Ambrose and Karl Rahner: Reflections on the "Virginitas in Partu"

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The doctrine which teaches that the Mother of God remained virginally and physically integral during the birth of her Son has always been, for some, one of the more perplexing and even "embarrassing" Christian beliefs. Even among Catholic theologians, the present century has witnessed efforts to re-interpret or re-read the meaning of the doctrine. The most significant attempt in this regard was the work, in 1952, by the Austrian priest Albert Mitterer who, while maintaining the miraculous nature of Mary's virginity "before, during, and after" the birth of Christ, thought that biological integrity was not to be considered a necessary element of the doctrine and held that the birth process was, in itself (though not in its origins or causes or significance), natural.

The thesis of Mitterer won little support at the time, and the discussion which his views provoked gradually subsided, especially after a *Monitum* of July, 1960, from the Holy Office warned against the danger of irreverence toward Our Lady to which such discussion easily led. Subsequent events, especially the temporary decline in Marian devotion and studies, as well as the widespread theological turmoil during the period immediately following the Second Vatican Council, effectively ended much consideration of the issue. As we will see, even the article on the matter by Karl Rahner in 1960 evoked little response.

Recently, however, the issue has surfaced, due to the reflections of the German theologian Walter Kasper (now bishop of Rottenburg).

In 1985, the Bishops Conference of Germany approved and published a catechism which was largely drafted by Fr. Kasper; it was published in English in 1987 as *The*
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Church's Confession of Faith: A Catholic Catechism for Adults. On the virginitas in partu the Catechism says the following:

Unfortunately, the dogma of the virginity during birth, in connection with certain apocryphal writings, has often given rise to inappropriate considerations about the nature of Jesus' birth. By this arises a misunderstanding of the deep meaning of this declaration for salvation history. According to Genesis 3:16, the painful bearing of children is a sign of deep disturbance connected with life itself and is a consequence of original sin. Now that new life appears and redemption from original sin begins, life no longer comes into the world under the sign of death and its harbinger, pain. Creation, once torn, now becomes whole and intact again. It was not the physiological event of birth that was different; rather, the virgin birth was a sign of man's being saved and healed through a personal cooperation. So the tradition records Mary's joy at the birth of her Son, ...

The essential words in the catechism's remarks are, I think, "It was not the physiological event of birth that was different." Of themselves, these words would seem to be saying that the doctrine is not speaking of biological integrity. On the other hand, they can be read as intending no more than a correct effort to stress the deeper significance of the virginal birth, and the preceding sentence ("... life no longer comes into the world under the sign of death and its harbinger, pain") can readily be interpreted as meaning that Mary was free of pain in giving birth, a corollary often associated in the traditional understanding of the mystery with her biological integrity. As a result there is, it would seem, a certain ambiguity in what the German catechism is teaching on this matter.

Kasper himself returned to the theme in a letter printed in Communio. The point of discussion in the letter is basically the virginal conception of Jesus. In mentioning the virginal birth, Kasper cites the above passage from the German Catechism, agreeing with it, stating that we must view the mystery of Mary's virginity (before, during and after birth) within a "holistic understanding of Mary as the prophetess." He then writes:

Such holistic understanding also prohibits fixing in detail the physiological aspects of Mary's virginity at Christ's birth (virginitas in partu). In the fourth volume of his Schriften, Karl Rahner has already said all that is necessary on this subject, and as far as I can ascertain, Catholic theology has accepted it without contradiction. ... On their own, some Church Fathers and theologians have proposed to us some strange and abstruse speculations on the subject. However, no Catholic Christian is obliged to accept them. One is rather allowed to assume that "It was not the physiological

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2 The Church's Confession of Faith: A Catholic Catechism for Adults (Ignatius Press, 1987). Kasper's role in preparing the catechism is explicitly mentioned in the Foreword by Cardinal Höfner (p. 12).
3 Ibid., p. 148.
event of birth that was different; rather, the Virgin Birth was a sign of man's being saved and healed through a personal cooperation.\textsuperscript{5}

Noteworthy in this statement is the appeal to the position of Karl Rahner as being acceptable and uncontroverted. The article by Rahner is cautious, carefully nuanced, and refrains from categorical statements. It does, however, explicitly call into question the biological integrity of Mary during and after birth.

..., the question arises once more: what is really included in the concept of 'bodily integrity' and what does it imply? If it is considered as a revealed concept, anterior to the individual details, it will be difficult to say what it really implies and whether the usual conclusions drawn from it really follow. Is, for instance, the normal expansion of the genital passages in a completely healthy birth to be considered a breach of 'bodily integrity'? Will anyone have the courage to maintain this categorically? Are any of the processes of normal birth to be placed under the rubric of 'injury' or 'damage' (\textit{corruptio})?\textsuperscript{6}

..., we must point out that the precise content of the \textit{virginitas in partu} which is perhaps included in the title still remains an open question. It is true that the Synod of Milan, under St. Ambrose, also condemned Jovinian for denying the virginal birth of Christ, which St. Ambrose certainly took to be 'the retention of the virginal bars in the genital parts'. But this is only a local synod, and it would be difficult to prove that the condemnation of Jovinian amounts to a positive sanction of everything that was in the mind of his opponent, St. Ambrose, on this matter.\textsuperscript{7}

With his usual perspicacity Rahner saw that Ambrose's understanding of the \textit{virginitas in partu} explicitly included the notion of biological integrity (he cites Ambrose, \textit{De institut. virg.}, cap 8, 52 [PL 16, 320]). Rahner himself was unwilling to view this as a necessary part of the doctrine as taught by the Church, although he also saw — at least by implication — that Ambrose's understanding was at least part of the context of the dispute and the definition of the synod of Milan. Whether Kasper is concurring with Rahner in this questioning of the Ambrosian (and the overwhelming previous and subsequent patristic writing on the matter) interpretation of the doctrine I am not certain. Even at the time of its publication there were those who interpreted the Rahner article as disagreeing with Mitterer and defending a miraculous birth.\textsuperscript{8} However, what was miraculous for Rahner did not include the specifi-

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 265.


\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 138.

\textsuperscript{8} Cf., for example, E. R. Carroll, "The Theological Significance of Mary's Virginity," \textit{Marian Studies} 13 (1962): 122-151. Carroll writes: "Karl Rahner also takes exception to Mitterer and defends virginity \textit{in partu} as miraculous. Rahner argues that the birth of Christ, no less than his conception, is for Mother and Son beyond the ordinary order of human origins since the fall. He sees the child-bearing of Christ as the counterpart to the sorrowful parturition of Gen. 3,16. The birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary is the prototype of the spiritual birth of us all" (pp.132-133, n. 22). Carroll himself defends Ambrose (p. 131).
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cally biological aspects which Ambrose saw as part of the mystery. Thus, in respect
to biological or bodily or physical integrity – although he does it less categorically
and in the form of questioning, not asserting – Rahner’s position is not materially
different from that proposed by Mitterer.

It is not quite accurate to say that Rahner’s position was accepted “without
contradiction.” The noted Marian scholar, J. Aldama, writing in 1962 a detailed
study of the definition of the virginitas in partu in the Lateran Synod of 649, con­
cluded that biological integrity was to be included in what the Church was teaching.9
Aldama, however, made no direct reference to the Rahner article. The fine study by
E. R. Carroll, already mentioned, defends Ambrose, noting that “It is worth observ­
ing, because of over-simplifications, that the strongest advocates of virginity in partu,
such as St. Ambrose, are also very anti-Docetist.”10 René Laurentin, writing
in 1968, defends the traditional and Ambrosian view without entering into physiologi­
cal detail, but makes no reference to the Rahner article.11 Rev. William Smith, in
1980, after the Second Vatican Council, reviewed the issue and explicitly rejected –
on liturgical and contextual grounds – the interpretation given by Rahner.12 A more
recent book by Gonzalo Gironés also defends the traditional doctrine.13 Only more
recently has a Marian scholar called into question the biological integrity of Mary as
expressed by the mystery of the virginitas in partu. Domiciano Fernández, C.M.F.,
while defending the virginal conception, has written:

The false, ancient ideas about blood, sex and childbirth brought it about that one
would speak of a miraculous birth for the sake of the dignity of the Savior and the

10 Carroll, “Theological Significance,” p. 131. We do not have the opportunity because of the
length of this paper to deal with the question of the Docetist associations found at times in the
defenders of the virginitas in partu. Fr. Carroll’s acute and fully accurate observation, however, is
sufficient for the moment to indicate that not all the defenders of the doctrine were Docetist in
outlook. Karl Rahner’s remark on the docetic nature of the Odes of Solomon (Theological Investiga­
tions, 4:149) is most doubtful. Moreover, even he admits that, apart from the reference to the
virginitas in partu, Ode 19 is an “otherwise harmless text” (ibid., n. 50).

As is well known, the first references to the virginitas in partu appear in the apocryphal literature of
the first and early-second centuries. We have passed the age, however, which simply dismissed the
doctrinal value of such non-canonical writings. Frequently these writings were simply works of
devotion and piety which, for all their lack of theological and historical acumen, are a witness to
what early Christians believed. While requiring careful evaluation in each case, they must be studied
as testifying to the developing Tradition.
12 W. B. Smith, “The Theology of the Virginity in partu and its Consequences for the Church’s
13 Gonzalo Gironés, La humanidad salvada y salvadora. Tratado dogmático de la Madre de Cristo, 2d
sanctity and purity of Mary. Today this mentality has been overcome.... Personally, I think that there are no reasons to deny to Mary the full maternal function nor to suppose in Jesus from the beginning the characteristics of a glorified humanity. As already noted, explicit treatment of the mystery has been rare since 1960. Nonetheless, what little ex professo treatment there has been indicates more disagreement than agreement with Rahner’s position. The question about numbers of theologians agreeing or disagreeing with Rahner’s position is, of course, of only relative and historical importance. What must be decisive are the weight of the Tradition, the teaching of the Church, and the value of the intrinsic arguments set forth by Rahner and those who would adopt his views.

Rahner’s basic argumentation was that, in teaching the virginitas in partu, the Church did not commit herself to the specifics of physical integrity as defended by Ambrose (as well as Athanasius, Chrysostom, Proclus, Hesychius, Cyril, Hilary, Zeno, Jerome, Augustine, Rufinus, Gaudentius, Maximus and Gregory the Great—all of them cited correctly by Rahner). Now it is true that, when she teaches or reaffirms a doctrine which has been challenged, the Church does not always include all the specifics and even less often the theological argumentation of those who have defended the doctrine. Nonetheless, the context is important for understanding what the Church means by any given doctrine. Failure to understand the context or a wholesale dismissal of the context can lead only to a theology of abstract theorems, or a theology of non-contextual propositions (the so-called “Denzinger theology” often criticized by Rahner himself). If that is so, then it is most difficult to envision the teachings at Milan and the Lateran in 649 as not intending to include the biological integrity spoken of so clearly by Ambrose. What is more to the point, however, is the most recent reaffirmation by the Church of the doctrine of the virginitas in partu, and this time not by a local Synod, whether of Milan or Rome, but of an ecumenical council. For Vatican Council II has taught the doctrine of Mary’s virginity during and after birth in Lumen gentium, 57:

Moreover, this union of the Mother with her Son in the work of salvation is manifested from the time of the virginal conception of Christ until His death.... [it was

14 Domiciano Fernández, C.M.F., “Jesús, el hijo de José,” Ephemeres Mariologicae 38, 3-4 (1988): 395; cf. idem, p. 486. Fernández’ remarks about Mary’s “full maternal function” hark back to remarks made by Mitterer, Rahner and others which imply that something would have been lacking to Mary’s true motherhood had she not experienced birth pangs, physical changes, etc., like other women. Attractive at first sight, such reflections carry with them strange consequences, for they make the quality of motherhood dependent, at least in part, on what happens in the delivery room. Are we to say that a woman whose labor is protracted and anguished is more a mother than the woman who delivers with relative ease?

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manifested] at the nativity... when the Mother of God joyfully showed to the shepherds and Magi her firstborn Son, who did not diminish but sanctified her virginal integrity.

What the Council is teaching is clear in part from the words of the official relatio explaining the text:

It is affirmed in liturgical and traditional words that the birth of Jesus was virginal. It appears to the Doctrinal Commission that this is sufficient and sufficiently clear. 16

The meaning of the text is further clarified by the official footnote. Note ten of Chapter Eight of Lumen gentium cites the teaching of canon three of the Lateran Synod of 649, Pope Leo's Tome to Flavian, the Council of Chalcedon, and, most significantly, the famous text of St. Ambrose which, in the part cited by Vatican II, reads:

"This door will be closed and it will not be opened." This good door is Mary, who was closed and was not opened. Christ passed through her but did not open her.... There is a door of the womb, although it is not always closed; indeed only one was able to remain closed, she through whom the virgin's offspring came forth without loss of genital intactness (sine dispendio claustrorum genitalium virginis partus exiuit). ... "This door will be closed," ... that is, closed before and after the passage of the Lord. 17

It is, of course, the very citation referred to by Karl Rahner in his remarks on the Synod of Milan. He saw clearly the differences between what he was proposing and what was proposed by Ambrose. Since Rahner wrote, however, and despite the many possibilities of choosing another patristic text which would be more ambiguous in its explanation of the doctrine of the virginitas in partu, an ecumenical council has chosen the clarity of the Ambrosian text to indicate what the Church intends when she proclaims the doctrine of the virgin birth. Any future effort to interpret the mystery in a merely religious or spiritualizing sense must, of theological necessity, deal with the context in which Vatican II has reaffirmed the doctrine. The mystery of the virgin birth must be seen as teaching, among other elements, a biological or bodily integrity of the Mother of God, a physical sign of her total spiritual virginity.

Such biological integrity is not to be interpreted as a lessening of the maternal functions of Mary. It is clearly taught that "she brought forth her firstborn Son" (Lk. 2:6); she delivered Him as a mother does, but in a way which miraculously left her bodily intact, just as her own conception and birth had delivered her into our fallen world spiritually intact.

17 LG, Ch. 8, n. 10, citing St. Ambrose, "On the Instruction of a Virgin," PL 16, 320.
Undoubtedly, the virgin birth is a salvific doctrine, revealed by God to teach us—as all revelation does—something about Himself and about His ways with creation. Part of what is being taught here surely must include His love for material creation and the delicacy with which the Creator—unlike ourselves at times—deals with the matter which He has created and which He has everlastingly united to Himself as His flesh.

The virgin birth is, perhaps preeminently, a doctrine about the new creation, about the universe as it will be when the heavens and earth are transformed, restored to what He intended them to be before the creation was deformed by sin (cf. I Cor. 7:31 and Gaudium et spes, 39) and we were changed for the worse in body and soul by our fall (cf. Denzinger-Schönmetzer, 371, 1511). In beginning that new creation, the Creator decided that Mary would remain spiritually and bodily what soul and body were like as they came originally from His hands, and she would remain thus as a sign of what the universe would be restored to on the Day of the Lord. Her integrity and beauty, spiritual and physical, is the Artist’s masterpiece, and it is not ours to say He should have done it differently.

In dealing with her as He has, the Lord Himself has employed the via pulchritudinis in respect to the Virgin-Mother. As a theological approach by which to understand the role and prerogatives of Mary, the way of beauty has been dear to Fr. Theodore Koehler and mentioned by him often to the members of the Mariological Society of America. As this volume honors him, it is my own personal pleasure to thank him for his manifold contributions to presenting the saving truth about Mary in all its beauty and integrity.