

# THE VIRGIN BIRTH: A THEOLOGICAL REAPPRAISAL

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ANY DESCRIPTION of what Catholics believe will inevitably include belief in the Virgin Birth. It would be inaccurate to say this is a belief shared by all Christians. There are still many dissentient voices. But over and above the controversy, there is considerable misunderstanding as to what precisely is being disputed. It is quite clear that when some people, perhaps the majority, speak of the Virgin Birth, they are really speaking about the virginal *conception* of Our Lord. When, on the other hand, theologians speak to this theme, they are probably speaking of the circumstances and conditions of Our Lord's *birth* in so far as these affected the virginity of His mother. It is one thing to say that Our Lady conceived by the Holy Spirit and therefore without the agency of man—a miracle of God's omnipotence, one aspect of the supernatural intervention of God in human history which we call the Incarnation. It is quite another to say that God intervened at the time of Our Lord's birth in order to preserve the physical signs of virginal integrity in the person of Our Lady. The latter point finds its place in the history of dogma and can be put in the form of a question: Does the faith of the Church in the perpetual virginity of Mary require this intervention of God in the actual birth of His Son at Bethlehem? Common teaching asserts it does.

At this point it may be felt that the question is to a large extent academic for the ordinary Christian who approaches Our Lady as virgin and mother without embarrassment or confusion of mind. If the faith of the Church in the unique character of the advent of God to the world is accepted, then questions about the particular effects of His being the real child of His mother are of secondary importance and could indicate an attempt to rationalize a mystery. On the other hand, this was not the attitude of the great figures of the formative period of the Church who discussed these questions without inhibition and judged it of great importance to find a way of reconciling the apparent contradiction of true virginity with equally real motherhood in the one person. In some respects they were forced to do this because of the controversies of the time, which were centred primarily on the person of Christ, truly God and truly man. Almost as a by-product of these controversies (though this word is ill-suited to convey the deep insights of the early Church into the mystery of Mary herself), the Fathers were drawn to consider the person of His mother. It was not till 649 that the Church by conciliar decree felt it opportune to express the common mind in a definitive formula:

If anyone refuses to confess, in agreement with the holy Fathers, that the holy and immaculate Mary, ever virgin, is properly and truly Mother of God, inasmuch as, at the end of the ages, by the power of the Holy Spirit and without the agency of human seed, she truly and in an especial manner conceived God the Word Himself, who was born of God before all ages, and gave birth to Him without experiencing corruption ("incorruptibiliter genuisse"), her virginity remaining ever inviolable and abiding intact after His birth, let him be condemned.<sup>1</sup>

Theologians and ecclesiastical writers from this time on are, with one or two unusual exceptions, unanimous in their submission that it is of Catholic faith that Our Lady was ever a virgin, i.e., before, in, and after the birth of Christ. This constant teaching was subsumed under the headings *virginitas ante partum*, *virginitas in partu*, and *virginitas post partum*. From the point of view of systematic theology, the Virgin Birth refers exclusively to *virginitas in partu* and indicates an unswerving belief that the actual birth of Our Lord in no way impaired the virginity of His mother. At the same time, at least from the end of the third century, the belief was explicit in many quarters that this required the miraculous preservation of the *physical* signs of virginity.

There is, however, a more contemporary reason for an enquiry into the problems that exercised the Fathers of the Church. It may well be that their biological knowledge was deficient and therefore they were tempted to ask the wrong questions. Even if this is the complete explanation, it needs to be noted that the patristic writers regarded this as a *theological* question, i.e., touching our understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation. Over and above these considerations, we are faced with a modern insistence, in papal teaching, on the dignity of motherhood, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, is rightly put forward as the great and unchallengeable model for all Christian mothers. But though this idea of type and model is not new, the emphasis has a certain new quality. It is because Mary really underwent the common experience of motherhood that all

<sup>1</sup> Lateran Council I, can. 3 (DS 503 [256]). This Council, convened to combat errors concerning Christ ascribed to the Monothelites, was not a general council, though it was regarded as possessing almost the same authority. The reference to Our Lady's perpetual virginity is "occasional," the opportunity being taken to express traditional belief. There were 105 bishops present. There was no discussion on this canon, presumably because none was needed. The fundamental belief was universal, whatever precise overtones were intended. Pope Paul IV took advantage of a similar opportunity in his Constitution *Cum quorundam*, published in 1555, directed against the Unitarians, where he condemns the error (one of many mainly concerning the Trinity of God) of those who would hold that Our Lord was conceived not by the power of the Holy Spirit but through the agency of Joseph. Likewise he condemns the error of those who hold that "the blessed Virgin Mary is not really the Mother of God and did not preserve intact her virginity ('nec perstitisse semper in virginitatis integritate') both before the birth, in the birth, and forever after ('ante partum scilicet, in partu et perpetuo post partum')." Cf. DS 993 (1880).

mothers feel the strength of a personal and common bond with her. Something would be lost, it is suggested, if Mary were exempted from the actuality of childbirth. If this were so, her experience of motherhood would appear to be on a different plane from that experienced by the rest of women. It is important to comment here that we are not speaking of the pains of childbirth so much as of the personal co-operation of a mother in the birth of her child. More will need to be said on this question of pain, but for the moment it is not directly relevant. The intensely simple words of the Gospel text would seem to suggest that there was no obvious difference between the birth of Jesus and the birth of any other first-born: "And while they were there the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes."<sup>2</sup>

The force of contemporary teaching, therefore, would appear to be minimal if a miraculous intervention is postulated, *even though for other reasons*, in order to dissociate Mary from normal experience. Child-bearing is the culminating point of a co-operation with God which is the particular glory of woman. The very fact that Mary's Son came to share our human condition, and the subsequent record of how His mother was involved, would suggest that it would be inappropriate to require novel features in Our Lord's birth which would nullify, at least to some extent, that sharing. However, it must be firmly maintained that the weight of traditional thinking is on the side of God's intervention, though possibly it would be more accurate to say that what traditional teaching demands is the preservation of the total virginity, body and soul, of the Mother of God. The intervention of God at Bethlehem is only postulated, it would seem, because the writers judged that her virginity could not be preserved without it. There is room here for sober investigation. There are too many questions unanswered. No solutions, however, should be pre-empted. It may be we will find convincing reasons to maintain the traditional teaching, even though we discount the reasons usually given. To say that traditional teaching in the Church has been explained in a way we may now legitimately question is not to say that the *facts* for which these explanations were adduced are not true, even in their details.<sup>3</sup> Whatever success we have in our researches, the theologian is conscious he is endeavoring to express the content of the mys-

<sup>2</sup> Lk 2:6-7. Matthew, on the other hand, concentrated on giving an accurate account of Mary's *conception* of Jesus. The birth is recorded, but in a simple statement: "She had borne a son" (1:25).

<sup>3</sup> The theologian has no warrant for denying that the Fathers were justified in asserting the total and perfect virginity of Our Lady, body and soul—even when he contests their explanation.

tery revealed in Christ. We recognize the mystery in the conception of Jesus, and we must at least be ready to encounter the continuance of this mystery in the early moments of His life on earth. Conception and childbirth, even the childhood itself, are one process.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

How and where the doctrine developed is still a matter for considerable research. It is even more important to establish why the doctrine, which culminated in the triple formula, was felt to require particular privileges for Mary at the moment of, or even before, the birth of her Son. Even here we cannot have complete certainties. It is not too much to say that at least some of the factors were nontheological. Nevertheless, it is possible to indicate the thought of some of the great patristic writers.

The New Testament asserts the virginal conception of Jesus, and it was not long before this testimony became part of the early baptismal creeds of the Church.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, more than doubtful whether there is any explicit evidence in the Scriptures for *virginitas in partu*. In fact, the Fathers and ecclesiastical writers (Ignatius of Antioch, the *Odes of Solomon*, Justin Martyr<sup>5</sup>) up to the middle of the second century add little to the evidence of the Gospels.<sup>6</sup> It would seem that this was not a preoccupation of the infant Church.

It is in the latter part of the second century that we encounter the phenomenon of the Apocryphal Scriptures.<sup>7</sup> These are imaginary accounts which include the details of Our Lord's birth and early life and probably witness to a popular demand. Scholars are sure, from a sentence quoted in Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 156–215), that the story of a midwife being present at the Nativity was current in the second century, though Origen

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dermot Ryan, "Perpetual Virginitas," in *Mother of the Redeemer*, ed. K. McNamara (Dublin, 1959) p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Ignatius, *Ad Smyrn.* 1, 1; *Ad Eph.* 19, 1; *Odes of Solomon* 19 (ed. J. H. Bernard, in *Texts and Studies* 8/3); Justin, *Dial.* 100 (cf. also 84). For a survey of the pertinent patristic material, cf. Walter J. Burghardt, in J. B. Carol (ed.), *Mariology* 1 (Milwaukee, 1955) 117–32; 2 (Milwaukee, 1957) 100–116.

<sup>6</sup> Patristic writings use, in an accommodated sense, several texts from the Old Testament in support of Our Lady's virginity and in particular the Virgin Birth. While Is 7:14 is generally accepted as a prophetic witness to the virginal conception, it can hardly be adduced as evidence for *virginitas in partu*. St. Ambrose, however, in his *Letter to Siricius*, is of another opinion; cf. *Ep.* 42, 4 ff. (*PL* 16, 1173 ff.). The usual texts are Ez 44:2 and Ct 4:12. These are clearly accommodations. J. H. Crehan (*Clergy Review* 41 [1956] 721) states that the comparison of the passage of Christ from the womb with His passage through the closed doors ("januis clausis") of the Cenacle is as old as Jerome and Ambrose.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Protoevangelium of James* (ed. Tischendorf; Edinburgh, 1870); the story is recounted in nos. 19–20. Also *The Ascension of Isaias* (ed. E. Tisserant; Paris, 1909) chap. 11, 2 ff. (pp. 202 ff.).

(185–253) is the first we know to mention the *Protoevangelium of James* in which it is recounted. According to this lurid story, the midwife attested to the permanence of the physical seal of virginity after Christ had been born. A similar account is to be found in other writings which some scholars attribute to Gnostic influence in Egypt in the first half of the same century, or even earlier. Docetism was prevalent in certain circles from an early date and involved the denial of Christ's real birth.

It is justifiable to conclude from these incongruous attempts to fill out the simple evidence of the Scriptures that the question was beginning to be raised in some quarters of the reconciliation of Mary's virginity with the incontestable fact of her motherhood and her childbearing. It will be some time before a growing concentration on the value of consecrated virginity will sharpen the issue and have its influence on the final formulation of Christian teaching.

However, there is a marked conviction emerging that Our Lady bore her Son without pain or, if one may put it, in joy. One finds this in the *Odes of Solomon*: "A virgin became a mother with many mercies, and she travailed and brought forth the son, without incurring pain. Because it happened not emptily [= in reality], and she had not sought a midwife." The same idea is apparent in Justin, who appeals to Is 44:7. Irenaeus (ca. 140–ca. 202) explicitly couples the verse with the Isaiah prophecy: "Also concerning His birth, the same prophecy says in another place: Before she who was in labor brought forth, and before the pains of labor came, there came forth delivered a man child."<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, though the tenets of the Gnostics he was combating gave him an obvious opportunity to declare his mind, has much indeed to say of the reality of Christ's manhood received from the substance of Mary, but apart from the question of painless birth, he makes no certain contribution to the development of the doctrine under review. The text usually quoted, "Filius Dei filius hominis purus pure puram aperiens vulvam," is not sufficient, because of its obscurity, to elucidate his mind.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to stress the opponents against whom the first apologists were writing. Docetism and Gnosticism were at one in denying that Christ was really a man, and a typical Docetist position attributed to Marcion will illustrate the general mind of the early heretics: "Our Lord was born of a woman but stole the place of the Creator, and came down and appeared first between Jericho and Jerusalem, like a son of man in form, image, and likeness, but without our body."<sup>10</sup>

With Tertullian (d. ca. 220) we have one of the first to approach the

<sup>8</sup> *Demonstratio* 54; cf. Crehan, *art. cit.*, p. 723. The quotation is from Is 66:7.

<sup>9</sup> *Adv. haer.* 4, 55, 2; cf. *Dict. de théol. cath.* 7/2, 2403; *Dict. apol. de la foi cath.* 3, 201.

<sup>10</sup> *Brit. Mus. Add MSS* 17215 (Syriac), quoted in Crehan, *art. cit.*, p. 722.

issue in clear terms. In his *De carne Christi* he addresses Marcion and Valentinian, both of whom denied the reality of Christ's birth. It is a highly polemical work, well salted with rhetoric and with much appeal to detail. But he openly denies that the birth of Christ needed a miracle. The birth, in fact, was "virginal" because Mary had no prior marital relations with Joseph: "She was a virgin so far as her husband was concerned; she was not a virgin so far as childbearing was concerned."<sup>11</sup> He repeats this assertion in other works and holds that Mary had other children by Joseph. One can understand that he is arguing against Valentinian Docetists, who agreed that Jesus passed through the womb of Mary but denied that He received anything from her substance. He is unambiguous in his belief in a virginal conception, but denies a virginal birth.

Origen does not see any contradiction between normal birth and the preservation of Our Lady's virginity, to which he attaches great importance. He is one of the first to show the preoccupation of the early centuries with the "unopened state" of the womb to indicate physical virginity, but argued that Mary is unique in that the act of childbearing, rather than sexual congress, was responsible for the opening of the virginal womb, and this fact preserves her virginity.<sup>12</sup>

Clement of Alexandria belongs to quite a different current of ideas than does Tertullian. He has nothing of the powerful realism of the Carthaginian. There can be no doubt that he explicitly holds the virginal birth.<sup>13</sup> He realized it was not held by a great number, who wished to maintain that Christ's birth, in relation to His mother, was perfectly normal and natural, but he protested vigorously against these views.

The Church is now moving into the fourth century. From the evidence of the *De recta in Deum fide*<sup>14</sup> it is clear that the doctrine of the virginal birth is still viewed with a certain disquietude, but there is already a growing conviction that the perpetual virginity of Mary involves something unique in the manner in which she gave birth to Christ. An important feature is that what was done in Our Lady does not obtain in any other woman who bears a child. This action, ascribed to God, is necessary because of an insistence on what was generally accepted to be the sign of physical virginity. St. Ephraem (*ca.* 305–*ca.* 372) insists on this physical sign, and in spite of the great difficulty of interpreting his writings, he would seem to deny any real participation by Mary in the actual child-

<sup>11</sup> *De carne Christi* 23, 2 (*Corpus christianorum, Series Latina* 2, 914).

<sup>12</sup> *In Lucam hom.* 14 (*PG* 13, 1836C).

<sup>13</sup> *Stromata* 7, 16 (*PG* 9, 529–32).

<sup>14</sup> 4, 14; cf. Philip J. Donnelly, "The Perpetual Virginity of the Mother of God," in Carol, *Mariology* 2, 273.

birth. His attention is focused completely on the glory of her virginity.<sup>15</sup> However, scholars are far from being unanimous concerning his mind, and it has even been suggested that in some passages, which are certainly authentic, statements are made clearly incompatible with the Virgin Birth.

St. Jerome (ca. 342–419), who wrote at considerable length against Helvidius, who denied *virginitas post partum* and asserted therefore that Our Lady had other children, is not particularly informative about the exceptional quality of Our Lord's own birth, but when he does speak he shows a spontaneous acceptance of the reality of that birth. He uses the well-known comparison between the entry of Our Lord into the Upper Room and His entry into His mother's womb at conception; but this does not lead him to assert the virginal birth of Our Lord, i.e., the nonrupture of the hymen, etc. In his *Dialogue against the Pelagians* (2, 4) Jerome seems to be of the opinion that Mary's womb was restored to its virginal state after the birth. But it is not clear whether he is merely intent on excluding the agency of man, for in the ideas of the time it was sexual congress which opened the womb. In any case, the debate was on a different plane. The great upsurge of asceticism in the Church raised the question of the comparative value of virginity, widowhood, and married life. It was inevitable that Mary's virginity would become a subject of discussion.

In St. Ambrose (ca. 339–397) we have an unequivocal defender of the physical virginity of Mary *in partu*. It is of interest here to quote the judgment of one Mariologist:

From the beginning of his episcopate Ambrose was an ardent champion of virginity, and of the ascetical practices of Egyptian monasticism, made known to the west by St. Athanasius, who spent several periods in exile in Treves, Rome and Northern Italy. These ideals and practices were by no means received with universal favour.

The west, just before the Council of Ephesus (431), had advanced far beyond the east, and had reached a settled and inescapable conviction concerning Mary's personal sanctity and her perpetual virginity. In the east nothing absolutely decisive had been accepted universally on these two fundamental points of Marian theology. There were still opponents of her virginity, who were not, for this reason alone, considered to be heretics. The primary reason for the superiority of the west was the remarkable initiative of St. Ambrose, of his great disciple, St. Augustine, and of St. Julian.<sup>16</sup>

This verdict would seem to be supported by the evidence we have to hand. By the end of the fourth century the formula of Zeno of Verona

<sup>15</sup> Lamy, *Hymn 14*, no. 20 (col. 612).

<sup>16</sup> Donnelly, *art. cit.*, pp. 282, 291.

(d. 380) expressed the mind at least of the West: "A virgin conceived, you are astonished. A virgin gave birth, you are even more astonished. A virgin remains a virgin after the birth."<sup>17</sup> This quotation would have a greater force were it not immediately followed by an account of the apocryphal story of the midwife, as though it were true!

It is difficult, in the ensuing years after Ephesus, to find authors who engaged in any kind of explicit denial of what will be declared to be the faith of the Church by the Lateran Council in A.D. 649. Testimonies are abundant for the now common opinion concerning the perpetual virginity of Mary. However, this faith is held to imply the specific detail of her "physical" virginity. In other words, for the ecclesiastical writers of the period, it is quite certain that lack of sexual congress would not have been accepted as a sufficient *sign* of the virginal state of the Mother of God when she came to childbirth. In fact, it is not hard to detect a hardening of the position in so far as the "opening of the womb," which earlier writers were content to interpret in the general sense of coming to birth, is now interpreted as necessarily causing a rupture of the virginal seal—which had to be unambiguously denied. Consequently, Our Lord issues from the *closed* womb of His mother by divine power.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the absence of pain would seem to be related to a particular understanding of the physical processes of childbirth rather than to the reflection that, because of her sinlessness, Mary should not suffer the pain of Eve.<sup>19a</sup> The position is far from clear, but the affirmation of birth without pain is constant.

The dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity before, in, and after the birth of her Son is by this time fully established. In this latter part of the patristic period it is accepted that Jesus was not born in the normal way, that the physical integrity of His mother (the permanence of the hymen, etc.) was in no way impaired by His birth, and that Mary remained integrally and completely a virgin after Christ's birth throughout her earthly life. What was first a problem deriving from a misunderstanding of the utter truth of the Incarnation has now become a problem in virginity. The problem is exacerbated by a particular concept of physical virginity, and this fact will bedevil the sober speculations of the great

<sup>17</sup> *Sermo 196* (Lib. 2, tract. 8, 2; *PL* 11, 414-15).

<sup>18</sup> "This [= unembarrassed use of the term 'opening the womb' to signify mere birth] was usual with the Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, who used the term *aperuit* to explain it, whereas in the sixth century they carefully avoided it and expressly denied the opening of the womb of Mary, as, for example, Gregory the Great" (Gerald Owens, "Our Lady's Virginity in the Birth of Jesus," *Marian Studies* 7 [1956] 59).

<sup>19a</sup> But there are writers like Cyril and Nestorius who point to the lack of original sin as the reason for the painlessness; cf. J. Crehan, in *Month*, Sept.-Oct. 1946, pp. 370-71.



Schoolmen and the even more extensive tractates of the commentators on St. Thomas. There will be, of course, one or two exceptions.

In the ninth century there is an interesting intervention by Ratramnus.<sup>19</sup> It concerns the reality of Christ's birth, which Ratramnus felt was not sufficiently safeguarded in the now general teaching of *virginitas in partu*. The point of detail he is reacting against is the insistence on the *closed womb*. He endeavors to solve the problem by distinguishing between a violent and painful opening of the birth canal and a general relaxation of the muscles etc. involved in birth. Mary's virginity would only be under attack if it involved a violent rupture. Though this is a particular controversy, it is noteworthy that Ratramnus' distinction will later be invoked by the commentators. The problem is not so much a problem in virginity as a problem in birth. We have the first glimpse of our own contemporary preoccupation with the reality of Mary's motherhood. However, when the massive attempt to give a systematic exposition to the whole content of faith was at its height from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, the question of Mary's virginity was treated by all the great Scholastics. In general, it is fair to say that there is no particular change in the common teaching. No attempt is made to seek a "solution" to *virginitas in partu* by an analysis of birth in the state of innocence. The connection is noticed but seldom fully explored. A typical exposition is to be found in St. Albert the Great.<sup>20</sup> He asserts the common doctrine, cites Is 66:7 and Ez 44:2, as well as Jn 20:26. Christ was born in the same way as He came forth from the tomb. "Hence she bore (her child) without pain, without destroying the virginal seal (*conservato pudore*)."

Albert's disciple St. Thomas, even though he speculated more, is in the same tradition. As one of the greatest masters of the period, it is convenient to reproduce his teaching as typical of the very great majority of the Schoolmen. He treats the question specifically in the *Summa theologiae* (3, q. 28, a. 2), where he asserts that it is absolutely certain that the mother of Christ was a virgin in childbirth. The reasons he adduces in order to show that this is appropriate rely heavily on the medieval notion of *corruptio*. It was right, he declares, that Our Lord "should be born from the uncorrupted womb of a virgin." In answering the three typical objections, he does not fear to say that Christ showed His divinity by being born of a virgin. His mind is, in fact, made trans-

<sup>19</sup> PL 122, 82-102: *De eo quod Christus ex virgine natus est liber*. His conclusion: "confiteamur ore veridico Verbum carnem factum per ministerium vulvae naturaliter natum" (col. 102).

<sup>20</sup> *Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel* 2, 6 (*Opera omnia*, ed. Borgnet, 22 [Paris, 1844] 198).

parently clear when, under the impression that he is quoting Augustine, he says: "The virgin Mother of God is exempt from this condemnation [i.e., Eve's]; for conceiving Christ without the intervention of sin (*collusione*) and without any injury from the agency of man (*sine virilis admixtionis detrimento*), she gave birth without pain and, her integrity untouched, maintained in its completeness her physical virginity."<sup>21</sup> Commenting on the Ave Maria, he says: "She conceived without corruption, she found peace in her pregnancy, and she bore the Saviour with joy."

How, then, did Aquinas reconcile this with motherhood? It is sufficient, in his opinion, that Christ's body was taken from and formed of the immaculate "blood" ("sanguinibus") of the virgin mother.<sup>22</sup> In the next article he asserts: "a woman is called the mother of a person from the fact that she conceived that person and gave birth to him." But what of the pain of childbirth? The physiological science of his time leads him to assert that this pain is caused through the opening up of the birth canal ("ex apertione meatuum per quos proles egreditur"). In the case of Christ, however, He issued forth from the closed womb of His mother and so there was no violent perforation of the area. Just as there was no "corruption," so there was no pain, but only the greatest joy from the fact that the man-God was born into the world.<sup>23</sup> In reply to an objection he says: "the pain of childbirth is consequent upon male insemination."

It is interesting to note that when treating the state of innocence<sup>24</sup> Thomas argues that there would have been no loss of integrity, no labor pains, but the muscular movements consequent upon the fetus coming to term ("maturitatis impulsus feminea viscera") would "relax" the female organs. He argues against Gregory of Nyssa (who denied it) that there would have been natural generation in the state of innocence but without the defects already listed. His principle is absolute, for he holds that whatever is natural to man is neither suppressed nor given to him because of sin.<sup>25</sup>

Thomas had a considerable amount to say regarding virginity. To his way of thinking, three things are required for its perfection. The first is the choice, or decision of the will, which consists in a fixed intention never to experience sex ("delectatio venerea"). This is the formal principle. The second, or material principle, consists in the actual nonexperience of sex. He refers here to the case where a woman may be raped,

<sup>21</sup> *Sum. theol.* 3, q. 35, a. 6, ad 1m.

<sup>22</sup> *Sum. theol.* 3, q. 35, a. 3 c.

<sup>23</sup> *Sum. theol.* 3, q. 35, a. 6 c.

<sup>24</sup> *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 98, a. 2 ad 4m.

<sup>25</sup> *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 98, a. 2 c.

yet would not thereby lose her (formal) virginity. The third element is, to him, in the strict sense accidental, i.e., something that goes along with virginity normally but not necessarily, and this he calls "bodily integrity." He is quite clear what he means here, namely, the presence of the so-called virginal seal, which he admits can be lost by accident or surgical intervention.<sup>26</sup>

With this explanation behind him, he takes the opportunity of asserting that unless these three elements are present, a woman cannot be a mother and remain integrally a virgin—except by a miracle. The miracle he cites is that of Christ's birth. However, taken in a wider sense, virginity can coexist with motherhood, even though, in rape for example, the material element of virginity may no longer persist. Mere sexual experience does not necessarily destroy virginity, but it is against its perfection. Yet, in another place<sup>27</sup> he says that if by some mischance virginal integrity (i.e., the rupture of the virginal seal) should be lost, this is no more against virginity than if one lost a hand or a foot. The obvious answer to the query that this raises in the mind is that he is here speaking not of the perfection of virginity but according to its general acceptance.

This sober yet detailed approach to one of the great privileges of the Mother of God shows very clearly that St. Thomas is quite unwilling to depart from the data of tradition. He is unable, however, to present a completely coherent picture, because of certain positions he adopts in other doctrinal areas, especially regarding original sin. Nevertheless, his analysis on virginity is bold and decisive. Though he requires the perfection of virginity in the Mother of God—and surely he is right—he includes in that perfection an element which he is ready to regard as accidental.

This position of St. Thomas expresses the common teaching of the Schoolmen, though he himself added considerable precision to its presentation. But there is the odd man out in the person of the hardheaded Durandus of Saint Pourçain. He appears to have been impressed by the continuing speculation on the quality of natural birth in the state of innocence and instinctively applies this to the birth of Christ.<sup>28</sup> His basic difficulty is philosophical. He cannot envisage the occupancy of the same place simultaneously by two bodies. This he regards as demanded by the traditional explanation of Christ's birth, which he therefore cannot accept. His view would be that Christ was born by the dilation of the birth canal without any rupture or breaking. Suarez, who can be cited as one of the more famous commentators on St. Thomas,

<sup>26</sup> *Quodl.* 6, 18 c.

<sup>27</sup> *Sum. theol.* 2-2, q. 152, a. 1, ad 3m.

<sup>28</sup> *In 4 sent.*, d. 44, q. 6.

knows this view but rates it as erroneous, while noting that it was regarded by some as having a certain "probability." However, he himself regards the common view as the right interpretation and one that should be retained.

Suarez' own position is clearly presented in his commentary on q. 28 of the *Summa*.<sup>29</sup> The error concerning *virginitas in partu* began, he asserts, with Jovinian and is perpetuated by the Lollards and Protestant writers. Insisting on the reality of Christ's birth, he nevertheless gives the now common interpretation of *apertio uteri*, i.e., a general description of human birth and signifying no more than that. As for Christ's coming forth at birth, he asserts that this occurred without any dilation or bodily change or injury. This position he regards as "certain."

His reasons are of interest. First, the over-all agreement of theologians. Secondly, the Fathers placed great importance on this *miraculous* birth. If, therefore, it occurred merely by dilation and was paralleled by the manner of birth attributed to the state of innocence, then there would be nothing particularly miraculous about it. Lastly—and this is specifically against Durandus—a birth in this manner (by dilation, etc.) would derogate from the purity and integrity of the Virgin Mary, which, according to the Fathers, not only was preserved but was increased by Christ's nativity.

It must strike the historian of the doctrine that Suarez' evaluation of the status of the common teaching is, in technical terms, relatively moderate. When, however, he discusses whether Christ was really born,<sup>30</sup> he has no hesitation in saying that this is *de fide*. As a consequence of his analysis, he reaches the conclusion that Our Lord's passage from His mother's womb was normal ("per naturalem viam qua reliqui homines nasci solent"), which he considers must obtain if it is to be a real birth. He also adds that Mary must have co-operated actively, like any other woman; otherwise she could never be said to have "borne Christ" (and it would be Christ Himself who would become the principal agent in His own birth). "In this," says Suarez, "there is neither difficulty nor impropriety."

However, the birth was painless because it was "virginal"—though Suarez adds that there are some who require all the normal "unpleasant" characteristics of birth to be retained, on the grounds that all that derives from nature and is not attributable to sin must not be denied to Christ or His mother. The afterbirth, as a natural feature, would have been naturally discarded. But Suarez himself finds this unacceptable, quoting the Council of Trullo (can. 79), which would sweep away all

<sup>29</sup> *In 3m partem*, q. 28, a. 1, disp. 5, s. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Q. 38, a. 8, d. 13.

“unpleasantness”—a version of the canon which he honestly admits might be unauthentic. It has to be a miracle, i.e., a suspension or modification of natural law. This leads him away from sane and sober analysis. Christ, he suggests, may have been conceived without the natural membrane (the amnial sac). There would then be no afterbirth. He admits that the pregnancy itself would be miraculous. As an alternative, the amnial sac would have been “left behind” by Christ.

These not very clever solutions could easily cause derisory comment. But they witness to an unshakable conviction concerning the perfect and complete virginity of Mary and, given widespread ignorance of the physiology of birth, were the only solutions available to a theologian who, along with everybody else, defined perfect virginity in set, unchallenged terms.

Suarez' speculation regarding birth in the state of innocence<sup>31</sup> reveals his own hesitations about the general teaching built up from the patristic writings. He faithfully records that certain Fathers rejected the normal processes of conception in these unknown circumstances before the Fall because they felt these would involve lust and the vehemence of sexual pleasure, the “corruption” or rupture of the virginal seal, and birth in pain. He accuses Jerome of holding that marriage in so far as it involved intercourse is to be cited *post peccatum*. The particular point that concerns the issue under discussion is, of course, the rupture of the hymen. Not unexpectedly, there are serious defects in his physiology. He states categorically that a woman's womb is “closed” before intercourse (or childbirth) and “open” afterwards—a complete reversal of the truth. In this he is only respecting general ideas. But this leads to a further categorical conclusion that “nothing could prevent the rupture of the hymen in conception,” and if material virginity is demanded in the state of innocence, it would be equally required in the process of birth. He is rightly against the “continuous miracle” which would then be demanded.

At this point Suarez refers to Durandus,<sup>32</sup> who bases his position on the impossibility of two bodies being simultaneously present in the same place. He does not like Durandus' explanation of a natural dilation of the physical parts involved, because, he adds, physical virginity consists in the contiguity and “nondivision” of the birth canal, and there can be no separation of these parts without great pain. Mere “relaxation” or dilation is not enough to produce painless birth without a new disposition of natural structures through divine intervention. This would be a “quasi connatural privilege.” Equally he dislikes the opinion of some

<sup>31</sup> *De opere sex dierum* 5, chap. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Loc. cit.*; also 2, d. 20, q. 2, ad 1m.

that there was a transitory opening of the physical seal. This he calls an evasion of the issue and heretical in content. "For this would be a denial of the virginity of Our Blessed Lady and involve its destruction, at least *in partu*."

This account of one great theologian represents the general position in the seventeenth century. There was to be no theological progress in the explanation of the implications of the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity, especially *in partu*, until our own times. Whether recent writings have actually increased our understanding is still debated, but they require a genuine and sympathetic assessment. Though it is true that this particular bracket (*virginitas in partu*) does not figure expressly in the day-to-day preaching of the Church,<sup>33</sup> except indirectly in the context of the presence or absence of suffering by Our Lady, the firm and explicit doctrine of her motherhood has, in one way or another, opened the way to a certain preoccupation with the reconciliation of this dogma with the equally important dogma of her virginity. Already in 1939, Merkelbach, one of the best known modern Marian scholars, seemed to be looking for a certain room to manoeuvre when he asserted that it does not seem necessary in the declaration of the doctrine to determine precisely in what the seal of virginity consists but it is necessary to say that the seal remained uninjured and entire.<sup>34</sup> Such a position would not have satisfied the Fathers and would not have been fully satisfactory to the Schoolmen. However, a newer approach appeared after the Second World War with the publication of Albert Mitterer's *Dogma und Biologie der Heiligen Familie*.<sup>35</sup> Though this is a particular study of St. Thomas' writings on the subject, it raises a fundamental issue noted by the editor of the *Clergy Review* when he reviewed the book in 1956.<sup>36</sup> Put in the form of a question, it is this: Can one hold the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity while denying a miraculous mode of birth for Christ? He rightly adds that Mitterer's affirmative conclusion is a hypothesis, but one which should be tested by a loyal examination of the facts.

#### CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING

There are no specifically new elements to the theological problem. It is still necessary, even as for the writers of the first centuries, to reflect on the correlative dogmas of Mary's motherhood and her perpetual virginity. But the historian of the dogma will have noted that the space

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Gerald Owens, in *Marian Studies* 7 (1956) 43-44.

<sup>34</sup> *Mariologia* (Paris, 1939) p. 248, no. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Vienna, 1952. Cf. also L. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Cork, 1956).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. below.

allocated to the discussion of the implication of Our Lady's virginity is, in fact, far in excess of that set aside to a study of the *implications* of her motherhood. Yet, Mary's motherhood is the foundational dogma on which all else is built. It would seem that motherhood was too obvious a fact to require much explanation, whereas virginity appeared to contradict it and provoked puzzling "problems." Were the right questions being asked? Were they based on false presuppositions? Do such false presuppositions, if they exist, in any way modify the dogma itself? Or are they rather to be attributed to theological speculation which is now seen to be irrelevant?

Mitterer, who is the first in modern times to raise such questions, came to this conclusion after a study of St. Thomas:

The Fathers and the Scholastics interpreted Mary's perpetual virginity as involving a miraculous process of birth, because they considered that the integrity of the hymen constituted an *element* in physical virginity. The reason does not seem valid: on the one hand, the hymen may be broken by accident; and on the other hand, there have been cases of sexual relations where the hymen has remained intact. An unbroken hymen, then, is not an element but a *sign*, and a doubtful one at that, of physical virginity. This consists in the absence of sexual intercourse and absence of male seed. At the same time the full concept of physical motherhood seems to require the active, muscular co-operation of the mother in the bringing forth of her child. The conclusion may be drawn from these observations that the miraculous process of birth with the consequent preservation of the hymen is not required for Mary's virginity and seems in fact to be opposed to her genuine and complete motherhood. Yet it is repeatedly affirmed in tradition. Are the Fathers attesting a truth of revelation or wrongly interpreting the revealed truth of Mary's virginity, owing to the inadequacy of their natural science? Mitterer leaves this question unanswered and hands the matter over to the specialists in positive theology.<sup>37</sup>

This report provoked an angry riposte,<sup>38</sup> and the editor of the *Clergy Review* felt it necessary to write:

"Re-interpretation" is always the separation of revealed truth from acci-

<sup>37</sup> *Clergy Review* 41 (1956) 545-46. I have used the summary of Mitterer's thesis in the review already noted. The intactness or rupture of the hymen is, for him, an irrelevant detail and in no way incompatible with perfect or complete virginity—a position contrary to the common teaching *as applied to Our Lady*. "Die Verletzung des Hymens ist nicht an sich und seiner Natur nach gegen die leibseelische Jungfräulichkeit gerichtet. Sie ist an sich nichts Seelisches und der Schmerz, der mit ihr verbunden ist, ist alles eher als eine Geschlechtsempfindung oder Geschlechtslust. . . . Nur wenn dieser Verlust durch den Geschlechtsakt geschieht, ist er gegen die volle Jungfrauschafft und auch dann nicht wegen der Verletzung, sondern wegen des Geschlechtsaktes, durch den er verursacht wurde" (*op. cit.*, p. 106).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Clergy Review* 41 (1956) 702 ff.

dental elements that have been associated with the truth in the past but are now seen as due to a passing historical content.

Mary's perpetual physical virginity is beyond all doubt a dogma of our faith; in other words, Mary's body always was and remains the body of a virgin. It was not impaired by the birth of Christ; that is the truth known as the *virginitas in partu*. But what is implied in the concept of physical virginity? Does it imply an unbroken hymen, and consequently demand a miraculous process of birth in Christ? Or can we say that this idea is an accidental element in tradition, coming from the notions current at the time but without permanent value? If so, one could hold firm the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity, while denying a miraculous mode of birth for Christ. Such would be the line of separation between the unchanging dogma and its changing associations. All this is hypothesis, and it must be tested by a loyal examination of the facts. A difficulty indeed comes to mind even before these are examined. The re-interpretation seems to make the assertion of *virginitas in partu* meaningless. This is not because it denies that Mary remained a virgin during birth, but because, on this view, the birth *could* not have affected the virginity, and it becomes quite pointless for the Church to affirm that it *did* not. I am under no illusion about the difficulties that anyone who tries to follow up Mitterer's suggestion will have to face, but to allow the possibility of an investigation is in no way unsound.

He found Mitterer's view attractive, however, on the point that "physical motherhood seems to require the active co-operation of the mother in the bringing forth of her child." It needs to be repeated that the active co-operation of Mary is by no means excluded in early testimony, and it is only when the question of *virginitas in partu* becomes inextricably involved with the "closed womb" physiology that it becomes a problem.

Mitterer is, of course, quite right in his evaluation of the presence or absence of the hymen. Its intactness or otherwise is without serious medico-legal significance. At the most, its presence is a presumption of virginity. St. Thomas observed this and therefore characterized it as an accidental feature and to this extent undermined the normal teaching derived from the Fathers. However, he still felt that its intactness was necessary for the "perfection" or most perfect realization of physical integrity. He did not prove this but would appear to have been very conscious of the weight of tradition.

Mitterer, on the other hand, does not build his reappraisal of the common teaching merely on this one detail. His study is concerned with establishing a true analysis of the constituents not only of virginity but also of motherhood. His conclusion is that true motherhood cannot be reconciled with the ancient teaching (continued into our own day) concerning Mary's virginity.

But what is also important is to decipher the over-all presuppositions



inherent in the patristic teaching. The fact that confronted them in their reflections was that, in Mary's case, virgin organs (better, a virgin's organs) are behaving nonvirginally. They then seem to have expected that these organs should retain their pristine physical state both during and after this particular and unique parturition. They were unable to accept that perpetual virginity is compatible with obviously parous organs; for the latter were inevitably modified by pregnancy and birth—unless God intervened.

Yet no stigma, blemish, or defect pertained to these organs in consequence of the divine maternity; quite the contrary. The ordinary physical signs of pregnancy, birth, and lactation were *of themselves* a signal glorification of Mary's sinless body: "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked" (Lk 11:27 RSV). Following St. Thomas' principle, the Fall would have made no difference to the natural characteristics of man, male or female.

But what of the pains of labor and childbirth? We now know that painless birth is possible. It is not unknown to medical science that all anguish has been absent even in a young primipara. It seems altogether appropriate in Our Lady. She was full of grace, without the tensions of sin and concupiscence, and would she not therefore have given birth to Our Lord with complete relaxation of mind and body, and with a great and ineffable joy of soul? The speculation of the Scholastics on birth in the state of innocence provides an interesting comment on this position.

It is legitimate, in the light of these considerations and the summary analysis of patristic and scholastic evidence, to question whether the "common teaching" belongs to the substance of the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity. Whether the external presumptive sign of physical virginity was unaffected by Our Lord's birth is not an ascertainable fact and would therefore not belong to the ordinary teaching of the Church. The normal view of virginity is that it is the state of a *person* who has chosen to abstain from sexual relations and has never voluntarily entered into them. There seems no compelling reason, in the light of the evidence, to refrain from appraising Mary's virginity according to the same criterion.

There is, furthermore, an overriding reflection that urges the theologian to regard the hitherto accepted explanation with some diffidence. It concerns the Son rather than the mother. For Christ accepted our humanity in all its fulness, limitations, and conditionings, sin excepted. Virginally conceived, He developed before and after birth like any other child. But He also accepted His human nature, not only as it affected His own person but as it had to affect others—His mother, His friends, His enemies. He consistently accepted the human condition (hunger, thirst,

sleeplessness, pain) and never protected Himself from its consequences. Mary was intimately involved in His redemptive mission. Nothering suggests that He sought to relieve her of its continuing cross. It would seem incongruous to demand any exemption from an absolute naturalness as the general context of His birth. Her fiat was His mother's acceptance.

If, then, God's special intervention does not seem required to preserve the dogma of her perpetual virginity, then we are at liberty to see the patristic evidence as one theological explanation and not pertaining to the substance of faith. This would permit the development of another theology of the Virgin Birth. It could be based on the following points:

1) The pregnancy, birth, and infancy of Our Lord followed strictly the natural order.

2) The birth would be similar to birth in the state of innocence.

3) No suspension of natural law is required, particularly because virginity, *in its fulness*, does not require the presence or absence of the presumptive sign.

4) The dogmatic formula *virginitas ante partum, in partu, et post partum* is substantially and absolutely true. It is a clear enunciation that Our Lady remained a virgin *throughout her life*. If the words *virginitas in partu* are taken in isolation, they are an assertion that when Mary's uterus acted maternally, this involved no impairment of her virginity. The *need* to assert this was contingent upon a particular understanding of virginity and this is not taught as of faith.

5) There is, therefore, no valid reason for the reversion of Mary's body to the condition obtaining prior to her conception of Jesus. This miracle would be pointless.

6) Our Lord's birth is the action of His *mother*, her gift to Him even as to us.