

The Immaculate Conception, St. Thomas, and Blessed Pius IX

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I. Influences on St. Thomas vis-à-vis the Immaculate Conception

AS ST. PAUL endured the mysterious thorn in his flesh, so Thomism over the centuries has borne the pain of St. Thomas's apparent denial of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The great doctor was innocent of heresy when he took his position centuries before the dogma was defined. But when Blessed Pius IX in 1854 stated that the Blessed Virgin Mary "in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin,"¹ one knows there was a rather chastened silence among Aquinas's disciples. It was the one crucial area where they had to admit that their hero's reputation was tarnished.

It has ever been a matter of debate as to what Thomas himself—as distinct from Thomists—exactly taught with regard to the immaculate conception.² Three issues make the topic somewhat complicated. First of all, there is what we would recognize today as bad science of Thomas's notion of delayed animation by contemporary standards—that is, that the

¹ Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854).

² Thomas Heath, OP, "The Immaculate Conception," in *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 51 (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1969), appendix, 113.

human soul is infused into the flesh of the unborn baby sometime after conception, either forty or eighty days—which made the idea of an immaculate conception more or less nonsensical to him from the outset. Second, he in fact taught that Mary was cleansed from original sin while still in the womb and that she never committed an actual sin—mortal or venial. Third, many theologians argue that his view on the doctrine changed over time, as manifested in different works.

We will argue two points: first, that Aquinas's basic argument is against the idea of the Immaculate Conception, but second, that his view of Marian sanctification is nonetheless close to the dogma as we have it. To do this, it will be necessary to review what he says about Mary's sanctification in his various works, doing so in chronological order. His view of the matter is more difficult to ascertain than one might think, and it will be useful to see the whole progression of his thought and reflect on its various expressions. Then it will be possible to summarize and evaluate what he actually taught, taking into account the trajectory of his speculations on the subject and using as a touchstone the reflections of some latter-day Thomists.

Thomas's Opinions Reviewed

The first work to look at is Thomas's *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*. He composed this commentary on the famous work of Peter Lombard during his first inception as a bachelor of theology in Paris from 1256–1257.³ He deals with the question of Mary's sanctification in the third distinction of the third book of the *Sentences*.⁴ There he asks whether Mary could have been sanctified before animation. The very basis for this question is his belief in delayed animation, which entailed that the embryo had first a vegetative soul, then a sensitive (or animal) soul, then finally the intellectual soul, which superseded the others and performed their functions.⁵ He concluded that since the human soul is closer to God than the body and “the virtue that is given by another agent comes through those things which are closer to it thence to those which are the more distant,”⁶ there has to be an intellectual soul for sanctification to

³ Gilles Emery, OP, “Brief Catalogue of the Works of Saint Thomas Aquinas,” in Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press, 1996), 332.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis magistri Petri Lombardi*, ed. Maria Fabianus Moos, OP (Paris: Sumptibus P. Lethielleux, 1933), 96–108.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 118, a. 2, ad 2; and I, q. 76, a. 3.

⁶ *Scriptum super Sententiis*, bk. 3, d. 3, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 2 s.c. 1: “Sed virtus alicujus agentis prius pervenit ad ea quae sunt sibi propinquiora . . . per ea ad magis distantia.”

take place. The answer to the question then is no, sanctification cannot take place before animation by the intellectual soul.

Thomas then asks whether Mary was sanctified before her birth. To this the answer is yes. Moreover, she was not merely sanctified in the womb but totally cleansed from original sin and then never committed a sin of any kind. Here we already have a basic doctrine of Thomistic Mariology: Mary was immaculate—a view that Aquinas would never change—but she was not conceived immaculately because she was not fully human at the time of conception. His Mariology is very high, and it is obvious that by his denial of what he understands the immaculate conception to be, he has no intention of detracting from the preeminence of Mary's sanctification.

The key question remains: Was she sanctified at the instant of receiving her rational soul, whenever that was? This is crucial because the real crux of the solemnly defined dogma of the Immaculate Conception is that Mary was cleansed from sin from the first moment of her existence as a person. If Thomas held that she was immaculate at the instant of her soul's infusion, then he could be seen as having basically defended the dogma-to-be. His objection based on delayed animation would fade to insignificance. But his answer in the *Sentences* excludes this interpretation, for he argues bluntly that Mary could not have been free from original sin “in ipso instanti infusionis.”⁷

The reason Aquinas gives becomes a standard in his arguments against the immaculate conception in subsequent works: Everyone needs to be redeemed by Christ. If Mary's soul had been immaculate at the time of infusion, she would not have needed that redemption. He can see no way of saying that she was always free from original sin without claiming that she therefore was free from the necessity of redemption. Thus, along with delayed animation, we have another reason why Thomas rejects the doctrine, and it would seem then that in the *Super libros Sententiarum*, his first systematic treatise, he has clearly staked his position against the immaculate conception of Mary.

The next work we can look at is his *Compendium of Theology*, a brief doctrinal synthesis, which he probably wrote in Rome from 1265 to 1267.⁸ He treats the question of Mary's sanctification in chapter 224.⁹ Again Thomas argues that Mary was “free from every stain of actual sin—not only of mortal sin but of venial sin.” That she was moreover sanctified *in utero* can be deduced from the fact that this privilege, according to the Scriptures, was

⁷ Cf. *Scriptum super Sententiis, solutio II to quaestiumcula III* of this question, 99.

⁸ Torrell, *The Person and His Work*, 164–65, 328.

⁹ Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, trans. Cyril Vollert, SJ (St. Louis: Herder, 1947), 263–66.

given to two lesser saints—Jeremiah and John the Baptist—and it would not have been fitting for Mary to have been less favored than they. Here Aquinas again argues against the immaculate conception, first, because her conception, unlike Christ's, resulted from the commingling of the sexes, and second, as he has already said, because an immaculate conception would have precluded the need for redemption.

Following along in temporal sequence there is Aquinas's *Quodlibetal Questions*. It is in the sixth of these, written sometime in the years 1268 to 1272 at Paris, that Aquinas treats the immaculate conception. In question 5, article 1, he asks, "Whether it is licit to celebrate the feast of the Conception of Our Lady?"¹⁰ His answer is no, because the privilege of being conceived without original sin belongs to Christ alone. He uses the reference of Romans 5:12 to Adam—"in quo omnes peccaverunt"—as proof that original sin is universal. Then he gives the universal redemption argument: Even Mary needed Christ's redemption. As he does in various places, he references 1 Timothy 2:4, which speaks of Christ's salvation being for all.

What he says next is significant and unique to the *Quodlibetals*. Thomas admits that though the Roman liturgy and most local churches do not, there are some churches that do have a feast in honor of the Conception of Mary. Sensitive to the theological authority of the liturgy, he must offer possible reasons for why such a feast is permitted. The first is that, given that Mary was sanctified in the womb but after conception, one does not know when exactly the sanctification happened, so one simply celebrates the sanctification at the conception. The other, similar, explanation is that some believe that Mary was sanctified immediately after conception or animation—"cito post conceptionem"—so they celebrate her sanctification at that point. Neither of these does Thomas advance as his own view but only as possible excuses for those who celebrate the feast.

Thomas's treatment of the immaculate conception in the *Summa Theologiae* deserves special treatment as it summarizes his thought clearly. In the *tertia pars*, which was written in Paris and Naples from 1271–1273, question 27 concerns "The sanctification of the Blessed Virgin Mary." In article one, Thomas asks, "Was Mary sanctified before birth?"¹¹ Consistent with his earlier arguments he answers in the affirmative. His basic argument—identical to the one employed in the *Compendium*—is that she must have been sanctified in the womb because others were and a priori Mary

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibetal Questions*, ed. Raymundi Spiazzi, OP (Rome: Marietti, 1956), 122–23.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, "Our Lady"; cf. also Torrell, *The Person and His Work*, 147.

surpasses everyone in dignity and holiness. However, in the answer to the fourth objection, which is basically that a person could only be sanctified after birth, Aquinas specifically implies that Mary could only have been sanctified *post animationem*—"after the animation nothing prevents the child from being sanctified in the womb."¹² This passage and the one in his *Commentary on the Sentences* mark the only two times that Thomas explicitly treats the question of sanctification at the instant of animation, and in both he denies it.

In article two, Thomas asks whether Mary could have been sanctified before animation. His answer, of course, is no. The first reason is that an embryo (today's terminology) without a soul cannot be sanctified. The second reason is his familiar appeal to the universal redemption of Christ. Thomas sees the issue as a clash between an article of faith—everyone needs Christ for salvation—and then, a mere theological opinion. Logically, he is correct to reject the latter if it contradicts the former. But the real question is whether there is truly a conflict between the two. Only later in the history of theology—especially with Blessed John Duns Scotus—would it become clear how the two views could be reconciled.

In the reply to the second objection, Thomas's view of the matter is perhaps most clearly crystallized:

If the soul of the blessed Virgin had never contracted the stain of original sin, it would have diminished the dignity of Christ in his capacity as Savior of all. . . . But the blessed Virgin did indeed contract original sin, but was cleansed from it before her birth.¹³

Here Aquinas clearly states, in a work that represents a summary of his teaching and at a period that is late in his career, that Mary's soul, at least for a time, incurred original sin. This point is of prime importance because there are some Thomists who will try to finesse his various statements on the matter to argue that he never said this, but only that her flesh before animation had some relationship to original sin.

It is in two of his late works, *On the Angelic Salutation* and *On the Psalms*, both written around the same time as the *tertia pars*, that Aquinas presents his highest Mariology. In the former work he avows that Mary "was free from sin more than any other saint."¹⁴ Moreover she is higher than the angels on three accounts—her fullness of grace, her closeness to

¹² *ST* III q. 27, a. 1, ad 4.

¹³ *ST* III, q. 27, a. 2, ad 2.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *The Three Greatest Prayers*, trans. Lawrence Shapcote, OP (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1937), 30–32.

God, and her purity. Yet even here he states very clearly that Mary was conceived in original sin, though not born in it. Only Christ is conceived without it.

In his commentary on Psalm 45 (46 according to the Hebrew version) in *On the Psalms*, Aquinas relates the verse “God is in that city, she will not be overthrown, and he will help her at the dawning of the day” to Mary. She will not be “overthrown,” Aquinas says, because of her sinlessness: “The Virgin never sinned, neither mortally nor venially.”¹⁵ Aquinas makes a reference here to the Song of Songs 4:7: “You are all beautiful, and there is no stain of sin in you.” That God “will help her at the break of day” is seen as a reference to Mary’s sanctification in the womb. It is perhaps fitting in this, his last statement on Mary’s sanctification, that Aquinas speaks of her sinlessness as going back to her mother’s womb but, for the only time, makes no reference to his belief in her conception in original sin. He certainly does not defend the immaculate conception here but his silence on the issue is thought-provoking. Perhaps it shows a certain hesitancy in Thomas to oppose a doctrine that would, after all, be shown to be true.

From this survey of Aquinas’s thought on the immaculate conception it is clear why there is a notion among theologians that he made a mistake on this dogma-to-be. Yet there have been thinkers over the centuries, albeit a minority, who held that his teaching is actually compatible with the doctrine. While it is clear that Thomas did not affirm the dogma of the Immaculate Conception as now formulated, they claim that he did not deny it either. We think this is an incorrect judgment, although it is true that Aquinas’s opposition to the doctrine is vaguer and less forceful as he matures than is often supposed. In a sermon authenticated as genuine by Louis Bataillon, OP, of the Leonine Commission, but yet unpublished, Thomas had this to say about the Blessed Mother:

The human race was sick. “Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am sick; heal me” (Ps. 6:3). This sickness is a consequence of sin, and God wanted to apply the remedy of medicine. He acted as good physicians do. When good physicians want to offer their medicines, they use them first upon the worst sicknesses, that they might gain renown. The whole human race was sick, and in woman it would seem as if wholly corrupt, whence Solomon said: “I have found woman more bitter than death” (Eccl 7:26). Hence the Lord, wishing to offer his good medicine, offered it first to woman, that through woman it might be given to others. Whence in Sirach we read, “the speedy coming of a cloud is a medicine for all” (43:24), and Solomon said in his prayer: “The Lord

¹⁵ Ibid.

said that he would dwell in a cloud" (1 Kgs 8:12). In a cloud, that is, in the Blessed Virgin, is the salvation of the human race, because it was healed through her. Hence it says in Sirach: "in me is all the grace of the way and of the truth, in me all hope of life and of virtue" (24:25). And since the medicine for all is in that cloud, that is, in the Blessed Virgin, therefore the Apostle says: "let us then with confidence draw near the throne of grace, that we may obtain grace and mercy in seasonable aid" (Heb 4:16).¹⁶

This is certainly high Mariology and, at the same time, gives the basis for Mary's role in our salvation.

The chief ambiguity that Thomas's defenders seize upon is based on his view of delayed animation. Thomas argues repeatedly that sanctification at conception is impossible because there is no soul there to be sanctified. As the scholastic maxim has it: "A thing must be before it is such."¹⁷ For Aquinas, the real issue, therefore, is whether there was an immaculate animation. Was Mary sanctified at the moment she came to be as a human person? The defenders claim that Aquinas never denied this. But this ignores the obvious. First of all, on every occasion that Thomas uses the delayed animation argument—in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, the *Compendium*, and the *Summa*—he also uses the universal salvation argument; furthermore, he uses only the universal salvation argument in the *Quodlibetals* and in the *Angelic Salutation*. It was this argument therefore that he saw as the most cogent and relevant against the doctrine, not the easily disposed with delayed-animation argument.

Furthermore there are the two occasions where Aquinas explicitly states that Mary could not have been sanctified at the instant of animation—in the *Sentences* and in the *Summa* (III, q. 27, a. 1). Although he says it only twice, nowhere does he say otherwise. Moreover there is the remark quoted above from the *Summa* that Mary's soul was tainted, which obviously could only have been the case at animation. It is clear that at widely differing occasions during his career, both at the beginning and near the end, Thomas held the same opinion against immaculate animation.

A more subtle argument employed by Thomas's defenders on this issue involves admitting that Thomas taught that Mary contracted original sin. One then denies that he meant the stain of original sin, or original sin strictly speaking, rather some kind of tendency toward it from which she was instantaneously delivered. Fr. Urban Mullaney, writing at the height of neo-Thomist fervor in the 1950s, makes this argument in a lengthy article

¹⁶ We wish to thank Peter Kwasniewski of Gaming, Austria, for this timely quotation and translation.

¹⁷ Heath, "The Immaculate Conception," 111.

called “Mary Immaculate in the Writings of St. Thomas.”¹⁸ He says that, in Thomas’s thought, “there could be in one instant in time (1) the infusion of the soul into the fetus . . . ; (2) *some order* to sin in the person constituted . . . ; and (3) grace excluding sin from the person.”¹⁹ The rub is clearly in point two: What is “some order to sin”?²⁰ Fr. Mullaney argues that this is the tendency toward having original sin without actually having it.

We would argue that this view is actually an exercise of neo-Thomism—a development of *Thomistic theology* of the immaculate conception, but not a real exegesis of any text of Thomas. For Aquinas, original sin is essentially two-sided: the formal aspect, which is the deprivation of original justice; and the material aspect, which is concupiscence or the *fomes peccati* (tinder of sin).²¹ He never speaks of any third element—a “tendency” or an “order” to sin. In his writings you either have original sin or you do not. Moreover and to be especially blunt, he argues that Mary had the *fomes peccati* even after her sanctification, although it was rendered harmless by grace and Divine Providence.²² Aquinas clearly never said that Mary had only a tendency to original sin but not the thing itself.

Fr. Mullaney’s rationale is nonetheless worthwhile as a Thomistic account of the immaculate conception, if not literally Thomas’s account. One can argue like this: Mary was redeemed preventatively, according to the dogmatic definition. The preventative element means that one cannot say that she ever contracted original sin. But, on the other hand, she was *redeemed*: She is not some kind of pure creature outside the line of Adam. The latter view, which existed in the Middle Ages, would entail that Mary was not in the order of redemption. Indeed it was probably specifically what Thomas had in mind when opposing the doctrine.²³ Now it is commonly understood that the advantage Scotus had over Aquinas was that the Franciscan was able to envision anticipatory redemption for Mary.

¹⁸ Urban Mullaney, OP, “Mary Immaculate in the Writings of St. Thomas,” *Thomist* 17 (1954): 428–68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 449, emphasis added.

²⁰ It is also an issue whether Thomas ever said that Mary’s sanctification happened “in one instant of time” with her animation, as Mullaney asserts. In fact he seems to say the opposite on a number of occasions. In the *Quodlibetals*, he mentions this possibility as an excuse to justify the localized liturgical celebration of the conception of Mary, but he does not present this as his own view.

²¹ cf. *ST* I–II, q. 82, a. 3 and q. 81, a. 3, ad 2.

²² *ST* III, q. 27, a. 3. Only after the conception of Christ in her womb was she thoroughly cleansed of the *fomes peccati*.

²³ Lawrence Shapcote, OP, “St. Thomas and the Immaculate Conception,” quoted in Heath, “The Immaculate Conception,” 113.

But we would submit that this may not have been Aquinas's major block to accepting the immaculate conception. He did, after all, see Mary as being sanctified in anticipation of her role as Christ's mother. Rather, his trouble was in explaining this logical problem: *How could someone never tainted by sin have been redeemed from sin?* Indeed this is the real puzzle about the doctrine on which Mullaney's explanation, perhaps, sheds some light.

To avoid the two extremes—on the one hand, that Mary incurred original sin and, on the other, that she did not need to be redeemed—it seems necessary to say that Mary had some “order” to sin—that she would have incurred original sin had God not intervened “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race” (cf. *Ineffabilis Deus*). Something like this was the solution of the commentator Cajetan, who argued that Thomists could hold for the immaculate conception so long as they posited a “debt” of sin, as opposed to the stain or guilt of sin, in Mary.²⁴ Though not universally accepted, this was one way of explaining how someone who never incurred sin could yet be redeemed from it. Whatever the solution, one must acknowledge that the grace Mary had was a grace of redemption and not something utterly unlike what the rest of the Christian faithful receive.

In favor of those who defend Thomas, one can say that he is certainly not abundantly clear in his opposition to the immaculate conception. As noted, on the crucial issue of immaculate animation he makes statements in only two places, and in neither place is it his central point. It is not one of his articles in the *Summa*. There, his two major articles deal with sanctification before and after animation, but not really at animation. Although he touches on it in an objection, it is noteworthy that he does not face this crucial question head on. There is thus some justification for saying that Thomas never really treats of the immaculate conception, if one means by this that he did not directly, in a self-consciously central argument, address whether Mary was sanctified from the first moment of her existence as a human person. At most, he did this in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, but this was an early work and carries less authority than his later, more independent pieces.

There is even a measure of confusion in St. Thomas's arguments, which is remarkable in this clearest of all theologians. For instance, there are several places where Thomas denies the possibility of the immaculate conception but says nothing of animation. Since sanctification at conception of the

²⁴ E. D. O'Connor, “Immaculate Conception,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press, 2003), 334. Cajetan, *Commentarium*, in *Opera omnia Sancti Thomae Aquinatis*, Leonine ed. (Rome: Typographia Polyglotta, 1903), 291–92.

vegetable soul is metaphysically impossible for him, these are rather weak statements. Why does he not ask the question more pointedly? Then again, there are three places—the *Compendium*, the *Quodlibetals*, and *On the Angelic Salutation*—where he argues that not Mary but only Christ was conceived free from original sin. If conception is relatively unimportant compared to animation, why does he take pains to guard Christ’s “immaculate conception”?²⁵ Also, the two arguments that he uses against the immaculate conception in one article of the *Summa*—from delayed animation and from the universal need for redemption—are really arguments from entirely different, mutually independent perspectives. One is metaphysical and the other is soteriological. It seems that these could have been treated separately.

One then can say, at least, that Thomas does not argue strenuously and clearly that Mary was conceived in original sin. He has a notion that she had to be redeemed and that she was sanctified in the highest fashion. He does aver that her soul was tainted for a time, but he only says this obliquely. Even as he approached the topic, he seemed to shy away from it, perhaps sensing the truth of the dogma even as his mind could not quite find its way clear to embracing it.

It would in fact have been extraordinary for Aquinas to have argued for the immaculate conception. The very notion had hardly presented itself coherently by his time. Although we can say that their writings were compatible with it, none of the Western Fathers spoke specifically of an immaculate conception. Nearly all the masters of Aquinas’s day were opposed to the doctrine—Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter Lombard, Alexander of Hales, Albertus, Bonaventure.²⁶ Although, as mentioned above, there was in some places a feast of the Conception of Mary, this was a case of piety preceding theology in embracing a doctrine. In Aquinas’s time the immaculate conception was still very much a concept whose theological formulation was undeveloped. It is perfectly possible that his opinion would have been more positive had his career coincided with a later stage in doctrinal development.

Conceding that St. Thomas did not argue for the immaculate conception, what can be said in a positive way concerning his theology of Marian

²⁵ It would seem that he is being inconsistent in his use of the term “conception.” Perhaps on the occasions he mentions Christ’s conception and in the instances where he speaks of Mary’s conception without mentioning her animation, he is using the term broadly to connote the whole process of coming to be as a person, which would include conception strictly so-called and then animation. In any case, he does not make extremely clear distinctions in these passages.

²⁶ Shapcote, “St. Thomas and the Immaculate Conception,” 113.

sanctification? Aquinas held that Mary was cleansed from original sin in her mother's womb and that she yet was redeemed by Christ. This is in fact the teaching of the Church as it was later developed if one includes the *caveat* that Mary was "cleansed" in an anticipatory way, not from any stain of sin actually incurred. On the specific question of whether she was sanctified in the very instant of her coming to be as a human person he seems to have erred, but even then his opposition is stated very mildly and he seems not to have focused his intellectual abilities in attacking the idea of an immaculate animation. On the issue of the immaculate conception, Aquinas is not perfect, but given the freedom he had in the absence of a dogmatic definition and the preponderance of theological argumentation against the doctrine, his is a thought-provoking and largely beneficial contribution.

II. Another Problem: Understanding What the Immaculate Conception Means

To appreciate the meaning and significance of Mary's immaculate conception, the theologian or the preacher also needs to understand several faith issues before looking at this datum of faith. They are: original justice, the consequences of original and personal sin on the human person, and sanctifying and actual grace (helping grace or assisting grace is the terminology used by St. Thomas Aquinas).²⁷ With these thoughts in mind, Mary's immaculate conception shines out even more clearly.

"Original justice" and "resplendent grace" are phrases used in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to describe the state of the first parents, Adam and Eve (nos. 376, 54). Based upon the tradition of the Church's teachers and following St. Thomas Aquinas,²⁸ it consisted of sanctifying grace, a mind and will totally in union with God such that the body, the emotions were in sync with the will and intellect because the spiritual faculties, being in union with God through sanctifying grace, kept perfect control of the emotions and instincts for food and sex. In addition, the first parents possessed freedom from suffering and death and from any slavery to Satan or the devil.

After the fall from grace through an act of disobedience, the proto-parents lost sanctifying grace (CCC, no. 399), original justice (CCC, no. 400), and the freedom from pain and death (CCC, no. 405). Further, they became more influenced by the devil's temptations (CCC, no. 407). However, they and their offspring were promised a Redeemer who would

²⁷ Cf. *ST* I, q. 62, a. 2; *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, ch. 72b.

²⁸ Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 82, aa. 1-4.

save them from the chaos but on his terms (CCC, no. 410). However, there are outcomes, the first of which affects the human mind:

The human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin. So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful. (CCC, no. 37, quoting Pius XII, *Humani generis*, no. 2)

Likewise, the other consequences of original sin are summarized in the *Catechism*. Control of the body by the spirit is shattered, union with others and lower created beings of nature is broken, and death comes into play (no. 400). Humans now, unlike Adam and Eve's prior situation before their sin, are drawn toward sin (CCC, nos. 401, 403, 405) and also the natural powers of intellect and will are wounded in some way (CCC, no. 405). Finally, the devil himself has acquired a certain but limited dominion over man (CCC, no. 407).

To be freed from all these consequences takes a lifetime, a physical death with a probable period of suffering in purgatory, and a final resurrection from the dead. While in this life sanctifying grace is given to children and to adults according to the measure of divine providence. Human nature has a disposition for grace, according to St. Thomas, even though it contains the wounds of original and personal sin. Sin diminishes this capacity for grace in human nature. This why St. Thomas reminds us that:

Since all children are equal at baptism, because they are baptized not in their own faith but in that of the Church, baptism has the same effect for all of them. Adults, on the other hand, who approach baptism through their own faith, are not equal. Therefore some receive more and others less of grace of new life, just as the one who draws more closely receives more warmth from a fire, even though the fire, of itself, radiates its heat to all in equal fashion.²⁹

Baptism does not restore the original justice of Adam and Eve but gives sanctifying grace to those disposed to receive it. Human nature is not all that it should be, thereby limiting grace's reception especially because of the inclination to sin, among other defects, flowing from original sin.

²⁹ ST III, q. 69, a. 8, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 62, ed. and trans. James J. Cunningham, OP (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1975).

*Immaculate Conception Primarily But Not Exclusively:
A Reality of Nature*

The numbers in the *Catechism* that touch upon the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary are numbers 490–494. In them we find the ancient and venerable teaching concerning Mary’s fullness of grace (no. 490), her redemption at her very conception (no. 491), her freedom from every personal sin (no. 492), and her constant obedience to the will of God (no. 493). These numbers reflect the living tradition of the Catholic Church.

However, theologians need to make more precise what the Immaculate Conception is in itself. While it is not the same reality as the fullness of grace, as will be shown, it was a gift that came together with the fullness of grace. It is similar to confession and absolution of sins, that is, at the same time, forgiveness of sin and the infusion of grace come together, yet they are distinct outcomes. However, the restoration of grace may or may not be as intense before one needed the sacrament to alleviate grave sin, depending upon one’s disposition. There are degrees of sorrow and degrees of penance.

Likewise, in Mary, her Immaculate Conception and her fullness of grace are also distinct yet completely united. For the sake of piety, the many saints, such as St. Maximillian Kolbe, and the people of God in general conflate the two. Strictly speaking, however, Blessed Pius IX did not solemnly define Mary’s fullness of grace. He had no need to do this because it had never been seriously denied over the centuries. Even today, modern Scripture scholars remind us that the Greek word “kecharitomente” of Luke 1:28, spoken to Mary by the angel, which is translated either as “highly favored” or “full of grace,” is only used once in the entire Bible!

In order to understand the significance of both the Immaculate Conception and the fullness of grace of the Blessed Virgin Mary, it is also necessary to reflect, therefore, on the meaning of grace, and why human nature in its weakness creates an obstacle for and limits any possible increase of grace.

The word “grace” has many distinctions with its modifiers: sanctifying or divine life, actual grace, such as inspirations of the mind and heart. It can also mean any favor from God not immediately connected with the supernatural order. So being created is a grace, a gift of the natural order. Now, for sanctifying grace to come into adult souls at baptism, there has to be a disposition, namely, the desire to receive the sacrament, divine faith, and sorrow for one’s past sins. The more one has sinned personally prior to baptism, the less suitable one becomes for receiving an abundance of either actual graces or sanctifying grace itself, unless God has

deeply prepared someone with actual graces prior to baptism and that person has cooperated with them. In fact, the natural good of human nature is an aptitude for grace, but sin, original or personal, while never totally corrupting it completely, still diminishes this aptitude.³⁰ Even after baptism the tendency to sin, called “concupiscence” since the Council of Trent (using St. Augustine’s terminology) and in the present Catechism (no. 405), still exists. This fact means that grace’s hold on the soul is in a weakened state. Thomas reminds us again that:

since our free will is of itself fickle, and its fickleness is not removed by the habitual grace of our present life, it has not the power even when restored by grace to keep itself immovably in the good, though it has the power to choose the good. For often the choice lies within our power, but not its realization.³¹

Some Confusions

From time to time, many Catholics have thought that the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was the virgin birth of Jesus or Mary’s birth as a virgin, which are mistakes and blunders of great proportion. But there seems to be another miscalculation on the part of the theologians and perhaps even an imprecise heading of *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as well. Both seem to conflate the Immaculate Conception with Mary’s fullness of grace; but, they are really distinct aspects, as nature and grace or even potency and act.

The clearest way to pinpoint the problem is to reread the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, to see exactly what Blessed Pius IX taught:

We declare, pronounce, and define: the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a *singular grace and privilege* of Almighty God, and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus, the Savior of the human race, *preserved immune from all stain of original sin*, is revealed by God and, therefore, firmly and constantly to be believed by all the faithful.³²

It has been common knowledge that when he came to the Latin word “declaramus,” Blessed Pius IX burst into tears and afterward the sun came

³⁰ Cf. *ST* I–II, q. 85, aa. 1–2; *De Anima*, 14, ad 17.

³¹ *ST* II–II, q. 137, a. 4, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 42, eds. and trans. Anthony Ross, OP, and P. G. Walsh, OP (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1966).

³² Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, emphasis added, cited in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, eds. and trans. J. Neuner, SJ, and J. Dupuis, SJ (New York: Alba House, 1996), no. 709, emphasis added.

out and shone through Bernini's window and cast a beam of light on him. Blessed Pius goes on to say that if anyone thinks otherwise "he has suffered shipwreck in the faith . . . separated from the unity of the Church . . . incurs penalties established by law."

What is interesting from a theological point of view is that he leaves out something that he could have easily put into the definition, that is, he could have said: We declare Mary "free from all stain of original sin and *given the fullness of grace*" (emphasis added). Was this lacuna a theological mistake on his part? Was this purposely left out so that theologians could debate the subject? It is interesting that he leaves it out of the definition but calls the Immaculate Conception "a singular grace and privilege." However, he does not explain the nature of this "singular grace" for clearly it is not simply sanctifying grace, nor a charism, nor an actual grace, but an external or negative grace, namely, a prevention of evil together with the infusion of sanctifying grace. That this grace is a certain "fullness" is a separate idea but based upon Mary's immaculate human nature.

As St. Thomas will say from time to time, "grace presupposes nature."³³ But nature is fallen except in Mary (and Jesus). Adam and Eve were also created without original sin. They committed the original sin. In addition, humans willingly sin, limiting the infusion of grace by their lack of a deep disposition or their desire for union with God, which can have many degrees in this life and the next. The purpose of understanding and living the spiritual life is to reorder nature's disorderly conduct and bad habits in order to grow in a desire for God and the things of God. When this process continues, then individuals become more and more open to God's grace and intimacy with him and thereby more readily do his manifest will with his help.

Original sin is first of all the absence of sanctifying grace that merits heaven, and secondarily, the negation of what was original justice, namely, a freedom from suffering, death, dullness of mind, and emotional and instinctual upheavals out of control with reason. How original sin is transmitted from person to person is undefined, the Church's official teaching merely indicates that it is transmitted at human generation and divine infusion of the soul. So, since Mary is spared from original sin, then her Immaculate Conception is the negation of a negation to her very nature, and therefore, must imply a perfect human nature with a certain receptivity to and abundance of sanctifying grace with a potential for growing in sanctifying grace beyond our imagining. In fact, Mary suffered and died, though neither teaching is solemnly defined but is

³³ Cf. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2 and q. 2, a. 2, ad 1.

taught by the liturgy and the ordinary magisterium. How can it be that since Mary's death was not defined the ordinary magisterium of the papacy taught it?

When the encyclical that solemnly defined Mary's Immaculate Conception was promulgated, titled *Munificentissimus Deus* by Pius XII,³⁴ within the document itself the Holy Father affirms that Mary died four different times.³⁵ He also refers to the liturgy's witness twice on this matter,³⁶ and gives the teaching of St. John Damascene,³⁷ St. Germanus of Constantinople,³⁸ Amadeus of Lausanne,³⁹ St. Francis de Sales, and St. Alphonsus Liguori,⁴⁰ who all agree that Mary died. He makes their teaching his own. Further, it should be noted that the definition of her Immaculate Conception does not say she received the fullness of grace, but it is understood to be so as we can see from the first paragraph of *Ineffabilis Deus* of Blessed Pius IX where he speaks of Mary's "fullness of holy innocence and sanctity."⁴¹

The *Catechism* teaches quite clearly that Mary's Immaculate Conception implies the fullness of grace when it says:

The "splendor of an entirely unique *holiness*" by which Mary is "enriched from the first instant of her conception" comes wholly from Christ: she is "*redeemed*, in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son." The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person "in Christ with *every spiritual blessing* in the heavenly places" and chose her "in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love." (no. 492, emphasis added)

Yet, strictly speaking, only possessing the privilege of the Immaculate Conception does not yet make her all holy. Something else is needed:

The Fathers of the Eastern tradition call the Mother of God "the All-Holy" (*Panagia*) and celebrate her as "free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature." *By the grace of God*, Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long. (no. 493, emphasis added)

³⁴ See www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius12/P12MUNIEHTM.

³⁵ See nos. 5, 14, 20, 40 of the encyclical letter.

³⁶ See nos. 17, 18.

³⁷ See nos. 21, 22.

³⁸ See no. 22.

³⁹ See no. 28.

⁴⁰ See no. 35.

⁴¹ See www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9ineff.htm.

Here we can say that the particular “grace of God” that kept Mary free of every personal sin had to be intrinsic: actual graces throughout her life, which were given in light of something else, namely, her supreme mission on earth as the Mother of God, together with her fullness of grace, which would be the expression of what theology calls “*gratia elevans*.”⁴² The *Catechism* further remarks:

The Holy Spirit prepared Mary by his grace. It was fitting that the mother of him in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” should herself be “*full of grace*.” She was, by sheer *grace*, conceived without sin as the most humble of creatures, *the most capable* of welcoming the inexpressible gift of the Almighty. It was quite correct for the angel Gabriel to greet her as the “Daughter of Zion”: “Rejoice.” It is the thanksgiving of the whole People of God, and thus of the Church, which Mary in her canticle lifts up to the Father in the Holy Spirit while carrying within her the eternal Son. (no. 722, emphasis added)

Again, we find a hint of why the “Immaculate Conception” is to be distinguished conceptually from the “fullness of grace.” The second sentence in this number teaches that her immaculate conception was a sheer grace that prepared her to receive the fullness of sanctifying grace when it says she was “the most capable of welcoming the inexpressible gift of the Almighty.”

A final section of the *Catechism* also gives us another deep insight into the definition when it says:

In Mary, the Holy Spirit manifests the Son of the Father, now become the Son of the Virgin. She is the burning bush of the definitive theophany. *Filled with the Holy Spirit* she makes the Word visible in the humility of his flesh. It is to the poor and the first representatives of the gentiles that she makes him known. (no. 724, emphasis added)

Now, the next question jumps out: Could Mary have been filled with the Holy Spirit without the Immaculate Conception? It does not seem possible according to St. Thomas. First, in his *Summa* we find an objection concerning the meaning of “fullness of grace”:

It would seem that the fullness of grace is not proper to Christ. For what is proper to anyone belongs to him alone. But to be full of grace is attributed to some others; for it was said to the Blessed Virgin (Lk 1:28): “Hail, full of grace”; and again it is written (Acts 6:8): “Stephen,

⁴² *De veritate*, 18, 1, ad 1.

full of grace and fortitude.”Therefore the fullness of grace is not proper to Christ.⁴³

Like so many of his objections, they seem to close the door to certain well-established beliefs or ideas. But then, Thomas surprises us in his reply:

The Blessed Virgin is said to be full of grace, not on the part of grace itself—since she had not grace in its greatest possible excellence—nor for all the effects of grace; but she is said to be full of grace in reference to herself, that is, inasmuch as she had sufficient grace for the state to which God had chosen her, that is, to be the mother of his only begotten. So, too, Stephen is said to be full of grace, since he had sufficient grace to be a fit minister and witness of God, to which office he had been called. And the same must be said of others. Of these fullnesses one is greater than another, according as one is divinely pre-ordained to a higher or lower state.⁴⁴

This fullness of grace is unique to Mary because it is received by someone whose capacity for the reception of sanctifying grace is not limited by original sin. Original justice, in part, is restored in her very nature. And even though this fullness of grace and being “filled with the Holy Spirit” are also profoundly distinct yet united, still, Mary would continue to grow in grace in ways we cannot and will never imagine or grasp, being outside the bounds of created intelligence. In other words, Mary’s Immaculate Conception is like an active potency, in that she was immediately and instantly capacitated to receive a superabundance of grace. She is like a potential galaxy that grace filled and deepened again and again with new splendors as she cooperated with the providence of God and the actual graces that came her way. She lived a simple life externally, seldom spoke and then very simply from what we read in the Gospels. What went on within her depths only saints can fathom but it did not mean a lesser love, compassion, or closeness to all of us but, strangely, brought her closer to us even now since that is the nature of mercy, the consequence of divine love in anyone’s soul on earth or in heaven.

St. Thomas Aquinas was neither a defender nor a dissenter from the Immaculate Conception, as we have seen, as it was eventually defined and explained in the encyclical, though some of his insights helped along the way to formulate the Church’s teaching. He did come close to one aspect of the consequence of her immaculate conception, that is, the truth of

⁴³ ST III, q. 7, a. 10, obj 1, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

⁴⁴ ST III, q. 7, a. 10, ad 1.

Mary's fullness of grace, even though he argued against certain misunderstandings of the Immaculate Conception of his day. He had this to say about her fullness of grace in his sermon *On the Angelic Salutation*:

Grace overflowed into her body. The Blessed Virgin was full of grace as regards the overflow of grace from her soul into her flesh or body. For while it is a great thing in the saints to be endowed with grace that their souls are holy, the soul of the Blessed Virgin was so full of grace that it overflowed into her flesh, fitting it for the conception of God's Son. Thus Hugh of St. Victor says, "the Holy Spirit had so kindled in her heart the fire of divine love that it worked wonders in her flesh, yea, even so that she gave birth to God made man." And St. Luke says, "For the Holy One that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Lk 1:35).

Grace overflows from her onto all mankind. So full of grace was the Blessed Virgin, that it overflows onto all mankind. It is indeed, a great thing that any one saint has so much grace that it is conducive to the salvation of many; but it is most wondrous to have so much grace as to suffice for the salvation of all mankind. Thus it is in Christ and in the blessed Virgin. So in every danger you can find a refuge in this same glorious Virgin: "A thousand bucklers" (that is, protections from peril) "hang therefrom" (Can 4:4; RSV = Song 4:4). Likewise, you may obtain her assistance in every virtuous deed; "In me is all hope of life and virtue."

She is therefore, full of grace, surpassing the angels in that plenitude. For this reason she is rightly called Mary, which signifies that in herself she is enlightened ("The Lord will fill thy soul with brightness," Is 58:11) and that she enlightens others throughout the world. Thus she is compared to the sun and the moon.⁴⁵

Today, as a result of Pius IX's solemn definition, we know what Thomas did not know from the official teaching of the Church of his period in history—namely, that none of this plenitude of grace would have been given to her, nor have grown intensely within her, had she not been created together with the great gift of the immaculate conception, preventing her from receiving the wounds of original sin.

This is why no other human can receive the fullness of grace no matter how well they prepare themselves, even though the crosses of life can purify someone from many effects of original and personal sin. If anyone cooperates with the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and more intensely acts from divine charity, he or she will become more apt to receive an increase of sanctifying grace from Jesus Christ. But Mary, unlike the rest of all

⁴⁵ *The Aquinas Catechism*, St. Thomas Aquinas (Manchester, NH: Sophia Press, 2000), 165–66.

Christians, did not need any healing or purifying graces at all, being preserved from the “stain of original sin,” and never throughout her life committed a venial sin. Venial sin also diminishes the capacity to grow in sanctifying grace.⁴⁶ Therefore, her advance in grace occurred each moment of her life on an upward swing, while our advance, given the fact that the just person sins seven times a day, is more erratic and gradual, if not downright slow. Even after confessing one’s sins in the sacrament of penance, someone may not necessarily receive the degree of grace he or she originally possessed because of the lack of intense sorrow for sin and desire to reform. Some few Christians, however, may actually return to grace with a greater intensity because of their deep sorrow for sin, caused by their cooperation with actual grace.⁴⁷

It is absolutely beyond doubt that the first and supreme reason Mary was given such a privilege of the Immaculate Conception and the fullness of grace was so that she would be readied for her own salvation and the mission of the divine maternity directly for ministering to Christ. Second, her role in the salvation of humankind was included in possessing such a privilege. Third, one should also deduce that she was given these gifts for her husband, St. Joseph, to enable their marriage to transcend all states of life and be “the summit from which holiness spreads all over the earth.”⁴⁸ In the work by John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, he develops some of these ideas in number 28 (section title, “The Model of the Virgin Mary”):

Mary, called “All beautiful,” is the human person who reflects most perfectly the divine beauty. . . . The relationship with Mary, which every Christian has from union with Christ, is even more pronounced in the life of consecrated persons and necessary for their individual and community progress. . . . She is the sublime example of perfect consecration since she belongs completely to God and is totally devoted to him. . . . Her life teaches unconditional discipleship and diligent service. . . . She is the model and mother of consecration to the Father, union with the Son, and openness to the Spirit. . . . A filial relationship to Mary is the royal road both to fidelity to vocation and to effective help for living it fully.

Could God have given anyone, other than Mary, the fullness of grace without the Immaculate Conception? To answer this question, a few distinctions are in order.

⁴⁶ *De Malo*, 7, 2, ad 4, 6, and 16.

⁴⁷ Cf. *ST* III, q. 89, a. 2.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos* (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1989), no. 7.

God gives a superabundant and quasi-infinite grace to Christ as Head of the Church; he gives to Mary a fullness appropriate to her high dignity as Mother of God and Mother of the Church; and he gives to Stephen or any other great saint a fullness appropriate to his place in the Mystical Body. Mary's fullness was "uniquely full" because her being did not have, and never had, any impediment whatsoever to the reception and outworking of grace. This fits into Thomas's schema, whereby Christ's soul is singularly full of grace because of the unique grace of the hypostatic union; then one can add, Mary's grace is singularly full for a created person because of the unique grace of the Immaculate Conception, which consecrates her person as entirely in its own order of being as the grace of union consecrates the human nature of Christ in its order of being; and finally, the other members of the Church are given grace according to the measure of the giving of Christ—first Apostles, then prophets, martyrs, and so on.

So, according to St. Thomas, God can do anything that is not a contradiction.⁴⁹ However, the degree of sanctifying grace given to human beings after initial grace is normally given to those who are so disposed to receive a higher degree of grace.⁵⁰ While it is a fact that God gives a greater intensity of grace to some rather than others, after initial grace much also depends on a person's cooperation with the actual graces of the Holy Spirit preparing the person for a "greater measure of grace."⁵¹

Writing about the question of sanctifying someone in the womb, Thomas clearly taught that Mary was given that "extraordinary privilege of grace," as was Jeremiah and John the Baptist.⁵² However, as we have already seen, this was not precisely the immaculate conception that rectified the human nature of Mary in an extraordinary way. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Thomas holds that Mary was given the fullness of grace as well as her sanctification in the womb. Neither Jeremiah nor John the Baptist were given this fullness. Had Aquinas known the solemn definition of the Immaculate Conception, he would have been more consistent in teaching about Mary's ability to possess the fullness of grace, since sanctification in the womb does not, of itself, prevent human nature from being wounded in some ways. Yet, Thomas did see clearly that Mary possesses grace almost beyond measure, sometimes referred by other theologians as "almost infinite": Believers should be grateful for this insight.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ScG* I, ch. 84; *ScG* II, chs. 22–23.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ST* I–II, q. 112, aa. 2–4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, ch. 224.

III. Conclusions

Thomas could have deduced a *convenientia* argument for the immaculate conception without in any way derogating from the primacy and salvific universality of Christ's redemptive work. But he would have had to contradict Bernard of Clairvaux and Albertus Magnus, among many others at the time. Moreover, Thomas might have seen that Mary could be perfectly full of grace *only if* she were perfectly free of all impediments to grace, for otherwise she would have necessarily failed in regard to some cooperation with grace, however minor or venial the issue. Thomas had the premises in his hand, but he failed to find the syllogism due to a lack in scientific discovery and the tradition against the immaculate conception as it was understood at the time.

Further, if our observations are correct, then Mary's fullness of grace stands out with such a bright light in Aquinas that it becomes easier to understand her role as Mediatrix, Redemptrix, and Advocate. It is grace that ultimately merits, redeems, and underpins one's relationship to the Church in heaven. If merit follows graced action and Mary is so filled beyond understanding with grace, then her moral actions become a deep source such that she merits not only for herself but also congruously for the rest of humankind. It also makes sense of why both Jesus and Mary conquered sin, death, and the devil—but she was a subordinate and secondary cause of our salvation under her son, since she is both preredeemed and does not possess the infinite grace of the hypostatic union.

Finally, the Immaculate Conception outfitted her being so richly as to be a perfect mirror image of her relationship to the Trinity as Mother of the God-Man, and also, to attain union or intimacy with the Father and the Holy Spirit that no other human person can reach. Finally, it becomes even clearer why she can be called the bride of the Holy Spirit by appropriation since she is full of his presence from her very beginning. **NV**