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OBSERVATIONS ON FR. NEUMANN'S PAPER

Fr. Charles Neumann's paper offers a thoughtful and patient examination of certain opinions put forward by some contemporary theologians who seek to re-interpret the "traditional affirmation" of the belief of the Church about the Virginal Conception and the Divine Motherhood. Such opinions pose a problem: How can the "traditional affirmation"—i.e., conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary—be maintained when it is *re-interpreted*? How does one maintain the "meaning" of a statement by a reinterpretation? For note, first, the traditional affirmation embraces its own historical factor. Second, the traditional affirmation expresses a meaning in which the historical factor is an integral element. Now, re-interpretation suggests that the traditional affirmation does convey a meaning. Now, however, the meaning is being changed, not merely being purified of troublesome theological concerns. To disassociate the meaning from the historical factor leads to a dismemberment of the meaning and of an integral element. Such an operation *radically* changes the very meaning of the original affirmation, since the original affirmation no longer will be in its existential situation.

To stress the seriousness of such attempts it is necessary, also, to address the question concerning historical truth. What is *historical truth*? Are we dealing here with a question about the *existence* of the fact? Or, is it a question about the *manner* in which the fact comes about?

Certainly, considered existentially, the existence of the fact is vital—whether the virginal conception is spiritual or physical. But, what if virginal conception be considered *modally*? There is agreement that, considered modally, the virginal conception is by reason of *divine action*. So an argument is developed in this fashion: modally there is no denial of divine activity, since the

divine intervention is preserved whether the virginal conception be purely spiritual or biological. Yet, existentially the difference is vital. If the virginal conception is biological, then the offspring possesses physical being, is truly a human being, and the fact then preserves the unity of faith. If the virginal conception is purely spiritual, then such a fact is in tension with the belief of the universal Church, with the revelation contained in the Scriptures emphasizing the divine origin of the true humanity of Jesus Christ, and also with the obvious sense of conciliar statements, the understanding and interpretation of the Magisterium and the doctors and theologians of the Church. For, we would thus be in a world of spiritualized being, and there would be serious consequences: How could we reconcile the notion of physical suffering, redemption, resurrection? (What would we make of Irenaeus' teaching about the relation of the virginal conception and the resurrection?)

Perhaps, some further explications may be helpful in the face of this serious contention—What is the relationship of faith to historical truth? In what ways does the establishing of historical truth preserve/destroy the faith response? Is historical truth the context? the object? the mode? or the basis for faith response?

Further, the attempt to present the virginal conception in terms assimilable by modern minds is not only reductionist but also a perversion of legitimate methodology. No historical/critical method may change the literary and cultural context to suit another age. Again, some may ask what difference it would make whether or not the virginal conception is a biological fact. I would point out that to Jesus, Mary and the Apostles it makes all the difference in the world.

Therefore, some additional clarifications I would urge include: What is the meaning of, or the ontological force of, "sign relation"? Is there involved in "sign relation" what we have identified as analogy? Is it the same to speak of "the virginal conception as a sign of pre-existence" and then of "pre-existence and the virgin birth"?

Along these lines, we should also ask: What is the sense of the problem about the term "Mother of God"? Is it merely a matter

of semantics? of an ontology? of culture? or of faith-sensitivity in response? What is the reason for the difficulty between the title "Mother of God" and the reality? Does it have to do with the relationship of the fact, or the content, of a faith statement and the reality itself? Are we seeking to justify the title? to clarify the meaning of the title? or, to accept the reality that it is? What are we seeking here: a faith response? or, an empiric proof for the title?

Finally, it seems we should question too just what is the accuracy of placing the physical and spiritual maternity under the rubric "Divine Motherhood"? To what degree does the distinction "passive in conception, active in motherhood" clarify or add to the reappraisal issue? Answers to these suggested topics will increase the value of an outstanding paper.

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