

2-23-1973

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### Recommended Citation

Carol, J. B. (1973) "Report on the St. Louis Convention," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 24, Article 4, Pages 5-11.  
Available at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies/vol24/iss1/4](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol24/iss1/4)

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## REPORT ON THE ST. LOUIS CONVENTION

Our celebrated humorist, Will Rogers, once remarked that if theologians would only stop trying to decide on *how* Christ arrived on this earth, we would all be a lot better off. *Pace* over much-loved "cowboy philosopher," we are happy to report that his advice was not followed by the theologians who met recently in St. Louis, Mo. for the twenty-fourth annual convention of The Mariology Society of America.<sup>1</sup> It seemed to be their conviction that the question concerning the mode of the Savior's entrance into this world is too paramount to be shunted aside, particularly whenever the teaching of divine revelation on the subject is openly challenged by influential scholars, as happens to be the case at the present time. Christ's virginal conception, then, and its various significant implication were the theme which dominated virtually every discussion during the two-day meeting.

The first general assembly opened at ten o'clock in the morning with a warm official welcome by His Eminence, John J. Cardinal Carberry, Archbishop of St. Louis, Mo. under whose gracious auspices the convention was being held. In the course of his brief talk, the Cardinal, whose genuine enthusiasm for any and everything Marian is well known, recalled his past close connection with our organization, and promised to continue following our activities with unflagging interest. Without mentioning any names, he alluded to the current debate on Mary's virginity occasioned by Father Raymond Brown, S.S., and he deplored the fact that this fundamental dogma was being questioned and even denied by some Catholic writers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Held at the Sheraton-Jefferson Hotel, January 3 and 4, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> For the record, the dogma is denied by the following "Catholics:"

The presidential address, a distinctive feature of our national conventions since 1961, was given this year by Father Charles W. Neumann, professor of theology at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Leaving the *ex professo* treatment of the virginal conception to other speakers on the program, the Marianist savant preferred to enlighten his audience with a rather detailed account of The Mariological Society's planned activities in connection with the forthcoming Marian Pastoral of the American hierarchy. A second section of his talk was devoted to a consideration of Our Blessed Lady as our model and intercessor. This, Father Neumann pointed out, would keep our vision open to a broader panorama. If we must indulge in controversy, so be it; but controversy should not deprive us of enjoying the full beauty of her in whose cause the contest is joined—or better still, "the full beauty of the mystery of Christ into which she was taken as Virgin Mother and servant of the Lord."

Following Father Neumann at the podium, the Rev. Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, graduate professor of systematic theology at Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis, Mo. delivered a lecture entitled *The Virgin Birth Controversy. A Lutheran's Reactions*. Our Mariological Society was already aware of Prof. Piepkorn's vast erudition, having been privileged to hear him during the 1967 convention in North Palm

Breckelmans, Döring, Evely, Halbfas, Groenendij, and Van Kilsdonk. It is regarded as an "open question" by Bless, Schillebeeckx, Schoonenberg—all Catholics. For more detailed information cf. the truly masterful articles by Father J. M. Alonso, C.M.F., *Cuestiones actuales. I. La concepción virginal en autores protestantes*, in *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 21 (1971) 63-109; Idem, *La concepción virginal entre católicos*, *ibid.* 257-302; Alonso-Schoonenberg, *La concepción virginal de Jesús. ¿Historia o leyenda? Un diálogo teológico*, *ibid.* 161-216. For the views of Father Raymond E. Brown, S.S. who depends heavily on Schoonenberg, cf. his article *The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus*, in *Theological Studies*, 33 (1972) 3-34. See likewise the unworthy remarks of Father George Hafner, suspended priest of the Diocese of Trenton, N.J. in *Commonweal*, Feb. 16 (1968) 592.



Beach, Florida. This time his theme was more specific and limited, but his treatment of it revealed an equally broad familiarity with the relevant literature.

Were we to summarize his views (a tall order, considering the breadth of his dissertation), we would offer the following condensation: 1) No controversy is evident among contemporary American Lutherans; the vast majority accept it unquestioningly. 2) The official Liturgical and Symbolical Books, to which Lutherans are seriously committed, consistently affirm the dogma. 3) Lutheran theologians in the subsequent era of classic orthodoxy (1580-1713) not only accept the doctrine under discussion, but speculate on the various reasons why Christ should have been conceived virginally. 4) With the contemporary Lutheran systematicians and exegetes we come to a fairly wide spectrum of opinion, including that of Prenter who claims that it is possible to reject the virginal conception as a historical event without thereby denying that the conception itself was miraculous; also that of Cullman for whom the infancy narratives betray legendary motives; the hesitations of Reumann; the denials of Grundmann; the unqualified affirmations of Danker and others. 5) The unfortunate investigation at the Concordia Seminary (1972) based on charges that the professors were taking a "permissive" view concerning the Virgin Birth. It turned out that, upon close examination, all the professors firmly believed and taught the dogma. 6) The author concluded with a beautiful profession of personal faith in Mary's virginity. This last section deserves to be read *in toto*.

The main feature of the afternoon session was, of course, the eagerly-awaited address by the Rev. Dr. Herbert Richardson, Presbyterian professor of theology at the University of St. Michael's in Toronto, Canada. Offering us like the quintessence of his own theological reflections on the subject, the renowned speaker began by proposing that the virginal conception was a "theological necessity" when considered in its proper

inner-trinitarian perspective. Then he went on to suggest that the non-sexual procession of the Holy Spirit might well be the model for understanding the Savior's virginal conception, indeed the normative character for all human procreation. Finally, he discussed the virginal conception and the life of Mary as the paradigm case of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As can be easily seen, the Holy Spirit plays a decisive role throughout Prof. Richardson's paper. The Holy Spirit and Mary are two realities that can be understood only in close relationship to each other.

Obviously, a sketchy presentation like the above does not even begin to do justice to the dense pages of the lecture under discussion. The logical concatenation of ideas is such that one would have to expatiate on one in order to fully grasp the others. Frankly, the present writer was favorably impressed by not a few of Prof. Richardson's original insights, although we cannot but share some of Father Philip Donnelly's reservations especially concerning the novel terminology employed by the author to describe the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we should add, too, that we were pleasantly surprised by his allusions to Our Lady's intimate association with Christ's salvific mission—something rather unexpected from a Presbyterian theologian.

Having heard the views of a Lutheran and a Presbyterian, the delegates were given an opportunity to hear also the views of a Roman Catholic on the main theme of the meeting. The Rev. Msgr. Austin B. Vaughan, professor of systematic theology at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y., afforded that opportunity on the second day of the convention. His lecture was titled, *Reflections on the Virginal Conception Controversy*. Let us say it in all honesty that this paper turned out to be somewhat disappointing. Some observers qualified it as "too weak a presentation of the Catholic side;" others felt that it was "too sympathetic" to Father Brown's well-known article



on the subject.<sup>3</sup> In any event, we regret that we are unable to print the Monsignor's dissertation in our Proceedings, although our readers will get a glimpse of his position from the transcript of the lively discussion following the paper.

<sup>3</sup> Not so sympathetic to Brown's article were the following: Father Joseph S. Brusher, S.J., *Waffling Theologians: A Problem for the People of God*, in *The Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, Dec. 1972, 22-28; Thomas Comerford Lawler, *Some Observations on the Brown Article on the Virginal Conception of Jesus*, *ibid.* 61-66; Father Francis L. Filas, S.J., long review in *Cahiers de Joséphologie*, July-December, 1972, 288-293; Frank Morriss, *Church Dogma Not to Be Doubted*, in *The Florida Catholic*, Dec. 17, 1971. After Fathers Andrew Greeley and Brown had made a feeble effort to answer Morriss' excellent column, the latter ably defended himself in *Response to Doubt is not Study*, *ibid.* Feb. 11, 1972, p. 7. More recently Richard Biow entered the debate and castigated Morriss for daring to disagree with a prominent scholar like Brown (cf. *ibid.*, Jan. 12, 1973, p. 6). Mr. Biow asks, "What stand did the Vatican take on the Morriss-Brown controversy? ... The Vatican did two things: 1. Ignored Frank Morriss. 2. Appointed Father Brown to the Pontifical Biblical Commission. How clear a message do we need?" Concerning which, some personal observations: 1) Most of the heresiarchs in the history of the Church were "prominent scholars." 2) Morriss is more orthodox than many of our so-called "professional" theologians. At least he has never defended any of the Modernist propositions condemned by Pope St. Pius X. Can Mr. Biow say as much concerning Brown? 3) The word 'Vatican' used by Biow in the above paragraph is one of the most ambiguous in the ecclesiastical lexicon. If he means the Pope himself (as it seems) we may note the following: A) The Pope does not normally make these appointments himself; he merely approves of the choice made by a committee, just as Pope John approved the appointment of the later apostate priest Charles Davis as *peritus* of Vatican II, and just as Pope Paul approved the appointment to the *International Theological Commission* of several scholars who had openly challenged his encyclical *Humanae vitae*. Has the Pope perhaps wavered on the subject of birth control? Not if one judges from his repeated statements since the original document was promulgated. B) The Holy Father has more than once reproved those theologians who question Our Lady's virginity (cf. e.g. his address of Nov. 30, 1966; and more recently his direct intervention in the unfortunate Dutch Catechism affair, including a personal letter to Cardinal Alfrink on the subject. Cf. Alonso, *art. cit.*, p. 164). If, on the other hand, Mr. Biow identifies the 'Vatican' with the Biblical Commission, then the statement obviously lacks the impact it was intended to have among his readers. Besides, we have it on reliable authority that the selection of Brown by the Commission was made *prior* to his controversial lecture.

After the prolonged exchange occasioned by Msgr. Vaughan's lecture—with spirited interventions by Father William G. Most and Father J. B. Carol, O.F.M.—the delegates were given a well-deserved ten minute intermission, and immediately the floor was granted to Father Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm., professor of theology of the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. As in the past, Father Carroll reviewed the more important recent publications in the field of Mariology, always interjecting brief comments of his own which made the presentation highly interesting and lively; he is, admittedly a consummate master of this technique. A born orator, he can actually read a few pages off the telephone directory and make it sound as stirring as Cicero's *Pro Archia*! Father Theodore A. Koehler, S.M. who served as discussion leader, contributed a resumé of the latest convention of the French Mariological Society, in which he took a very active part himself.

The last item on the agenda was the business meeting. On behalf of the Nominating Committee, Father Arthur J. Weiler, C.S.B., submitted the names of two candidates for the Board of Directors, namely, Father Matthew F. Morry, O.P. (to be re-elected), and Msgr. Austin B. Vaughan to replace Father Eric May, O.F.M.Cap. Both received the unanimous support of the delegates present and were so confirmed by the President. The treasurer's report was then read by Father Neumann on behalf of Father James Forgac, O.S.B. who had to absent himself. The President also announced that the next annual convention of the Society would be held, *Deo volente*, at The Happy Dolphin Inn, St. Petersburg Beach, Florida, on Thursday and Friday, January 3 and 4, 1974. He then conveyed the group's sincerest thanks to the following: Cardinal Carberry for hosting our meeting; Cardinal Wright and Father Stanley Matuszewski, M.S. for their generosity toward the Society; the distinguished speakers for their scholarly dissertations; all those who with their presence enhanced the success of the convention. On behalf of Very Rev. L. Pelczynski, Father Neu-



mann invited the members of our Society to the solemn festivities with the Marian Fathers plan to hold in connection with their 300th anniversary next October. Before adjourning, the President addressed an earnest plea to the delegates present, urging them to recruit new members, especially as we approach the Silver Jubilee of our Society in 1974. Since there was no further business to be transacted, the President declared the convention adjourned at approximately twelve noon.

REV. J. B. CAROL, O.F.M.  
*Secretary*