

The Immaculate Conception

Originally this essay started out as a few paragraphs about today's feast day but quickly morphed into an article. Despite being short, I figure might as well have it stand on its own. Perhaps at a later date it can be fleshed out some more. Anyway, it was a real joy putting together, and that's what counts.

December 8 is the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary is one of those major feast days of the Catholic Church that defies explanation. That makes it an easy target. The hostile attitude sometimes expressed toward it can be traced to an overall lack of the contemplative element not just among Christians but in Western society as a whole. This is especially true in a scientifically dominated world view. As for today's feast, it does represent a profound insight into the divine and human. For this reason you could expend all your energy explaining it away. Instead of this it might be better to take a long hard look at the original insight as presented by those persons who came up with the idea. It wasn't something they fabricated on their own but is a profound insight into the nature of transcendence and how it ties in with how we live in this world.

One obstacle that presents itself right off the bat is having to confront the conventional notion of sin. This, of course, is a favorite topic among Christians and is thrown about freely without much consideration. The same applies to mortal sin. In fact, we can't think of the Garden of Eden story without sin being front row and center. Actually the first mention of sin is Gn 4.7 with regard to Cain after he had murdered his brother. Before that we're dealing with an account of knowing good and evil which is a prerogative reserved for God alone. On the surface such knowledge sounds like a great thing to possess. Hence it's easy to see how one could give into the temptation to possess it as one's own. However, a harder look at such knowledge puts it in a wholly different light. The knowledge at hand isn't that desirable. When you think of it, such knowledge implies busy-bodyness, of constantly being on edge as to distinguishing between this from that.

A person so engaged never is at rest. No small wonder that the first man and woman hid themselves from the Lord while he was out for an evening stroll. They were accustomed to him do this and took pleasure in seeing him in a relaxed mode. So to top their dismay after having eaten the forbidden fruit, the two discovered that the knowledge obtained as to good and evil was wearying. In plain English, it simply wiped them out, made them exhausted. As for the image of God taking a

constitutional, the very casualness it implies unnerved the two and caused them to trip up. Instinctively they knew in advance that it would be the occasion for revealing their newly acquired knowledge of good and evil. Again, the Lord was in a relaxed mood, tired after a busy day, and wished to unwind. The last thing in the world he wanted was to deal with two of his creatures made in his image and likeness behaving in a way that was unbecoming.

When you take a really hard look at what had happened, death logically is the only solution to abolish the busy-bodiness associated with the knowledge of good and evil. Nothing else will suffice. The solution has to be total. However, the radical way of handling it is designed as a first response only, if you will. It's to be taken seriously but suggests a latent invitation to move beyond into something new and positive.

Okay, fast forward from then to the Virgin Mary and the threshold of the Christian era. At this point you come down to a concrete person, one and one alone. Everyone knows the story, so no need to get into all the details. Taken literally, this person without sin...without being entwined with the busy-bodiness so well put as a consequence of knowing good and evil...at one time was walking around like the rest of us. No difference, really, except minus a constant preoccupation with good vs. evil. Indeed, all her contemporaries were so bothered even if were a close-to-primitive existence. Such is the human condition as it has evolved.

If you look at it this way, it's easy to appreciate how this individual, basically a pre-teen or teenage girl who for all practical purposes was ignorant and living a backwater existence. Not only is she unrecognized but worthy of disdain by being a woman and by being subject to Roman authority. On the other hand, paradoxically she lived in a perfect environment. It was humble almost to the nth degree in so many ways. That means she had little occasion or let's say temptation to exercise knowledge of good and evil. Real life occasions were there alright but minimal in relation to the larger picture.

So when it came time for this teenager to give birth to Jesus Christ—and we take Jesus Christ as the Church has come to understand him as God incarnate—we find it easier to understand the relationship between the two. Putting it both truthfully and somewhat bluntly, on one hand we have God who's wholly transcendent and on the other hand someone without having the need nor the desire to hide. Throughout the time from prior to her pregnancy to the birth of Jesus and on to his death, we perceive this inability to judge between good and evil become more operative. We

don't see it directly, of course, but indirectly through the hostility shown toward her son. Thus their enmity becomes an inverse mirror whose benefit hasn't been recognized as it should. So while Mary did suffer, in another way she essentially did not identify herself with this suffering.

Although it might not tie in directly with the Immaculate Conception, an intriguing verse is worth throwing into this mix, Rom 5.14: "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam who was a type of the one who was to come." The death as a corrective measure mentioned above is the same one Paul has in mind. Note the verb *basileuo* or to reign. It suggests a complete domination, one that's almost serene in its presumed total control over the human race. However, that serenity was destined to be overturned.

As for the Romans verse, there are two types of transgression. Sin isn't mentioned but *paraptoma*, literally a falling beside. That is, one might fall but does so nearby, *para-*. There's one after Adam and another not specified except that it's not like Adam's. So we have one *paraptoma* as outlined and another *paraptoma* which is not the same but remains somewhat obscure. An example of the latter could be Aaron as when he succumbed to making a golden calf. Such a gesture is representative of an endemic tendency of the Israelites to fabricate idols, a real bugaboo for the Lord. That was present before the time of Moses seminally but didn't really come into play until the people were in the Sinai wilderness. From then on it became the Problem Number One. Part of the problem lay with the Lord himself, but that's a topic for another time.

Despite Adam's *paraptoma*, he becomes a *tupos* or type of the one who is to come, Jesus Christ. This stands in sharp contrast to that other *paraptoma*, one Paul alludes to but doesn't mention outrightly. As for the time span mentioned in the Romans verse, it goes from Adam to Moses and stops right there dead in its tracks. Why? Most likely it's because Moses was the one to whom the Lord revealed *Torah* on Mount Horeb. Also the relationship between the Lord and Moses was special. "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend" [Ex 33.11]. This friendship extended to the Lord himself having buried Moses. Although the text says no one knows where to the present day, chances are this is a ruse on the Lord's part. He took Moses into heaven in secret. The joke turns out to be both on Israel and the rest of us.

If we look at human history from the time of Moses on to Jesus Christ and beyond or to us today, there seems no let up with sin. Easily one could argue things got worse, much worse. However, to look at it like this would be to miss the point. From Mount Horeb onward the *paraptoma* or falling-beside somehow is held at bay and later put in chains by the coming of Jesus. Perhaps failure to recognize this early on has a lot to do with how screwed up we've become and unfortunately remain. The best part is that the evil isn't mitigated but mysteriously diverted to the side of our awareness where it continues to do its thing. In sum, it no longer dominates.

Indeed, there is an alternative to putting ourselves in the same position as the first man and woman hiding from the Lord as he strolls in the garden or as the text has it, "in the cool or *ruach* (spirit, breath) of the day" [Gn 3.8]. Instead, we can be aware of what had set this whole thing in motion, the so-called first transgression. It wasn't direct perception of this walking but having heard its sound or better, voice which is the more fundamental meaning of *qol*.

So what happened to Mary who was born with the inability to hide which when you really consider it, has become the bane of the human race. Let's say by way of illustrating a point that she didn't get it at once whole and entire. It came from her parents and grandparents, more immediately speaking. Then it goes back...way back...to the beginning. Throughout this long time or passage of generations God inserted a seed, a very tiny one, that worked inversely to the way sin took hold. While sin increased, with regard to Mary's genealogy, it decreased. Thus we have the same reality: sin or better, *paraptoma* at work but in two opposite directions.

Fast forward now to the Assumption. Like Enoch where we can slightly paraphrase Gn 5.24, "Mary walked with God and was not, for God took her." The Hebrew is notable, *'eynenu* or "no him." Poof. At once she was there but now is nowhere to be found pretty much like the Lord snatching away Moses under the pretext of burying him. Actually there was no Mary, if you will, by reason of not hiding. Such not-ing becomes the way out of the mess we've created for ourselves and is not laid out there as a means or method. Instead, it requires cultivating a certain presence which again is tied in with not hiding.

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