,

of John McHugh (Ushaw College, Durham England) to Paul Ford 5/20/76

As for the Immaculate Conception, I should argue thus:

(1) There cannot be a doctrine of the Immaculate Conception before St. Augustine, because it was he who coined the technical term “original sin.”

(2) Before that, all one could find would be testimonies that Mary was totally sinless (which of course would include the Immaculate Conception, in an era when sin had not been distinguished into *actuale et originale* [actual sin and original sin]).

(3) The phrase *homo lapsus* [fallen man] too is really the common currency of Augustine and the Scholastics. Before Augustine this notion is expressed by speaking of *fili Adam* [sons of Adam]; i.e. *filius Adam* [son of Adam] = *homo lapsus* [fallen man].

(4) Thus Christ by reason of the virginal conception is not *filius Adam* [son of Adam] in the usual sense, but is the direct creation of God, and hence sinless.

(5) Yet Irenaeus speaks of Mary as the new Eve. Why? The first Eve was the one person other than Adam who did not have original sin: for her it was *peccatum actuale* [actual sin]. But also, she alone was not *filia Adam* [daughter of Adam]. So in speaking of Mary as the new Eve, Irenaeus is saying that she was the one person who was not *insofar as sin is concerned* “a daughter of Eve/Adam.”

(6) Irenaeus sees this as Mary’s role.

(7) With this we can base the doctrine on a full understanding of *cecharitomeme* [highly favored], where the Vulgate is terribly right in rendering *gratia plena* [full of grace].

Along those lines, then . . . though I have not written on the point. I don’t think there is anything very satisfactory in print . . . yet . . . !!!

Virginitas in Partu

Ludwig Ott

Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1974, reprint of fourth English edition [Cork, IR: Mercier, 1960]) 205–206

2. Virginitas During the Birth of Jesus

Mary bore her Son without any violation of her virginal integrity. (*De fide on the ground of the general promulgation of doctrine.*)

The dogma merely asserts the fact of the continuance of Mary’s physical virginitas without determining more closely how this is to be physiologically explained. In general the Fathers and the Schoolmen conceived it as non-injury to the hymen, and accordingly taught that Mary gave birth in miraculous fashion without opening of the womb and injury to the hymen, and consequently also without pains (cf. S. th. III 28, 2).

However, according to modern natural scientific knowledge, the purely physical side of virginitas consists in the non-fulfilment of the sex act (“sex-act virginitas”) and in the non-contact of the female egg by the male seed (“seed-act virginitas”) (A. Mitterer). Thus, injury to the hymen in birth does not destroy virginitas, while, on the other hand, its rupture seems to belong to complete natural motherhood. It follows from this that from the concept of virginitas alone the miraculous character of the process of birth cannot be inferred, if it cannot be, and must not be derived from other facts of Revelation. Holy Writ attests Mary’s active rôle in the act of birth (Mt. I, 25; Luke 2, 7: “She brought forth”)

which does not seem to indicate a miraculous process.

But the Fathers, with few exceptions, vouch for the miraculous character of the birth. However, the question is 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. It seems hardly possible to demonstrate that the dignity of the Son of God or the dignity of the Mother of God demands a miraculous birth.

Mary's virginity during the birth of Jesus was contested in the Early Church by Tertullian (*De carne Christi* 23) and especially by Jovinian, an opponent of the Church ideal of virginal purity; and in modern times by Rationalists (Harnack calls it: "a Gnostic invention").

Jovinian's teaching (*virgo concepit, sed non virgo generavit*) was rejected at a Synod at Milan (390) under the presidency of St. Ambrose (cf. Ep. 42), which recalled the invocation of the Apostles' Creed: *Natus ex Maria virgine*. Her virginity during the birth of Jesus is included in the title of honour "perpetual virgin" (*aeiparthenos*), which was given to Mary by the Fifth General Council at Constantinople (553) (D 214, 218, 227). The doctrine is expressly taught by Pope St. Leo I in the *Epistola Dogmatica ad Flavianum* (Ep. 28, 2) which was approved by the Council of Chalcedon; it was taught also by the Lateran Synod (649) and by Pope Pius IV (1555) (D 256, 993). Pope Pius XII in the Encyclical "Mystici Corporis" says: "It was she who gave miraculous birth to Christ our Lord (*mirando partu edidit*)." The Church's general teaching is expressed in her Liturgy also. Cf. the Responsorium to the fifth Lesson of the Feast of Christmas, and to the eighth Lesson of the Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord.

Is. 7, 14 announces that the maiden (as a virgin) would give birth. The Fathers also, in a typical sense, refer to the virgin birth of Our Lord the words of the Prophet Ezechiel on the closed gates (Ez. 44, 2; cf. St. Ambrose Ep. 42, 6; St. Jerome, Ep. 49, 21); the words of the Prophet

Isaias on the painless birth (Is. 66, 7; cf. St. Irenaeus, *Epis.* 54; St. John Damascene, *De fide orth.* IV 14); and the words of the Song of Songs on the closed garden and the scaled well (Hl. 4, 12; cf. St. Jerome, *Adv. Jov.* I 31. Ep. 49, 21).

St. Ignatius of Antioch characterises, not merely Mary's virginity, but also the bringing forth of her Son as a "mystery which must be proclaimed aloud" (Eph. 19, I). Christ's virginal birth is accepted without question in the apocryphal writings of the second century (*Odes of Solomon*, 19, 7 et seq.; *Proto-Gospel of St. James* 19 et seq.; ascension into heaven of Isaias 11, 7 et seq.), and also by Church authors such as St. Irenaeus (*Epis.* 54; *adv. haer.* III 21, 4–6); St. Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* VII 16, 93); Origen (*In. Lev. hom.* 8, 2; otherwise in *Luc. hom.* 14). St. Ambrose (Ep. 42, 4–7), St. Jerome (*Adv. Jov.* I 31; Ep. 49, 21) and St. Augustine (*Enchir.* 34) defend the traditional Church doctrine against Jovinian. For the illustration of the mystery the Fathers and Theologians employ various analogues—the emergence of Christ from the sealed tomb, His going through closed doors, the penetration of the ray of sun through glass, the birth of the Logos from the bosom of the Father, the going out of human thought from the human spirit.

Christ's miraculous emergence from the unimpaired womb of the Virgin Mother finds its ultimate explanation in the Omnipotence of God. St. Augustine says: "in such things the whole ground of the mystery is the might of Him who permits it to happen" (Ep. 137, 2, 8). Cf. S. th. 111 28, 3.