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## Preface: The Immaculate Conception: Calling and Destiny

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**THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION:  
CALLING AND DESTINY**

**Houston, Texas, 2004  
55th Annual Meeting of the Mariological  
Society of America**

The 55<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Mariological Society of America took place in Houston, Texas, May 19-22, 2004. The meeting's theme—"The Immaculate Conception: Calling and Destiny"—commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception by Blessed Pius IX. In his letter of welcome to the Archdiocese of Houston-Galveston, Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza noted that this program was being held in the Diocese of Galveston-Houston which "has been under the protection of Mary Immaculate since its beginning in 1847." The Cenacle Retreat House, the location of the meeting, is tucked in the peaceful woods of the Houston Memorial area; the staff of the retreat house extended a warm welcome. The retreat house's wooded grounds afforded paths and ample vistas for prayer and relaxation.

The opening address, "Biblical Theology and Marian Studies," by Dr. Scott Hahn (Franciscan University of Steubenville) advocated a greater attention to the signs, symbols, and types of the Old Testament which converge in the New Testament and appear in the Marian texts of the liturgy. In contrast to an approach which narrowly isolates the books of Scripture, such convergence nourishes spirituality, with its affirmation that God is the ultimate author of all Scripture. All these polyvalent images of Holy Scripture are brought together beautifully in the liturgy which makes present the whole Mystery of Christ—prefigured, manifested, continued in the Church.

Marking Vatican II's fortieth anniversary of the document on Mary and the Church, Fr. Myles Murphy's presidential address,

"The Second Vatican Council and Mary: Forty Years Later," noted that the Second Vatican Council's statement on the Virgin Mary was part of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Within the Church, Mary is *trait-de-union* between humanity and God; she is the one closest to God but also completely one with us. Mary's physical motherhood of Jesus clearly communicates that Christ is a person—not a phantom; similarly her motherhood of the Church denotes that the Church is truly a human/divine community, not an abstraction.

Dr. Deyanira Flores (Montes de Oca, Costa Rica), in "Mary, the Virgin, 'Completely and Permanently Transformed by God's Grace': The Meaning and Implications of Luke 1:28," explored the meaning of Pope John Paul II's words in *Redemptoris Mater* which speak of Mary's *fullness of grace* as that which "determines the extraordinary greatness and beauty of her whole being" (RM 11). Witnesses from the medieval and mystical tradition were called upon to describe how this fullness of grace influenced Mary's life, knowledge, and her participation in Christ's work of redemption.

Dr. Catherine O'Brien (Kingston University, UK), in "Seeking Perfection of Form: French Cultural Responses to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception," spoke of the intersections between theology and French culture in the work of writers and artists who have embraced the true meaning of the Immaculate Conception and have struggled to conceptualize the woman who "from the first moment of her conception [was] preserved free from all stain of original sin." By presenting Mary as mother and worthy associate of Jesus Christ, the Immaculate Conception has "rehabilitated" the feminine. Dimensions of doctrine are examined, as they appear in the work of French writers and film directors.

Dr. Wendy Wright (Creighton University) spoke of "Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and Mary Immaculate." In contrast to the sometime harsh polemical writings of the Counter-Reformation, St. Francis de Sales presented a pastoral program of evangelization featuring "the beautiful vision of God's great love in Christ." De Sales' view of the world is one which comes from the "heart of God" and returns to God's love. St. Francis's concept of Mary is rooted in the conviction, well stated in the

*Treatise on the Love of God*, that love is the beginning, the goal, and the means of living the Christian life. Love preserved one individual from the "flood tide of sin," and this love grew and was nurtured continually in the heart of Mary who is both model of the Christian life and exemplar of the interior process of spiritual transformation.

Fr. François Rossier, S.M. (the International Marian Research Institute/Dayton, Ohio), presented "*Kecharitomene* (Lk. 1:28) in the Light of Genesis 18:16-33: A Matter of Quantity." The extraordinary designation in the Angel's greeting to Mary—"full of grace"—recalls that, although God wills to communicate his grace and blessing to humanity, this communication is blocked by sin and human transgression. As the ten men in Genesis 18:32 formed an "entity" which prevented humanity's destruction, so the Virgin Mary is an entity which is completely open to God's blessing and grace—all in preparation for the birth of the one who would be our Redeemer and Savior.

In "The Art of the Immaculate Conception," Fr. Thomas Buffer, Ph.D. (Pontifical College Josephinum), and the artist Bruce Horner pointed out how the art related to the Immaculate Conception developed and changed through challenge and controversy. Early art of the Immaculate Conception usually represented the Woman of Genesis (3:15) or the Woman of Apocalypse (Rev. 12) surrounded by stars, with the crescent moon at her feet. Whereas earlier representations always included many biblical symbols, with the 1661 declaration of Alexander VI, indicating the Holy See's preference for the teaching, such supporting signs and symbols were no longer needed, and the *Tota Pulchra* was "in the heavens"—as exemplified in the paintings of Zurbarán and Velasquez. The controversies are reflected in the art.

Dr. Virginia Kimball spoke of the Immaculate Conception in ecumenical dialogue with Orthodoxy. Eastern Orthodoxy names the Virgin Mary primarily as *Theotokos*, but also as *Panaghia* (the All-Holy). Eastern writers, already in the sixth century, ascribed an absolute pure and new type of holiness to Mary. Orthodoxy was never influenced by the Augustinian teaching on original sin. In the Eastern view, Mary is considered to have been sinless but never given any privileges that separated her from the

rest of humanity; she is understood to be the link between humanity and God and in a long series of men and women who responded affirmatively to God.

Finally, Fr. Thomas A. Thompson, S.M. (The Marian Library/Dayton, Ohio), spoke of the Immaculate Conception in the Catholic-Protestant ecumenical dialogue. The definition of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 was rejected by many Protestants, especially German Lutherans, and served as a clear line of demarcation between the churches. Vatican II's "rereading" or enlargement of the definition of the Immaculate Conception has alleviated Lutheran fears that this teaching compromises the sole mediatorship of Jesus. Three recent ecumenical documents seek to understand some of the anthropological and theological meaning of the doctrine which well exemplifies the Protestant principle of *sola gratia*.

The meeting also included Fr. Eamon R. Carroll's annual Survey of Recent Mariology, a feature of every meeting of the Mariological Society for the last thirty-five years.

*Thomas A. Thompson, S.M.*  
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