

What Came First? The Sequence of God's Grace in the Life of the Blessed Mother¹

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IN THE ORDINARY COURSE of Christian life, there are two different sequences one can follow in the order of grace. In the first case, that of infant baptism, sanctifying grace precedes any act of the will on the part of the individual himself, and later as the faculties of the soul develop the grace received in infancy extends its influence to intellect and volition. By contrast, in the case of adult conversion, antecedent grace working on the adult soul elicits assent of mind and heart which subsequently prompts the receipt of the saving graces of baptism.

The question I am interested in pursuing here regards which scenario is exemplified in the personal history of the Mother of God. Which comes first for Mary, sanctifying grace at conception, or actual grace to move the will in adulthood?

Of course in a chronological sense the Church has already answered this question, and answered it definitively, in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. From her first moments in existence, before any exercise of her rational powers, Mary enjoys that unique degree of participation in divine life which will remain uninterrupted for the remainder of her life. So temporally speaking, the sanctifying grace received at conception precedes the actual graces of adulthood. So much is simply established doctrine.

But what I want to argue is that for Mary the chronological and causal

¹ I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer whose helpful comments and criticisms prompted a significant number of clarifications and developments which greatly contributed to the precision of this article's final version.

sequences of grace do not run parallel. In other words, the burden of this article is to show that *causally* the actual graces present at the Annunciation are prior to the sanctifying grace bestowed at the Immaculate Conception. Put more concisely, the graces of Immaculate Conception² depend on what happens at the Annunciation, and not *vice versa*.

To make this case I will first present a *reductio ad absurdum* against the notion that Mary's *fiat* in the first chapter of Luke depends upon the extraordinary graces given at the Immaculate Conception. The *reductio* goes like this:

1. Mary's *fiat* at the Annunciation depends on the Immaculate Conception.
2. Mary's Immaculate Conception depends on Calvary.
3. Calvary depends on Mary's *fiat* at the Annunciation.

The vicious circularity is textbook, such that if the second and third propositions are true the first simply cannot be true.³ In what follows we will examine the principles in question, conclude to the causal priority of the actual grace at the Annunciation, and close with a discussion of what implications this conclusion entails for Mariology as a whole.

Presentations of Mary's *Fiat* as Dependent on the Immaculate Conception

In the first volume of his massive *Theological Investigations*, Karl Rahner includes a chapter which attempts to deduce the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception from the *fiat* of Mary's divine motherhood. In other words, instead of seeing the formulation of Gabriel's greeting as the primary revealed axiom from which to derive the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, he says that this latter teaching could be known simply

² Henceforth when I use "Immaculate Conception" it will refer to the distinctive grace that kept Mary immaculate at the moment of her conception.

³ This is not the first time questions of causal circularity have surfaced in Mariology; such questions were not uncommon between Pius IX's *Ineffabilis deus* (1854) and the Second Vatican Council. However, the primary point at issue in those debates concerned how Mary could participate in Christ's saving work at Calvary if (1) the Immaculate Conception depended on Calvary and (2) Mary's coredemptive activity at Calvary depended on her status as immaculately conceived. See Juniper B. Carol, "Our Lady's Coredemption," in *Mariology*, vol. 2, ed. J. B. Carol (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1957), 377–425, esp. 417–22. This essay, while it is concerned with issues involving vicious circularity in Marian doctrine, does not specifically address Our Lady's role at Calvary, but instead presses the issue back further to her role at the Annunciation.

from reflection on Mary's free cooperation in the Incarnation.

Rahner rightly sees the Incarnation (and therefore, we may presume, the events of Calvary) as resulting from Mary's free acceptance of her mission as the Mother of God. She therefore has the most perfect role of any mere creature, namely, the role of immediately assisting in bringing God to earth. But since Mary's creaturely role is of supreme importance, she must consequently be a creature of supreme holiness: "As Mother of God, Mary is most perfectly redeemed, and *vice versa*. . . . If this is so, then it includes a perfect correspondence between Mary's unique task in saving history and her personal holiness."⁴ And a little later on Rahner reemphasizes: "For here 'office' and personal holiness must coincide."⁵

Why? Why does Mary's role as Mother of God (and her free acceptance of that role) require maximal personal holiness? Rahner's answer is elusive. The closest he comes to an argument is in the following passage:

Redemption takes place as the reception of Christ in the act of faith, which is itself grace and—for faith—establishes itself as something historically tangible in the world. Then the most perfect redemption is the conception of Christ in faith and in the body for the salvation of all in the holiest act of freedom, which is grace. Because Mary stands at that point of saving history at which through her freedom the world's salvation takes place definitively and irrevocably as God's act, she is most perfectly redeemed.⁶

The definition of "redemption" is a bit idiosyncratic, but the reasoning is straightforward enough: redemption means freely receiving Christ, Mary freely receives Christ most perfectly in her divine motherhood, and therefore Mary is most perfectly redeemed. Fair enough. But then at the end of the article Rahner commits a blatant equivocation by saying that since Mary is the most perfectly redeemed one, she must be redeemed from any stain of sin or original exclusion from the life of grace.⁷

This is a pretty clear conflation of two logically distinct ideas. It is one thing to receive Christ after an act of faith, and another to enjoy flawless human nature and sanctifying grace from conception, and it is

⁴ Karl Rahner, "The Immaculate Conception," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1961), 207.

⁵ Rahner, "Immaculate Conception," 209.

⁶ Rahner, "Immaculate Conception," 206.

⁷ Rahner, "Immaculate Conception," 211.

no good trying to infer one from the other just by deciding to call both “redemption.”

From what I can tell, this simple equivocation appears to be the sole basis for Rahner’s position that the divine maternity implies the Immaculate Conception. Sarah Jane Boss, however, perhaps motivated by a charitable desire to find some more substantial argumentation underlying Rahner’s position, offers a different interpretation:

It is because of her exceptional state of grace that Mary is able to consent fully and freely to a vocation which demands the participation of her whole person, and it is in this respect that Rahner understands Mary’s immaculate conception to have a direct bearing on her motherhood. The possibility of full and free consent, rather than the requirement for purity or fittingness, is what makes Mary’s radical sinlessness a necessary precondition for her divine motherhood.⁸

The idea here is that the graces of the Immaculate Conception provide the required causal support needed for Mary to respond properly to the divine invitation relayed by Gabriel. On this reading Rahner would not be postulating a mere matter of logical connection between the Immaculate Conception and Mary’s *fiat* at the Annunciation, but rather a relation of causal dependence, with the latter relying on the former. Again, although I have not been able to find even implicit evidence that Rahner was motivated by the rationale which Boss attributes to him, the idea that the Immaculate Conception served as a necessary causal condition for the divine motherhood is an interesting position which will work as a helpful foil in trying to present a better account of the causal history of Mary’s life of grace.

However, if the position which Boss attributes to Rahner is that the Immaculate Conception is a *necessary* condition for Mary’s “yes” at the Annunciation, there is a still stronger position which holds that the Immaculate Conception is a *determining* condition of Mary’s “yes” at the Annunciation. In other words, some think the Immaculate Conception not only *allows* for Mary to make the right decision, but determines her to make it inevitably.

To take a very clear instance, Fr. Peter Fehlner maintains the position

⁸ Sarah Jane Boss, “The Doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception,” in *Mary: the Complete Sourcebook*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 207–35, at 230.

that the Immaculate Conception entails the impossibility of Mary ever sinning:

This brings us to the so-called theological objection, claimed by some to be even more important. This objection arises from the truism that the Immaculate Conception would render Mary sinless, to the point of being impeccable. Therefore, it deprives her of her personal freedom, and renders her nature unlike ours. We may cheerfully agree the Immaculate Conception does render Mary impeccable from the first moment of her conception. But this does not mean her human nature is different from ours. . . . The so-called possibility of sinning is not a characteristic of freedom as such, viz., as a simple perfection. The possibility of offending God is but an index of limited freedom, not of freedom itself. The greater the impossibility of sinning, the greater the freedom.⁹

Prescinding from any thematic discussion of the torturously complicated issues involved in analyzing problems of grace and human freedom, suffice it to note that in this passage the author clearly maintains that the grace of the Immaculate Conception has as one of its consequences the perpetual sinlessness of Mary. Because of the Immaculate Conception, says Fr. Fehlner, Mary is incapable of "offending God." Now since sinning, or offending God, always consists at its root in some kind of privation, it would seem quite legitimate to formulate the same idea in positive terms: the Immaculate Conception causes Mary to always do whatever God wills that she do.

But then the natural conclusion to be drawn is that the Immaculate Conception is what causes Mary's *fiat* at the Annunciation. If the grace of the Immaculate Conception causes Mary not to fail in following God's will in every situation, then we can dispense with the double negative and state that it is the grace of the Immaculate Conception which causes Mary to follow God's will in every situation. Looking at the Annunciation situation then, in which Mary follows God's will by giving her *fiat*, adherence to Fehlner's principles compels the further assertion that it is the Immaculate Conception which causes Mary to give her assent to the angel's message.

What characterizes the views considered in this section is not simply

⁹ Peter M. Fehlner, "The Virgin Mother's Predestination and Immaculate Conception," in *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons*, ed. Mark I. Miravalle (Goleta, CA: Seat of Wisdom, 2007), 213–76, at 243–44.

their agreement that the Immaculate Conception is a dignity befitting the Mother of God, nor their agreement that the Immaculate Conception is a doctrine revealed through the Scriptures and taught by the Church, but rather their conviction that Mary's free, divine motherhood somehow presupposes her status as immaculately conceived. Looking at the other, less debatable principles of our *reductio* will hopefully show the implausibility of this construction.

The Immaculate Conception Depends on Calvary

One of the chief historical difficulties with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception finds its chief expression in Aquinas's concern that were Mary from the beginning free from all effects of original sin, she would not be among the fallen, and so would have no need of a redeemer. This would in turn undermine the universality of Christ's redemptive work, since it would brook of human exceptions: "If the soul of the Blessed Virgin had never incurred the stain of original sin, this would be derogatory to the dignity of Christ, by reason of His being the universal Savior of all."¹⁰

Famously, the doctrinal tradition adopted the solution of John Duns Scotus to the effect that Mary is redeemed by Christ preservatively, not liberatively, such that she was saved from inheriting a fallen human nature by a miraculous intervention of God's graciousness. Notice that Mary's vulnerability to original sin is unaffected by the "Franciscan Thesis" which maintains that Mary's destiny as the Immaculate Mother of God would have been included in the providential program regardless of any concrete need to redeem a sinful humanity. Scotus himself, an iconic representative of the Franciscan Thesis, developed the notion of preservative redemption precisely because he believed that, in the contingent state of affairs in which Mary found herself as descended from a fallen race, she needed to be saved.¹¹ Indeed, so urgent is her need for salvation that Scotus distinguishes her from those who are raised up after they have fallen by describing her as being caught "in the very act of falling" (not as being prevented from ever reaching a precarious position!).¹²

Nor do the various speculations about the mechanisms of the trans-

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 27, a. 2, ad 2.

¹¹ John Duns Scotus, *Opus oxoniense*, d. 3, q. 1, no. 14.

¹² Scotus, *Opus oxoniense*, d. 3, q. 1, no. 2. See also Joseph Pohle, *Mariology: A Dogmatic Treatise on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God*, trans. Arthur Preuss (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1930), 59–61, and Matthias J. Scheeben, *Mariology*, vol. 2, trans. T. L. M. J. Geukers (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1947), 2:105–7, who both see Scotus as characterizing Mary's situation with regard to original sin as so desperate that she is only just saved from it in the very moment when it descends upon her.

mission of original sin make a difference to Mary's need for redemption by the merits of Christ's Cross. Whether she needed to be saved because she was physically from Adam's seed, or because she stood to be accused of complicity by association in her first ancestor's sin, or because the original couple had squandered the gifts of grace and now could only transmit an impoverished human nature to their descendants,¹³ what is crucial for our purposes here is that "the opinion . . . that Mary was immaculate in the sense of not needing to be redeemed, and that her first grace was independent of the future merits of her Son—may no longer be admitted."¹⁴

However, Pius IX's phrasing of the dogma in *Ineffabilis deus* initially appears to contain a certain degree of ambiguity about how to frame the causal relationship between Calvary and the Immaculate Conception. The formulation states that Mary was preserved immune from all stain of sin from the first moment of her conception, "in view of the merits of Jesus Christ," or more literally, "by an intuitive cognition of the merits of Jesus Christ" ("intuitu meritorum Christi Jesu Salvatoris humani generis"). What are we to make of this term, *intuitu*? Why this intellective language when speaking about the relationship between the Immaculate Conception and Calvary? Several interpretations are plausible at the outset.

On the one hand, the relationship between the two events might be modeled in terms of final causality. That is to say, we could interpret *Ineffabilis deus* as declaring that the Immaculate Conception was granted to Mary for the sake of Calvary. Here *intuitu* would be understood along the lines of "having in mind." In this case we could say that Calvary "causes" the Immaculate Conception in the sense that it consists in the final cause of the "Immaculate Conception," that it serves as God's motivation, so to speak, for keeping Mary replete with grace from the beginning. "Primus in intentione, ultimus in executione" ("the first thing in intention is the final thing in execution"), so the scholastic maxim goes, and it seems a very natural solution to propose that although Calvary is later in the order of time, in the order of the divine intention it comes before Mary's creation in an immaculate state.

The problem with this solution is that if Christ's passion on the Cross is reduced to the final cause of Mary's Immaculate Conception, then Our Lord's sufferings are stripped of their efficiency with respect to Mary's

¹³ On the various distinctions connected to Mary's *debitum peccatae*, see Aidan Carr and Germain Williams, "Mary's Immaculate Conception," in *Mariology*, vol. 1, ed. Juniper B. Carol (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1954), 328–94, esp. 379–86.

¹⁴ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Savior and Our Interior Life*, trans. Bernard J. Kelly (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1949), 53..

redemption. In plain words, on such an account Mary would be graced at conception for Christ, but not by Christ. The graces she receives would come from God, and more specifically from God's plan to redeem the world through the shedding of Christ's blood, but it would not be the actual shedding of Christ's blood that supplies Mary with the sanctifying graces which keep her stainless. Aquinas' objection would not be met: God's salvific designs, not Christ's passion, would be responsible for redeeming Mary, and there would remain a glaring exception to Christ's title as redeemer of all humanity.

A similar but subtly different interpretation might be made by appealing to divine foreknowledge. Since God knows from all eternity that Calvary will occur (it does not matter for our discussion whether God knows this after the Molinist or Bañezian pattern), it would involve him in no difficulty to grant Mary a plenitude of redeeming grace "ahead of time," since he knows with unerring certainty that this generous advance will be abundantly repaid as the providential enterprise unfolds. In this case *intuitu* would more accurately be rendered as "with foreknowledge of," since in creating Mary immaculate God would be acting on his infallible cognizance of the events of the passion.

Again, the problem is that this suggestion does not appear to leave any room for Christ to fulfill his role as Mary's redeemer. The proposal considered earlier made God's *design* the cause of the Immaculate Conception, and the present proposal makes God's *knowledge* the cause of the Immaculate Conception. But on either proposal there seems to be no room for Christ's death on the Cross as meritorious cause of the Immaculate Conception. And although it might be tempting, we cannot attempt to bridge the gap by maintaining that Christ's passion causes Mary's preservative redemption indirectly by causing God's design or God's knowledge. Why is this proposal not viable? For the simple reason that Calvary cannot be the cause of God's design or God's knowledge: any theory of divine providence which wishes to maintain even the semblance of orthodoxy is bound to acknowledge that God's design and God's knowledge are the cause of Calvary (and all contingent realities), not the other way around. So if we reduce the relationship between Calvary and the Immaculate Conception to a matter of God's foreknowledge or God's salvific design, then the Immaculate Conception becomes not "a grace of the Redeemer," but "a grace of the Creator," an untenable position.¹⁵

We come to the felicitous conclusion, then, that the proper English rendering of *intuitu* is the standard one, namely, "in view of." Every

¹⁵ See Scheeben, *Mariology*, 2:48.

member of the Church is granted sanctifying grace in view of Christ's death on the Cross, which is to say that God gives each of the elect a share in salvation because Christ pays the price. If we have sanctifying grace, it is because of Christ's death; if the heroes of the Old Testament enjoyed sanctifying grace, it is because of Christ's death; and if Mary was given a superabundant share of sanctifying grace from the first moment of her conception, it is because of Christ's death. Moreover, "because" is used in the same efficient-causal sense in all three cases. The temporal moments are all different, some before the crucifixion, some after, but the causal mechanism of redemption is the same for all the descendants of Adam.

In concrete terms, this means that Christ died with the intention of saving his mother from sin before she was even born:

If we consider Christ's redemptive suffering on the Cross in its aspect of sacrificial love, we can, and indeed are bound to, conclude that he suffered first and foremost and most of all for Mary. While he was enduring the agony of the Cross and when he died, Mary, so to speak, occupied the centre of his feelings. As the most beautiful creation of his redemptive death, Mary is the person for whom Christ shed his redeeming blood most liberally and with the most fervent sacrificial love.¹⁶

Although the time and degree of Mary's redemption is vastly different from ours, the relation of her sanctification to Calvary exhibits the same fundamental structure. Her sanctifying grace depends, as ours does, on Christ's passion as efficient cause. Jesus is Mary's redeemer, not just abstractly in the mind or plan of God, but in the concrete world of created things. Her Immaculate Conception therefore incontrovertibly depends on Calvary in the strongest possible sense.

Calvary Depends on Mary's Fiat

Before developing the next point, which will hopefully require less formal argumentation, it is important to elaborate on some of the finer nuances of what is and what is not meant by causal dependence. Causality entails a

¹⁶ E. Schillebeeckx, *Mary: Mother of the Redemption*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 50. See the discussion of the distinction proposed by Gabriel Roschini on the two logical moments of redemption—one for Christ's Mother, and the other for the rest of the redeemed—by Arthur B. Chalkin in "Mary Co-redemptrix: The Beloved Associate of Christ," in Miravalle, *Mariology: A Guide*, 349–409, at 383–84.

relationship wherein one thing, the cause, contributes to the existence of another thing, the effect. If B has a causal dependency on A, it means that A contributes to the production of B.

Notice, however, that causal dependency does not necessarily mean that without A, B would fail to exist. After all, it might be that should A fail to make its causal contribution to B, something else would step in to help produce B. To take a trivial example, if I use a match in lighting a candle, the match is a partial cause of the flame, such that we would say the flame is causally dependent on the match. Of course, the flame might have been produced in a different way: I might have used a cigarette lighter, or (improbably) a magnifying glass that focused the rays of the sun. But supposing that I do in fact use the match, the candle flame owes its existence to the match, and so causally depends upon it.¹⁷

Now in the case of Our Lady, her obedience to the angel's instructions becomes a partial cause of the Incarnation. Therefore, the Incarnation, and by implication everything the eternal Word does following his hypostatic union with human nature (including his death on the Cross), is causally dependent upon Mary's *fiat*.

Again, Mary's status as a legitimate cause of the Incarnation (and therefore redemption) does not imply that God could not have come to earth as man through some other means—or even through no means at all (i.e., Our Lord could have simply appeared on earth as a grown man in an instant). If Mary had refused her consent to Gabriel, God was still free to accomplish his saving plan in a different way. But as it is, Mary is a contributing cause to the Incarnation, and so by implication the whole redemptive program is partially indebted for its actual accomplishment to her.

All this is expressed in the New Eve Mariology that traces its roots to the Patristic era. Just as the first woman contributes to our downfall by saying “yes” to the devil, the new Woman contributes to our salvation by saying “yes” to the angel. In both cases, although the man (Adam and Christ, respectively) is the chief protagonist in our downfall or redemption, the woman's role in launching the process is crucial, and so she bears a significant degree of responsibility for what follows. Adam's sin is partially

¹⁷ The relationship between causality and counterfactuality (i.e., what would have happened if the cause had not been present) is a complicated and hotly contested issue; see *Causation and Counterfactuals*, ed. John Collins, Ned Hall, and L. A. Paul (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). The least that can and should be acknowledged for the sake of this theme is the principle that if one receives being from another, then one is casually dependent on that other for existence, regardless of whether one might have received being from a different source in differing circumstances.

explained by Eve's involvement ("the woman whom you put with me gave it to me, and so I ate of it") and likewise Christ's atonement is based on the humanity with which Mary freely provided him.

Mary's *fiat* is therefore causally related to Calvary; Christ's passion depends on a young girl saying, years before, in Nazareth, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

At this point we have the material necessary for constructing our vicious circle by *reductio*. Again, we have firmly established that the Immaculate Conception depends on Calvary, and that Calvary depends on Mary's *fiat* at the Annunciation. If we go the next step and assert that Mary's *fiat* depends on the Immaculate Conception, then we have a clear-cut case of circular causation in which Mary's *fiat* ultimately depends on itself.

Well, what is so bad about circular causality? Maybe we creatures cannot normally pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, or make something be its own effect (and cause), but perhaps it is within the scope of divine competence to accomplish such a miracle if so desired. After all, if God can omnipotently ordain an exception from the standard temporal sequence of causality (as he apparently does when having the later event, Calvary, influence the earlier event, the Immaculate Conception), why is it impossible for God to bring about a causal sequence in which A causes B and B causes A, the way Escher was able to draw two hands that appeared to draw each other?

Indeed, Hans Urs von Balthasar appears willing to embrace just such a circular arrangement:

Here, as we have already said, there is an unbreakable circle: each is "prior" to the other. It is true that the priority of Mary's "immaculate" consent owes its existence to grace, to the fullness of grace that is "merited" on the Cross; but it is equally clear that, by grace, the possibility of this fullness on the Cross is dependent, in part, on the Mother's consent.¹⁸

To those sympathetic to von Balthasar's complacent attitude regarding causal circularity, a reminder is in order concerning the relation of divine omnipotence and logical absurdities. Inherent contradictions do not express things God can do because they do not express anything at all—they are simply meaningless word-pairings. Now, there is no contradiction entailed in saying that what is *causally* prior is *temporally* later (as in the

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1992), 352.

case of Calvary and the Immaculate Conception), since in this case “prior” and “later” are used in different senses. But a thing cannot be described with the contraries “prior” and “later” in the same causal sense without contradiction, anymore than a thing can be described with the contraries “square” and “round” in the same sense without contradiction. Nor can the difficulty be evaded by distinguishing between different kinds of causes—insofar as a cause is worthy of a name, its effect depends upon it, and not vice versa. Consequently, God cannot make an effect to be its own cause, anymore than He can make a round square. The upshot is that Mary’s Immaculate Conception cannot be the cause of her *fiat*, otherwise Mary’s Immaculate Conception would cause her own Immaculate Conception (*via* the *fiat* and the Cross).

So, returning to our initial discussion of Rahner, Boss, and Fehlner, we see now that it cannot be the case that the *fiat* necessarily requires the Immaculate Conception, nor that the *fiat* is contingently dependent on the Immaculate Conception, nor that the *fiat* is causally determined by the Immaculate Conception. The consent given by Mary at the Annunciation does not require, in any of these senses,¹⁹ that she be immaculately conceived. She does not say “yes” because she is immaculately conceived; she is immaculately conceived because she says “yes.”

Graces Not from Calvary

If we are to avoid circular causality, and if Mary’s *fiat* causally contributes to the Incarnation, which in turn enables the redemption at Calvary, then to avoid vicious circularity we must go further and add that the grace which makes Mary’s *fiat* possible cannot itself depend on Christ’s passion; otherwise Christ’s passion would depend on the actual graces given at the Annunciation and the actual graces given at the Annunciation would depend on Christ’s passion.

Now somewhere along the line it became commonplace to talk as though all of God’s graces—any spiritual divine gifts whatsoever—are somehow causally traceable to Christ’s passion. For instance, Fr. Nicolas, a French theologian who authored a small introduction to the theology of grace in

¹⁹ One can say, of course, that it is fitting that when giving her consent to Gabriel’s message, Mary should be in a sinless state. But of course fittingness is a much weaker relationship than logical necessity or causal dependence. More to the point, fittingness is generally only discernible after God’s plan has been revealed—when we say God has done something fitting, we celebrate a doctrine of salvation history; we do not presume to dictate to God what the best course of action would have been after making certain deductions from other axioms.

the 1950s, after distinguishing between various species of grace (sufficient, operative, habitual, etc.) blithely declares that “all the graces distributed to humanity since Adam’s fall” are “due to Christ’s merits.”²⁰ If this were so, then *ex hypothesi* the particular spiritual empowerment of Mary’s will at the Annunciation would also be causally traceable to Christ’s passion. Yet Fr. Nicolas provides no dogmatic or even doctrinal support for this assertion that every grace comes from Calvary. And in fact the assertion is not warranted by the revealed data—the magisterial tradition simply does not state that every grace *simpliciter* is derived from the Cross.

The Church *does* teach unequivocally that “no one can be just unless the merits of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ are imparted to him.”²¹ The graces of salvation are conferred because of the Cross of Christ, and, as we have seen earlier, the case of Our Lady is no exception. The Church also teaches that for every good act the creature relies on divine assistance of some kind: “Man can do nothing good without God.”²² Were this teaching not upheld, the human person would be presented as originating goodness in himself, and would therefore usurp the place of God as the sole absolute creator.

But from these two truths, (1) every good act requires divine assistance and (2) all the sanctifying graces of justification, by which we are made children of God and heirs to the kingdom of heaven, come from Christ’s passion—from these two truths it most certainly does not follow that the divine assistance needed for every good or salutary act originates from Christ’s suffering and death on the Cross. And in fact nothing in the Tradition necessitates that every actual grace to do what is right derives from God as *redeemer*.²³

²⁰ Jean-Hervé Nicolas, O.P., *The Mystery of God's Grace* (Dubuque, IA: Priory, 1960 [original French version, 1951]), 94. E. Towers also affirms that every grace, whether actual or habitual, comes not only from God, but specifically from Jesus Christ and his merits; see *Actual Grace* (New York: MacMillan, 1928), 68–69. The following pages give the impression, however, that Towers has in mind only those graces given after the Incarnation.

²¹ Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, ch. 7: *nemo possit esse iustus, nisi cui merita passionis Domini nostri Iesu Christi communicantur* (Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, ed. Peter Hünemann, 43rd ed. [DH], English ed. Anne Englund Nash and Robert Fastiggi (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 1530).

²² Second Synod of Orange, can. 19: *Nihil boni hominem posse sine Deo* (DH, no. 390).

²³ Interestingly, it sometimes happens that the prevenient actual graces given before baptism are attributed to the Holy Spirit, while the sanctifying graces of justification are attributed to Christ qua redeemer. See Trent’s Decree on Justification,

We need not attribute the causality for every true thought or every virtuous act of the will to Calvary.²⁴ True, without the salvific graces from the Cross true thoughts and virtuous acts will be impotent to bring us to intimate and saving friendship God, but not every good decision that predisposes toward salvation is necessarily caused by Christ's death.

Of course all grace, and every gift whatsoever, comes from Christ *qua* the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. But which graces are not caused by the Incarnation and death on the Cross? How can we distinguish between the graces of redemption and the graces which do *not* come through and from the humanity and passion of Our Lord?²⁵

I can offer no comprehensive principle that would systematically assign each and every grace to one category or the other. I have, for instance, no settled opinion as to whether the graces given to the angels are dependent on Calvary.²⁶ However, the conclusions drawn so far do in fact indicate a more modest principle, namely, *that no grace can depend on Calvary if postulating its dependence on Calvary results in a vicious circle.*

For instance, creation itself, though not technically a grace insofar as it is not a supernatural aid to or participation in divine life,²⁷ is nonetheless a divine gift that cannot be dependent on Christ's sacrifice for the simple reason that Christ's sacrifice itself presupposes creation. By the same token, if there were any human decisions (besides Mary's *fiat*) that required actual grace for their accomplishment, and if the Incarnation somehow depended on those decisions being made, then the actual graces corresponding to those decisions could not depend on Calvary—since obviously the Incarnation is a prerequisite to Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. As a final example, it seems to me that whatever graces were supplied to our first parents in order for them to resist the original temptation could not be dependent on Calvary, for the simple reason that if our first parents had cooperated with such graces, Christ would not have died to redeem us from our sinful state. Here, the grace, had it been efficacious (i.e., had Adam and Eve actu-

cans. 3 and 10 (DH, nos. 1553 and 1560). Clearly, one should not posit a division or dichotomy between the graces merited by Christ and communicated by the Holy Spirit, but the difference of emphasis is suggestive.

²⁴ Quite the contrary, such a position appears to be explicitly condemned by Clement XI in *Unigenitus Dei Filius* (1713), condemned proposition (DH, no. 2438).

²⁵ For an introduction to this distinction between "the grace of God" and "the grace of Christ," see Joseph Pohle, *Grace, Actual and Habitual*, trans. Arthur Preuss (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1915), 10–11.

²⁶ Thanks to the anonymous review for suggesting this example.

²⁷ On distinguishing "grace" in a general sense from its more precise supernatural signification, see Pohle, *Grace*, 7–9.

ally responded to the grace by resisting temptation), might have precluded Christ's sacrifice—and it is absurd to assert that something depends on what it might have prevented.

The Actual Grace at the Annunciation

Therefore, my proposal is that the actual graces given to Mary to say “yes” to God's plan are graces which come from the creator, but not from Calvary. Why? Because if the actual graces of Mary's *fiat* depend on Calvary, and Calvary depends on the *fiat*, then we are right back at the vicious circle whose avoidance is the main motivation of this essay. Whereas if we say that God as creator equipped Mary with the actual grace necessary to assume the role of *Theotokos*, leading to the salvation of the world by the immolation of Our Lord, whose death also brought about the salvation of Mary at her conception, then all logical and theological problems are avoided.

Of course the principle that the first grace is an unmerited grace would need to be upheld for Mary as well as for everyone else; we would say then that the actual graces given by God to enable Mary to hear and accept the call to be mother of the savior are simply gratuitous, and not based on Mary's previous merits. As Aquinas points out, while Mary is the one most suited to assume the role of Mother of God (which is what the *Regina Coeli* signifies with the words *quem meruisti portare*) she does not strictly speaking merit the extravagant honor of the role.²⁸ Nor, I would add, does she merit the grace required to accept that role—for if that actual grace is metaphysically the first grace of her supernatural journey, then it must come from God without any more fundamental claims on Mary's part.

Note too that everything argued up to this point is fully compatible with the doctrine of Mary's predestination as articulated by Pius IX in *Ineffabilis deus*. The Holy Father writes:

God Ineffable—whose ways are mercy and truth, whose will is omnipotence itself, and whose wisdom “reaches from end to end mightily, and orders all things sweetly”—having foreseen from all eternity the lamentable wretchedness of the entire human race which would result from the sin of Adam, decreed, by a plan hidden from the centuries, to complete the first work of his goodness by a mystery yet more wondrously sublime through the Incarnation of the Word. This he decreed in order that man who, contrary to the plan of Divine Mercy had been led into sin by the cunning malice

²⁸ Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 2, a. 11, ad 3.

of Satan, should not perish; and in order that what had been lost in the first Adam would be gloriously restored in the Second Adam. From the very beginning, and before time began, the eternal Father chose and prepared for his only-begotten Son a Mother in whom the Son of God would become incarnate and from whom, in the blessed fullness of time, he would be born into this world. Above all creatures did God so love her that truly in her was the Father well pleased with singular delight. Therefore, far above all the angels and all the saints so wondrously did God endow her with the abundance of all heavenly gifts poured from the treasury of his divinity that this mother, ever absolutely free of all stain of sin, all fair and perfect, would possess that fullness of holy innocence and sanctity than which, under God, one cannot even imagine anything greater, and which, outside of God, no mind can succeed in comprehending fully.²⁹

This passage plainly teaches that God—from all eternity—willed not only the Incarnation, and not only that this Incarnation come about through a human mother of the Word made flesh, but moreover that this human mother of the Word made flesh be endowed with the fullness of grace and innocence. Thus God—again, from all eternity—willed Mary’s divine motherhood with the Incarnation in mind, and willed Mary’s Immaculate Conception with her divine motherhood in mind. And of course, what God ordains is not susceptible of frustration; what he wills happens.

In other words, Pius IX unmistakably declares firstly that God wills all three of these events—the Incarnation, the divine maternity of Mary, and Mary’s Immaculate Conception—from all eternity, and secondly that these three events are importantly interrelated in God’s providential program. What is decidedly not specified in the above passage is the causal structures which obtain between these three events. More precisely, granted that God has decided to bring all of these events about, which of the events in question will causally depend on the others? The Holy Father does not give any explicit answer. If the problem occurred to him at all, he was content to leave its solutions to later efforts at clarification—and it is exactly such a clarification that is attempted here.

²⁹ Pius IX, *Ineffabilis deus*, English translation from papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm.

Conclusion: Implications for Mariology

Besides obviating some small potential for rational incoherence, what concrete advance is made in the study of the Blessed Mother by establishing that while the Immaculate Conception chronologically precedes the *fiat*, it is the latter which comes first in the order of causality? I can think of at least two promising areas which might benefit from this distinction.

First, as already hinted at in the introduction, the dissymmetry between the chronological and causal sequences of Mary's life of grace has the potential to highlight the way she models the Christian life both for cradle Catholics and for adult converts. Mary, in my view, receives sanctifying grace at conception, and her reception of sanctifying grace depends on her rightly responding in truth and freedom to God's call.³⁰

There is some analogy here with the way Mary ideally lives both celibacy and parenthood; even though no one else can realize both roles, she can and does exemplify them perfectly such that any member of the Church can look to her as a model. So in the case of ordinary believers, they cannot both be sanctified before their free decisions (i.e., by infant baptism) and receive sanctifying grace as the result of God's grace informing and guiding their free decisions—but Mary can. Our presentation, then, provides a new avenue for appreciating the universal exemplarity of the Mother of God.

Secondly, this reflection may prove helpful in broadening the co-redemptive implications of the Annunciation. It has become standard in the Tradition to note that Mary's "yes" to Gabriel fulfills a similar function to Eve's "yes" to the serpent, but it initially seems that there is a disappointing disparity between the two cases, for while Eve's act causes her to lose her blessed state, Mary, since she is already "full of grace," simply remains in the state in which she was before giving her assent. Yet if Eve's act causes her to lose sanctifying grace, should Mary's act not cause her to receive sanctifying grace? Among the early Patristic supports for the New Eve role which Mary fulfills in the redemptive scheme, perhaps the strongest and most enigmatic is St. Irenaeus's assertion that Mary "became the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race."³¹ How can Mary be the cause of her redemption if she's already redeemed? The preceding discus-

³⁰ Of course, as was emphasized earlier, Mary's sanctifying grace is ultimately traceable to God's beneficent causality and to Christ's sacrifice at Calvary, such that she is "redeemed in a more exalted manner by reason of the merits of her Son" (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §53).

³¹ Irenaeus, *Contra haereses* 3.22, in *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies*, selected with an introduction by Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. John Saward (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 61.

sion supplies the answer, and so vindicates Irenaeus's insight and strengthens the parallels between Eve and Mary: Mary did, in virtue of her *fiat*, serve as a participant in her own salvation just as Eve in virtue of following Satan's promptings, participated not only in humanity's downfall but also in her own.

Distinguishing between causal and chronological priority in the life of Mary may or may not open up other interesting lines of speculation, but regardless of consequent Mariological development, it is always worthwhile to smooth out any potential tangles of thought that might threaten to obscure the clarity and consistency of the Church's doctrine. It is moreover always edifying to reflect, even through the prism of logical analysis, on the details of our Blessed Mother's life.

A small, stylized logo consisting of the letters 'N' and 'V' in a square frame, likely representing the publisher or a specific collection.