

Deification: The Mariology of the Ordinary Faithful

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Abstract

Popular devotion to the Virgin Mary can often be understood as implying a doctrine of deification, that is, of becoming perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. The Mother of God herself is the primary example of the deified person, and she in turn assists her devotees in their own process of becoming deified. The doctrine of deification articulated by Maximus the Confessor and John Scotus Eriugena provides an account that explains particularly well the theology implicit in much Marian devotion, and this is illustrated by two sets of examples, namely, devotional texts concerning the *in partu* virginity, and devotional practices at the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Keywords

Deification, Mariology, Devotion, *in partu* Virginity, Immaculate Conception, Wisdom, Lourdes

In the early twelfth-century, Eadmer of Canterbury, best known as the biographer of his teacher, St Anselm, wrote a Tract on the Conception of St Mary, which begins as follows:

On today's solemnity it is fitting that I should consider the origin from whom the salvation of the world proceeded. Today's feast is the conception of the blessed Mother of God, Mary, which is joyfully commemorated in many places. Moreover, indeed, it was celebrated from the very earliest times more frequently by those in whom pure simplicity and lowly devotion to God especially flourished. Where, though, greater knowledge, and very exalted scrutiny of things, imbued and raised the minds of certain people, they despised the simplicity of the poor, and did away with this solemnity, treating it with disregard as if it were entirely without rational foundation. This opinion carried all the more weight because those who subscribed to it were pre-eminent in secular and ecclesiastical authority and in abundance of riches. However, as I reconsider both the simplicity of the ancients and the sublime ingenuity of the more up-to-date, there come to mind

the words of certain divine scriptures to place between them. When it comes to judging these views, they are to be carefully weighed, in my opinion, with pious thought, to see how far each may be approved by authority, what should be ascribed to each, and what things may be followed with greater reason by me and those like me.¹

Eadmer goes on to say that those who argue against the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady's Conception do so partly on the grounds that the celebration of her Birthday – a feast that was universally commemorated – is sufficient. In reply, Eadmer writes:

Therefore, having seen the reasoning of these very great and proficient men for the abolition of the feast of the Mother of God, may we see also the charity of the simple, mourning the loss of such joys. They are simple; they seek answers to the profound reasons of the philosophers, and they perhaps do not know how to deliver them. What they do say, founded in devoted love of the Mother of the Lord, is that any human praise offered to her dignity or honour, seems of small importance if it is compared to her outstanding merits.²

Now, there was a particular political context for Eadmer's defence of the Feast of the Conception. The feast had been celebrated in England during Anglo-Saxon times, but was suppressed by the Normans after the Conquest.³ So Eadmer's simple folk who celebrate the Conception out of 'devoted love for the Mother of the Lord' are probably English; whilst those who are 'pre-eminent in secular and ecclesiastical authority and in abundance of riches' are England's new Norman rulers, and it is they who have deprived the lowly English of their joyful celebration. Eadmer's Tractate goes on to discuss the theological questions that arise from the celebration of the Feast of the Virgin's conception, and his text is the oldest surviving work to contend explicitly that Mary was conceived without original sin.

In the history of Catholic polemic, Eadmer is by no means alone in claiming that strong devotion to Our Lady is a particular mark of the poor and humble, and neither is he alone in using this kind of claim as part of a defence of some point of Marian doctrine. On the contrary, an expansion of the boundaries of Marian doctrine and devotion is almost always accompanied by the claim that such an expansion corresponds to the practice of the ordinary faithful. Furthermore, that claim almost always seems to be correct. We might think of Robin Hood's reputed devotion to Our Lady in medieval England, or the role

¹ *Eadmeri Monachi Cantuariensis Tractatus de Conceptione Sanctae Mariae*, ed. H. Thurston and P. Slater, (Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 1904), 1-2. Trans. Tessa Frank and Sarah Jane Boss.

² *Eadmeri Tractatus*, 4.

³ Brian Reynolds, *Gateway to Heaven: Marian doctrine and devotion, image and typology in the Patristic and Medieval periods* Vol.1 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), p.351.

of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the peasant and working-class cultures of modern Mexico. The evidence does suggest that high Mariology – or, at least, a high Marian devotion – has been the *sensus fidelium* from early centuries.

In this paper, I shall give a theological account of popular Marian piety. I shall show two examples of Marian belief and devotion, namely, belief in the perpetual virginity, and the cult of Our Lady of Lourdes, and I shall argue throughout that one aspect of the theology implicit in this intense passion for Mary is a doctrine of *deification*.

The *in partu* and perpetual virginity

One of the earliest post-biblical texts concerning the Blessed Virgin is the so-called Protevangelium of James, a work that is included in most editions of New Testament apocrypha.⁴ It is thought to have been composed in the latter half of the second-century, and it narrates the life of the Virgin from before her conception until the Massacre of the Innocents. Many scenes that are familiar from Medieval and Renaissance art are first recorded in this text. These include the embrace of Mary's parents, St. Anne and St. Joachim, at the news of her conception; her Presentation and childhood in the Temple; and the choice of Joseph to be her spouse. It is hard to say to what extent the stories contained in the Protevangelium were already widespread, or the extent to which the text itself popularized them, but popular they certainly became. It seems that the narrative was first written in Greek, but manuscripts survive in Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian and Slavonic. Fragments of a Latin translation also exist, but the stories of Mary's life were spread in the West principally through the early Medieval Infancy Gospel of Matthew (or Pseudo-Matthew),⁵ which is very similar to the Protevangelium. Most of the events recorded in these books also exist in Medieval texts in other languages, including James of Voragine's *Golden Legend*, and some became celebrated as feasts of the Church in both East and West.

From the various elements of these narratives, the one that I want to focus on now is Mary's miraculous childbearing – her giving birth to Christ without pain or loss of her physical virginity. The belief that she gave birth painlessly is in fact recorded in a text that is probably older than the Protevangelium, namely, the Odes of Solomon;⁶ but since, over time, that collection did not enjoy the same popularity

⁴ Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, ed. and trans., *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and translations* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.31-71.

⁵ Ehrman and Pleše, *Apocryphal Gospels*, pp.73-113.

⁶ Ode 19, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), pp.752-753.

as the Protevangelium or Pseudo-Matthew, it is not so important for present purposes. The Protevangelium, however, gives a very detailed account of Mary's *in partu* virginity:

When the time comes for Mary to give birth, Joseph leaves her in a cave, and goes to search for a midwife. Joseph and the midwife then return:

They stood at the entrance to the cave, and a bright cloud overshadowed it. The midwife said, 'My soul has been magnified today, for my eyes have seen a miraculous sign: salvation has been born to Israel.' Right away the cloud began to depart from the cave, and a great light appeared within, so that their eyes could not bear it. Soon that light began to depart, until an infant could be seen. It came and took hold of the breast of Mary, its mother. The midwife cried out, 'Today is a great day for me, for I have seen this new wonder.'

The midwife went out of the cave and Salome met her. And she said to her, 'Salome, Salome, I can describe a new wonder to you. A virgin has given birth, contrary to her natural condition.' Salome replied, 'As the Lord my God lives, if I do not insert my finger and examine her condition, I will not believe that the virgin has given birth.'

The midwife went in and said to Mary, 'Brace yourself. For there is no small controversy concerning you.' Then Salome inserted her finger in order to examine her condition, and she cried out, 'Woe to me for my sin and faithlessness. For I have put the living God to the test, and see, my hand is burning, falling away from me.'⁷

The hapless Salome then prays to God that she will not be shamed for her unbelief, and her hand is healed by her lifting and holding the infant Christ.

Through the centuries, Catholic visionaries, such as St. Bridget of Sweden (1303-73),⁸ Mary of Ágreda (1602-65),⁹ or Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824),¹⁰ have received visions of the Nativity being enacted and, whilst there is great variation in the detail that the different visionaries provide, they still retain elements described in this ancient text. They do not usually include Salome's anatomical investigation, but they do attest to the reality of the *in partu* virginity.

My own exegesis of the narrative in the Protevangelium is that it is concerned principally to show the divinity of Christ: who but God

⁷ Protevangelium 19(2)-20(1), in Ehrman and Pleše, *Apocryphal Gospels*, pp.63-65.

⁸ *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations*, trans. Albert Ryle Kezel; Classics of Western Spirituality series, (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 'Revelations' VII. 21, p.203.

⁹ Sister Mary of Jesus: *Mystical City of God* Vol.2: *The Incarnation* (trans. Fiscar Marison), [Tan Books] 1902, II.X, 472-478, pp.393-401.

¹⁰ *The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary from the Visions of Anne Emmerich*, transcribed by Clemens Brentano; translated by Michael Palairot; ed. Sebastian Bullough, (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1970 [Burns & Oates, 1954]), Ch.X, pp.119-121.

could transcend bodily boundaries in this incomprehensible way? Through the ages, however, the *in partu* virginity became a standard aspect of Christian belief, and a part of the Church's official teaching,¹¹ and reflection on it has often focussed as much on Mary's purity as it has on the Incarnation. The doctrine has also been associated with other spiritual concerns, such as the reversal of the curse upon Eve, whereby she was condemned to have pain in childbirth;¹² and there is evidence that belief in Mary's painless childbearing has contributed to her popular role as the helper of women in labour.¹³ Implicit in the doctrine, however, is something that seems to me to be at the heart of Christian anthropology and the doctrine of creation more widely, namely, that human persons and relationships can be conformed to the likeness of God.¹⁴

Many readers will be familiar with the fifteenth-century carol whose first stanzas are:

There is no rose of such virtue
As is the rose which bare Jesu: *Alleluia*.
For in that rose containèd was
Heaven and earth in little space: *Res miranda*.¹⁵

This is a mystical poem, by which I mean that it has a spiritual meaning that is both hidden behind, and disclosed through, a symbolic text. The 'rose' is evidently the Virgin Mary, since it is she in whom heaven and earth were contained when she was pregnant with Jesus, the Creator of the universe, in whom all things have their being: truly a 'res miranda', a marvellous thing. A part of the song whose meaning is less clear, however, is the following stanza that begins:

By that rose we may well see
That He is God in Persons three.

For how is it that the mother of Christ can reveal the truth of the Blessed Trinity? The poem implies that we can come to know this truth through contemplating Christ's birth and Incarnation.

¹¹ E.g., The Tome of Pope Leo, included in the documents of the Council of Chalcedon (451). DEC, Vol.1, p.77.

¹² Reynolds, *Gateway to Heaven*, pp.80-81, on Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose and Augustine.

¹³ Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On nature and gender in the cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Cassell, 2000), pp.192-196.

¹⁴ The following section includes material from Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp.52-55.

¹⁵ 'Trinity Carol Roll', MS O.3.58, Trinity College, Cambridge. Widely reproduced in books of carols and medieval poetry.

Another fifteenth-century carol, ‘Make We Joy’,¹⁶ perhaps gives slightly more of a clue as to how the mystery of Christ’s birth may reveal that of the Trinity. The song begins with its Christmas refrain:

Make we joy now in this feast
In quo Christus natus est. [In which Christ is born.]

The first verse then begins:

A Patre unigenitus [Of the Father sole-begotten]
 Through a maiden is come to us.

Verses four and five conclude the carol as follows:

Maria ventre concipit, [Mary conceived in her belly]
 The Holy Ghost was ay her with:
 In Bethlehem yborn he is,
Consors paterni luminis: [Consort of the Father’s light:]

O lux beata, Trinitas! [O blessed light, Trinity!]
 He lay between an ox and ass,
 And by his mother, maiden free.
Gloria tibi, Domine! [Glory to you, Lord!]

Note the pairing of the heavenly and the earthly – Mary’s body with the Holy Spirit, the light of the Trinity with the ox and ass, and so on. A parallel is being drawn here between Christ’s heavenly origin in his eternal Father, and his earthly origin in his human mother. This theme was common in the Christmas sermons of early Christian writers, and is often referred to as the ‘double nativity’. It is concerned with the paradox by which God the Son, who is eternally begotten, or ‘born’, of God the Father, is at the same time the mortal son of Mary, conceived and born of an earthly woman. In ‘Make We Joy’, it is this dual character to Christ’s sonship which means that the contemplation of Christ’s nativity is the occasion for revelation of the Trinity. Mary conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit, and the child who is born of this conception is only-begotten of the Father and of one substance with the Father. The consubstantiality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is, of course, the meaning of the reference to the Trinity as ‘light’: as a flame that is lit from another flame does not diminish, or in any other way alter, the flame that is its source, so the Son’s generation from the Father, and the Holy Spirit’s procession from the Father and the Son, do not bring about any change in any of the three Persons. So the Father is not altered by the generation of the Son.

Christ being the son of Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit, reveals to the world Christ’s eternal sonship of the divine Father.

¹⁶ MS Selden B.26, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Reproduced in many books of Christmas carols.

For Mary's motherhood is, in effect, the created counterpart to the Fatherhood of the First Person of the Trinity. She is the human parent to the Son of whom God the Father is the eternal parent, and the human mother's relationship to her son is the earthly image of the divine Father's relationship to that same Son. And this is surely one part of the meaning of Mary's *in partu* virginity, and, indeed, of her threefold virginity – before, during and after childbirth. For just as the eternal Son goes forth from the Father without any change occurring (as 'light from light'), so the earthly son goes forth from his mother without inflicting any change upon her either. The earthly nativity is thus the closest possible image of the heavenly one, through the agency of the Holy Spirit; and it is thus that 'by that rose we may well see, there be one God in Persons three'.

The Mother of God, then, takes on a God-like character. She is 'perfect as her heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5.48); and it is this perfection which God wills to accomplish in all humanity and, through humanity, all creation. This perfecting of the world is the process of deification, or *theosis*.

At this point, I should make it clear that I am not claiming that the author of the Protevangelium of James was consciously thinking of the state of deification, and of Mary as its primary exemplar – although it is possible that that was the case – and neither am I making such a claim for the authors of the fifteenth-century English carols. What I am saying is that the widely popular belief in Mary's miraculous childbearing is, as it were, pregnant with the idea that she is deified; and, as with all Marian doctrines, what is being said about her is a sign and guarantee of what God intends for all creatures.

Deification

Let us look, then, at the doctrine of deification. I draw here on the writing of John Scotus Eriugena, the great ninth-century Irish theologian. In addressing this question, Eriugena quotes Maximus the Confessor, whose work he had translated and which greatly influenced Eriugena's own major work, the *Periphyseon*. According to Eriugena, all things come from God who is beyond being, and all things have been destined from the beginning to return to God, although God as the beginning and end of all things can never be immediately perceived by any creature, now or in eternity. The state of the blessed is to gaze upon the goodness, greatness, justice, truth, and so on, of God, and, by gazing on them, to come to reflect those same qualities. In this way, the creature becomes entirely a mirror to the being of God, and is thus united to him. The end to which all beings are moving, that is, perfect union with God, is the state of being fully deified. Eriugena characterises this state by quoting

Maximus: When you see light shining in air, all you see is the light: the air is invisible. Yet the air is fully present and is fully itself. Likewise, when a creature is fully deified, what you perceive in that creature is God alone. You do not notice the creature as such, yet the creature is still wholly present and fully itself.¹⁷ This is the state of the saints in Heaven, and it is what endows them with a special power of intercession. Yet Eriugena tells us that it is sometimes possible for this state to be obtained even in this world, in space and time. The example that Maximus gives of someone who was deified whilst still living on Earth is Melchizedek, the priest of Salem.¹⁸ Later authors, however, did not hesitate to ascribe this condition to the Mother of God.

The fourteenth-century Bishop of Constantinople, Theophanes of Nicaea (†1381), wrote a stunning treatise on the Mother of God,¹⁹ in which he associates her own deification with that of all other people. He sees deification as the purpose for which God created the universe, and says it is accomplished through the Incarnation, in which God unites the creation to himself. This is given in the work's very title:

Discourse of Theophanes, Bishop of Nicaea, on Our Lady, the most holy and immaculate Mother of God, celebrating in a thousand ways her ineffable and divine greatnesses, and in order to show also, that in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God, there is a joining and conjunction of God with all creation, which is the supreme good and final cause of beings.

The created agent of the Incarnation is, of course, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and it is in her that we see the state of deification most perfectly accomplished. Describing Mary's relationship to God the Father, he says that the greatest thing about this mystery is that the Divine Son is common to both the Eternal Father and the Virgin Mother. Both can say of the Person of the Word, 'Our Son is this beloved only child, "fruit of our entrails"'. For the Father, this fruit comes from his love; for the Mother, from her flesh.²⁰ But he goes

¹⁷ Iohannis Scotti Eriugena *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)*, Book 1 [Latin text with English translation], ed. I.P. Sheldon-Williams with Ludwig Bieler, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968), pp.52-57; Maximus the Confessor: *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, Vol.1, Greek text and English translation by Nicholas Constan (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 7 (26-27), pp.110-115.

¹⁸ Maximus, *On Difficulties*, 20a. (42-46), pp.212-221.

¹⁹ Martin Jugie, ed., *Theophanes Nicaenus, Sermo in Sanctissimam Deiparam* [Greek text with Latin translation] (*Lateranum* I, NS 1935).

²⁰ Jugie, *Theophanes, Sermo*, p.93.

on to say that, in the heart of the Mother, the love of the subsistent Father is transfused.²¹ He writes:

The union of the Son with his Mother is, beyond being natural, divine; and in this sense, the work of the Son and the Mother is one, which – divine and uncreated as it is – surpasses all other natural operation of the soul to give unity to the members [that is, the Son and the Mother]. But we also, in the final restoration of the universe, will have, through Mary, one sole operation joined to God, as the saints teach.²²

Theophanes does not seem to have written any other substantial work on the Mother of God, and I think that what he presents here is an explication of the Mariology of the ordinary faithful in fourteenth-century Constantinople. Yet it seems to me that Theophanes in fact gives a good account of the implicit Mariology of the ordinary faithful of many times and places in the Church of both the East and the West.

So when I say that the Mariology of the ordinary faithful is a theology of deification, what I am saying is that it presents the Blessed Virgin as completely transparent to the presence of God, as air is to light. When Mary gives birth to the Son of God without loss of her virginity, she is not only the image of God the Father begetting the same Son, but more than this: for if the Second Council of Nicaea, in its ruling on the use of images, says that the image possesses the properties of its original,²³ then what happens in Mary's giving birth to Christ is a representation so perfect that what we should perceive in it is entirely the action of the Blessed Trinity.

Nevertheless, my own experience of teaching Mariology leads me to think that many devout Catholics in modern Britain find the doctrine of the *in partu* virginity difficult to understand or accept. It seems to me that this is because we have forgotten the unimaginable glory to which God's sons and daughters have been called, and to which Mary's virginity will bear witness if we will only see the world through the eye of faith. Eschatology is not an optional extra in the Christian life, and it should infuse both our spirit and our intellect. Without it, we are not fully the *fideles* and, in this respect, we have much to learn from the earlier generations, whose writings I have been quoting thus far.

Indeed, it can plausibly be argued that all the Church's major teachings about Mary are eschatological: that is, that they are concerned, to one degree or another, with the world's deification, and that they have come about, at least in part, as a consequence of popular practice. Certainly, there is little doubt that the doctrines of the

²¹ Jugie, *Theophanes, Sermo*, p.94.

²² Jugie, *Theophanes, Sermo*, p.93.

²³ DEC Vol.1, p.136.

Divine Motherhood, Assumption and Immaculate Conception have given voice to the *sensus fidelium*,²⁴ and it is to the Immaculate Conception that I want now to return.

The Revelation to Bernadette Soubirous

It is evident that to ‘be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect’, that is, to be deified, will mean being free of all sin, since sin is imperfection and is what tarnishes the image of God in us. Mary’s conception without original sin means that she has not been purged of the sin of Adam and Eve, but preserved from contracting it. Since the church also teaches that she never committed any actual sins during her lifetime, this aspect of deification is accomplished in her to the highest degree. I shall now examine one aspect of the theology of the Immaculate Conception, and look at its expression in one manifestation of popular Catholic devotion, namely, in pilgrimage to Lourdes.

When Eadmer wrote his Tractate on the Conception of St. Mary, as I have already said, he was writing to defend the practice of celebrating the Feast of her Conception. The principal theological objection to the feast was that any human conception that comes about through sexual intercourse will be tainted by the stain of original sin. Therefore, to celebrate Mary’s conception was, according to the objectors, to celebrate a sinful act. Theologians generally agreed that the Blessed Virgin would have been sanctified in the womb, during her mother’s pregnancy, and thus would have been sinless at birth, but some were concerned that it was wrong to celebrate her conception, since, in sexual intercourse, Mary’s parents must have transmitted original sin to their daughter. Therefore, those who wished to defend the feast had to show that Mary’s conception was an exception to this general rule – that it was immaculate.

While the debate continued amongst theologians for some centuries, the celebration of the feast spread very widely during the high and later Middle Ages, being observed in very many dioceses and religious orders, and being officially espoused by other institutions, such as the University of Oxford and the royal courts of Castille and Aragon. The decision in favour of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception had, to all intents and purposes, been won before the end of the seventeenth-century, and it was only the opposition of some Dominican theologians that kept the disagreement running for as long as that. Pope Pius IX’s proclamation of the dogma in 1854

²⁴ For the Divine Motherhood, see Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), pp.205-228.

was partly political and partly theological, but was not the resolution of a dispute, because the dispute had already been settled.²⁵

As is well known, in 1858, four years after the dogma was proclaimed in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, a girl named Bernadette Soubirous, from the town of Lourdes, in the French Pyrenees, had a series of visions of a lady in white. On 11 February, Bernadette went with other girls to collect firewood in the grotto of Massabielle. According to local folklore, this was a place inhabited by fairy-folk (*hadassas*, or *fatas*, in the local dialect). While the girls were there, Bernadette suddenly entered into a trance-like state. Afterwards, she described having seen something white in a hollow of the cliff, and having heard the apparition speaking. One of Bernadette's companions referred to the apparitional figure as 'your white lady'; and 'white lady' was a term sometimes used to refer to a fairy. Moreover, it was believed that a fairy could be the manifestation of a Christian saint.

Bernadette went on to have a sequence of visions at the grotto over the next couple of weeks, and those local people who were willing to believe in the veracity of the apparition discussed the possible identity of the 'white lady'. Some suggested she might be a ghost, and others that she might be a deceased relative who had come with a message for the living. Bernadette's aunt, Bernarde, seems to have been the first to suggest that the apparition might have been the Virgin Mary. Eventually, under pressure from others, Bernadette asked the apparition who she was. As is well known, the answer she received was, 'I am the Immaculate Conception.' After this, the apparition instructed Bernadette to dig in the ground. She dug in the mud with her hands, and uncovered a spring which was soon attributed with properties of healing.²⁶

After Bernadette's visions had eventually received official recognition from church authorities, Pope Pius IX took the vision's statement that she was the Immaculate Conception as confirmation not only of the truth of the dogma, but also of his authority to make dogmatic pronouncements without reference to a Church council. Indeed, at the first Vatican Council, the words spoken to Bernadette, 'I am the Immaculate Conception', were cited in support of the doctrine of papal infallibility, since they seemed to confirm the truth of the dogma that had been proclaimed four years previously. In the words that Bishop Ullathorne is reputed to have spoken, 'The Pope said to Our

²⁵ Sarah Jane Boss, 'The Development of the Doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception', in Sarah Jane Boss, ed., *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London and New York: Continuum and OUP, 2007), pp.207-235.

²⁶ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), pp.23-82; Thérèse Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes: Her life, death and visions* (London: Continuum, 2003).

Lady, “You are immaculate,” and Our Lady said to the Pope, “You are infallible.” Yet what Bernadette’s vision said was not, ‘I am the Virgin Mary who was immaculately conceived’, but, more enigmatically, ‘I am the Immaculate Conception’. This strange locution has not received the close attention that it deserves, and I am going to consider it now in the light of one of the principal theological arguments in support of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

During the centuries of disagreement, a number of different arguments were advanced in favour of the Blessed Virgin’s having been conceived without original sin. One that became especially popular is as follows. In the debates over the ‘motive’, or reason, for the Incarnation, the one that tended to be favoured by Franciscans, amongst others (and which is widely held in the Eastern churches as well), is that the Incarnation was not, in the first instance, a response to human sin: it was not ordained primarily for the purpose of saving the world from Adam’s Fall. This was a secondary effect. The primary purpose was the fulfilment of God’s plan for creation – that the world should be brought to glory and perfection through union with him; and God’s uniting himself to the world in Jesus of Nazareth was the means by which this purpose would be accomplished. (We have just seen an example of this theology in the work of Theophanes.) So God ordained the Incarnation ‘from before the sin of Adam was foreseen’, that is to say, God intended that the Second Person of the Trinity would become incarnate in the particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, regardless of whether or not humanity sinned. If this was the case, some theologians argued, then the woman from whom the Eternal Word took flesh, that is, Mary, must have been ordained to be the Mother of God in the same act by which the Incarnation itself was predestined. That is to say, it was ordained from all eternity that the Son of God would take flesh from this particular woman. And if Mary was predestined to be the Mother of God ‘from before the sin of Adam was foreseen’, then her designation for that noblest of all creaturely offices must take priority over any subsequent human sinfulness. Mary’s creaturely perfection belongs to her eternally designated status as Godbearer, it cannot therefore be undermined by Adam’s temporal evil. Therefore, the Mother of God must have been conceived without original sin.

Now, that argument, as it stands, is an argument taken from disputations conducted in universities. However, the argument received enormous support from liturgical practice that would have been familiar to a very wide group of ordinary Christians over many centuries. From at least the eighth-century, the lections for the Office and Mass of the Blessed Virgin’s Nativity and Conception – as well as for her commemoration on Saturdays – were readings concerning the figure of Holy Wisdom. In Ecclesiasticus 24, Wisdom speaks, saying, ‘From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall

not cease to be.’ She goes on to talk about having ministered before the Lord in his Holy Tabernacle. Proverbs 8.22-31 also became standard for these feasts. This is the very beautiful passage in which, again, Wisdom is speaking. It begins, ‘The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his ways, the first of his acts of old’, and goes on to describe Wisdom’s presence with the Lord from before the foundation of the world. She says, ‘Ages ago, I was conceived . . . before the hills were brought forth’.

Although the primary referent for Holy Wisdom is Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the use of these readings in Marian liturgies quickly meant that the texts were applied by accommodation to the Blessed Virgin; and by the high Middle Ages, because the Church had authorised the use of these texts in Marian liturgies, it was taken for granted that they could refer to her directly. In popular devotional writing down to the time of Vatican II, Mary is straightforwardly identified with the Wisdom of God who was conceived and present in the mind of God from all eternity.²⁷

From eternity, then, the Blessed Virgin was conceived in the mind of God to be the Mother of God, and we read about this eternal conception in the Wisdom lections from Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus. Mary’s human conception by St. Anne was then the earthly instantiation of God’s eternal plan for her. God’s timeless mental conception became a temporal and bodily conception, immaculate because of its divine purpose.

Let us turn back now to the apparition granted to Bernadette Soubirous, later canonised as Saint Bernadette. The vision said, ‘I am the Immaculate Conception.’ This does not mean simply, ‘I am the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was conceived without original sin.’ It means something deeper and more mysterious than this. It means, ‘I am the perfect conception formed in the mind of God in eternity.’ The speaker is, indeed, the most immaculate of conceptions. Yet Bernadette’s apparition is simultaneously the flesh-and-blood Virgin Mary, Mother of God: she is the very image of Holy Wisdom, completely transparent to God’s presence. As the Book of Wisdom says of Wisdom, ‘She is the brightness of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God’s majesty, and the image of his goodness’ (Wis. 7.27). That image is used of Our Lady in devotional writing, and is found in the visual arts with reference to the Immaculate Conception,²⁸ where it also refers to the title ‘Mirror of Justice’, from the Litany of Loreto. To be a mirror to the divine names, or attributes, is what it is to be deified.

²⁷ Boss, ‘Development of the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception’.

²⁸ E.g., Juan Valdés Leal (1622-1690), *La Inmaculada*, National Gallery, London.

If we look more closely at the cult at Lourdes, we can see that the belief in, and aspiration to, deification is implicit in the whole practice of pilgrimage there. In the 1980s, an anthropologist, Andrea Dahlberg, studied three English pilgrimages to Lourdes, and observed how pilgrims saw the holiness of the place as a source of bodily healing: Mary's perfection can, as it were, be contracted in some measure by the devotee.²⁹

Yet we have already seen that, according to the classical theologians of deification, it is not only humanity, but, through humanity, all creation that is destined for this union with God. Traditionally, it has been said that the human person is a microcosm; that is to say, all aspects of creation are present in each human being. In particular, each man or woman is composed of both spiritual and bodily aspects. So when the Son of God was sent to draw all creation to its fulfilment, it was a human being that was chosen to be the object of this union. By uniting himself to humanity, the Word of God associated himself immediately with the animal, the vegetable, the mineral and the angelic realms, because all are present in humanity, and through humanity, all can therefore be drawn back to God and deified. And at Lourdes, the natural world really is treated as transparent to the presence of its maker.

The main focal point of pilgrimage to Lourdes is the grotto, where the sacred spring rises. The water is drunk from neighbouring taps, and used for bathing – especially the bathing of the sick – in the baths there. Pilgrims often touch and kiss the rock of the grotto, or wipe it with a cloth which they take away with them. So the rock, as well as the water, is seen as permeated with sacred power. St Bernadette reported that the apparition told her that people should go there in procession with candles, and candle-light processions are one of the principal activities that pilgrims take part in at the shrine. There are always candles burning there. So fire, water and earth are all part of the worship of God, and are seen as instruments of God's grace in the shrine's devotional practice. The element of air can be added to this, since the shrine's characteristic acts of worship and devotion take place out of doors.

Not only is the whole of creation signified in the cult at Lourdes, but also all conditions of humanity. The sick and disabled are given pride of place in liturgy and devotion, and the nineteenth-century basilica is constructed with great handsome, curved ramps for

²⁹ Andrea Dahlberg: *Transcendence of Bodily Suffering: An Anthropological Study of English Catholics at Lourdes* (London School of Economic and Political Science, PhD thesis, 1987), especially p.286. See also Boss, *Empress and Handmaid*, pp.149-150; Andrea Dahlberg, 'The Body as Principle of Holism: Three Pilgrimages to Lourdes', in John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, London: Routledge, 1991, pp.30-50.

transporting those whose ailments mean they have to travel in wheeled vehicles. Since the early days of the promotion of the shrine, diocesan pilgrimages have come to Lourdes from all over Catholic Europe and, nowadays, they come from further afield. The European pilgrimages themselves often include large numbers of people of Asian and African descent.

At Lourdes, then, all humanity and all creation is transfused with holiness, and it is not surprising that a centre-piece of the cult is the procession of the Blessed Sacrament. It is through the Son of God taking flesh from his mother that he unites himself to humanity and all creation; when the faithful receive that divine body and blood of Christ into themselves, they in turn progress in their own deification; and so it is that the veneration of the Body of Christ is a high point in a cult in which human bodies, along with fire, air, water, and rock, are all capable of becoming transparent to the presence of God – of both receiving and radiating God's sanctifying grace.

The doctrine of deification, as it is articulated by Maximus and Eriugena, gives a sense of what it means to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. The spiritual practices associated with the Mother of Christ tell us that she both exemplifies and assists others in this process. She is the inspiration and helper both of other human beings and of the whole of the cosmos, whose ultimate destiny is to return, perfected, to the God from whom they came.

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