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The Immaculate Conception and Mary's Death

FATHER JUNIPER B. CAROL, O.F.M.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Father Juniper B. Carol, O.F.M., America's foremost Mariologist, was born in Cardenas, Cuba, and educated in Havana, Washington, and Rome, where he received his doctorate in sacred theology in 1950. He was ordained to the priesthood as a member of the Order of Friars Minor in 1935 and has been on the faculties of Siena College and St. Bonaventure University.

In 1949 Father Carol founded the now flourishing Mariological Society of America and served as its president for five years. He is now secretary of the organization and edits the society's publication *Marian Studies*. In 1950 he was the recipient of the Marianist Award, given each year by the University of Dayton for outstanding work in promoting the glory of Mary.

At present, besides lecturing and teaching, Father Carol is editing a three volume Mariology by American scholars. His own best known work is *De Coredemptione Beatae Mariae Virginis*, a Latin work of some six hundred pages which presents an exhaustive treatment of Mary's part in the Redemption. "The Immaculate Conception and Mary's Death" was read as a paper at second Marian Institute sponsored by the Marian Library in June, 1954.

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The Immaculate Conception and Mary's Death

FATHER JUNIPER B. CAROL, O.F.M.

Among the numerous questions claiming the attention of Catholic theologians in recent years, perhaps none has been the object of a more animated debate than the one relative to Our Lady's death. Several factors have contributed to bring this problem to the fore particularly within the last century, but the most important was undoubtedly the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX in 1854. The centennial of this memorable pronouncement, which the Catholic world is now commemorating, plus the later definition of Mary's Assumption in 1950, have furnished students of the sacred sciences with a golden opportunity to ventilate again this question with new verve and enthusiasm.

It is easily recognized by all that the point under discussion is far from being as simple as it might appear on the surface. It is, rather, a difficult and complex problem; one which has made taxing demands on the talent and learning of our most able scholars because it has a definite bearing on some rather intricate and highly technical phases of the science of theology.

The question of Mary's death may be approached and studied from several angles (for example, the teaching of the Magisterium, the data furnished by Sacred Scripture or Tradition etc.), but the scope of this paper has been purposely restricted to one specific angle, namely, that of the Immaculate Conception. Briefly and clearly stated, the central point around which our discussion revolves is this: did the Immaculate Conception confer on Our Lady a right to bodily immortality? If so, did Our Lady surrender that right, or did she actually escape death?

In answer to these questions several opinions are now being circulated by those who have made a serious study of the problem. They may be reduced to the four following groups:

(A) The first group holds that Our Blessed Lady was immortal both de jure and de facto. In other words, she had a right to escape death and actually escaped it. This view is defended by a few, though learned, modern theologians, among whom we may mention D. Arnaldi, T. Gallus and G. M. Roschini. (1)

(B) The second group (which partially coincides with the first) holds that, while Our Lady did have a right to immortality, she nevertheless willingly surrendered it and actually died. This opinion is supported by not a few distinguished scholars, such as Cardinal Lepicier, J.M. Bover, A. O'Connell, C. Koser and B. Kloppenburg. (2)

(C) The third group (diametrically opposed to the first) contends that
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Our Blessed Lady not only actually died, but that she never had a right to be exempt from the law of death. This view, which is shared by the vast majority of Catholic theologians, has been vigorously championed in recent years by C. Balic, J. F. Bonnefoy, E. Sauras and several others. (3)

(D) The fourth opinion, recently introduced by A. Mancini, holds that Our Blessed Lady, while subject to the law of death, nevertheless did not actually die in the proper sense of the word. There was no separation of the soul from the body; there was merely a transition from a lower to a higher form of life. (4)

It is important to note that each of the above opinions has a twofold aspect, or if you will, two elements which are totally different, namely: the quae\stio juris and the quae\stio facti. Being or not being subject to a law, and fulfilling or not fulfilling that law are two entirely different things, although closely connected in the concrete order.

It is hardly necessary to remark at this point that the solution to the problem being debated among these various groups depends largely, if not wholly, on one's personal views concerning the nature of the nexus between sin and death on the one hand, and between immunity from sin and immortality on the other. It is precisely the nature of that nexus that will furnish the key to the settlement of the controversy. This seems to be, in the last analysis, the only possible approach to the problem, at least from a speculative point of view. All other issues may be considered "side-issues" and will ultimately lead us back to the fundamental question which remains: what is the nature of the nexus between sin and death? And it stands to reason that since there is no agreement among theologians on this primary point, there can be no agreement either on the related question of Mary's death or immortality.

Let us now proceed to outline briefly the arguments advanced by the various groups in favor of their respective thesis. Since the fourth opinion has not made much of an impression among theologians, we may be permitted to pass it over in silence and concentrate on the remaining three.

One of the most ardent exponents of the first opinion is the very Reverend Gabriel M. Roschini, O.S.M., whose competence as a Mariologist is known the world over. We summarize his views as expressed in his most recent book La Madonna nella fede e la teologia. (5) The author argues as follows: In the present order of things, death is the penal consequence of sin. That much is clear from Sacred Scripture (Gen. 2, 17; Rom. 5, 12). Where there is no guilt of sin, there can be no punishment for sin. Now, since Our Blessed Lady was completely preserved from
the guilt of original sin by reason of her Immaculate Conception, it follows logically that she must have been preserved also from the necessity of incurring the punishment of sin, namely, death. Hence Mary's immortality is not only a dogmatic fact, but it is also formally implicitly revealed in the dogma of her Immaculate Conception. (6) The author further corroborates his reasoning by appealing to a canon of the Second Council of Orange (529) according to which, if anyone claims that "(corporal) death alone, which is the punishment of sin, and not sin itself... was transmitted through one man to the entire human race, he attributes an injustice to God..." (7) Moreover, continues the author, in his encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950) Our Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, expressly states that, owing to the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady was not subject to the law of remaining in the corruption of the grave like the rest of men. From this we may logically infer that the privilege of the Immaculate Conception gave Our Lady a right to immortality and preserved her from actually dying. (8)

The theologians of the second group heartily agree with the first claim made by Roschini, but emphatically reject the second. Impressed by the tremendous weight of Tradition in favor of Mary's death, these men naturally refuse to deny that fact. On the other hand, they are impressed also by the canon of the Second Council of Orange relative to the nexus between original sin and the general law of death. Hence, they adopt a middle position which may be summarized as follows: The Immaculate Conception did confer on Our Lady a right (or quasi right) not to die; her preservation from original sin automatically placed her outside the universal law of death. Nevertheless, she actually underwent death, not as a result of a sin she did not personally contract, but for reasons of a higher order, namely, to fulfill her mission as Co-redemptrix of the human race. (9)

As indicated above, the theologians of the third group in this controversy decidedly reject the twofold claim made by the first group. Since this happens to be the view of our personal preference (at least tentatively) we may be permitted to enlarge somewhat on it. In our opinion, no amount of speculative reasoning can rule out the fact of Mary's death which has been universally believed in the Catholic Church for so many centuries. As to the so-called right to immortality, we feel that it has never been proved convincingly. How do we attempt to establish our case? In order to follow the line of reasoning, we must bear in mind the basic argument brought forth by the adversaries. The latter claim, as you recall, that death is the necessary effect of original sin personally contracted and that, since Our Lady was conceived without original sin, she was, therefore, immortal *de jure*; and since there was no suf-
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ficient reason for her giving up that right, she was immortal also de facto.

We begin by pointing out that from the Immaculate Conception one may infer only one thing, namely, that Mary's death could not have been in punishment for original sin personally contracted; one may not infer, in good logic, that Mary was not subject to death and actually died for some other reason. (10) For example, the single fact that Our Lady received from her parents a human body which was inherently mortal may be rightly considered a sufficient reason postulating her death. Let us elaborate further on this premise which embodies the very antithesis of the Roschini theory.

By its very nature the human body is, and always has been, subject to the law of death. The scientific reason for this is that the human body, in its essential structure, is an organic composite of heterogeneous elements which, obeying chemico-biological laws, automatically tend to dissolution. Almighty God being the Author of nature may, of course, if He so desires, suspend the fulfillment of the laws of nature by a special divine intervention. In this event the immortality of the human body would be, obviously, a gratuitous gift of God and never an exigency of nature as such. (11)

As a matter of fact, Almighty God did not leave man in a purely natural order. In His infinite goodness and liberality He raised man to a higher sphere, to an order above nature, by placing him from the very beginning in what is technically known as the state of original justice. Essentially, this state of original justice consisted in the supernatural gift of sanctifying grace and the consequent right to the beatific vision; to this God had de facto attached the preternatural gifts, namely: immunity from concupiscence, immunity from ignorance, immunity from suffering and immunity from death. All these preternatural gifts (and therefore the gift of immortality) were to be enjoyed not only by Adam himself, but also by all his descendants on condition that Adam remain faithful to God's command. Unfortunately, Adam did sin and God withdrew these gifts from him and from his posterity. Hence, in the present order of things, if we have concupiscence, ignorance, suffering and death, we owe it to the original prevarication of our first parent.

Now the troublesome question returns: If Mary was absolutely immune from original sin, why should she be deprived of the preternatural gifts? Why should she be subject to suffering and death? Does not the Immaculate Conception automatically remove from Mary the necessity of dying?

The representatives of the third theory insist that the Immaculate Con-
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did not confer on Our Lady any right to the preternatural gifts. And why not? Because the preternatural gifts were not intrinsically and essentially part of the original grace bestowed by God upon Adam. They were connected, to be sure, but only extrinsically, by a positive act of the divine will. Hence, Our Lady could very well receive the supernatural gifts (sanctifying grace and the right to heaven) without receiving likewise the preternatural gifts, among which is the gift of immortality. (12)

At this point the Roschini group interjects that, whether the nexus between the supernatural and preternatural gifts be intrinsic or extrinsic, the fact remains that, in the present historical order, death is the effect of sin personally contracted. Since Mary was free from the cause, she should be free from the effect also.

To the above objection one may counter that death is not, strictly speaking, the “effect” of Adam’s sin, but rather its penalty and punishment, which is not the same thing. In other words, sin does not, of itself and by its very nature, produce death. Death is connected with sin by an act of God’s will and disposition. Nor will it help to say that, in the beginning, Adam’s immortality was the effect of his original grace and that, since Mary was never deprived of that grace, she, too, should be immortal. The fact is that Adam’s immortality was granted him in connection with, but not as an effect of, his original grace. If immortality were the necessary effect of grace, then surely Christ Himself would have been immortal, for He possessed grace in a most eminent degree. Yet we know that Christ not only died, but that His death was natural; it was violent, to be sure, as far as extrinsic circumstances were concerned, but it was natural nevertheless, as regards its intrinsic causes. (13)

Furthermore, even in the hypothesis that Adam’s immortality had been a necessary effect of his original grace, it still would not follow that Our Lady’s grace conferred a similar prerogative on her. The reason is that, as Pius XI once pointed out, the grace Our Lady received at the time of her conception, although unique and far surpassing the grace of all others in excellence, was not a grace of the order of creation (such as Adam received), “but a grace of Redemption which did not confer on her a true and proper immortality”. (14)

Let us now turn to one of the strongest arguments adduced in favor of Mary’s immortality, namely, the decree of the Second Council of Orange in 529. The canon in question reads: “Si quis soli Adae praevari-cationem suam, non et ejus propagini asserit nocuisse, certe mortem tantum corporis, quae poena peccati est, non autem et peccatum, quod mors est animae, per unum hominem in omne genus humanum transiisse testatur, injustitiam Deo dabit, contradicens Apostolo dicenti: Per
A twofold solution may be offered in this connection. In the first place, the words of the canon “injustitiam Deo dabit” need not be translated as “will attribute an injustice to God”. It is true that the verb “dare” has at times the meaning of attributing or imputing, but in that case it is used with two datives; in the canon mentioned it is used with an accusative and dative. Hence it seems that the conciliar expression should be translated rather as “will do an injury to God” or “will offend God”. If so, the meaning of the canon would be this: those who claim that Adam’s children inherit from their first parent death only (without original sin), do an injury to God because they contradict the Apostle’s teaching that “by one man sin entered into this world and by sin death.” (16) The canon, therefore, does not authorize us to conclude that the nexus between the preternatural gifts and freedom from original sin is such that God would be unjust were He to separate the two in a specific case and for reasons known to Himself.

Another possible solution to the difficulty may be stated as follows: Even in the hypothesis that the disputed words of the canon should be translated as “attributing an injustice to God” it does not follow that the right to immortality is necessarily connected with innocence. The reason is obvious. According to the Council we would attribute an injustice to God if we supposed that He inflicted death as a punishment for personal sin on an individual who had never contracted sin. The Council does not say that God would be unjust if He were to allow an innocent individual to die not in punishment for sin, but for some other reason extrinsic to sin. Besides, we must bear in mind that the Council is here dealing with the specific, concrete and universal law concerning the transmission of sin and death, as denied by the Pelagian heresy. It does not visualize possible exceptions, such as the unique case of Our Blessed Lady. The Council also states emphatically that the sin of Adam was inherited by the entire human race; and yet we know now that Our Lady was actually an exception to that general law.

This position seems to be further strengthened by a decision of the Council of Trent relative to the effects of the sacrament of Baptism. According to the conciliar decree, this sacrament so thoroughly wipes away the stain of original sin and all its punishments from the soul of the
baptized, that no trace of the previous curse remains and the soul is left utterly pure and immaculate in the sight of God. (17) And yet daily experience shows that many children suffer and die, even while in possession of this baptismal grace. Are they the victims of an injustice? Not at all. They suffer and die, not in punishment for sin, but simply because they do not enjoy the preternatural gifts to which they had no right anyway.

The above, then, is a concise and objective presentation of the various opinions concerning Our Lady's death and immortality viewed only in their relation to her Immaculate Conception. As we pointed out before, the problem could have been approached and studied also from several other angles, but the scope of our paper was purposely restricted to this fundamental issue. To summarize now our personal views: As to the question of Mary's actual death, we do not see how it can be doubted, much less denied, considering that it has been believed and taught in the Catholic Church for so many centuries by the vast majority of theologians. (18) However, since the Church herself allows free discussion on this point, we would abstain from censuring those who express a different opinion. As regards the so-called "right to immortality" on the part of Mary, we feel that none of the arguments so far advanced in its favor are decisive and apodictic, although they are much stronger than the arguments to prove that Our Lady did not actually die. At any rate, if it is ever conclusively established that the Immaculate Conception did confer on Our Lady a right to immortality, then it seems that the only plausible explanation of her actual death would be her mission as Coredemptrix of the human race. (19)

Which of these conflicting views is more likely to triumph in the end? At this stage of the discussion it is difficult to forecast with certainty what future developments will bring. All things considered, the "traditional" view seems to be destined for final victory. But regardless of the ultimate outcome, we feel that this whole controversy has not been a vain and fruitless diatribe among professionals. It has had many rewarding points. For one thing, it has led Mariologists to a deeper and more penetrating analysis of several other phases of the sacred sciences, heretofore somewhat neglected, and in this sense it has proved quite profitable to all concerned.

FOOTNOTES


12. Actually, Our Blessed Lady was endowed with immunity from concupiscence and, in a manner consonant with the condition, immunity from ignorance. But these privileges were conferred on her as most fitting to her exalted dignity as the Mother of God, not because she had a right to the preternatural gifts. Cf. A. Kippes, O.M.I., The Immaculate Conception and the Preternatural Gifts, in Marian Studies, vol. 5, 1954, pp. 186-199.


15. D. B. 175.


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