

THE FRUITFUL VIRGINITY OF MARY

By DESMOND CONNELL

IN THE NICENE CREED, which we recite in common, we confess concerning Christ our Lord that 'by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man'. What we confess in this article of the creed is the explicit teaching of the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

There are two aspects of this teaching that create difficulty for the modern mind. The first is that it presents Christ's conception as miraculous, and the modern mind finds miracles distasteful, if not repugnant. That is why we are sometimes recommended to interpret Christ's virginal conception as a myth — for myth is the device that draws the sting of the miraculous. Difficulty arises, however, for another reason in that our teaching seems to signify an adverse judgment on human sexuality, as if it implied that the natural means of procreation would be unworthy of the Son of God because it bears a stain incompatible with his dignity. But is it not necessary to affirm the intrinsic goodness of sexuality? Should we not say that, like every authentic human value, it has been restored and reaffirmed in its goodness by Christ? And how can this be if we are obliged to say that Christ was preserved from its taint? And so it might seem that it would accord more truly with the restoration of all things in Christ if we were to say that Christ was really the fruit of a sexual union rather than fruit of the Virgin. Considerations of this kind, however, show that the theory of the myth does nothing to advance our appreciation of the teaching of sacred scripture. For what could be the meaning of the myth? If, as the myth implies, Christ was not really begotten of a virgin, the myth can only serve to conceal God's judgment on the dignity of sexuality.

No doubt some may feel that the issue is only a local difficulty that may easily be put aside, that it presents no far-reaching implications for the christian mystery as a whole. My purpose in this paper is to show that such an attitude would be mistaken, and to indicate the fundamental nature of the revelation that God presents to our faith in the fruitful virginity of Mary.

Like other miracles recorded in the New Testament, Mary's fruitful virginity is not a myth but what John calls a sign, that is, an event in which God presents to our faith aspects of the grace he reveals and bestows in Christ. To speak of myth may seem to accord with a contemporary outlook, but in reality it is close to the very early heresy which refused to accept the reality of the Incarnation. Docetism regarded Christ's manhood as an appearance, not a reality. To reduce miracle to myth is likewise to refuse to accept reality and to substitute an appearance in its place. But just as the reality of Christ's manhood is the fundamental sign in and through which our faith is led to the manifestation of God in Christ, so too miracles are the realities in and through which our faith is led to the manifestation of the grace bestowed in Christ. The loaves are multiplied in order that we may find the mystery of the bread of life in Christ; the dead are raised in order that we may find the mystery of everlasting life in Christ; the sick are cured, the blind given sight, the lepers cleansed, in order that we may find the mystery of our restoration in Christ. What then is the meaning of the sign that is offered to our faith in Mary's fruitful virginity? Here we are given a sign of the new birth of the children of God, who are born 'not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God';¹ a sign that our new birth is the work of the Spirit of God in those who believe; a sign that this new birth is possible for all, and not just for those descended by human generation from Abraham; a sign that human love, though rendered fruitful for a perishable life by sexuality, is rendered fruitful for everlasting life by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew proclaims the mystery of Christ's conception in the first chapter of his gospel. He begins with the genealogy of Christ, which he traces from Abraham to Christ through Joseph. He then goes on to say that Christ was not begotten of Joseph but of Mary, his betrothed, through the action of the Holy Spirit. Joseph becomes the legal father of Christ by obeying God's command to him to take to himself Mary his wife, and through this legal fatherhood Christ becomes heir to the promises made throughout the Old Testament from Abraham through Judah and David. The Old Testament is here summed up in Joseph, who receives the promises through carnal descent, for carnal generation is fundamental to the whole Old Testament economy. Mary on the other hand, is the beginning of the New Testament through a motherhood bestowed not by the action of man but by the action of the Holy Spirit. The marriage of Mary and Joseph is thus the union of the two Testaments. What

Matthew emphasizes is Joseph's faith. It is the faith of Abraham, the faith of the old people of God, attaining its fulfilment in the acceptance of the Saviour. Through this faith the union of Mary and Joseph is effected so that Mary, who represents the New Testament, secures for her child the inheritance of the promises of the Old Testament, and Joseph, who represents the Old Testament, accepts the revelation of the New in his acceptance of Mary's child as the promised Saviour. Through Joseph, Mary and her child are one with the Old Testament; through Mary and her child, Joseph is one with the New Testament.

We turn now to St Luke's account of the mystery in his annunciation narrative. Here there are three points in particular that I should like to bring out. The first point concerns Mary's faith. Mary receives the word addressed to her by the angel and embraces it with complete and humble submission: 'Let it be to me according to your word'.² Luke brings out the perfection of Mary's faith by contrasting her with Zechariah, who disbelieved and was struck dumb. A little later he speaks the praise of Mary's faith through the mouth of Elizabeth, who, filled with the Holy Spirit, declared: 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord'.³ Here we find the faith that lies at the origin of all participation in the grace of Christ. This faith at the same time renders Mary a true daughter of Abraham and raises her beyond him, because what was promised to him from afar through centuries of human generation is accomplished in her in a manner that surpasses human generation. In Abraham human fruitfulness is blessed with a promise that is fulfilled in Mary in a fruitfulness that is divine. Moreover, Abraham's faith, which was tested in the command to sacrifice his son, but released from the command before the sacrifice was completed, is subjected to a far greater test in Mary as she stood by the cross with the words of the angel's promise ever present in her heart. Abraham's faith lies at the origin of the old people of God; Mary's faith lies at the origin of the new people, because through her faith the Saviour is given who is the source of life to the whole world. Mary was the first to receive Christ in faith; first not just in time, but first in this that the faith of the Church is already present in its origin in Mary's faith. This is signified by John's account of the Cana miracle which our Lord worked in response to Mary's faith. John concludes his narrative by saying: 'This beginning of miracles Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him'.⁴ The

beginning of the disciples' faith is thus associated with Mary's faith, and, through the disciples, the faith of the Church.

The second point in Luke's annunciation narrative is the revelation of the action of the Holy Spirit. In answer to her question as to how she is to become the mother of the promised child, she is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that the power of the Most High will overshadow her, and that for this reason the Holy One to be born of her will be called the Son of God.⁵ The virgin will become a mother not through the intervention of man and the exercise of sexuality but by the action of the Holy Spirit. Here we have the revelation of something unprecedented, without parallel throughout the Old Testament period. During that period it was recognized that God was the source of all fruitfulness. This was acknowledged in the law that prescribed that the first-born should be consecrated to God. It was conveyed in a special way in the narratives about God's gift of fruitfulness to the barren: to Sarah, to the mother of Samson, to Hannah, to Elizabeth. Once again Luke stresses the uniqueness of what is accomplished in Mary by contrasting it with the gift bestowed on Elizabeth. Elizabeth is advanced in age and barren, and her reproach among men is removed when God renders her fruitful through her husband.⁶ Mary is not considered to be barren; she is young and unmarried. Her virginity is not a reproach. And it is the virgin who is rendered fruitful by the sole power of the Holy Spirit. It is important to grasp that what is conferred on Mary is the unprecedented privilege of fruitful virginity. Sometimes the mystery is presented inadequately as if it involved the preservation of Mary's virginity in spite of her motherhood, as if virginity and motherhood were opposed realities which in her case were miraculously preserved from conflict. To view the mystery exclusively in this way is to tend to see it as a device by which God preserves the virgin from the taint of sexuality. But what is involved is something wholly positive: the raising of virginity itself to the perfection of fruitfulness.⁷ Sexuality is not a taint, but a reality of this world that is surpassed in the new reality revealed by fruitful virginity. Virginity is no longer sterility; by the action of God it has become a source of life. Motherhood in Mary is virginity in the fruitfulness that comes directly and exclusively from the Holy Spirit. This is the mystery expressed by the Church in the words *virginitas foecunda*. 'Blessed is the fruit of your womb'.⁸ Blessed is the fruit of the womb of the Virgin.

My third point is contained in the promise made to Mary concerning her child: 'He will be great and will be called the Son of the

Most High. And the Lord God will give unto him the throne of his father David. And he shall reign in the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end'.⁹ Mary's motherhood embraces the eternal destiny of her Son. The human life in which he is begotten of Mary is indeed perishable; in the flesh he takes from her he will suffer death and thereby accomplish the sacrifice of our redemption. But the child who is begotten of her in this perishable life is the immortal Son of God, immortal in virtue of his divine life, and who will remain immortal in his very death. For that reason the Church on Good Friday addresses him as *hagios athanatos* (holy, immortal). That is why even in his death, which he can suffer in virtue of his human nature, Mary's motherhood, unlike the motherhood of any other woman, suffers no interruption.¹⁰ It endures throughout the paschal mystery by which his flesh and blood become the source of imperishable life for the whole world. The flesh and blood taken from the virgin are the flesh which is food indeed and the blood which is drink indeed so that they who partake of them have everlasting life.¹¹ The fruit of the virgin brings imperishable life to the world by means of the flesh and blood in which he was begotten of her, in which he died, in which he rose again, by which he feeds his flock.

We can sum up the three points we have seen by saying that the virgin believed the word that was spoken to her, that she was made fruitful by the Holy Spirit, that the fruit she bore brings everlasting life to the world.

It is time now to turn to Luke's other book, the Acts of the Apostles. 'It is the same Spirit', says Congar, 'that made Mary fruitful that makes the Church fruitful. The beginnings of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles correspond to the infancy gospel in the first two chapters of Luke'.¹² As at the beginning of his gospel the Spirit descends on the virgin and renders her fruitful, so at the beginning of the Acts the Spirit descends on the small group of believers and brings the inexhaustible fruitfulness of Pentecost. Peter preached on that day to the crowds 'and those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls'.¹³ The water of baptism is the womb of the Church in which all who partake of the Church's faith are born by the power of the Holy Spirit to the new and everlasting life of God in the likeness of Christ. Here we find a theme dear to the early Fathers:

All those things, therefore, that the Son of God did and taught for the world's reconciliation, we perceive not just in the history of

actions gone by but even in the power of works here and now present. He it is who, brought forth by the power of the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mother, renders fruitful by the same Spirit (*inspirazione*) his spotless Church, so that through the child-bearing of baptism a countless multitude of God's sons is begotten.¹⁴

He has placed in the baptismal font the origin he himself took from the virgin: he gave to the water what he gave to his mother: for the power of the Most High and the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, which brought it about that Mary should bear the Saviour, brings it about that the flowing water (*unda*) regenerates the believer.¹⁵

Augustine says: 'It behoved our head to be born of a virgin according to the flesh, for the sake of a wonderful miracle by which he might signify that his members would be born according to the Spirit of a virgin, the Church'.¹⁶ Like Mary, the Church receives the word in faith and is rendered fruitful through the water of baptism by the overshadowing of the Spirit. The new birth of the children of God is signified and proclaimed by Christ's birth from the virgin. Virginity has received a fruitfulness incomparably surpassing the fruitfulness of sexuality.

It is remarkable how profoundly generation enters into the relationship between man and God as this relationship is revealed in sacred scripture. At the beginning God blessed the man and the woman with a fruitfulness that was blighted by their sin, so that their descendants come into the world deprived of the intimacy with him which God had originally established. When God chose Abraham he destined him to be the father of a people from which would come eventually the Saviour, and the unity of that people was a unity of blood maintained through centuries of carnal descent. This is the religious meaning of the rite of circumcision. For this reason one finds little evidence in the Old Testament of regard for virginity. Virginity is seen as sterile, and the fruitfulness of the sexual union is a sign of God's blessing. We see this especially in Judges 11: 'And Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh, "If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then the first person to meet me from the door of my house when I return in triumph from fighting the Ammonites shall belong to Yahweh, and I will offer him up as a holocaust"'. The one he met was his little daughter, who submitted to his terrible vow, but asked one thing: 'Grant me one request: Let me be free for two months. I shall go and wander in the mountains and with my companions bewail my virginity'. Virginity is the fate worse than death.

There is perhaps some evidence of a new attitude in late Judaism: for example, in the septuagint translation of Isaiah 7,14, and in the practice of celibacy amongst the Essenes, reflected in John the Baptist.¹⁷ But there is no doubt about the attitude of Jews generally then and since in their conviction that it is birth that relates them to God, descent from Abraham that renders them spiritually privileged. That is why so often in the New Testament we find this theme in prominence. The Baptist warns the pharisees not to rely on their descent from Abraham because God can raise up children to him from the very stones.¹⁸ Our Lord found little faith amongst his kinsfolk and had to make clear that it is not kinship but faith that wins God's favour.¹⁹ When the woman cried out: 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that suckled you', he had to protest that it is not carnal descent that relates one to God, but faith in his word. 'Blessed rather are they who hear the word of God and keep it'.²⁰ Is it then contrary to his teaching to attach spiritual importance to Mary's motherhood? That would be so if it were a question of a merely carnal relationship, as the woman who cried out supposed. But Mary's motherhood is the beginning of something new. She is the virgin whose relationship with God in her very motherhood is based on a hearing of the word in faith, whose motherhood shows forth the new birth of the sons of God under the action of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament revelation thus brings a complete change, signified by Mary's fruitful virginity. The children of God are they who receive the word in faith and are born again in the likeness of the son of the virgin. The true descendants of Abraham are they who imitate his faith, not they who merely trace their descent to his blood. We know how difficult was the struggle recorded in the Acts and in Paul's letters to secure the triumph of the new revelation, that salvation is through faith and not through conformity with the Law. And the fruitful virginity of Mary stands as the sign of this new revelation.

It is instructive to follow the account of this difference between Judaism and Christianity as expressed sixty years ago by Franz Rosenzweig, Jewish author of *The star of redemption*. Karl Loewith presents Rosenzweig's teaching as follows:

The 'wandering Jew' is not an invention of the Christian and anti-semitic world, but a phenomenon of world history which contradicts all other experiences of the power of time. The authentic Jew can, in fact, say of himself 'we' and continue 'are eternal' because the

Jewish people, as God commanded and promised them, are made eternal through the natural procreation of the succession of generations. In this way the descendants attest to the faith of their ancestors. For the Jew, the belief in his own eternity is identical with belief in his God, because he knows that he is one of God's people. His faith, unlike that of the Christian, is not the content of a tradition based upon testimony, but the 'product of a procreation'. . . . The Christian is originally, or at least by virtue of his birth, a pagan. The Jew, however, is only a Jew. Hence, the way of the Christian continually consists in freeing himself from his racial ties, whereas the life of the Jew leads him deeper and deeper into the line of his descent. Christianity is essentially a missionary activity and must spread in order to maintain its existence in the world. Judaism, in contrast, lives only and always upon its own 'remains' and maintains itself through its isolation from other peoples. Through this believing community of blood, the Jew has at every moment of his historical miseries the guarantee that he is already 'eternal' in the present.²¹

The fruitfulness of the old people of God is based on carnal generation; the fruitfulness of the new people of God is based upon the new birth from water and the Holy Spirit of those who believe.

It is time to bring our conclusions together. I began by describing Christ's virginal conception and birth as a sign, and all that I have said has been an elaboration of the meaning of this sign in the light of the teaching of sacred scripture. It is a sign of great richness, signifying in its own way the entire Christian mystery.

In the first place, we have the revelation of a new fruitfulness which surpasses the power of man to confer, but owes its origin directly and exclusively to the action of the Holy Spirit. In the most proper sense of the term it is grace, the gift of God which manifests the grace of our birth in the likeness of Christ. The sign of this fruitfulness is given in the virgin. Virginity is of itself a sign of poverty, for of herself the virgin is sterile. She is rendered fruitful by God's gift with a fruitfulness that surpasses all that man can bestow because it is a fruitfulness unto everlasting life. This fruitfulness remains permanently in the Church, not only in the sacramental power of baptism by which she constantly brings forth new offspring by the power of the Holy Spirit, but also in her practice of consecrated virginity. The consecrated virgin is not the sterile one who has turned aside from the fruitfulness of marriage, but the one into whose heart God's love has been poured by the Holy Spirit and rendered fruitful in the service of God and his people. We can say

that every Christian bears in his origin as a Christian the sign of fruitful virginity: he is born of the virgin Church, and so of the Virgin in whom that fruitfulness of the Church has its beginning. The practice of consecrated virginity is a special participation in the fruitfulness of the christian life, which is always radically a virginal fruitfulness bestowed by the action of the Holy Spirit. That is why there will always be a special relationship between consecrated virginity and ministry in the Church's life. For the priest has a particular association in virtue of his call with the fruitfulness of the Church.²²

In the second place, we have the revelation of the fundamental role of faith, through which alone we can share in the christian mystery, in that fruitfulness that comes from God alone. Mary is the faithful virgin who received the word of God and was obedient to it. It is through this faith that she receives God's gift, and her faith is itself already the gift of the Holy Spirit which entitled her to be addressed as 'full of grace'.²³ Has she not, then, a special appeal for all who acknowledge the fundamental importance of faith, that faith of which St Paul speaks especially in the letters to the Galatians and the Romans?

In the third place, we have the revelation of the universality, the catholicity, of the christian people. Racialism, which is based on human generation, is surpassed and with it all exclusivism whether jewish or nationalistic. Sexual difference too is reduced to secondary importance in that woman is delivered from subjection to man: it is no longer the case that she can fulfil her role in the midst of God's people only through a motherhood that subordinates her to a husband. And this truth must itself transform the relation between the christian husband and wife. That is why christian mothers have never resented, but rather rejoiced in, the sign of the Virgin with her child.²⁴

Lastly, christian marriage is ennobled by Mary's virginity. It is through the fruit of the virgin that marriage is restored and raised to a new dignity that enables it to be itself a sign of the love between Christ and the Church.

NOTES

- ¹ Jn 1,13. ² Lk 1,38. ³ Lk 1,45.
⁴ Jn 2,11. ⁵ Lk 1,35. ⁶ Lk 1,25.
⁷ Cf Vonier, A.: *The collected works of Abbot Vonier*, 3 vols (London, 1952), vol 1, pp 340-41.
⁸ Lk 1,42.
⁹ Lk 1,32-33. ¹⁰ Cf Vonier, A., *op. cit.*, vol 1, pp 336-37.
¹¹ Jn 6,55.
¹² Congar, Y.: *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans D. Smith, 3 vols (New York/London, 1983), vol II, p 100. ¹³ Acts 2,41.
¹⁴ Sermo LXIII, ch vi (PL, 54, 356b-c).
¹⁵ Leo the Great, *Sermo XX*, ch v (PL 54, 211c).
¹⁶ *De sancta virginitate*, ch 6 (PL 40, 399). The interested reader will find a rich collection of patristic references in de Lubac, H.: *The splendour of the Church*, trans M. Mason (London/New York, 1956), ch ix.
¹⁷ Cf *Traduction oecuménique de la bible, Ancien Testament*, p 759, note o.
¹⁸ Mt 3,9.
¹⁹ Jn 7,5; Mt 13,58. ²⁰ Lk 11,27-28.
²¹ Loewith, K.: *Nature, history, and existentialism*, edited with a critical introduction by A. Levison (Evanston, 1966), p 70.
²² Cf Jn 15,16. ²³ Lk 1,28.
²⁴ This point was made by my colleague, Dr Michael Nolan, Department of Psychology, University College, Dublin.

NOTES (continued from page 43)

- ¹² De Konick, *op. cit.*, p 371.
¹³ Briggs, *op. cit.*, p 227; see also p 159.
¹⁴ Briggs, *op. cit.*, p 229.
¹⁵ Briggs, *op. cit.*, p 230.
¹⁶ Briggs, *op. cit.*, p 231; see also p 126ff.
¹⁷ Briggs, *op. cit.*, p 232.
¹⁸ Briggs, *op. cit.*, p 232.
¹⁹ Mascal, Eric L.: 'The Mother of God', in Alberic Stacpoole (ed), *Mary's place in christian dialogue* (St Paul Publications, 1982), p 92.
²⁰ Balić, Carlo, O.F.M.: 'The mediaeval controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the death of Scotus', O'Connor, *op. cit.*, pp 161-270.
²¹ a Diest, Henrici: *Theologia biblica* (Deventer, 1643), p 178.
²² Calvin, John: *A harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (St Andrew's Press, Edinburgh, 1972), p 32.
²³ Calvin, John, *op. cit.*, p 33.
²⁴ Jouassard, Georges; 'The Fathers of the Church and the Immaculate Conception', O'Connor, *op. cit.*, pp 51-85. See also Rusch, pp 129-35. Schmaus, Vol 5, pp 198-201. Soell, George: *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Vol III, Faszikel 4, (Herder, Freiburg, 1978), pp 137-44.
²⁵ Balić, *op. cit.*, pp 202-12. The logic of Scotus's position, characterized by the logical move 'deceit, potuit, ergo fecit', has been opened to criticism and reformulation by Karl Rahner. For the ecumenical implications of this see Yarnold, Edward, S.J.: 'The Immaculate Conception, the Assumption and Reunion', in Stacpoole, *op. cit.*, pp 125-30.
²⁶ Macquarrie, John: 'Immaculate Conception', in Stacpoole, *op. cit.*, pp 125-30.