

History Of the Dogma Of the Immaculate Conception.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception has many phases. At the outset it bears the appearance of a "modern" doctrine, since it has but recently been defined. For that reason it seems to imperil the oneness and infallibility of the Church which defined it.

It is sufficiently manifest that if any teaching body originate an article of belief, change substantially an accepted article, or abolish an old one, it thereupon forfeits its title to unity of doctrine. Furthermore, since truth is one and unchangeable at all times, such a body proves itself fallible, defective, and consequently without authority. It may not, therefore, claim for itself divine institution. Of such an establishment Christ did not make Himself the author when He empowered and bade His apostles to "teach all nations," promising that He would remain with them "all days, even to the consummation of the world." (Matt. xxviii, 20.) "The Son of God, Jesus Christ, was not, 'It is' and 'It is not' but, 'It is,' was in Him." (2 Cor. i, 19.) If then the Immaculate Conception is an entirely new dogma or wholly a nineteenth century invention, the authority of the Catholic Church is impeached, and men must look elsewhere for the Rock of Salvation according to the injunction of St. Paul: "Though we or an angel from heaven, preach a gospel to you besides that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema." (Gal. i, 8.)

Another interesting feature of the Immaculate Conception is that it is not contained expressly in Sacred Scripture. To enhance this difficulty—for it is a grievous difficulty in the way of its acceptance by non-Catholics—the law of original sin is set down in such clear, forceful terms by St. Paul as to warrant the denial of any exception to it, in one who chooses to accept the Scriptures as the sole rule of faith. Our knowledge of this mystery assumes that tradition must go hand in hand with the sacred writings, and that the Catholic Church is the guardian and interpreter of both.

We need not linger on these preliminaries. A brief history of the dogma will reveal that it is by no means an invention, but rather an ancient teaching coeval with the Church, and in perfect harmony with other apostolic traditions.

For several centuries the Immaculate Conception, as an object of belief, was in what might properly be styled an embryonic state; that is to say, it was implied in other revealed truths which were openly professed.

It ought not to be a source of wonderment that this teaching, which redounds so much to the glory of Mary, was not explicitly believed from the beginning. This fact serves only to illustrate that God, Who had designed His Church for the sanctification and eternal welfare of men, chose to make it in some degree like human institutions. It was indeed never to exceed the margins of truth and righteousness, yet it was to pass through certain evolutions and developments of teaching, legislation and disciplinary enactments to a more perfect state. Many dogmas were held explicitly in the Church's infancy, such as the divinity of Christ, the necessity of baptism, the Eucharistic presence, etc., but others were not so well understood, and these Christ deposited with His Church to be expounded and made clear by her in future ages. To this class of truths belongs the mystery of the Immaculate Conception.

The representatives and exponents of the Church's beliefs in early ages were the Apologists and Fathers. That their idea of Mary was that of a creature conceived without sin is evinced from their unanimity in pronouncing her "most innocent, most pure, inviolate, undefiled, immaculate, the daughter of life, the new and sacred heaven made perfect unto God." So deep was St. Augustine's appreciation of Mary's sanctity that he declared in his work "On Nature and Grace" that he wished never to mention her in connection with sin. Sts. Ephrem and Ambrose, contemporaries of St. Augustine, were equally as pointed. "In thee, O Lord," exclaimed the former, "there is no stain, and thy mother is without spot," while the latter writes: "The Virgin Mary was not defiled by any blemish of sin." (Comm. Ps. cxviii.) Such epithets and eulogies were meaningless, did they not signify freedom from original not less than from actual sin.

It was particularly on the feasts of the Nativity and Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin that the Fathers extolled the august privilege of her Conception, and proclaimed loudly and unmistakably that never for a moment was the Holy Spirit absent from her soul.

Thus the way was paved towards the institution of the feast of the Conception which inaugurated the second period in the history of the dogma. Andrew of Crete chronicled the celebration of this festival in the Greek Church as early as the year 675. The truthfulness of this annual is borne out by compilations of sermons still extant, which were composed for the occasion during the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries. From Greece the devotion made headway throughout Sicily and thence to Naples. In the latter place a marble tablet of the ninth century still commemorates the keeping of the feast on December 9.

It is recorded that the festival was observed in the Oriental monastery of St. Saba, near the Aventine Hill, early in the twelfth century. At that time (1115), a nephew of St. Anselm, also named Anselm, was abbot. He fostered piously the cult which flourished under his rule and, when he was afterwards transferred to the abbacy of Edmundsbury (1121), and elevated to the Episcopal See of London (1138), he labored zealously and efficiently to promote in England the devotion which he found already there established (viz., since 1110). His chief act in this regard was the institution of the feast of the Conception.

It was perhaps owing to Anselm's repeated missions to Normandy (1115 and 1119) as Apostolic Legate that the devotion took root in that country. From Normandy the pious movement passed into France, where it grew so rapidly that, by the year 1154, the entire Christian populace of the nation patronized it. It was at this juncture that St. Bernard sent his celebrated Epistle to Lyons in which he severely censured the institution of the feast in that city as an "innovation." Many theologians strive to excuse this action of the Mellifluous Doctor by maintaining that its author failed to grasp the meaning of the mystery in its proper light. They argue also that he would not have displayed such unwonted hostility if the canons concerned had procured the approval of the Holy See. However this may be, the cult spread subsequently through Germany, Spain, and the rest of Europe. Rome manifested its proverbial tardiness in advocating the devotion. It made no effort to check its progress and expansion, nor did it display opposition to the observance of the festival. It was merely waiting to learn the mind of the Holy Ghost before sealing with its positive approbation a universal impulse which could not have sprung but from God.

Meanwhile the spirit of controversy was waxing warm in the schools. Whatever may have been the intention of St. Bernard in writing the epistle referred to, it is an historical fact that by it he placed a temporary damper on the growth of the devotion, and furnished its opponents with efficient weapons. His untoward influence must have been felt the more because he was otherwise so unbounded and effusive in his praises of Mary. St. Bernard and other representative Catholic doctors of the medieval period seem to have apprehended the law of original sin as being so stringent and universal that absolutely no one who had been endowed with existence by human progenitors, could escape its yoke. In the case of our divine Saviour alone, it appeared to them, was the curse of Eden totally suspended, or, more properly, removed, and this was by reason of his miraculous human origin as well as His divinity. Hence Blessed Albert the Great queries ("missus est"), "Why was not at least one man (besides the Saviour) conceived without original sin?" and he answers that this would be "impossible, unless such a one were conceived of a virgin." Mary, moreover, like others needed redemption. Wherefore she was at one time, albeit for the shortest instant, offensive to her Creator. Thus reasoned the keenest minds, notably Peter Lombard and Hugh of St. Victor. St. Anselm has been adduced both as favoring and opposing the dogma. The latter opinion is more likely. True, he claimed as befitting our Lady, a purity than which "none greater is intelligible in a creature." ("De Conceptione Virginali,") but he did not distinctly

apply these words to the first moment of her existence. He and his contemporaries fully appreciated the difficulties which surrounded them and, as they viewed the earnest and warming devotion of the faithful to a mystery which they could not explain, they paused. They were involved in deep perplexity. They failed to grasp the truth that God Who sanctifies by cleansing from the guilt of sins contracted, can also sanctify by preventing the contraction or inheritance of guilt. Consequently they saw not that redemption is necessary in a more excellent degree for the latter benefit than for the former.

St. Bonaventure approached the question more closely than any of his predecessors, yet even he failed to answer it conclusively. However, while his reason was deluged with the conflicting arguments hurled about in the Parish University and other seats of learning, he seemed to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in the simple and pious ejaculations of the faithful. Accordingly, when he was made Minister-General of his Order, he approved of the observance of a feast in honor of the Conception throughout its rank and file. To this he might also have been moved by the commendation which the Blessed Virgin herself was said to have given to the festival, or by the revelation made to Hsinnus, an English Abbot, about the year 1066.

The mind of St. Thomas Aquinas expressed in his works as we have them to-day, is obscure. In places he seems to have imbibed the theories of his master, Blessed Albert the Great, and of Peter Lombard. He likewise touches the point of debate, as did St. Bonaventure, and like him answers it according to the view which at that time held sway in the University. Still, in other parts of his works he leaves ample grounds for dispute, so much so that it cannot be demonstrated conclusively that he was averse to the dogma.

It was reserved for Duns Scotus (1265 (?) -1308) (?) to bring order out of confusion. He was the first to reconcile the systems of the schools with the effervescent devotion of the populace. This erudite Franciscan maintained in the beginning with becoming moderation, and afterwards with the boldness of deep conviction, that Mary, although naturally fated to incur the guilt of original sin, was by the special intervention of Divine Providence, preserved intact. This unspottedness was secured to her, not before her soul had been infused into her body, nor even a moment afterwards, as many had ventured, but at the very instant of her animation or conception. With such consummate skill, deep penetration, and nice discernment did Scotus defend his thesis, that is was thereupon incorporated into the creed of the University. Thenceforth no one was admitted to the degree of Master at Paris, who did not bind himself by oath to defend the Immaculate Conception until death. Scotus, as a reward, was thrice adorned with the title of "Subtle Doctor," viz., by the universities of Paris and Cologne, which were the leading strongholds of Catholic learning in Europe, and by the reigning Supreme Pontiff. These last data are given us by Cavellus (14th century), whose authority as to these particulars all do not accept. At any rate, the title of "Subtle Doctor" has clung to Scotus, as has also that of "Herald of the Immaculate Conception."

It is needless to say that continued discussions called forth several acts of the Holy See, and it is from these acts that the attitude of the Church is to be learned.

The Council of Basle (15th century) seems to have comprehended the dogma as we now understand it, but it lacked the authority to define it. Pope Sixtus IV. (1471-1484), approved of an office of the Immaculate Conception in which the victory of Scotus is commemorated. He also enriched the pious observance of the feast with indulgences, and rebuked all opponents of the dogma. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) renewed and confirmed the last-named action of Sixtus and, after having explained the Church's tenets regarding the racial sin, it declared that "it was not its intention to embrace the blessed and immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God" in its decree (Sess. v, 5). Pope St. Pius V. (1566-1572) inserted the feast in the Roman calendar and breviary, although he suppressed the word "Immaculate" from the name of the festival and prescribed the office of the Nativity B. V. M. for its celebration. St. Pius also condemned Michael Bains for teaching that "no one except Christ was free from original sin," and that "the Blessed Virgin died on account of sin contracted from Adam." (Prop. 73.) He likewise silenced popular controversy over the subject. Paul V. (1605-1621) forbade the doctrine to be

publicly impugned, and Gregory XV. (1621-1623), Paul's successor, extended this prohibition to private discussions. The latter Pontiff, however, exempted the Friars Preachers from this restriction. (Brief, "Eximii.") Towards the middle of the 17th century Pope Alexander VII. (1655-1667) expounded the dogma in almost the same phraseology as that used by Pius IX. in his famous definition. Yet Alexander refrained from issuing a definition and contented himself with renewing the Constitutions of Sixtus IV. It was Pope Clement IX. (1700-1721) who first ordered the feast of the Conception to be kept throughout the universal Church. It is pertinent to note that Pius VII. granted the Franciscans a special preface for the Mass of the feast in the year 1806, which preface was later conceded to the archdiocese of Seville (1834), to the Dominican Order (1843), and finally to the rest of the Latin Church. The invocation, "Queen conceived without original sin," was inserted in the Litany of Loretto in 1839 by Gregory XVI.

Thus, however, impetuous the disputants in the schools may have become, the Church herself viewed the doctrine calmly and deliberately. It never once censured either the teaching or any of its defenders. On the contrary, it gradually laid severe strictures on its opponents as a class, and for several centuries assisted notably in diffusing a knowledge of the mystery and in fostering devotion towards it. Borrowing the words of Pope Pius IX.: "The Church of Rome has held nothing dearer than the declaration, defence, furtherance, and upholding of the Immaculate Conception in the most persuasive terms."

In this manner the second period was drawing to a close. The time was getting ripe for a definition. The Immaculate Conception had not as yet been made an article of faith. It was somewhat like the mystery of the Assumption B. V. M. in our day. Men might not deny it with impunity, yet they might do so and escape the brand of "heretic." Few there were, however, who displayed strong aversion for the doctrine. Some found greater difficulties in it than others, but all were ready to bow their heads in reverent submission as soon as Peter would speak. The vast majority were loudly clamoring for a decision.

These circumstances were, so to speak, peculiarly distinctive of the Immaculate Conception. Other doctrines had been defined in the Church at various times, but only on account of heresies that had arisen concerning them. Relative to this dogma there was no heresy, but merely a mistiness which obscured the truth to a few, but which awaited only the bright and radiant light of the Vatican to dispel it.

Then began the third stage in the dogma's history. After repeated and untiring solicitations on the part of Christian kings and rulers, the hierarchy, and the faithful at large, and after having invoked the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit by fasting and both public and private prayers, Pope Pius IX. saw fit to promulgate on December 10, 1854, the following decree:

"To the honor of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, for the grace and adornment of the Virgin Mother of God, for the exaltation of the Catholic faith, and the increase of the Christian religion, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and Our Own. We declare, pronounce, and define that the teaching which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary was by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in virtue of the merits of Christ Jesus, the Saviour of the human race, preserved free from every taint of original sin, at the first moment of her Conception, has been revealed by God, and is therefore strongly and constantly to be believed by all the faithful." (Bull, "Ineffabilis.")

The cause was finished. Since that proclamation the course of Catholicism has been clear. Controversy has ceased and the old discussions, having lost all living import, form little more than materials for history. In that domain they are to stand forever as monuments to the imbecility of unaided human reason in fathoming "the deep things of God."

In accordance with the teaching of Holy Church, all Catholics now believe and maintain unflinchingly that our Blessed Mother was never for an instant under the dominion of Satan. Never was her soul tarnished with original guilt. At the first moment of its creation it was made the repository and temple of the Holy Ghost. It was, indeed, infused into a body subject to the penalties of sin, to sorrow, infirmity, suffering and death, but it had been timely rescued from the slightest moral deformity and had been made to outshine the angels in the brilliancy of its purity.

This ennoblement of Mary was due to her Divine Son's future merits. Christ was to redeem mankind, and Mary was to be His helper, His co-operatrix, His Mother. She then should be the first to experience the kindly influence of His deserts. She, who would naturally have been a doomed and helpless daughter of Eve, should first bask in the brightness of His vivifying rays. Jesus, therefore, Who was the Sun of Justice, illumined Mary, the Mirror of Justice, from the first moment of her existence.

This benefit was a peculiar prerogative, "a singular grace and privilege." In its bestowal, our heavenly Father deemed to regard the soul of His beloved Spouse as already purchased by the Precious Blood of His Son, notwithstanding the fact that that Blood had not as yet been shed.

Such is the dogma which all Catholics proudly and openly profess, not on account of its plausibility or intrinsic reasons, but because it has been revealed by God. Here it must be called to mind that the revelation was not simultaneous with the definition, as some non-Catholics understand the Church to teach. It was made two decades of centuries ago. It was not always so clear and distinct as other revelations, yet it was confided to an unerring Church which was ultimately to identify it and extricate it from the mass of deposited dogma.

The difficulties advanced at the beginning of this paper must ere now have vanished from the minds of intelligent readers. The Catholic Church in defining the Immaculate Conception, the infallibility of the Pope, transubstantiation, or any other dogma, does not originate, change, or reject an article of faith, or reform its code of truth. It merely gives evidence of its sound and healthful vitality. Just as its Divine Founder, although He knew all things from the beginning, "advanced in wisdom, and age, and grace with God and men," (Luke ii, 52), so the Church, although possessed of all its dogmas at the date of its birth, passes through the periods of infancy, youth, and manhood, showing at each stage new signs of growth, development and independence, by the evolution and confirmation of its dogmas not less than those of its legislation.

Nor should it be alleged with reference to the Immaculate Conception, that tradition, to which appeal is made, is in conflict with Sacred Scriptures, since St. Paul extends the ban of sin to all men, whereas tradition exempts the Blessed Virgin. St. Paul merely utters a positive law which depends wholly upon the will of God for its execution. God can, therefore, if He chooses, grant dispensations from such a law without abolishing it. It is to the actual concession of a dispensation or privilege of this kind that tradition attests. From this it is obvious that the Scriptures speak truthfully and tradition speaks truthfully. The latter supplements but does not contradict the former.

Yet the Bible is not wholly silent about our Lady's prerogative. In the book of Genesis (iii, 15), we find a prediction of it in those "enmities," which God was to place between the woman and the serpent, and in the crushing of the serpent's head. Again, the Archangel's address to Mary, declaring that she was "full of grace" (Luke i, 28), is pertinent, but these texts are not demonstrative and are fully understood only when viewed in the light of the definition.

Not a few Catholics survive who are able to recall the universal joy which followed upon the solemn proclamation of the Immaculate Conception. Fain do we join with these in congratulating our Blessed Mother who now beams with undimmed, unwonted splendor, Mary's internal happiness, it is true, has not been increased, but her external glory has been enhanced. Men know her better and love her more. "Hail full of grace," they jubilantly salute her, "full," with a plentitude of benediction which their minds cannot grasp. Hail, Conqueror of Satan and Morning Star! Hail, Tower of David in which sinners take refuge! Hail, Restorer of our liberties and our inheritance, our Heavenly Queen! "Queen, conceived without original sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee."—By Rev. T. A. K. Redly, O.P., in Rosary Magazine.

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SAVINGS IN LITTLE THINGS.

There is probably no industry in the world in which more attention and thought are given to the saving of small items of expenditure than in the railroads of this country. And a great deal of ability is expended on that subject. The saving of a quart of oil in the running of a freight train one mile, while apparently insignificant in itself, amounts to a large sum when applied to the millions of freight train miles run in the course of a year.

This effort to economize in the small items of expenditures is the main object in most of the enormous improvements that the railroads of the country have made during the last few years. According to the report of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the number of train miles run in 1900 by the railroads of the country amounted to 856,090,082. It can, therefore, be easily understood that a saving on each of these train miles, although amounting in itself to but a fraction of a cent, will aggregate an enormous sum when applied to the total number.

It appears that during the same year the average operating expense per train mile was \$107,288. Suppose that, through the extensive improvements that the railroads are now making, it will be possible to effect in average saving of only two cents per train mile. That would be equivalent, on the 856,090,082 train miles run in 1900, to a total saving of over \$17,000,000. This is equivalent to an annual dividend of 4 per cent. on \$825,000,000. Even if a saving of only one cent per train mile, on an average, can be effected, that would be equivalent to a total saving of over \$8,500,000 on the number of train miles run in 1900. Capitalizing this sum at 4 per cent. gives \$212,500,000.

In other words, supposing the railroads of the country could borrow money at 4 per cent., and could effect a permanent average reduction of one cent in the train mile cost, they would be justified in spending \$200,000,000. In reality, however, the railroads have netted a much larger profit on the money that they have spent on improvements. It is estimated that the capital which the Pennsylvania Railroad has spent on improvements has returned the company a profit of between 15 and 20 per cent. These facts are largely overlooked in much of the current criticism of the liberal manner in which the railroads have capitalized extraordinary improvements and betterments.—New York Times.

"Alma Redemptoris
via coeli
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curre cadenti."
Antiphon

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