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MARY'S VIRGINITY IN THE SYMBOLS AND COUNCILS

The general theme of this convention, the physical virginity of Our Blessed Lady, leads us to re-examine the historical foundations of our Christian faith as that faith came to be formulated in the Marian dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity. Father Craghan has already delivered a paper on the "The Gospel Witness to Mary's *Ante-partum* Virginity." Presupposing the basic facticity of the accounts in the context of the Biblical Revelation, the purpose of this paper is to trace the broad lines of the development of faith as expressed in the doctrine of Mary's virginity, and to propose the general way it seemed to evolve gradually toward the status of a dogma in the context of a living Tradition as the Church explicitated the inspired Word of God. The particular task assigned me in this paper calls for a concentration upon the origin of the Christian symbols or creeds in the course of the Church's early history and the eventual dogmatic formulation of Mary's perpetual virginity by the councils. To do this it will be necessary to point out some of the significant patristic tradition particularly as it witnesses to and bears upon the creedal and conciliar formulation of this doctrine. And since Msgr. Vaughan's topic tomorrow will treat of "Interpreting the Ordinary Magisterium on Mary's Virginity," my task is basically limited to its dogmatic development through the extraordinary magisterium of ecumenical councils, mentioning patristic tradition, particular councils or regional synods, and any organ of the Church's ordinary magisterium only insofar as they may have influenced the historical development of the dogma. Finally, the development of each part of the doctrine will be considered separately, namely the affirmation of Mary's virginity *ante partum*, i.e. the virginal conception, *in partu* or *durante partu*, i.e. the virginal parturi-

tion, and, *post partum*, i.e., the perpetual virginity after the birth of Christ

Throughout our consideration of the development of this doctrine in its symbolic or creedal expression and in its dogmatic formulation, we must always strive to keep the dogma in its proper theological perspective. We should not allow the theological and fundamentally Christological significance of Mary's virginity to be obscured by its physiological or biological aspects. Traditionally, from the Fathers of the Church,¹ through the great Medievalists² to contemporary theologians of distinction,³ there is abundant evidence that this doctrine is most efficacious in safeguarding and shedding light upon such central mysteries of our faith as the Incarnation, Redemption, Church, and commitment of Christian living. At the same time, its fundamental facticity, namely, the physical virginity of Mary, must not be viewed as irrelevant to, or, as some would

¹ The Christocentric character of the patristic witness to Mary's virginity is made manifest in the course of this paper.

² Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, 28, 1, where he gives four reasons of fittingness why the mother of Christ was a virgin in conceiving. The first two reasons concern His divinity, namely, His unique relationship with the Father and His unique characteristic of being sent as the Word of God. The third has to do with the reality of His sinless humanity, and the fourth with the soteriological purpose of the incarnation where he refers to St. Augustine's statement: "It was appropriate for our head, by a wonderful miracle, to be born physically of a virgin in order to signify that his members should be born spiritually of a virgin church." (*De sancta virginitate*, 6. PL 40, 399) similarly in the second and third articles of the same question, the Angelic Doctor's arguments of convenience for Mary's virginity *in partu* and *post partum* are mainly based upon the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation and the Christian vocation. (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, 3a, 27-30 (New York, 1969), Latin text, Eng. trans., Introduction, Notes, Append. & Gloss by T. R. Heath, O.P.)

³ Cf. R. Laurentin, *The Question of Mary* (New York, 1965), p. 143, where he makes the following observation about the centrality of the *Theotokos* for the Eastern Churches: "The best representatives of this tradition never seem to lose sight of the fact that Mary's virginity, conception in holiness, and assumption, as well as her present relationship with mankind are precisely the virginity, sanctity, conception and assump-

say, even detrimental to the real meaning of these mysteries. Recent attempts on the part of some, including those of the Roman Catholic communion, to interpret this dogma more or less as a purely spiritual symbol or myth represent a serious threat to the historicity of our faith, as hopefully will become clearer in the course of this paper. For our faith is rooted in the deeper spiritual significance of real historical events. As the Jewish faith has been based upon the mighty deeds of God as especially revealed in the Exodus-event, so is traditional faith of the Christian rooted in the Church-event culminating in the Paschal mystery. Our deep concern with the reality of concern with the basic realism of our faith in Jesus Christ as truly conceived and born of this woman and as Emmanuel, the God who has really become one of us.⁴ His very immanence must always reveal His divine transcendence, and the reality of Mary's virginity in conceiving and bringing forth Christ is

tion of the Theotokos, or in other words, a particularly privileged illustration of the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation. However, let us not exaggerate. I am not arguing here for a mistrust of formulae, or for an impoverishment of concepts. . . Nevertheless, do let us see these formulae, always, in their most essential, most theological, most Christological light, the light that shines in the word, *Theotokos*. In this we contemplate the most sublime heights of Mary's glory, and, at the same time, the sign and human reality by means of which God actually entered into our tragic story to make of it a history of salvation. In this mystery of the *Theotokos* we see, finally, the relationship, all of grace and love, which God contracted with the holiest, the most receptive, and the most cooperative of all the redeemed."

⁴ Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (New York, 1964), p. 4, where, in speaking about the history of Jesus' life as the history of a theophany, he remarks about Mary: "The Virgin from Nazareth is, after Christ, the principal person in this historical sequence of events. Mariology is therefore concerned with *the life of a person*, of one definite person in history. It is concerned with the mother of one definite person—Jesus of Nazareth. Mary is the mystery of a mother who had a child! Yet this historically conditioned life is the *revelation* of the divine act of redemption which became, in Mary's Child, a reality which was at the same time also a historical reality."

a testimonial to the fact that, while He is truly human, He has no human father. For God alone is His Father. And her perpetual virginity is an eternal witness to the wonders that He wrought in her Christian love as a woman and a mother which reveals the glory that is the hope of us all.⁵

With this in mind we turn now to consider the first aspect of Mary's virginity, her virginal conception of Christ without the intervention of any human father. How this first facet of the doctrine developed historically through creedal expression into eventual dogmatic formulation accepted by an ecumenical council requires some general consideration of the rise of the early Christian Creeds.

Mary's Virginity in Conception

The origins of our Christian creeds are still cloaked in mystery. Thanks to such scholarship as that of J. N. D. Kelly, the brilliant Anglican patrologist from England, however, much of the obscurity has been removed and we have certainly come a long way from the ancient legend about the beginning of the *symbolum apostolorum*, the Apostles' Creed, which was repeated by Rufinus writing about the year 404:

As they were therefore on the point of taking leave of each other, they first settled an agreed norm for their future preaching, so that they might not find themselves, widely separated as they would be, giving out different doctrines to the people they invited to believe in Christ. So they met together in one spot and, being filled with

⁵ Cf. M. Thurian, *Mary Mother of All Christians* (New York, 1964), p. 183, where, in chapter 10 entitled "A Great Sign in Heaven", he asserts "Thus Mary and the Church are closely united in the event of the Cross and in this event recorded in Revelation. These two moments of revelation present the Virgin Mary, mother of the Lord, as the symbol of the Church militant and triumphant. Mary, in the Church and with the Church, with all the members of Christ, shares in His humanity, in the suffering of the Crucified and the hope of the Resurrection."

the Holy Spirit, compiled this brief token, as I have said, of their future preaching, each making the contribution he thought fit, and they decreed that it should be handed out as standard teaching to believers.⁶

As naïve as such a legend sounds by today's standards, still it did echo a long standing conviction among the Fathers that any authentic confession or creed must be rooted in the apostolic tradition. And therein lies the unique value of their early witness to truths of faith.

While there is no strictly creedal statement as such in the New Testament and early Church documents, the movement toward formulation and fixity had already gotten under way. The beginnings of embodying the basic beliefs of Christianity in creed-like slogans, tags or catchwords arose from peculiar situations in the Church, especially the occasion of Baptism which would prove to be the greatest source of creedal development in the first centuries of Christianity. Obviously on such a solemn and significant occasion some assurance of the catechumen's faith was called for. But also the catechetical instruction preceding Baptism helped shape creedal summaries, as well as the preaching of the kerygma, defending the faith from heretics within the Church and from pagans without, the celebration of the divine Liturgy, the rite of exorcism, and the official letters of ecclesiastical leaders to their flocks, as those of St. Paul, which were often read aloud at Church assemblies. The *Sitz im Leben* of such occasions also helped to form the style, substance and structure of these tentative creeds. And so, if a terse summation of beliefs was appropriate for catechetical instruction, a more expansive expression of faith was fitting for liturgical celebrations.⁷

Such creedal confessions are far removed in form and time from the creeds of Nicaea or Constantinople, or the Apostles'

⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York, 1960) 1-2. This book will be referred to as *ECC* in the footnotes.

⁷ *ECC* pp. 13-15.

Creed, which are fixed formularies and declaratory statements of the Christian faith. Yet they do identify for us the origin of creeds in the technical sense, especially in their baptismal usage. The declaratory profession of faith in the Apostles' Creed during the rite of Baptism today harkens back to the simple interrogatory creeds of the baptismal ceremony in the early days of Christianity. As J. N. D. Kelly observes:

In fact, it was precisely the need for a formal affirmation of belief to be rehearsed by the catechumen at baptism which instigated the Church to invent creeds in the first place. Whatever other uses they may have been put to in the course of history, the true and original use of creeds, their primary *raison d'être*, was to serve as solemn affirmations of faith in the context of baptismal initiation.⁸

Creedal development which started with the baptismal preparation and ceremony reached the status of declaratory creeds by the beginning of the 4th century in the rite of Baptism.⁹ It is well to note that the term *symbolum* came into use in this same context. For the creedal questions and answers of the interrogatory creeds were looked upon as a "sign, an expressive and portentous symbol, of the Triune God in whose name the baptism was being enacted and with whom the Christian catechumen was being united."¹⁰ It is also worth bearing in mind that the most fruitful source of creedal development seems to be catechetical instruction, to hand on to the catechumens the mighty deeds of God accomplished in Jesus Christ. Although the anti-heretical aspect was a most obvious source from the beginning, as will soon be seen in the strong anti-docetic accents of St. Ignatius of Antioch, it was not the only or even the most important function of creedal formulae. That their original intent was the more positive function of proposing the faith to the inquirer or the catechumen seems significant for our

⁸ ECC p 31

⁹ ECC p 38

¹⁰ ECC p 60

purposes since the particular doctrine under examination could be interpreted in too negative a mode if it is viewed exclusively or primarily in the context of a polemic against heresy. Consequently, as we examine the patristic witness to the creedal development of the doctrine concerning Mary's virginity, let us keep in mind this more positive setting of its historical background.

St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110) wrote to the Christians at Smyrna in accents that remind one of the later Roman creed.

... being fully persuaded as regards our Lord, that He was truly of David's stock after the flesh, Son of God by the divine will and power, begotten truly of the Virgin, baptized by John that He might fulfill all righteousness, truly nailed in the flesh on our behalf under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch... that through His resurrection He might set up an ensign... in one body of His Church ¹¹

Involved with defending the faith in the human reality of Jesus against the Docetists, his complete concern with Mary's virginal motherhood of the Lord is Christological. But he repeatedly affirms that the virginal conception is a certain truth of the faith and even refers to it in terms of being a distinct mystery:

"And the Prince of this world was in ignorance of the virginity of Mary and her childbearing and also of the death of the Lord—three mysteries loudly proclaimed to the world, though accomplished in the stillness of God ¹²

The first apologist, Aristedes of Athens (c. 125) wrote to the Emperor Hadrian that the virginal conception of Christ is an article of faith along with His divinity, crucifixion, and resurrection ¹³

¹¹ *Smyrn.* 1, 1-2. Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (the one volume edition) (London, 1891) 127

¹² *Eph.* 19 1; *Ancient Christian Writers* 1 67

¹³ Cf. N.C.E. 14 693a

Another apologist, the most famous, St. Justin Martyr (d. 163) saw in Mary's virginal conception of Jesus a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14: (and notice the creed-like expression)

We find it proclaimed beforehand in the books of the prophets that Jesus our Christ would come to earth, be born through the Virgin and be made man . . . would be crucified and die, and be raised again, and ascend into heaven ¹⁴

Again in his first Apology, Justin asserts: "He was conceived as a man of the Virgin, and was named Jesus, and was crucified, died, and rose again, and has ascended to heaven."¹⁵ Then, in his dialogue with Trypho, he states "For the rest you must prove that He consented to be born as a man through the Virgin according to His Father's will ."¹⁶ (creedal), and also "For in the name of this very Son of God and first-begotten of all creation, Who was born through the Virgin, and became a passible man . . ."¹⁷ In the context of the development of symbols, as these expressions would indicate, Justin is the first to provide direct evidence for the emergence of relatively fixed creedal questions at Baptism. His slightly younger contemporary, Aristedes, may also be considered a witness to the Christ-kerygma as a source of creed-like statements during the middle of the 2nd century.

St. Irenaeus († 202), the great Christian theologian of the 2nd half of the 2nd century, was strong in insisting that the doctrinal content of the Christian faith, as handed down in the Catholic Church, was identical and self-consistent everywhere, unlike the divergent doctrines of the Gnostic heretics. In his famous work, *Adversus Haereses*, he proclaims:

¹⁴ *Apol* I, 31, 7. Cf. E. J. Goodspeed, *Die ältesten Apologeten*, 46f.

¹⁵ *Apol* I, 42, 4. Cf. Goodspeed, *op. cit.*, 55

¹⁶ *Dial* 63, 1. Cf. Goodspeed, *op. cit.*, 168

¹⁷ *Dial* 85, 2. Cf. Goodspeed, *op. cit.*, 197

For the Church, although scattered throughout the whole world as far as the limits of the earth, has received from the Apostles and their disciples, handed down, its faith in God the Father almighty, Who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all the things in them, and in one Christ Jesus the Son of God, Who was made flesh for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit, Who through the prophets proclaimed the saving dispensations, and the coming, and the birth from the virgin . . .¹⁸

In the same work he describes barbarian tribes who have no written Scriptures but only the Christian traditions written in their hearts as believing "in one God, the maker of heaven and earth and all things that are in them, through Christ Jesus the Son of God, Who because of His outstanding love toward His creation endured the birth from the Virgin, uniting in Himself man to God. . ."¹⁹ St. Irenaeus shows familiarity with a brief baptismal creed and also continues the early patristic witness to the Christian kerygma with its recital of the Lord's experiences and accomplishments. His proclamation that the virginal conception is a doctrine of the Church handed on from the Apostles, while a direct defense of the true faith in the human reality of Jesus, expressed an even deeper and more enduring concern that the one true faith be preserved and handed on intact which meant a movement toward some fixity of form²⁰

As Irenaeus held the virginal conception of Christ to be part of what he called "canon of truth," so Tertullian, the polemical African of the early 3rd century, included it in what he termed the "rule of faith," i.e., a body of truth transmitted in the Church by Sacred Scripture and Tradition. He declares:

The rule of faith is . . . that rule by which we believe that there is one, and only one, God, and He the creator of the world, Who

¹⁸ *Adv. haer.* 1, 10, 1 in *PG* 7, 549.

¹⁹ *Adv. haer.* 3, 4, 2 in *PG* 7, 855f.

²⁰ *ECC*, pp 80-81

by His Word coming down in the beginning brought all things into being out of nothing; and that this Word, called His Son, appeared in manifold wise in the name of God to the patriarchs, made His voice heard always in the prophets, and last of all entered into the Virgin Mary by the spirit and power of God His Father, was made flesh in her womb and was born from her as Jesus Christ . . .²¹

Later on in the same book, Tertullian extols the one faith that the Roman church holds in common with the African. "She acknowledges one Lord God, creator of the universe, and Christ Jesus, Son of God the creator from the Virgin Mary, and the resurrection of the flesh"²² Two other sources in which there is evidenced creedal testimony to the virginal conception are: *De virginibus velandis* (dated 208-11), in which he includes the birth of Jesus Christ "from the Virgin Mary" in the rule of faith that is "one everywhere, alone incapable of alteration and reform"²³; and, the second, *Adversus Praxeam*, (after 213), where he again puts into the same rule of faith that "this Son was sent by the Father into the Virgin, and was born from her, man and God, son of man and Son of God, and was given the name Jesus Christ. . ."²⁴ We should note that in the four references cited, where the Tertullian polemic against the Gnostics is apparent in the first and last, it is still an element separable from the rule of faith as such, and, that, when such controversial elements are removed, there remains a structure which is a creed-like summary of the faith. We are not saying that Tertullian had any one creed in mind, but his rule of faith seems to indicate his source is the baptismal questionnaire based on some stereotyped summation of the faith for catechetical instruction.

²¹ *De praescriptione*, ch 13 in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (CCL) I, 197f.

²² *De praescriptione*, ch 36 in CCL I, 217

²³ *De virginibus velandis*, ch 1 in CCL II, 1209

²⁴ *Adversus Praxeam*, ch 2 in CCL II, 1160

Tertullian's Roman contemporary, St Hippolytus, in his *Apostolic Tradition* provides us with the first document that shows what appears to be a fixed creed in its integrity²⁵ In this creed we find another witness to the universal faith in the virginity of Mary *ante partum* "Do you believe in God the Father almighty? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary. . ?"²⁶ There is no doubt that this creed of the *Tradition* was formal and fixed But we cannot conclude that it was therefore the official creed of the Roman Church.²⁷ Formal liturgical prayer was still very young and fixed forms were far from being made universally obligatory even within any local church. Probably this baptismal creed found in Hippolytus' *Tradition* was one of several semi-official creeds or symbols for the Roman Church at the time

Writing a little later at Caesarea during the 230's, Origen seems to be referring to a formal creed, doubtless from his native Alexandria Commenting upon *John 13.19*, he maintains that certain articles of faith are absolutely essential, and that the Church cannot pick and choose, but must believe all of them. Among such articles of faith he includes the virginal conception. "Or again, if a man should believe that He who was crucified under Pontius Pilate . . . (but should not accept) His birth from the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit . . . he too would be most defective . . ."²⁸ Elsewhere in Origen's works there are similar summaries He attached great importance to the ecclesiastical tradition of doctrines, and bears special witness to the formula "born of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit"

At this point in our tracing of the creedal development as it particularly concerns the doctrine of the virginal conception,

²⁵ *ECC*, p 89

²⁶ *Apostolic Tradition*, ch 21 Cf P Palmer, *Mary in the Documents of the Church*, (London, 1953), p 4

²⁷ *Ecc* p. 91.

²⁸ *In ev Joann*, 32, 16 Cf E Preuschen, *Origines Werke*, Vol 4 (Leipzig, 1903) p 451f

we would do well to pause for a brief summary and recapitulation. Although there were no creeds in the strict sense of the term during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, symbols or creeds as semi-formal and official summaries of the faith did exist at that time. The Christological type continued the Christ-kerygma which was so important in apostolic times and consisted principally of items that were gradually but definitely becoming fixed: the sequence of Christ's birth from the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, His passion and death under Pontius Pilate, His resurrection on the third day, His sitting at the Father's right hand and His future coming to judge the living and the dead. The interrogatory creeds of Baptism, as early as St. Justin in the middle of the second century, easily came first in verbal fixity and as symbols of official recognition in the local churches. By the middle of the 3rd century they were highly developed in customary and established words. Creeds and creedal formulae were part and parcel of the liturgy and their fortunes as fixed forms went along with those of the prayers and services as accepted forms of worship. But, as we saw in the *Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus, there was a definite tendency toward fixed forms. This movement, first found in the context of liturgy and itself the natural result of instinctive life in societies and institutions, was accompanied by the gradual codification of creeds. Finally, it would be wise to point out again that the motive of opposing heresy, while very influential, was far from being the only or even the principal one responsible for creedal development. The primary motive seems to have stemmed from the Church's sense of fidelity to the apostolic kerygma. Consequently, we may conclude that the testimony of the living Tradition of the Church to the doctrine of the virginal conception is a strong affirmation that it was part of the original kerygma.

While it would be well beyond the scope of this paper to go into any detail on the origin of the old Roman creed, we should make some remarks regarding its relevance to our considera-

tions. The Roman Church was quick to recognize the need for some fixed formulation of the faith in face of the vast number of converts to Christianity from paganism during the 3rd century. And so it was there that one of the earliest local baptismal creeds took shape and became canonized as a declaratory formula to be given back to the Bishop by the catechumen before baptism. The old Roman Creed persisted for centuries after the Council of Nicaea had started a long line of conciliar creeds which claimed more than a local allegiance. It can be traced at least to the closing decades of the second century with such witnesses as St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus and Tertullian whom we've already considered. It became the direct ancestor of all other local creeds in the West and even had a considerable influence upon Eastern creeds. The Apostles' Creed itself is a most illustrious descendant which gradually evolved as the old Roman creed enriched by various elements from the provinces of the West.²⁹

Rufinus, in his famous treatise *Commentarius in symbolum Apostolorum*, comments on the baptismal creed of his own Church, Aquileia, and compares it with that of Rome. We can be assured that he gives us the text of the old Roman Creed because of his conviction that the Roman Church preserved the so called original creed of the Apostles in its integrity. "I believe in God the Father almighty; and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord, Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary . . ."³⁰ A survey of the local creeds for baptism used by the churches throughout the provinces of the West will show that they bear witness to the constant tradition that Christ was born, i.e. conceived of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Similarly a survey of the symbols used in the local churches of the East shows the same continual testimony to the tradition of the virginal conception. Of course there are differences in the line of development between the East and West since no Eastern

²⁹ ECC, pp. 100-101.

³⁰ ECC, p. 102

Church enjoyed the status and authority of the Roman Church in the West. The various Eastern creeds of the local churches existed in friendly competition, but were all rooted in the baptismal ceremony and catechetical rule of faith preparatory to that sacrament. One significant theological difference is that the creeds of the West were mainly concerned with the primitive kerygma about the Savior whereas the Eastern creeds emphasized the cosmic setting of the divine drama of Redemption with their stresses on Christ as the Logos who pre-existed creation and was the Father's agent in the creative activity.³¹

Now we come to the origin of conciliar creeds or symbols as tests of orthodoxy. Of course the Nicene Creed was the first to be published by an ecumenical council and so the first to claim universal authority in a legal sense. Even though it was the logical development of a practice that had been going on in local synods for two or three generations (e.g., the Synod of Antioch in 268 which dealt with the case of Paul of Samosota), its excommunication in the name of the Catholic Church of those who dissented from its creedal definitions marked a new era in the history of the Church as an institution.³² The Nicene Creed probably consists of some local baptismal creed from the Syro-Palestinian provenance into which the keywords of the first ecumenical council were inserted. In vain do we look for a testimony to the doctrine of the virginal conception. This should not alarm us, however, since such a reference would have run the risk of favoring the Arian interpretation of subordinationism, and so only mention of Christ's divine Sonship was made.

Following Nicaea was an age of synodal creeds. These symbols of local councils bring out the tradition of faith in the teaching of Mary's virginity *ante partum*. But more in accord with the purposes of our consideration is the origin of the Constantinopolitan Creed at the second ecumenical council held

³¹ *ECC*, p. 194.

³² *ECC*, p. 207.

in Constantinople in 381. For it added the testimony of its faith in the virginal conception to the creed of Nicaea and has come to enjoy a universal recognition not given to any other creed in the Church. As J. N. D. Kelly observes:

Of all existing creeds it is the only one for which ecumenicity, or universal acceptance, can be plausibly claimed. Unlike the purely Western Apostles' Creed, it was admitted as authoritative in East and West alike from 451 onwards, and it has retained that position ... right down to the present day. So far from displacing it, the Reformation reaffirmed its binding character and gave it a new lease of life and an extended currency by translating it into the vernacular tongues. It is thus one of the few threads by which the tattered fragments of the divided robe of Christendom are held together.³³

The text, as pertinent to our purpose, is "... and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man ..." which was added by I Constantinople to the Nicene Creed because of polemical concerns with Apollinarianism, while Nicaea feared that such a reference to the Lord's temporal birth might favor an Arian interpretation.

Although our primary source for the Constantinopolitan Creed is found in the *acta* of the Council of Chalcedon, 451, the Council of I Constantinople did in fact promulgate this creed that bears its name. That it did not receive distinctive recognition in the name of this council till Chalcedon may be explained by the fact that the conciliar fathers at Constantinople considered their declaration as confirming the Nicene Creed. It does not seem that the fathers composed the creed at Constantinople because its creedal expression appears more like a symbol from the life and liturgy of the Christian community rather than a conciliar artefact. The conciliar fathers judged that the particular creed which they adopted was best suited both to confirm the sense of the Nicene faith and to deal with

³³ *ECC*, p. 296

the refutation of special heresies such as Apollinarianism by making certain modifications and additions.

Mary's Virginity in Parturition

Now let us turn briefly to consider the second part of the dogma of Mary's virginity, her virginity *in* or *durante partu*, the doctrine that she gave birth to Jesus without losing her bodily integrity and without suffering the ordinary pangs of childbirth. Generally speaking, the Western Fathers emphasized the aspect that Mary's physical integrity was preserved, while those of the East stressed the element of joy and her freedom from pain in bringing forth Christ.³⁴ In Tradition as a whole, the greater attestation is given to Mary's bodily integrity in parturition and it is illustrated by comparison with Christ's miraculous emergence from the closed sepulchre in His resurrection and His entry into the upper room through the closed doors in appearing to the apostles as the risen Lord.³⁵ Again, our consideration of patristic witness will be only to the extent that it seems relevant to any creedal or conciliar development of the doctrine. Obviously much of what has already been considered will be applicable to this part of the dogma of Mary's virginity.

Because of the earlier Fathers' concern with the docetic denials of Christ's real humanity, as is especially true of Tertullian's polemic, the patristic teaching in both East and West did not arrive at any universality or unanimity on Mary's virginity in parturition till the late 4th or early 5th century, the period between 375-425, the decline of Arianism and the rise of Nestorianism. In a letter from the Synod of Milan to Pope Siricius in 390, which represents the teaching of St. Ambrose and his suffragan bishops who signed the letter, we have a strong affirmation of Mary's virginity in giving birth to Christ. It is made on the basis of the Scriptures and the faith of the

³⁴ *NCE*, 14: 693b

³⁵ *NCE*, 14: 694a

Roman Church as expressed in her creed, referred to by them as the Apostles' Creed, but as we have already seen, which is really the old Roman Creed:

But if they do not believe the teaching of the priests let them believe the oracles of Christ, let them believe the admonitions of the angels saying For nothing is impossible with God" (Lk. 1:37). Let them believe the Apostles' Creed which the Church of Rome ever guards and preserves inviolate... This is the virgin who conceived in her womb and as a virgin bore a son For thus it is written: "Behold a virgin shall conceive in the womb and bear a son" (Is. 7:14). He has said not only that a virgin shall conceive but also that a virgin shall give birth Now, who is that gate of the temple, that outer gate toward the east, which remains closed "and no one" he says, "shall pass through it, except the God of Israel alone" (Ezech 44:2)? Is not Mary this portal through which the Redeemer entered into this world? The portal is the Blessed Mary of whom it is written that "the Lord shall pass through it and it shall be closed" (Ezech. 44:2) after birth, because a virgin did conceive and give birth. What then is there impossible of belief if, contrary to the natural way of birth, Mary has given birth and remained a virgin, when contrary to the course of nature, "the sea looked and fled and the waters of the Jordan turned back toward their source" [Ps. 113A-(114) 3]³⁶

St. Augustine is in complete accord with St. Ambrose on Mary's virginity *in partu*. As he puts it very tersely and clearly: "She conceives and is a virgin; she gives birth and is a virgin"³⁷ The Council of Ephesus, 431, without addressing itself directly to this dogma, seems to endorse the teaching: "Nor was He first born of the holy Virgin as an ordinary man, in such a way that the Word only afterwards descended upon Him; rather was He united (with flesh) in the womb itself, and thus is said to have undergone birth according to the flesh, inasmuch as He makes His own the birth of His own flesh. For this reason

³⁶ St. Ambrose, *Epist.* 42 4 in *PL* 16:1123-26

³⁷ *PL* 38:1319

(the holy Fathers) have boldly proclaimed the holy Virgin Theotokos³⁸ Also one of the canons from this ecumenical council speaks in terms that presuppose Mary is a virgin in giving birth to Christ: "If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is in truth God, and that the holy Virgin is, in consequence, Theotokos (Mother of God), since she brought forth according to the flesh the Word of God who has become flesh, let him be anathema."³⁹

In 449 St. Leo the Great wrote a letter to Flavian, Archbishop of Constantinople, in preparation for the Council of Chalcedon, in which he stated: "she brought Him forth without the loss of virginity, even as she conceived Him without its loss . . . (Jesus Christ was) born from the Virgin's womb because it was a miraculous birth. . . "⁴⁰ The fourth ecumenical council held at Chalcedon in 451 wholeheartedly accepted this authoritative teaching of the Pope which would indicate its general acceptance in the East and West at that time

The Lateran Synod of 649 included the virginal parturition in its definition of Mary's divine maternity:

If anyone does not, in accord with the holy Fathers, acknowledge . . . that Mary is the holy mother of God, ever virgin and without stain, inasmuch as she specially and truly conceived of the Holy Ghost, without seed, in the fullness of time, God the Word Himself, who was born of God the Father before all ages, and without corruption brought Him forth, her virginity remaining intact also after His birth, let him be condemned."⁴¹

Although this synod did not have the status of an ecumenical council, this teaching was accepted by Constantinople III in 681.

Mary's Perpetual Virginity

Finally let us consider the third facet of the jewel that is

³⁸ DBS 251

³⁹ DBS 252

⁴⁰ Letter 28 to Flav. in DBS 291, 294

⁴¹ DBS 503.

the dogma of Mary's virginity, the truth that she remained a virgin after the birth of Christ throughout the remainder of her life. Although Mary's perpetual virginity did not really come into its own till the last part of the 4th century, especially with Ambrose and Jerome, there was ample patristic witness to it for some time before. In the early part of the third century, Origen was upholding the doctrine while his Latin contemporary, Tertullian, was denying it. Clement of Alexandria, Origen's predecessor, had already affirmed it.⁴² While Origen does not consider denial of the doctrine heretical, he does look upon it as senseless and contrary to Christian feeling. Hilary of Poitiers, a century later, referred to those who reject Mary's perpetual virginity as "irreligious and very far removed from spiritual teaching."⁴³ Responding to the denial of Eunomius, the Arian Bishop of Cyzicus, Basil the Great, though considering only the virginal conception to be a binding dogma, nevertheless maintained: "The friends of Christ refuse to admit that the Mother of God ever ceased to be a virgin."⁴⁴ During the 4th century Athanasius appealed to Mary's virginity as the model of all those who embrace this vow. His *Letter to Virgins* inspired much of Ambrose's work *De virginibus*. Epiphanius defended Mary's perpetual virginity in his *Panarion* and condemned the rejection of this belief as "unheard of insanity and preposterous novelty."⁴⁵ He is also responsible for the introduction of the expression "ever-virgin" into the Eastern form of the Nicene Creed and uses the term a number of times in his writings.

The term "ever-virgin" became very popular after the middle of the 4th century, and when we reach the period of 383-392 we find an abundance of evidence in favor of Mary's perpetual virginity.⁴⁶ Jerome, in his famous treatise *Adversus Helvidium*,

⁴² NCE, 14:696a.

⁴³ PL 9:921-922.

⁴⁴ PG 31:1468.

⁴⁵ PG 42:705.

vehemently destroyed the arguments of Helvidius who denied the doctrine in order to advance his teaching on the equality of marriage and virginity and that Mary is a model of both through her virginal conception of Christ and her experience of the marital act afterwards.⁴⁷ When Bonosius, Bishop of Naissus (c 390) denied the doctrine, St Ambrose defended the faith in his *De institutione virginis*, and helped gain the condemnation of Bonosius by the bishops of Illyria.⁴⁸ From the end of the 4th century there is general unanimity among the Fathers that belief in Mary's perpetual virginity is obligatory. The usage of the triple formula that Mary is a virgin, before, in, and after the birth of Jesus becomes standard in Augustine,⁴⁹ Peter Chrysologus⁵⁰ and Leo the Great.⁵¹ Again, as a testimony to the faith in Mary's perpetual virginity, we call your attention to the letter of Leo the Great to Flavian which was accepted by the Council of Chalcedon (451), and the Lateran Synod of 649 whose teaching of the virginity of Mary was approved by III Council of Constantinople (681)

In 1555, during the period of Trent but not as one of its conciliar decrees, Pope Paul IV directed a decree against the Socinians or Unitarians who denied Mary's perpetual virginity: ". . . we are anxious to admonish each and everyone who has heretofore asserted, taught, or believed . . . that the same most Blessed Virgin Mary is not truly the Mother of God or that she did not always retain the integrity of her virginity, that is, before birth, during birth, and continuously after birth. . ."⁵²

Before making some brief concluding comments in the context of the contemporary problematic concerning this dogma of our faith, let us close this broad survey of creedal and conciliar

⁴⁶ NCE, 14 696a

⁴⁷ PL 83:183-206

⁴⁸ NCE, 14.696a

⁴⁹ PL 38.1008

⁵⁰ PL 52:521.

⁵¹ PL 54:195.

⁵² DBS 1880.

development with a few references to Vatican II on Mary's Virginity. In chapter 8 of the dogmatic constitution of the Church the conciliar fathers of the most recent ecumenical council refer to Mary as the "perpetual Virgin Mary";⁵³ and declare that "the union of the Mother with the Son in the work of salvation was manifested from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death,"⁵⁴ and that "this association was shown also at the birth of our Lord, who did not diminish His mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it. . . ."⁵⁵

Concluding Comments

Mary's virginity *ante partum*, her virginal conception of Christ, while never explicitly defined by the solemn magisterium, is nevertheless a dogma of the faith by reason of the Church's universal and ordinary teaching authority. The patristic witness to this truth of revelation was early and constant. The Fathers provide ample testimony to its affirmation in the preaching of the Christ-kerygma and the interrogatory creeds employed in the preparation for Baptism. The doctrine was incorporated into the universal conciliar creed promulgated by the ecumenical council held at Constantinople (381). At the Council of Ephesus (431) it was presumed in the definition of the *Theotokos*, and was taught explicitly in the authoritative letter of Pope St. Leo the Great to the Council of Chalcedon (451). The dogma of Mary's virginity *ante partum* was defined by the regional council of the Lateran (649), the acts of which were accepted by the *ecumenical* council of Constantinople III (681). The Apostles' Creed, in its continuous formation and development from the old Roman Creed to the received text of medieval Christendom, bears continuous witness to this truth in the living Tradition of the Church.

Similarly, Mary's virginity *post partum*, her perpetual vir-

⁵³ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 57.

⁵⁵ *Loc. cit.*

ginity after the birth of Christ, may be theologically noted as *de fide*, but not *definita*, since it has never been the object of a direct definition by a Pope or ecumenical council. As Mary's virginity *ante partum*, it is a dogma of our faith from the universal and ordinary magisterium. Although there was earlier patristic testimony to this truth, only from the end of the 4th century is there general unanimity among the Fathers that it is binding in faith. After the middle of the same century the expression "ever-virgin" grew in popularity. Presupposed in the definition of the *Theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus (431), Mary's perpetual virginity was expressly taught in Pope St. Leo the Great's dogmatic letter to Flavian which was accepted by the Council of Chalcedon (451), and was included in the definition of the divine maternity at the regional council of the Lateran (649) whose acts were received by the general Council at Constantinople III (681). The constant teaching of the ordinary magisterium concerning this truth of our faith is contained in Pope Paul IV's decree against those who denied Mary's perpetual virginity and in chapter 8 of Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on the Church.

Mary's virginity *in partu* poses the theological problem of interpretation, and is currently being discussed as a case in the development of dogma and tradition in the context of the whole hermeneutical question.⁸⁶ Generally speaking, the Fathers taught the doctrine in clear enough terms as the preservation of Mary's physical integrity and her exemption from the ordinary pangs of childbirth. It is not at all clear, however, just what creedal and conciliar expressions intended by such formulae as "born of the Virgin Mary," "she brought Him forth without the loss of virginity, even as she conceived Him without its loss . . ." and "without corruption (she) brought Him forth." What is of faith in this mystery, or just what its

⁸⁶ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, IV (Baltimore, 1966) "*Virginitas in Partu*: A contribution to the problem of the development of dogma and of tradition", pp. 134-162.

content might be, is still open to question within certain limits. It is not our intent here to make any attempt to offer a solution to the problem, but merely to identify the question and to propose one possible approach in the quest for an answer.

About twenty years ago, Albert Mitterer raised the question that a denial of the opening of Mary's womb and its ordinary consequences in her giving birth to Christ would detract from the truth of her motherhood.⁵⁷ He advanced his views for consideration by theologians with the realization that a definite decision in the matter could come only from the living Tradition of faith. His proposed interpretation, however, would empty the doctrine of Mary's virginity *in partu* of any content in its traditional understanding. Now, whether or not it can be reinterpreted in accord with faith and be reconceptualized in such a way that the physical aspects of bodily integrity and exemption from birth-pangs are not considered essential to the mystery of her virginity, is still open to question.

Karl Rahner is one theologian who has attempted to explore the problem raised by Mitterer. Thus he does dialectically, tentatively, and cautiously by treating the question in the context of a contribution to the problem of the development of dogma and of tradition. He understands Mitterer's theory as holding that Mary's virginity *in partu* is simply an application of her perpetual virginity to the act of giving birth to Christ. After examining the relevant data in the patristic and magisterial tradition, he proposes a view which does not definitely attribute birth-pangs to Mary as would Mitterer's, but rather avoids such concrete details while at the same time affirming a virginal character of her parturition that is more positive and distinctive than merely the experience of a woman who conceived virginally or as the application of her perpetual virginity. Rahner sees the *virginitas in partu* as the act of child-bearing by a woman who is the mother of God's redeeming Word, the immaculate

⁵⁷ A. Mitterer, *Dogma und Biologie der Heiligen Familie* (Vienna, 1952).

one who is free from concupiscence. Consequently there is a unique character of virginity involved in light of the total context of Mary's virginal motherhood of God. Because of the unique grace in her human personality, each aspect of her child-bearing must have been essentially different from that of those who are subject to sin and concupiscence. To go into any further detail on Rahner's proposed view would be well beyond the scope of this paper. Let us listen, however, to his general conclusion concerning the doctrine of Mary's virginity *in partu*:

All we say is this. Church doctrine affirms, with the real substance of tradition, that Mary's child-birth, as regards both child and mother, like the conception, is, in its total reality, as the completely human act of this 'virgin', in itself (and not just by reason of the conception, as Mitterer says), an act corresponding to the nature of this mother, and hence it is unique, miraculous and 'virginal'. But this proposition, which is directly intelligible, does not offer us the possibility of deducing assertions about the concrete details of the process, which would be *certain* and *universally binding*.⁵⁸

In closing, we might consider very briefly the problem of ecumenical dialogue with some of our fellow Christians on the matter of Mary's virginity. Two books, appearing during the 1960's, have raised basic Protestant difficulties with the traditional Roman Catholic interpretation of this mystery.⁵⁹ Both reject the virginity *post partum* as an early instance of progressive "marianism" as well as Mary's virginal conception. They see in the doctrine of her perpetual virginity the special influence of ascetics who were searching for a model of their own celibate existence. Theirs are representative Protestant positions, the most thorough arguments for which were provided in two German books by Hugo Koch.⁶⁰ He traces the denial of Mary's perpetual virginity back to sub-apostolic times. The currency that such concepts and arguments seem to be gaining today among Christians, including some Catholics, constitutes a

⁵⁸ K. Rahner, *op cit.*, p. 162.

challenge concerning the sources of our convictions in faith about the development and meaning of this Marian dogma within an authentic Christian Tradition. Hopefully this paper has helped provide some basis for further discussion, not in the spirit of polemical debate, but under the Holy Spirit's direction toward true ecumenical dialogue

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⁵⁹ Hans von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church* (Naperville, Ill., 1964) and Thomas Boslooper, *The Virgin Birth* (Philadelphia, 1962).

⁶⁰ *Adhuc Virgo* (Tubingen, 1929; Kraus Reprint, Liechtenstein, 1966) and *Virgo Eva—Virgo Maria* (Leipzig, 1937).