

FIRST STAGE

BEFORE THE ANNUNCIATION — MARY, CHOICE FRUIT OF ISRAEL

The first task is to situate the point of departure of Mary's destiny.

The history of the world before Christ is the closed field of two opposite movements. On the one hand, mankind is being dragged along in the dialectical struggle of sin. On the other, God's gratuitous interventions are leading it toward the victory which is to be Christ. The downward movement of degradation held sway up to Abraham (Gen. 3-11). Then God's interventions became increasingly efficacious, but within a scope that was more and more *restricted*, and on a level that was more and more *spiritual*. God chose Abraham's family, and then, among his descendants, Jacob in preference to Esau. Then, as Israel's dreams of political greatness and prosperity came to nothing, grace progressively concentrated upon an elite, obscure from a worldly point of view — the "poor," the "humble," who are the spiritual "remnant" of the chosen people — and finally upon the flower of Israel, the Virgin Mary.

The two aspects of this ascent of mankind towards its Savior can be summed up as *reparation* and *preparation*. They are two aspects closely connected, the one negative, the other positive. Little by little God purifies a chosen lineage

so that Christ can be born without being touched by sin. Among them he stirs up a faith increasingly refined, increasingly explicit, so that Christ's divine coming may be the answer to a desire on man's part, something that was waited for and hoped for, a work of liberty and love, rather than a kind of intrusion marked by surprise or violence.

So it was that between Abraham and Mary a double progress was accomplished, in the order of *moral purity* and in the order of *faith*.

1. In the *moral order* it is a far cry from Israel's first ancestor, Abraham, to the Flower of Israel. The behavior of the father of believers was still crude and at times shocking.¹ The Virgin Mary's very first acts exhibit the most perfect purity. With Abraham, the "rock" in whom God began to "carve" the image of his people (Is. 51:1-2), there begins what might be called the stone age of salvation. Vigor and brute strength characterize it. With Mary comes the golden age, the achievement of perfection.

2. From the viewpoint of *belief and fidelity* a deep resemblance, rather than any further contrast, seems to emerge between Abraham and Mary. All begins with faith and ends with faith. At the outset it is the unconditional faith of the chosen people in the promise; at the conclusion it is the unconditional faith of the Mother of God in the realization of the promise (Lk. 1:38). Yet here too the evolution that had taken place is considerable. At the beginning it was an elementary faith that remained bound up in a promise of material prosperity; at the conclusion it is a faith spiritualized and enriched by the long development of revelation, of which the message of the Annunciation marked the definitive stage.

And so a double mystery invites investigation here:

1. Polygamy, subterfuge, disconcerting compromises for obtaining the benefits that the relations of his wife would secure from the Pharaoh (Gen. 12:16; cf. 16:6, etc.). Obviously there are impressive compensating qualities.

Mary's original purity, which is the transcendent completion of the long moral reparation that God effected in Israel, and Mary's faith, which, while remaining in the same order, is the completion of the long preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

1. The Immaculate Conception: Mary's Original Purity

Mary's original purity appears at the conclusion of the Old Testament as the key to an indecipherable and apparently contradictory enigma which arises from the very Bible itself. In fact, it consists in the most baffling element of the mystery of salvation, the love God has for man the sinner. The people that came forth from the faith of Abraham did not escape the dialectic struggle of sin. This people whom God had chosen as a "well beloved spouse,"² according to the teaching of the prophets, proved unfaithful. It "prostituted" itself before false gods. And yet God's love did not give up in despair. It endured even stronger. Hence, beginning with the second chapter of Hosea a mysterious promise begins to take shape: in the last days God will take up his adulterous spouse anew as an unsullied bride. At the end of this line of development, in the Song of Songs, all the past with all its reproaches is blotted out. As bridegroom, Yahweh addresses Israel, his bride, "You are wholly beautiful, my love, and without a blemish" (Song 4:7).³ The paradox is disconcerting. How is

2. Hosea 2; Jer. 31:17-22; Is. 51:17, 21, 22; 52:1-2, 7-8, 12; 54:4-8; 61:10-11; 62:4-5.

3. The old argument drawn from Song 4:7 in favor of the Immaculate Conception, and the liturgical use of this verse, reveal their worth if, with A. Robert, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*. Paris, Gabalda, 1963, the Song is taken as the culmination of the Old Testament theology of the relationships of Yahweh and Israel. Where is this prophecy of the adulterous spouse become fiancée realized if not in Mary, in the main line of the unfolding plan of salvation?

This is stated in awareness of the objection that Robert himself makes

all this possible? Its possibility lies not along human ways, but along the ways God chose, ways that involved the passing of Israel into the Church, which is the new creation of the chosen people in Jesus Christ. But at the point of departure for this new creation and recapitulation there was need of a pure and unspoiled seed of growth, a bud of grace from which the Flower of Jesse might blossom forth without disgrace (Is. 11:1), a renewal of purity within which the people might give birth to God its Savior as he came into its midst for the eschatological wedding. Such is the mystery of Mary, "Object of all God's favor" according to the name of grace

against applying the Song to Mary: "It chants the praise of merciful love . . . that we have offended. The expressions of the Song cannot apply to the Blessed Virgin either in the literal sense — even the fuller sense — or in the typical sense, but only as accommodations which are isolated from the central idea that animates them" (A. Robert, article in *Maria* 1 (1949), p. 33). This argument would carry weight if the Song spoke expressly of Israel's sin and the mercy shown toward it. But, as Robert himself insists in very forthright terms, Israel's faults precisely "are so completely pardoned that no explicit mention of them is made" (*ibid.*). No doubt the inspired writer did not grasp how God would realize this return to original purity. But the apparently hyperbolic declaration that Yahweh-King makes to Israel — "There is no stain in you" — was literally realized only in the new creation that began with Mary's Immaculate Conception. Since this sense is objectively verified, since it was recognized (though manners of expression often were deficient) by an abundant tradition, the theologian is authorized to see there a "fuller sense" or further sense that corresponds to the plan of God, principal author of Scripture.

The same can be said of the text of Jer. 31:22, likewise put aside by Robert (*Maria* 1 (1949), pp. 24-26). Here again he seems to disregard the theological import of the excellent exegesis he proposes. This woman who "danced round" false gods and is going to turn around to Yahweh, in other words, to convert, is Israel. But in whom is this total and uncompromising conversion fully realized, if not in Mary and the Church? In short, these prophecies concern Mary at the same time as Israel and the Church. Likewise, according to Luke, Mary is the eschatological Daughter of Zion in whom the people of Israel become the new creation, without ceasing to be the people of the promises. There is here a mystery of continuity of race within discontinuity of grace.

given her from on high (Lk. 1:28). It is in her that Holy Church begins, and thus it is that from the beginning God can say, not simply in poetic figure but in very truth, "You are wholly beautiful, my love, and without a blemish."

To this mystery of renewal within the continuity of the race to be saved, a mystery of re-creation by grace and of rejuvenation for a world grown old in sin, the Church has given a precise formula. On December 8, 1854 Pius IX defined the initial point of the mystery in these terms:

"At the first instant of her conception, by the grace and privilege of Almighty God and in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, the Virgin Mary was preserved and exempted from all stain of original fault."

This dogmatic formula, the terms of which were intentionally borrowed from the Bull *Sollicitudo* of Alexander VII,⁴

4. The two texts (as found in *Bullarium Taurinense* 16, 789, and *Acta Pi IX* 1, 616; Denz. 1100 (2015) and 1641 (2803)) read in parallel as follows:

Alexander VII	Pius IX
Bull <i>Sollicitudo</i>	Bull <i>Ineffabilis</i>
Dec. 8, 1661	Dec. 8, 1854
<p>VETUS EST Christi fidelium erga . . . <i>beatissimam</i> Matrem PIETAS SENTIENTIUM ejus ANIMAM</p>	<p>DEFINIMUS doctrinam quae tenet <i>beatissimam</i> Virginem MARIAM <i>in primo instanti</i> creationis et infusionis in corpus</p>

joins together and sanctions the two great traditional requirements which in their apparent opposition had given rise to so many conflicts in the past:

1. From the beginning Mary was *absolutely exempt from original sin*.
2. Yet this daughter of Adam was *saved by Jesus Christ*.

The difficulty of combining these two requirements arose from the order of time: how could Mary, conceived according to the ordinary laws of nature, not have incurred, were it only for an *instant*, the sin of the *race* to which she belonged? How could she have been saved *before* Christ had redeemed the world? These two difficulties are resolved in the two words "preservation" and "prevision." Mary was *preserved* from original sin, in *prevision* of the merits of Jesus

<i>fuisse speciali Dei</i>	<i>fuisse singulari</i>
<i>gratia et privilegio</i>	omnipotentis Dei
<i>intuitu meritorum Jesu</i>	<i>gratia et privilegio</i>
<i>Christi</i>	<i>intuitu meritorum Jesu</i>
<i>ejus Filii</i>	<i>Christi</i>
<i>humani generis</i>	Salvatoris <i>humani generis</i>
Redemptoris	ab OMNI <i>originalis</i> culpae
a macula peccati <i>originalis</i>	labe
<i>praeservatam immunenem</i> .	<i>praeservatam immunenem</i>
	esse a Deo REVELATAM.

The identical terms have been *italicized*, and three important differences have been CAPITALIZED:

1. Alexander VII *approves* the doctrine of original preservation as a pious belief; Pius XI *defines* that it is *revealed doctrine*.
2. Pius IX suppresses the distinctions relative to *soul* and *body*, and relates the privilege to the *person of Mary*.
3. Pius IX more radically excludes all stain of sin.

Christ. Thus she was "redeemed more perfectly" than any other — *sublimiori modo redempta* — in the words of the Bull of 1854.⁵

In this admirably precise and concise definition the Pope held fast to the surest doctrine. He deliberately phrased it in terms that avoid the particular questions and controversies raised by theological schools. One of these questions, however, he seems virtually to have answered: was Mary exempt from every inclination to sin (*concupiscentia*)? The affirmative answer seems implied by the formula of the definition, which excludes "all stain of original fault," for the inclination to evil has indeed the character of a stain left by sin. It is, however, a fact that this formula was adopted without any positive intention of deciding the debate.⁶ Another question, one of the most heatedly debated, was deliberately left aside: did Mary incur any "debt of sin" (*debitum peccati*)? It would seem that the question so phrased labors under an unfortunate terminology and gives rise to a false problem, since essentially the answer is a simple one. On the one hand it is evident that Mary, as a daughter of Adam, does have a debt — a debt of thanks toward God who by his gracious kindness withdrew her from the universal sin of the race from which she issued. On the other hand, this debt does not in any way constitute a stain or a shadow on her luminous purity.⁸ If I prevent a child from falling into a mud puddle,

5. Bull *Ineffabilis*, *loc. cit.*, p. 605.

6. It must even be said that the formula is accompanied by the express purpose not to settle this point, as shown by J. Alfaro, "La formula definitoria de la Inmaculada Concepción," *Virgo Immaculata* 2 (1956), pp. 264–266.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 243–245. Bianchini's proposition, which affirmed that Mary was exempt from the debitum (V. Sardi, *La solenne definizione* . . . , Rome, Vaticana, 1904, t. 1, pp. 528, 532), found no echo.

8. One must deem unfortunate such expressions as the following, which strangely objectify and materialize the *debitum*: "Mary sinned in Adam" (X. Le Bachelet, DTC 7:1157); "A certain flaw (*aliquid maculae*) was

will it be said that the child is stained from the fact that, but for my intervention, he *should have* fallen into it?

At this beginning of Mary's destiny everything is gratuitous on God's part. It is in her first instant that she is the object of his love, before she has been able to perform any meritorious act. But the gratuitous nature of this intervention, that by anticipation stems entirely from the merits of the God-Man, should not blind us to the way this mystery is connected with all the preparation that had gone before. In the first place, God refrains from interfering here with the biological continuity essential to the unity of the human race, or even with the ordinary process of human generation. Corresponding to this perfect continuity in the order of nature, there is a discontinuity in the order of grace — a discontinuity, however, prepared for in a certain sense. By devoting two solemn and universal liturgical feasts to the parents of the Blessed Virgin — the only Old Testament saints honored by feasts common to both East and West — the Church intends to show that in them the long moral purification begun with Abraham had reached its peak. All that was lacking was liberation from the bonds of original sin. This is the ultimate stage that God completed "in the first instant of Mary's conception."

Every word in the abstract formula of the dogmatic definition has been weighed to answer or to avoid answering this or that complex question clustering about the mystery. But what is important is to grasp the heart of the mystery. It is a mystery of love, of divine love that, unlike ours, does not depend on its object but creates it and unfolds itself therein boundlessly. In the very midst of a world grown old, divine

present in Mary's flesh, capable of instrumentally causing a stain in her soul itself . . . Total preservation from original sin seems contrary to the Catholic faith. . . . The Blessed Virgin in some manner contracted it. . . ." (N. del Prado, *Divus Thomas et Bulla Ineffabilis*, Fribourg, 1919, pp. ix, 119, 229.

love takes up creation anew at its source. In his love God makes Mary the most lovable, the most attractive of creatures. She is the one in whom God can, without compromise with sin, establish his dwelling. The Immaculate Conception is indeed the triumph of God's grace alone: *sola gratia*.

2. Israel's Climax in the Advance toward Salvation: Mary's Faith

The momentum of this grace, unhampered by any interior hindrance, bore Mary toward God in a soaring impulse of faith and love. According to that law whereby the creatures most favored by God are also those that thirst after him most, Mary's strong thirst for the Most High exceeds in intensity any other desire there ever was or ever will be. Having thus reached its climax, Israel's waiting was to receive its response. That would be the message of the Annunciation, a subject to be taken up in the next chapter of this study. Before attention is turned to it, however, another aspect of the mystery of Mary Immaculate deserves to be noted. So far this mystery has been envisaged in relation to God. Now the place it conferred on Mary within mankind should be considered.

3. Mary's Position in the Human Family

By her total sanctity, which renews the regal sanctity of our first parents, Mary is raised above the rest of mankind. Alone perfectly pleasing to God in all her being as well as in all her actions, she is the first of all creatures, the queen of creation. But does this regal position alienate her from the rest of mankind? To suppose it did would be a serious error. In fact, the very opposite is true. This queen lives humbly in the world of the poor. Royal as she is in the spiritual order, exempt from sin which divides men and turns them in on themselves, endowed lavishly with grace that opens outward

and unites, she is at once the humblest servant and the most majestic queen — the humblest servant *because* she is the most majestic queen.⁹

Here we touch upon an important facet of God's plan. To a degree that we shall never sufficiently comprehend, he created man according to a law of unity (cf. Acts 17:26; Col. 3:15, etc.) and solidarity. To each creature was confided a measure of responsibility proportionate to the gifts received from God. The higher he raises men, the more he calls upon them to serve, so that the greatest among them will be the "servant," and the "first . . . the slave of all" (Mk. 10:43-45). Thus Christ the Head, "the First" (Apoc. 1:17), is also the "Servant" par excellence (Is. 53), who came "not to be served but to serve" (Mk. 10:45 and Mt. 20:28; cf. Jn. 13:12-18 and Lk. 12:37). He is the one in whom supreme responsibility for mankind rests, the universal Savior who in his own person takes up the responsibility betrayed by Adam, the first head. Mary, first among those who are simply creatures, is after Christ the servant par excellence and the most responsible among human beings. This responsibility will progressively take the form of a universal spiritual motherhood, whose spirit very early she already had.

Abraham was the first to benefit from God's gifts at the origin of the plan of restoration, and he quickly understands his responsibility toward men. Standing before Sodom and Gomorrah, those foreign cities, he already feels himself "the father of nations" (cf. Gen. 17:4-5); he launches into a rather bold intercession (Gen. 18:17-33). Mary could not be inferior to him. Before Christ's coming she is already the high point of intercession on earth. In a world in crying need of

9. These expressions are borrowed from C. Péguy, *Porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, Paris, NRF, 1918, t. 5, pp. 311-317. Paul VI echoed the same thought in his address of December 4, 1963, the terms of which were taken up in *Lumen Gentium* art. 53: "In the Church Mary occupies, after Christ, the highest place and the one nearest us."

its Redeemer, this first of the redeemed, this one supremely redeemed, was beginning her vocation as advocate for mankind. Her prayer is the summit of mankind's desire. By the very wealth of the grace given her, the Virgin Mary is the representative who in the name of all takes possession of the salvation destined for all — the servant of mankind in the very impulse that made her "the servant of the Lord" (Lk. 1:38).

The Church has thought fit to single out various moments in the Blessed Virgin's life before the Annunciation: her birthday, the first visible appearance of the one in whom salvation was to be given; her presentation in the Temple, the first visible expression of her yearning after God. But all these moments are only manifestations of a single mystery in which three different aspects may be distinguished: the divine gift, Mary's response to God, and her intercession for the world. This mystery made of her, in a certain sense, the summit of humanity. The true summit and only head of humanity, of course, is Christ, whom she was destined to welcome to earth. On the other hand, if she is in some sense the summit of Israel, it is only in the spiritual and interior order. She does not have any place in the priestly hierarchy or in public teaching or worship, functions reserved to men. It is not she but John the Baptist who officially prepares the coming of the Messiah. Her mission, superior to that of the Precursor, is appropriate to the condition of woman: she welcomes divine grace, and enables it to bear fruit in her, and from her to radiate life.

SECOND STAGE

MARY, MOTHER OF THE SAVIOR GOD

The crucial moment of Mary's destiny, the climax of all that went before and the foundation of all that followed, was the moment of the Annunciation. But this mystery overflows beyond the person of Mary. It is, first of all, the initial and fundamental mystery of the saving work of Jesus Christ. The Virgin Mary is an integral part of this mystery. She welcomes the Savior and introduces him into the race of mankind, along with the salvation he brings.

Although the object of this *Short Treatise* is the Virgin Mary, she must not be wrenched from the ensemble of the mystery. However great the title of *Theotokos*, Mother of God, it would be disastrous to isolate it from the whole of the mystery that it is intended to express and manifest.

This mystery defies all deductive explanation. It is irreducible to a single approach. Its logic, if it has one, is that of a work of art, not of a deduction. The only way to describe the mystery is to have recourse to successive approaches, the combination of which enables us to glimpse, beyond anything we could possibly imagine, both the logic of the mystery and its wealth of meaning. Our study, then, centers successively on Mary's *motherhood* envisaged as conscious, holy, and divine, on the *relationship* involved in this mother-