

FRANCIS CONNELL

THE INITIAL GRACE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

In explaining and defending the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, theologians and spiritual writers are accustomed to emphasize the negative aspect of this sublime privilege conferred by the Almighty on the woman chosen to be the Mother of the Word Incarnate that is, her preservation from original sin from the first moment of her existence. Indeed, in the words by which Pope Pius IX, on December 8, 1854, infallibly proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, it is simply stated as a doctrine of revelation that the Blessed Virgin « was preserved free from all stain of original sin from the first instant of her conception », and nothing is said about the influx of divine grace into the soul of Mary by which this unique favor was accomplished (1).

However, in the present order, wherein every member of the human race is ordained to a supernatural goal, the vision of the divine nature, to which sin alone is an obstacle, freedom from sin (both original and mortal) necessarily postulates the presence of sanctifying grace in the soul. A human being can never be in a state of neutrality, a state in which he is free from grave sin (original and mortal) and at the same time devoid of that sublime quality of sanctifying grace whereby the soul is made a partaker of the divine nature. Hence, the fact, that the Blessed Virgin Mary was free from original sin from the first moment of her existence, necessarily implies that she was in possession of sanctifying grace at that same moment.

Sublime as was the grace received by Mary in the first moment of her conception, the grace itself in its nature differed in no respect from the grace which sanctifies the ordinary human being. Unlike her Divine Son, to whom the hypostatic union gave a unique form of holiness known as the grace of union (2), Mary's holiness consisted only in the same supernatural qualities which God bestows for the sanctification of any human soul, the basic quality being sanctifying grace.

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss briefly two questions relative to the initial grace in the soul of Mary: first, the measure of this grace; second, the manner in which Mary received this grace in the first instant of her existence.

I. THE MEASURE OF MARY'S INITIAL GRACE

It is a doctrine of divine-catholic faith, solemnly defined by the Council of Trent, that justice (the basis of which is sanctifying grace) once received,

(1) DENZINGER-BANKWART 1641. In other sections of the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* Pope Pius IX explicitly spoke of the positive aspect of Mary's initial sanctity, as will be expounded later. But these portions were not intended to be infallible pronouncements, though as authoritative statements they possess great value.

(2) Cfr S. THOMAS, *Summa theologiae* III, 7, 13.

is increased by good works (3). From this it logically follows that the measure of sanctifying grace can be greater in one soul than in another even from the moment of the first infusion; for God can distribute His supernatural gifts irrespective of the merits of the recipients. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: «The first cause of this diversity [of grace in different individuals] is to be found on the part of God, Who dispenses His gifts of grace differently, in order that from different degrees the beauty and perfection of the Church may arise» (4). The increase in the measure of grace is not to be conceived in the same way as the quantity of a material substance is increased, but rather after the manner of a *deeper actuation* of the soul by the supernatural quality of sanctifying grace. Lépicier explains it thus: «The increase of grace does not take place by addition, but only inasfar as the subject is reduced more to act by grace» (5).

That the measure of grace granted to Mary in the very first instant of her sanctification — which was the first moment of her existence — was extraordinarily great is beyond all doubt. From all eternity she was destined to the dignity of Mother of God; and it is an accepted axiom that God proportions His gifts of grace to the office and the supernatural dignity of the recipients. Surely, the dignity of the divine maternity is the most excellent privilege to which any mere creature has ever been destined; hence, the measure of her initial grace must have been very great. Thus, in the prayer for the Marian Year composed by Pope Pius XII, we say to Our Lady: «We admire and praise the peerless richness of sublime gifts with which God has filled you, above every other mere creature, *from the first moment of your conception* until the day on which, after your ascension into heaven, He crowned you queen of the Universe».

Pope Pius IX, in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, proclaiming the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, states that Mary possessed that fulness of holiness than which no greater under God can be understood, and which no one save God can understand (6). The Sovereign Pontiff did not explicitly state that this degree of holiness adorned Mary's soul *from the very beginning of her existence*; but it can be reasonably inferred that such was his meaning, since in this papal pronouncement the central idea is the holiness of Mary's soul at the moment of her Immaculaté Conception.

Theologians are wont to discuss the measure of Mary's initial grace by comparing it with the degree of grace possessed by other creatures, both angels and men. Of course, there can be no doubt that Mary's holiness was immeasurably less than that of the created soul of Jesus Christ, which was infinite *secundum rationem gratiae* (though ontologically finite) inasmuch as He was the universal principle of sanctification for all mankind, including Mary (7). In establishing a comparison, therefore, between the grace of Mary and that of other creatures, we are speaking only of *mere creatures*.

The problem of the measure of Our Lady's initial grace can be considered under four headings, inasmuch as we can compare this first infusion of the

(3) DB. 834.

(4) *Summa* I-II 112, 4.

(5) LÉPICIER, *Institutiones theologiae speculativae* II, Romae 1932, 117.

(6) Cfr Bullam *Ineffabilis Deus* (*Collect. Lacensis* VI, 842ff).

(7) Cfr *Summa* III 7, 11.

supernatural life into her soul with: 1) the grace granted to any individual saint or angel in the first moment of his sanctification; 2) the grace possessed by any individual saint or angel at the end of his period of probation, or the grace to which his measure of glory is proportioned — his consummated grace, as it is called; 3) the grace granted to all other saints and angels in their initial sanctification taken cumulatively; 4) the grace possessed by all other saints and angels at the end of their period of merit, taken cumulatively. We shall consider each of these questions separately.

1. — All theological writers admit that Mary received a greater degree of sanctifying grace in the first moment of her existence than was granted by God to any individual saint or angel in his first sanctification. The words of the Marian Year prayer, asserting that God filled Mary with sublime gifts of grace from the first moment of her conception *above every other mere creature* can be adduced in this connection. It would be most incongruous if any other mere creature began the life of grace in higher favor with God than the child who was destined to be the Mother of His Son. It is true, the angelic nature surpasses human nature in excellence and dignity; but nevertheless it is unthinkable that even the highest of the angels should surpass Mary in holiness. The angel is destined to render adoration before the throne of the Most High and to serve as His messenger; but Mary was always destined to be the Mother of God, and as such, in the words of St. Thomas, she possessed «a kind of infinite dignity» (8). Furthermore, she was destined to be queen of the angels, and hence could not ever have been inferior to any of them in the order of grace.

2. — That Mary's initial grace surpassed the measure of holiness possessed by any angel or saint at the termination of his period of merit is also commonly admitted by theologians. Even those who, with LÉPICIER deny that Mary possessed a greater measure in the first instant than the *accumulated* grace of all men and angels at the end of their probation, admit her preeminence when the comparison is made with any *individual*. LÉPICIER asserts unhesitatingly that «the initial grace of Mary surpassed the final grace of the highest among the saints or angels, so that then the Blessed Virgin Mary, because she was predestined to be the Mother of God, was loved by God more than any creature was ever loved by Him. Hence, her beginning or foundation surpassed, not only the beginning and foundation, but also the terminus and peak of the first among the Seraphim» (9). According to ROSCHINI, this opinion is theologically certain (10).

3. — The comparison between the initial grace of Mary and the accumulated initial grace of all the saints and angels is not discussed by many theologians. Since the more common opinion, next to be discussed, upholds the pre-eminence of Our Lady in holiness even in comparison to the combined *consummated* grace of all the heavenly spirits and the elect, it can safely be asserted that *a fortiori* it is the more commonly accepted view of theologians that Mary's initial grace exceeded the combined initial grace of all

(8) *Summa* I 25.

(9) LÉPICIER, *De Maria nunquam satis. De quantitate gratiae B. Mariae Virginis*, Romae 1905, 58.

(10) ROSCHINI, *Compendium Mariologiae*, Romae 1946, 394.

saints and angels. Roschini proposes this question, but merely states that the opinion attributing superiority to the Mother of God in this form of comparison « can be solidly proved ». The arguments which he believes so cogent are those already presented in the discussion of the first and second questions, and those to be presented in connection with the fourth question (11).

4. — It is this phase of the problem that has aroused most of the controversy among theologians: the question whether the soul of Mary, even in its first moment of existence, was endowed by the Almighty with a greater degree of holiness than the combined holiness of all the saints and angels at the termination of their period of merit. The comparison is between the initial grace of Our Lady and the combined consummated grace of all other mere creatures who have ever existed or ever will exist. It is indeed an astounding comparison, when we realize that on one side there is only a single individual, while on the other side there are billions of creatures, angelic and human, each endowed with a greater or lesser degree of the precious quality of sanctifying grace, granting the privilege of participation in the life of God Himself. Some theologians, while eager to extol the glory of Mary as far as it can reasonably be expected, are not willing to admit that so great a degree of holiness was infused into her soul in the very first moment of its existence. The most prominent of these writers in recent times was Father (later Cardinal) Lépiciér OSM., who wrote a special treatise in defence of his opinion (12). While admitting that the *consummated* grace of Mary exceeded the consummated grace of all the angels and saints taken collectively, this eminent author does not admit the superiority of Mary's *first* grace over the final grace of all other mere creatures united. He regards the time when Mary stood beneath the cross and was appointed by the dying Saviour the spiritual mother of all mankind as the occasion when she received the abundance of grace that elevated her in holiness above all angels and saints in their consummated and accumulated spiritual perfection (13).

However, the opinion that even in the first moment of her existence the grace infused into the soul of Mary surpassed the combined consummated grace of all angels and saints seems to be the more common among theologians, and undoubtedly can be supported by good arguments. This opinion was vigorously championed by St. Alphonsus, a Doctor of the Church. «One must admit as very probable», the Saint asserted, «that Mary received this grace, superior to that of all the saints and all the angels combined, from the first instant of her Immaculate Conception» (14). The chief arguments adduced by St. Alphonsus are the offices of Mother of God and of Mediatrix of all graces, both of which, he believes, demand such exalted holiness in Mary even from the beginning of her existence.

In his work *Sainteté initiale de l'Immaculée*, the second edition of which appeared shortly after the work of Father Lépiciér, Father F.X. Godts C.S.S.R., replies at length to the distinguished Servite theologian (15). He points out

(11) *Ibid.* 395.

(12) LÉPICIER, *De Maria nunquam satis. De quantitate gratiae B. Mariae Virginis*, Romae 1905.

(13) *Ibid.* 61.

(14) *Glories of Mary* P.II Disc.2.

(15) F.X. GODTS C.S.S.R., *La sainteté initiale de l'Immaculée*; Bruxelles, De Wit, 1905; 3°, 412.

that the view which the latter advocates is not supported by any positive arguments, but rather arises merely from the fact that Father Lépicier does not see the probative force of the arguments adduced by the writers who ascribe the superiority in question to Mary's initial grace (16). Indeed, Father Lépicier's choice of the occasion beneath the Cross as the particular moment for the reception of a great abundance of grace seems arbitrary. Why should this particular time be chosen rather than the occasion of the Incarnation or even of the Immaculate Conception?

Roschini upholds the view of St. Alphonsus, developing in its favor the arguments based on the divine maternity and the universal mediatorship. He also finds support in statements of Pope Pius IX and Leo XIII, who, while not explicitly asserting that they were referring to Mary's *initial* grace and the *combined consummated* grace of all saints and angels, are reasonably presumed to have meant this when they said that she surpassed in holiness all saints and angels (17). A similar interpretation might be given by some to the statement of Pope Pius XII, in the prayer for the Marian Year, that *from the first moment of her Conception* God filled the soul of Mary with the peerless richness of divine gifts *above every other mere creature* (18). To us, however, it seems that the Sovereign Pontiff wished to abstain from deciding the question of Mary's superiority in grace over all creatures together, and hence contented himself with confirming the commonly admitted doctrine that from the beginning of her existence she possessed a greater measure of grace than any other creature taken individually.

In citing authorities for the opinion that, from the first moment of her conception, Mary enjoyed a higher degree of holiness than all saints and angels united at the final stage of their spiritual perfection, a difficulty is encountered inasmuch as the statements of many writers do not bring in all the requisite qualifications. Thus, as Father Godts explains, some authors assert that Mary surpassed in holiness all the saints and angels considered united, but do not say that this was the case in the first instant of her conception, while others propose the opinion that from the first moment of her conception she was more holy than all the saints and angels, but do not add «taken collectively» (19). Fr. Godts himself believes that all these authors can reasonably be adduced in favor of his thesis, because the whole trend of their thought upholds it; but inasmuch as they do not explicitly defend this thesis in its entirety, he does not cite them as defenders of the opinion of St. Alphonsus.

Our view on this question is that with which Roschini concludes his discussion of the problem: «The initial grace of the Blessed Virgin surpassed the consummated grace of all men and angels taken together» (20).

II. THE MANNER IN WHICH MARY RECEIVED THIS INITIAL GRACE

The chief question concerning the manner in which Mary received the first infusion of sanctifying grace into her soul is whether or not there was any free co-operation on her part to this influx of grace. Evidently, one

(16) *Ibid.* 338ff.

(17) ROSCHINI, *o.c.* 396.

(18) AAS. 45(1953) 757.

(19) GODTS, *o.c.* 319ff.

(20) ROSCHINI, *o.c.* 397.

who would answer this question in the affirmative would have to hold logically that Mary enjoyed the use of reason in that first instant of her existence. Whether or not this privilege was granted to her is a question discussed by theologians. On the one hand, some entirely deny to Mary the use of reason in the first instant of her existence. Thus, Pohle says that this view is utterly untenable, without the shred of an argument in its favor (21). Others, with Lépiciér, hold that Mary received the privilege of knowledge in the first instant, but possessed it only transiently (22). Others, with Roschini, hold that the gift of knowledge of divine things was infused into the soul of Mary in the first instant of her existence, and that she retained it permanently. This was *scientia per se infusa*, that type of knowledge which does not require the aid of the internal sensitive faculties for its exercise, and consequently does not need for its use the development of the body (23). However, this same author admits that at most we can ascribe probability to the opinion that Mary enjoyed the use of reason permanently, since both Scripture and Tradition are silent on this point (24).

If Mary enjoyed the use of reason in the first instant of her existence, she could also make an act of the will, loving God, and thus co-operating from the very beginning with divine grace. Indeed, Cardinal Lépiciér asserted that by her free co-operation with divine grace she disposed herself for her sanctification (25). With this opinion Roschini agrees (26).

The objection that if Mary received the state of grace from the very beginning of her mortal existence, she could not have disposed herself for sanctification — because a disposition precedes the reception of the form to which it is directed. The answer is found in a principle upheld especially in Thomistic philosophy — *causae ad invicem sunt causae*. Mary's act of love in the first instant of her existence, while subsequent to sanctifying grace in the order of formal causality, could be prior to the infusion of grace in the order of dispositive causality. That such a mode of sanctification was most suitable for the Mother of God is thus pointed out by Cardinal Lépiciér: «It is nobler to approach to grace by one's own act than by the act of another. We know that the soul of Christ was sanctified in the first moment of His conception by an act of His own will. But Mary was likened to Christ in as far as it was possible. Therefore, she too received grace in the moment of her conception by the motion of her own free will, by consenting to it» (27).

Together with sanctifying grace Mary received the theological virtues, the gifts of the Holy Ghost and the infused moral virtues, at least in as far as they did not conflict with her extraordinary holiness. It is a matter of uncertainty whether she received the moral virtue of Penance. Certainly Our Lady never committed an actual sin, and hence could never make an *act* of contrition. Whether she could possess the habit or virtue of Penance depends on the nature of her impeccability. It seems to us that the view advocated by Roschini is most probable — that her impeccability was moral only, not phy-

(21) POHLE (tr. Preuss), *Mariology*, St. Louis 1914, 30.

(22) LÉPICIER, *Institutiones theologiae speculativae* II, Romae 1932, 330.

(23) ROSCHINI, *o.c.* 408.

(26) ROSCHINI, *o.c.* 390.

(24) *Ibid.* 392.

(27) LÉPICIER, *Institutiones* II 330.

(25) LÉPICIER, *Institutiones* II 330.

sical or absolute (as was the impeccability of Christ) (28). Consequently, she could possess the virtue of Penance, even though it could never produce its connatural act.

CONCLUSION

It is good for Catholics to meditate on the great holiness of the Mother of God, particularly in the course of this year, dedicated by Pope Pius XII in a special way to Mary. For the thought of Mary's immeasurable sanctity emphasizes the immeasurable love of God for her who was destined to fulfil the function of maternity for the Word Incarnate. Even one who would not admit the opinion that Mary's measure of sanctity in the first moment of her existence surpassed that of all angels and saints combined or the opinion that she possessed the use of reason in that first moment, so that she could co-operate with the influx of divine grace that preserved her from the stain of original sin, must admit, in virtue of the Church's tradition, that from the very beginning of her existence the Mother of God was endowed with a measure of grace that surpassed that of every individual angel or saint. This, of itself, would suffice to justify the veneration which the Catholic Church pays to Mary, as one whom the Almighty Himself chose to be the recipient of His most precious graces, as one who was truly «full of grace».

ALFRED RUSH

OUTLINES OF MARY'S HOLINESS IN NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA

The purpose of this paper is to furnish in outline form the theme of the holiness of Mary in the New Testament Apocrypha. The present paper will serve as an introduction to a later study which will treat this theme in full detail.

The source of our investigation will be the New Testament Apocrypha. Besides the canonical New Testament, there grew up a type of literature known as the Apocryphal New Testament writings. These writings strive to supply data regarding Christ, Mary, the Apostles and the future life. Thus there developed such writings as apocryphal Gospels, Epistles, Acts and Apocalypses. In supplying for the silence of the canonical writings on these various points, the writers give free sway to their imaginations, write in a fantastic manner, and surcharge their accounts with home made miracles. To gain readers and to bolster up their accounts, the writers pose as Apostles or as people closely associated with the Apostles. Aside from the fact that these writings are not inspired, it has been said that these works, by their

(28) ROSCHINI, *o.c.* 378ff.