

1-15-1963

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### Recommended Citation

Agius, Ambrose (1963) "The Problem of Mary's Holiness in the First Christian Centuries," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 14, Article 6, Pages 41-61.

Available at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies/vol14/iss1/6](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol14/iss1/6)

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## THE PROBLEM OF MARY'S HOLINESS IN THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CENTURIES

In this paper we are not concerned with the orderly marshalling and unfolding of patristic ideas on the Mother of God up to the council of Ephesus (431). That has already been done, with expert finality, by Canon Jouassard and Father Burghardt.<sup>1</sup>

Here we are concerned with the passages in which notable figures, and especially Origen, Basil, Cyril of Alexandria and John Chrysostom, utter some strictures on the Blessed Mother implying sin, or at least weakness, in her conduct on various occasions. How far should we allow ourselves to be disturbed by these passages, which have furnished ammunition for the enemies of the Church, and of Our Lady, over many years? This we shall now discuss.

Our title actually resolves itself into the problem of the acceptance or non-acceptance of Mary's holiness in the first Christian centuries.

Very briefly, the apparent non-acceptance of Mary's holiness by distinguished publicists is to be found in professional lectures on

\* The following authorities may be consulted with advantage: P. M. Frua, O.S.M., *L'immacolata Concezione e S. Agostino* (Saluzzo, 1960); B. Przybylski, O.P., *De mariologia Sancti Irenaei Lugdunensis...* (Rome, 1937); C. Vagaggini, O.S.B., *Maria nelle opere di Origene* (Rome, 1942); A. Eberle, *Die Mariologie des hl. Cyrillus von Alexandrien* (Freiburg, 1921); S. S. Fedyniak, O.S.B.M., *Mariologia apud P.P. Orientales...* (2nd ed., Rome, 1958); Ph. Friedrich, *Die Mariologie des hl. Augustinus* (Cologne, 1907); A. Pagnamenta, *La mariologia di S. Ambrogio* (Milan, 1932).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Jouassard, *Marie à travers la patristique: maternité divine, virginité sainteté*, in *Maria. Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge*, ed. H. du Manoir, S.J., I (Paris, 1949) 71-157; Id., *Le problème de la sainté de Marie chez les Pères*, in *BSFEM* (1947) 10-31; W.J. Burghardt, S.J., *Mary in Western Patristic Thought*, in *Mariology*, ed. J.B. Carol, O.F.M., I (Milwaukee, 1955) 110-117; Id., *Mary in Eastern Patristic Thought*, *ibid.* 2 (1957) 88-100.

Scripture, quite often mere guess-work and unwarranted by the text or just the echo of an encrusted literary tradition. We find also a glimpse of prejudice and invalid argument *a fortiori*. Usually the speaker is not concerned with Mary's holiness at all, but with some other subject then under discussion. And sometimes we have to say what the editors of Tertullian remark in a footnote to the *Migne Patrology*: "Dicendum est hic, ut quandoque alias, dormitasse bonum Tertullianum."<sup>2</sup> Or, as we say, "Even Homer nods." And Shakespeare too.

Before producing textual examples, we may outline the development of the recognition of Mary's holiness from the beginning. The New Testament gives us the Divine Maternity and the Virginité *ante partum*. Sub-apostolic times produced, in Justin and Irenaeus, the notion of Mary as the Second Eve, though its implications were only gradually understood. But the moral grandeur of Mary's close association with God were appreciated very early. Attention on Mary as Mother of the Savior was focussed successively by the early heresies and their refutation. Even the unreliable Apocrypha showed the Christian mind obsessed by her. Then, with Athanasius and the rise of asceticism, Mary is proclaimed as the inspiration and model of virgins. The implications of virginité *in partu* and *post partum* were worked out. And, to the ascetics, virginité and sanctity were almost interchangeable terms. Then came Ambrose with his unforgettable presentation of the Blessed Mother, unique in her own splendor: "Quid splendidius ea quam Splendor elegit?"<sup>3</sup> and as the model of virgins and indeed the pattern of every virtue.<sup>4</sup> This is the complete and flawless Mary: "Virgo per gratiam ab omni intergra labe peccati."<sup>5</sup> The mistakes and blunderings of previous commentary

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, cp. 7; *PL* 2, 767, note 2.

<sup>3</sup> St. Ambrose, *De virginibus*, 22, 7; *PL* 16, 220B. Cf. A. Agius, O.S.B., *St. Ambrose and Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, in *DR* 44 (1926) 50-58.

<sup>4</sup> "Talis fuit Maria ut ejus unius vita omnium est disciplina." (St. Ambrose, *De virginibus*, 2, 2, 15; *PL* 16, 222D.)

<sup>5</sup> St. Ambrose, *Expositio in ps.* 118; *PL* 15, 1599D.

are brusquely and effectively demolished. And all this even though in the East Cyril of Alexandria was rekindling some of the embers of past criticism. After Ephesus, with the liturgical expansion of devotion to Mary, her grandeur is extolled with an ever-increasing vehemence chiefly in the East. In the West, which had hitherto led in recognition of Mary's grace, a misunderstanding of Augustine's reply to Julian of Eclanum held up belief in the Immaculate Conception for some centuries. The Greeks admitted no such problems.

This is a brief conspectus of the way in which acknowledgment of Mary's prerogatives was worked out, gradually, of course, as in the case of all dogmas. Let us now, as promised, produce some passages to show how the minds of those who criticized the Blessed Mother were working.

The source of the trouble was undoubtedly Origen. It is true that Tertullian, after vigorously defending the Blessed Mother against the infamous slander that an unknown soldier named Panther was the father of her Son,<sup>6</sup> himself falls into error. Reacting against the Manichaean heresy, he presents Mary as the exemplary mother of a family. He also says that Mary went along with the family council who "did not believe in Him." But, as we have seen, "Tertullian sometimes nods" and he was not regarded as a reliable exponent of Christian orthodoxy.

But with Origen it is otherwise. With his vast audience and immense prestige he set, in this matter, a literary tradition at Alexandria which we find echoed, with gradually diminishing reverberations, in Basil, Amphilochius of Iconium and others, and obviously inspiring the more startling declarations of Cyril of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. So Origen requires some close attention.

Origen was a human dynamo.<sup>7</sup> He would have been quite at

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 30; PL 1, 662A.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Agius, *Origen and Our Lady*, in CR 43 (1958) 671-678; Id., *The Blessed Virgin in Origen and St. Ambrose*, in DR 142 (1932) 126-137.

home as president of a corporation in Wall Street. At one time he retained the services of twenty amanuenses, copyists and calligraphers, paid for by a rich disciple, Ambrose. In his teaching career also he was a human dynamo. At 18, after his father's martyrdom, he became head of the Catechetical School at Alexandria. Thenceforward he was, like Ambrose of Milan, teaching and learning at the same time. In one of his lectures we get a hint of the pressure:

We have to skim rapidly through all this, because we are hurrying on to say something about the laws governing leprosy.<sup>8</sup>

He was frequently falling foul of ecclesiastical authority. He never hesitated to take a leap in the dark. And some of his guesses were almost comic. He also had the Eastern contempt for women as a sex, which reappears in all the critics whom we have to consider.

But first let us take a look at the brighter side. For Origen, as all the others, had plenty to say in praise of the Blessed Mother. It is important to stress this point as a corrective to those who quote only the critical passages as if they represented the whole mind of the writer.

Mary, says Origen,<sup>8</sup> was saluted by the Angel with a form of address reserved to her alone, (The East was impressed by the fact that it was given to a woman!) No one else has there been, or can be, to share such a grace: the divine conception, the divine offspring, the mother of the God-man all alike are unique. Elizabeth says to Mary: "It was fitting for me to go to you because you are blessed above all women, the Mother of my Lord, and my Lady."

Only a madman would suggest that Mary was denied by her Son because, after His birth, Mary gave herself to another. Mary

<sup>8</sup> PG 12, 497C.

<sup>9</sup> For this summary cf. our article in CR 43 (1958) 671-678. References in the text are to Origen's *Hom. 17 in Luc.* (PG 13, 1814 ff.).

shows herself a prophetess. As sin began from a woman, so salvation had its start from a woman, so that other women might transcend *the weakness of their sex* and imitate those recorded here. God "regards" Mary's justice, wisdom, restraint, courage. John, in the womb, went on being "trained" because of Mary's presence, and the Savior, present in her, instructed Zachary also.

There is more to it than that, but let me conclude with a beautiful passage, important for its implication of Mary's Spiritual Maternity:

For whosoever is perfect no longer lives himself, but Christ lives in him. And since Christ lives in him, of him is it said to Mary: Behold thy son, Christ.<sup>10</sup>

So Origen had some great passages about the Blessed Mother. As for the criticisms, they occur in four contexts:

A) *"The days of their purification."*<sup>11</sup>

Here Origen shows two of the characteristics that led some of the Fathers astray: extensive knowledge of the Scriptures and blind clinging to the letter of the text. We shall meet them again.

In this case Origen "would like to say boldly" that Mary needs purification "because she was a human being." But the text has "their" and not "her." So, Origen takes the plunge and concludes "therefore Jesus needed purification, since Job (14:4,5) says 'No one is free from sin.'" Then he essays to distinguish between sin, *peccatum*, and stain, *sordes*, quoting from Isaias (4:4) "If the Lord shall wash away the filth of the daughters of Sion." Then he thinks of another text, Isaias 3:4:, and cites the Crucifixion as the cause of the stain. Then he causes more confusion by saying that babies are baptized because Baptism washes away the "stains" of birth. And to crown it all he says, elsewhere, that Mary is a pure virgin and not amenable to the Levitical Law.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Comment. in Joan.*; PG 14, 32. Cf. Vagaggini, *op. cit.*, 115.

<sup>11</sup> PG 13, 1834AB.

<sup>12</sup> Origen, *Hom. 7 in Levit.* Cf. Procopius of Gaza, PG 87, 1964.

B) *The opening of the womb.*<sup>13</sup>

Here Origen's defense of the virginity *ante partum*, though praiseworthy, is based on two Scripture texts that have nothing to do with it. Such is his method. But then, in order to insist on the fact that Mary's womb was not opened at conception, he goes to the other extreme, conceding that it *was* opened at the birth of Christ. This is an instance of a writer "falling over backwards," as we say, and in establishing one vital point conceding another. Actually, in another context, Origen can be quoted as defending the virginity *in partu*.

C) *The Sword of Simon.*<sup>14</sup>

This was probably the text most widely used to denigrate the Blessed Mother in early times. Not that such was the intention of the writer. He was only concerned with safeguarding a Scripture text: in this case "all have sinned and need the glory of God. (*Rom. 3:23*) So, he must find instance of sin in Mary, and since he cannot find one in Scripture, he invents one. He takes the Sword of Simeon to mean not only distress, but also disbelief, for which he has no evidence at all.

To bolster up this weak argument Origen draws on the Eastern depreciation of the female sex. Put as a syllogism it would run as follows:

Even the apostles, men, were scandalized (as Our Lord foretold),  
But Mary, as a woman, is inferior to men.  
Therefore she must have been scandalized also.

Then he adds another and more intelligible argument which still holds sway:

If she did not suffer scandal at Our Lord's Passion,  
Then Jesus did not die for her sins.  
We all, since Duns Scotus, know the answer to that one. But at

<sup>13</sup> PG 13, 1835A.

<sup>14</sup> PG 13, 1835B

the time it was held to be conclusive. And it is echoed in Basil, Titus Bostrensis, Amphilochius, Theophylact, Cyril of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom.<sup>15</sup> But, as we shall see, not Ambrose!

D) "*Went down with them.*" (Lk. 2:52)<sup>16</sup>

Here is another example of Origen's hermeneutics: an inaccurate guess to give an allegorical meaning to a text which is quite clear in itself. As follows:

Because Joseph and Mary had not yet attained full faith, therefore they could not remain above with Him, but, as it is said, He went down with them.

Another improbable guess of Origen's is concerned with the loss of Our Lord in the Temple. They searched for Him because He had strayed, or, says Origen, "as I am more inclined to believe, had gone back to Heaven till it pleased Him to return."<sup>17</sup>

St. Basil is worth quoting because, while he obviously echoes Origen in what was by then the Alexandrian literary tradition, nevertheless he waters it down as far as he can. And Mary is not now, as a woman, ranked below the apostles. "Since every soul" says Basil, "at the time of the Passion was subject to some doubting, according to what Our Lord said, 'all ye shall be scandalized in Me,' Simeon predicts even of Mary herself that when she should stand at the Cross and see what was going on and hear what was being said, after the testimony of Gabriel, after the ineffable knowledge of the divine conception, after the great testimony of the miracles, there would be a certain wavering about her soul also."<sup>18</sup>

On which we note that Our Lord's words "shall be scandalized" were not addressed to His mother but to the apostles. The prophecy of Simeon had no literal reference to sin or failure except in

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Agius, *art. cit.*, 676.

<sup>16</sup> *Art. cit.*, 677.

<sup>17</sup> *Art. cit.*, 674.

<sup>18</sup> St. Basil, *Epist.* 260, 6-9; *PG* 32, 964B-968B.



Origen's unwarranted explanation. So Basil imputes sin and scandal to Mary only to comply with the universality of Christ's redemption, not from any hint in the Gospel that Mary sinned. It is all therefore inherited guess-work and *a priori* reasoning based on false premises.

Basil goes on to explain, following Origen's lead:

For it behoved Our Lord to taste of death for all, and being made the propitiation of the world, to justify all in His blood. Therefore thyself also, He says to Mary, who hast learnt the things regarding the Lord, some doubt shall reach. That is meant by the Sword.

Well, it isn't, of course, but for want of a better explanation

Basil just follows Origen. He is not engaged in assessing Mary's holiness, but just repeating the traditional explanation of a difficult text. Ambrose, however, though he follows Origen's commentary on Luke in great detail, shows himself independent here. As we shall see.

Basil goes on to explain the words "many thoughts shall be revealed" to mean that "after the scandal has taken place through Christ's cross, both to the disciples and to Mary herself some speedy relief shall come from the Lord to confirm their hearts in faith in Him."

Which again is pure guess-work quite unwarranted by the text. It seems odd to me that these experts who are so insistent on the use of Scripture texts and their literal interpretation should sometimes give us, without comment, explanations that are their own guess or an inherited opinion as if they were Scripture itself.

Of course, the problem of reconciling the universal need for redemption with the idea of Mary's sinlessness was a very real one, as will appear from Augustine's tussle with Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum. Only gradually, as in the case of the other dogmas of our Faith, was the correct solution worked out. But it is important to remember that these derogatory comments of some early Fathers were guesses before the solution, and not, as they

are sometimes quoted as being, mature and final decisions after it.

John Chrysostom reflects strongly the literary tradition which ascribed faults to Mary, and adds some color of his own.<sup>19</sup> He, too, is not assessing Mary's holiness, or lack of it, and his true mentality is discernible in the care he takes to represent Our Lord as jealous of His mother's honor on all occasions. But he is a literal interpreter of Scripture texts and he seems to have inherited the "boldness" which Origen ascribed to himself.<sup>20</sup> For sometimes he senses a hostile reaction in his audience, though he remains sure of himself.

In connection with the Annunciation John Chrysostom has this apparently startling comment:

For it was to be feared that she, not knowing the actual truth, might have come to some dire decision, and unable to bear the prospect of disgrace might have hastened to commit suicide by cord or sword.

But this, surprising as it may seem, is not an adverse criticism but a recognition of the extreme sensitiveness of Mary's character.

He goes on:

For wonderful indeed was that Virgin, and St. Luke points out her excellence, saying that when she heard the salutation, she did not at once pour herself out nor did she accept the invitation, but she 'was troubled', seeking what manner of salutation this might be.

Now, she was of such perfect delicacy that she would have been distracted with dismay at the thought of her shame.

For she did not expect, whatever she said, to convince anyone who had heard of it that it was not adultery. Therefore, to prevent this, the angel came before and not after conception.

<sup>19</sup> To save multiplying references, the citations we give from St. John Chrysostom are from his *Hom. 27 in Mat.*, 3; PG 57, 347; *Hom. 44 in Mat.*, 1; PG 57, 464-465; *Hom. 4 in Mat.*, 5; PG 57, 45; *Hom. in Joan.*, 21, 1-3; PG 59, 129-134.

<sup>20</sup> PG 13, 1834. Cf. Agius, *art. cit.*, note 2.

And now John Chrysostom adds a sentence which reveals his esteem of the grandeur of Mary's vocation:

Besides, it was fitting that the womb entered by the maker of all things should be free from trouble, and the soul deemed worthy to be the minister of such mysteries to be rid of all perturbation.

There we have a warning against quoting an author as condemnatory of Mary before finding out all he has to say about her.

But John is certainly aggravating. In references to the Cana episode he blandly offers this:

Mary wanted to curry favor with the apostles and make herself still more illustrious through the medium of her Son.

To which the answer is: *Quod gratis datur, gratis negatur*. Where in the New Testament is there any justification for such a statement?

Handling the episode of the "Mother and brethren" John shows himself as the preacher using a text as a peg on which to hang a moral for his audience. But note also how the honor of His mother by Christ is emphasized.

But to understand that He exceedingly honored [*sphodra edeito*] His mother, hear Luke recording how He was subject to His parents and this same evangelist [St. John] showing how He took care of her at the very hour of the crucifixion.

If Our Lord so honored His mother, why did He ask "Who is my mother and my brethren?" John tells us:

"Not to treat her with contumely, who had given Him birth, but to do her the greatest good," sc. by lifting her thoughts from the natural to the supernatural.

Commenting on the Cana episode again, John argues from the general to the particular, which is a common fallacy of logic. It seems, too, that he must have prided himself on his knowledge

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of human nature, because he is constantly introducing it. As follows:

Because she had given Him birth, she made claim, *as mothers are wont to do*, to command in all things Him whom she should obey and adore as Lord.

There are instances of this maternal influence in Scripture, as when David says: "Speak, mother, for I must not turn away my face." (3 Kings 2:20) and in history, as when Coriolanus, at his mother's request, gives up the siege and ruins his cause. But there is nothing in Scripture to justify John's generalization here. If anything, the New Testament is all to the contrary.

Here is a typical example of the same fallacy:

Since it was probable that on hearing this from her Son she would be loath to obey, but would everywhere be claiming for herself precedence as His mother . . .

Maybe the socialite mothers that John Chrysostom knew behaved like that, but in regard to Mary it was pure guess-work, and not very good guessing at that. He goes on:

He therefore gave this answer to those who spoke: for otherwise He would not have raised her from lower sentiments to higher thoughts, as she was always expecting to be honored by her Son and not regard Him as God.

What John has in mind is accurate enough. Our Lady was gradually, and without fully understanding it, being led to realize the implications of her vocation as mother of the Redeemer and the subordination of her natural feelings to the Mission of Christ. But he might have put it less awkwardly!

Here is a quotation that should warn us to weigh carefully any utterance of John Chrysostom that may seem derogatory to Our Lady:

. . . that the miracles He worked might not fall under suspicion,

Note that he said "probably" as if he were not quite sure that his hearers would agree. So he piles up the reasons which

caused Mary's mind to have swerved almost from the course of right reason.

These reasons were the bitterness of Our Lord's death, the mockery of the Jews, the ribaldry of the soldiers, tossing up for His clothes and laughing at the hanging figure in the very presence of His mother. Then he goes on:

*Have no doubt* that her thoughts ran something like this. 'I am the mother of Him who hangs on the cross.

Perhaps He was deceiving Himself when He said He was the Son of Almighty God. He who said, 'I am the Life' how comes He to be crucified, to be caught in the toils of the executioners? Why didn't He defeat the plots of His persecutors? He ordered Lazarus to return to life and He filled Judea with the wonder of the miracles, why doesn't He come down from the cross?'

*It is really very probable* that the woman, not knowing the mystery, found herself with some such thoughts as these.

And he tries to bolster this up with the usual gibe at women as the weaker sex. He goes on:

We may well believe that the passion was so afflicting by its very nature that it could dethrone even a balanced and constant mind. . . .

That is so. Even Our Lord seems to have felt, momentarily, that utter dereliction. But Cyril is not thinking of Our Lord:

Why it is so wonderful if a woman had that experience? For Peter, the leader of the holy apostles, was scandalized once, when Our Lord prophesied that He would be delivered into the hands of wicked men and suffer the death of the cross, so that he cried out, 'Far be this thing from thee, O Lord! This won't happen to Thee!' (*Mt.* 16:22).

Why wonder then, I ask you, if the tender mind of a woman should turn to thoughts of weakness?

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Incidentally, it seems odd to me that such ardent readers of Scripture did not recall the valiant women of the Old Testament, Judith and Esther and Abigail, and their intrepidity under pressure. But now Cyril gives up the revealing sentence:

In saying those things which we have *conjectured* about Our Lord's mother, we are guided, *not, as some people have persuaded themselves, by empty guesswork*, but by the written record.

This is the perfect example of "qui s'excuse, s'accuse."

Finally, Cyril follows Eastern tradition in interpreting the Sword of Simeon as the impact of the Passion,

driving the woman's thoughts to unworthy conclusions.

And he adds, as proof,

For trials prove the minds of those who suffer them and reveal their secret thoughts.

Which may be true, but doesn't seem to fit in with Luke's account of Simeon's words.

We need not follow Cyril in his next attempt to explain why Our Lord was so tender with His mother after she had supposedly lost faith in him. He gives two reasons, one to show Christ as an example how to bear sufferings and thus confirm the Mosaic Law, and, two, to relieve Mary's "scandal" by giving her John, a "wise theologian," to help her recovery.

So we find Cyril reproducing ideas which had become traditional in the East, without trying to reconcile them with the question of Mary's intrinsic holiness. But that question was raised, and triumphantly answered, in the West.

First, Athanasius and the ascetics glorified Mary as the ideal of the virginal life and therefore, by implication, of personal sanctity.

Ambrose, thrust suddenly into ecclesiastical life, but with memories of his sister's living pattern of consecrated virginity (for Marcellina lived at home), is caught up in this clearer assessment

of the Blessed Virgin, and becomes its illustrious mouthpiece.

He was a trained Roman magistrate, and they, when they were good, were world-famous. See how incisively he demolishes, in sentences of four or five words, the foggy groping of Eastern commentators.

They had posited Mary's mental disturbance and distress on Calvary as something to be expected in a woman, and they claimed the backing of Scripture. But Ambrose says:

stantem lego: flentem non lego.<sup>22</sup>

And here is a worthier use of the argument *a fortiori*:

Sed nec Maria minor quam matrem Christi decebat.

That nonsense about the hardier male sex Ambrose cuts off abruptly:

Fugientibus apostolis, ante crucem stabat,<sup>23</sup>

where the force of the imperfect tense is that Mary went on standing in front of the cross, while the apostles were in flight.

Instead of arguing from the supposed tendencies of women, Ambrose presents Mary as the unique mother of Christ, and acting in character:

piis spectabat oculis filii vulnera quia expectabat non pignoris mortem sed mundi salutem. Aut fortasse quia cognoverat per filii mortem mundi redemptionem aula regalis etiam sua morte putabat se aliquid publico addituram muneri.<sup>24</sup>

And in adding his own moral tag, encouraging women to imitate the Blessed Mother, he has this tender passage:

Hanc imitamini, matres sanctae, quae in filio dilectissimo tantum maternae virtutis exemplum edidit, neque vos dulciores liberos habetis,

<sup>22</sup> St. Ambrose, *De obitu Valentiniani*, 39; PL 16, 1371B.

<sup>23</sup> *Epist.* 83, 110; PL 16, 1218; *De instit. virginis*, 7, 49; PL 16, 333A; *In Luc.*, 10, 9; PL 15, 1529D-1531.

<sup>24</sup> *In Luc.*, 10, 132; PL 15, 1930.

neque illud Virgo quaerebat solatium, quod alium posset generare filium.<sup>25</sup>

It is nearly time to sum up and pronounce judgment on the so-called denigration passages in the first Christian centuries. But first a word about Our Lady's personal holiness in Augustine.

Ambrose, whom Augustine follows so closely, had pronounced that Mary is:

Virgo per gratiam ab omni integra labe peccati.<sup>26</sup>

This should be read with another pregnant sentence from Ambrose

Dominus, redempturus mundum, operationem suam inchoavit a Maria, ut per quam salus mundi omnibus parabatur, eadem prima fructum salutis hauriret.<sup>27</sup>

To Ambrose then, as I read him, Mary was not only sinless, but sinless by grace in an operation which preceded that of the rest of the world, to which it looked forward.

Augustine also believed in Mary's sinlessness: but he was in quite a predicament when challenged by Pelagius how to reconcile that with the doctrine of universal original sin. What added to his difficulty was the fact that Mary's prerogatives, as we shall see, were often defended by heretics in support of their heresy, as here.<sup>28</sup>

And so Augustine "brushes off" the question with what Dom Capelle calls an "échappatoire."<sup>29</sup> His reply is well known:

<sup>25</sup> *Epist.* 83, 111; *PL* 16, 1218D.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. footnote 5 above.

<sup>27</sup> *In Luc.*, 2, 17; *PL* 15, 1640B. Cf. Pagnamenta, *op. cit.*, 72-82.

<sup>28</sup> St. Augustine, *De natura et gratia*, 36, 42; *PL* 44, 267.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. B. Capelle, O.S.B., *La pensée de saint Augustin sur l'Immaculée Conception*, in *RTAM* 4 (1932) 370. Cf. also Ch. Boyer, S.J., *La controverse sur l'opinion de saint Augustin touchant la Conception de la Vierge*, in *Vgl* 4 (Rome, 1955) 48-60.



...excepta igitur Sancta Maria, de qua propter honorem Domini nullam prorsus, cum de peccatis agitur, haberi volo quaestionem...<sup>80</sup>

That is, "in discussing sin, I won't have Mary's name brought up," which is creditable to Augustine, but not an answer to the question under discussion.

Augustine, it is true, goes on with a suggestion, put in the question form,<sup>81</sup> like Moses when challenged to produce water from a rock in the desert (*Num.* 20:10):

... unde enim scimus quid plus gratiae collatum fuerit ad vincendum omni ex parte peccatum [ei] quae concipere ac parere meruit quem constat nullum habuisse peccatum?

This in an interesting side-light on the acknowledgement of Mary's holiness and moral grandeur because of her association with the All-Holy, and it is important in assessing the recognition of her sanctity in the first Christian centuries. But still it doesn't clear up the crucial question, whether that extra "plus" of grace was given before, or, as in the case of John the Baptist, after conception.

An even more obscure reply of Augustine was given to Julian of Eclanum in a work begun late in his life and left incomplete. Julian, referring to Jovinian, says that Augustine is a worse heretic than he because:

Ille virginitatem Mariae partus conditione dissolvit: Tu ipsam Mariam diabolo nascendi conditione transcribis.

To which Augustine replied:

Non transcribimus Mariam diabolo conditione nascendi, sed ideo quia conditio solvitur gratia renascendi.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> *De natura et gratia*, 36, 46; *PL* 44, 367.

<sup>81</sup> P. M. Frua, *op. cit.*, 49, decides that the interrogatory form of the reply "risultava di ordine retorico." But there does not seem to be scope for a rhetorical question here.

<sup>82</sup> St. Augustine, *Opus imperfectum ad Julianum*, 4, 22; *PL* 45, 1418.

Commentators are still discussing the correct interpretation of that reply, but at the time, and for some centuries after, it held up belief in the Immaculate Conception in the West, and Eastern Mariology once more took the lead.

We have now to assess the apparent criticisms of the Blessed Mother in early patrology, and how they may be discounted. Incidentally, let me remark here, as perhaps I should have done before, that there is no intention to depreciate the illustrious Saints of God who did so much for the Church and for Christian literature. But in discussing contested passages one has to be as objective as in reviewing a book.

We may therefore comfort ourselves with the following considerations:

1) The criticisms are put forward, not as the official teaching of the Church, but as the personal opinion of the commentator. We have the inherent fallacies, the prejudiced opinion concerning women, the loyalty to literary tradition, the instinct to quote and follow at their face value texts of Scripture, to speak boldly and to guess wildly.

These things were tolerated in an atmosphere dominated by the prestige and reputation of the commentator (as G. B. Shaw dominated the Shavians), but outside they were confronted and shattered e.g. by Athanasius and Ambrose and Augustine and many more. Nor need we be hypnotized by them now.

2) When such texts are quoted nowadays it is often assumed that they represent current Church teaching on the holiness or otherwise of the Mother of Christ. That is not so. The commentator was but using a text to hang on to it a moral precept (as preachers still do) and sometimes (as still happens) the preacher's texts cancel out one another.

3) Criticisms of Mary were often the reaction against heretics who were espousing Mary's cause to bolster up their own heresy. Thus reaction against the Manichaeans caused Helvidius to oppose

Mary's virginity *post partum* and present her as the mother of a bonny family. The Docetists championed Mary's virginity *in partu* to support their idea that Christ's body was only a wraith or phantom, and therefore would not affect Mary's virginal seal. In consequence, Origen seems to have wobbled and even Jerome to have been confused. But not Ambrose, who says:

Virginali fusus est partu et genitalia virginitatis claustra non solvit.  
Mansit intemeratum septum pudoris et inviolata integritatis duravere signacula.<sup>33</sup>

Nestorius denied Mary the title of Theotokos because he thought it impugned the majesty of God. Similarly some writers, starting with Origen, clung to the idea that only God and Christ are all-holy, and they did not understand how Mary could escape the universal stain of original sin. All the more because Mary's complete sinlessness was championed by heretics like Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum.

4) The danger of teaching Mary's high prerogatives to new converts from paganism can easily be understood when we recall the widespread and degraded cult of a Divine Mother based on the worship of fertility in nature and mankind. For if some such were respectable, like that of Ceres, and intellectual like the Eleusinian Mysteries, most of them were anything but respectable. Such were those of Diana of the Ephesians, Demeter, Cybele, the Phrygian *Megale mater*, Iris in Egypt, Hecate in Greece, with Semele, Lete, Artemis and Aphrodite of Cnidus. The Gnostics had their share in spreading such worship. And Irenaeus tells us of the Collyridians who offered cakes in adoration of Our Lady.

Ambrose, succinct as usual, offers the universal answer:

"*Maria erat templum Dei, non Deus templi.*"<sup>34</sup>

5) If we are disturbed at the slowness with which Mary's

<sup>33</sup> St. Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, 8, 52; PL 16, 320A.

<sup>34</sup> St. Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 3, 80; PL 16, 795.

prerogatives were recognized and the incidence of derogatory comment, we should remember that exactly the same process is evident in the case of Our Lord's prerogatives and indeed His very nature, and that of the Father and the Holy Spirit. So that it is, as it were, routine process if the truth about Mary's holiness is hammered out slowly, with good men and saints on either side.

6) If that is true of all Christian dogma, especially it is true of dogma about the Blessed Mother. The Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were a battleground almost up to our own times, with not only saints, but Marian saints, preachers and panegyrists, ranged against the ultimate terms of the definition in her favor.

So, with these denigratory passages, if we remember their literary history and the circumstances in which they were penned, and weigh against them the testimony on the other side, we need not be unduly disturbed. Once again Ambrose gives the answer to them all:

Quid splendidius ea quam Splendor elegit?<sup>35</sup>

Which may be translated:

Splendor Himself chose her: Who then so splendid as she?

For the critics of the Blessed Mother are the exceptions. More characteristic of the universal appreciation of the woman chosen of God is Ambrose's triumphant declaration:

Tantum contulisti gratiam, quantum ante oracula divina credere nemo potuisset.<sup>36</sup>

You have bestowed on Mary grace so great that without divine revelation no one could have imagined it.

REV. AMBROSE AGIUS, O.S.B.  
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<sup>35</sup> Cf. footnote 3 above.

<sup>36</sup> St. Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, 17, 108; *PL* 16, 346B. Cf. *PL* 16, 786CD.