

## St. Thomas Aquinas and the Immaculate Conception

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The Church teaches that the stain and guilt of the original sin of Adam is passed to his progeny through the physical act of intercourse between man and woman in conception, which is contracted by the soul in animation.<sup>1</sup> As St. Paul reveals, “Wherefore as by one man sin entered into this world, and by sin death; and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned” (Rom 5:12). However, by a singular privilege based on the merits of Jesus Christ, God prevented Our Lady’s soul from contracting original sin from the first moment of her conception. In his bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of December 8, 1854, Blessed Pope Pius IX defined the dogma of Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception:

“We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine, which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary at the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in virtue of the merits of Christ Jesus, the Savior of the human race, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and on this account must be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful.”<sup>2</sup>

Some arm-chair theologians, mostly from the liberal post-Vatican II wasteland, flatly insist, without addressing any of the nuances of his theological positions, that “St. Thomas Aquinas denied the Immaculate Conception.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, because St. Thomas is the Church’s antidote to modernism, modernists take any opportunity to find fault with the Angelic Doctor. If they think they can find a chink in the scholastic armor of St. Thomas, they can rationalize throwing out the entire scholastic system altogether! Let us briefly examine on what basis their argument is advanced, and show how erroneous the argument really is. In fact, in his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas’ explication of the sanctification of the Blessed Virgin Mary is at the very basis of the Church’s dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception.

The controversy originates with St. Thomas’ distinction between Our Lady’s conception (creation of the body through intercourse) and animation (infusion of the soul into the body by

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the Council of Mileum II (416), the Council of Carthage XVI (418), the Council of Orange II (529), the Council of Quiersy (853), and the Council of Trent’s Decree on Original Sin (1546).

<sup>2</sup> Denzinger, 1641.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional theologians have also maintained that St. Thomas denied the doctrine (see, for example, Fr. Joseph Pohle, *Mariology – A Dogmatic Treatise on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God*, B. Herder Book Co., 1953, p.70). Indeed, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not defined in St. Thomas’ time, and most of his contemporaries opposed the dogma, such as St. Anselm, St. Bernard, Peter Lombard, Alexander of Hales, Albert the Great, and St. Bonaventure. But notwithstanding the theological environment in which he addressed the question, St. Thomas advanced the analysis beyond his contemporaries, in fact, with invaluable insights that form the basis of the Church’s dogma (and, as I maintain, prove he held, not denied, the essence of the dogma).

God) and the fact that St. Thomas says “the Blessed Virgin was sanctified *after* animation”<sup>4</sup> while Pius IX says She was sanctified *at the first instance* of Her animation.<sup>5</sup> If Our Lady was sanctified after animation in the temporal order, then She would have contracted original sin prior to being cleansed of it. In fact, St. Thomas says “she contracted original sin, since she was conceived by way of fleshly concupiscence and the intercourse of man and woman.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, St. Thomas’ detractors argue that the Universal Doctor denied the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Is this true? Does St. Thomas contradict the Church’s definition? No, as we will now explain.

We first note that St. Thomas says both that Our Lady did and did *not* contract original sin. For example, while St. Thomas says “the Blessed Virgin did indeed contract original sin, but was cleansed therefrom before her birth from the womb,”<sup>7</sup> he also says “it is possible to find some creature purer than all the rest, namely one not contaminated by any taint of sin; such was the purity of the Blessed Virgin, who was immune from original and actual sin, yet under God, inasmuch as there was in her the potentiality of sin.”<sup>8</sup> St. Thomas’ apparent contradiction can be understood in terms of potency and act, whereby the Blessed Virgin’s soul contracted original sin in potency, having been conceived in the corruption of sinful flesh (Her soul being disposed to contracting the sin), but did not contract original sin in act (Her soul being prevented from contracting the sin).<sup>9</sup> In other words, the Blessed Virgin was subject to original sin potentially, but not actually, by the singular privilege of the Immaculate Conception.

St. Thomas’ teaching can also be interpreted to mean that Our Lady, like Our Lord, suffered the “bodily defects” (e.g., hunger, thirst) which “flow from the common sin of the whole nature,”<sup>10</sup> but not the guilt of original sin in Her soul.<sup>11</sup> St. Thomas makes this connection when he says, “The flesh of the Virgin was conceived in original sin, and therefore contracted

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<sup>4</sup> *Summa Theologica* (ST), III, Q 27, Art 2, *sed contra*.

<sup>5</sup> While the Pope uses the word “conception” and not “animation,” it seems certain that he is using these words as synonymous terms because, as St. Thomas explains, “the soul is the subject of original sin.” ST, I-II, Q 83, Art 1. That is, the act of Christ’s redemption pertains not to the conception of Our Lady’s *body*, but rather to its animation, whereby God prevented Her *soul* from contracting original sin, because “the soul can be the subject of guilt, while the flesh, of itself, cannot be the subject of guilt.” Ibid. If the guilt of original sin applies to the soul and not the body, and Our Lady was spared from original sin “at the first instance of her conception,” then it follows that Her conception and animation occurred at the same time.

<sup>6</sup> ST, III, Q 27, Art 2, *ad. 4*.

<sup>7</sup> ST, III, Q 27, Art 2, *ad. 2*.

<sup>8</sup> Comment in *Quatuor Libros Sent.*, I, dist. 44, Q 1, Art 3.

<sup>9</sup> Fr. Gerard M. Paris, O.P. interprets St. Thomas to mean “the Blessed Virgin incurred sin dispositively, as it were, in the act of conception according to the concupiscence of the flesh,” which is the same thing as saying She incurred sin potentially, but not actually. See *The Summa Abridged* (1950), published by Refuge of Sinners Publishing, Inc., p. 548.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, ST, III, Q 14, Art 1, *sed contra.*, Art 4, *sed contra*.

<sup>11</sup> Unlike Our Lady, who contracted these bodily defects through Her conception, Our Lord did not contract them, but rather assumed them according to His will. ST, III, Q 14, Art 3.

these defects.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, just as Christ assumed these defects in His Body by His will without sin, so Our Lady contracted these defects in Her natural conception without sin, for these bodily defects “are not incompatible with the perfection of knowledge and grace.”<sup>13</sup> Again, such an interpretation is entirely compatible with the dogmatic definition.

St. Thomas also points out that Jeremias and St. John the Baptist were cleansed from original sin in their mothers’ wombs, and yet the Blessed Virgin Mary’s purity far exceeds all the saints: “Moreover, it is to be observed that it was granted, by way of privilege, to others, to be sanctified in the womb, for instance, to Jeremias, to whom it was said (Jer. i. 5): ‘Before thou camest forth out of the womb, I sanctified thee’; and again, to John the Baptist, of whom it is written (Luke i. 15): ‘He shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother’s womb.’”<sup>14</sup> Yet, St. Thomas says, “Consequently, after Christ, who, as the universal Saviour of all, needed not to be saved, *the purity of the Blessed Virgin holds the highest place.*”<sup>15</sup> That St. Thomas says the Blessed Virgin’s purity is second only to that of Christ (and thus immeasurably surpasses that of Jeremias and St. John the Baptist) also demonstrates his view that Our Lady was spared from original sin by a greater privilege, that is, in Her animation, and not just before Her birth from the womb.

We also note that we can understand St. Thomas’ use of the terms conception and animation in the order of time (temporal) or nature (metaphysical). In regard to bodily conception, St. Thomas explains that “there is a two-fold order: - one, of time; the other, of nature”<sup>16</sup> according to the axiom “a thing must be before it is such.”<sup>17</sup> In terms of the order of nature, when St. Thomas says “It remains, therefore, that the Blessed Virgin was sanctified after animation,”<sup>18</sup> his words can be interpreted to simply mean the soul (the “thing”) must exist (“be”) before it can be sanctified (“is such”). St. Thomas’ statement does not of necessity mean Our Lady’s soul contracted original sin before animation, and he never denies that her animation and sanctification could have occurred at the same instant in the order of time. Hence, his conclusion that She was sanctified after animation does not at all contradict the dogmatic definition.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, St. Thomas concludes that the Blessed Virgin was not sanctified before animation based on that same order of nature, that is, because sanctification pertains to the soul, and thus Our Lady could not be sanctified before She had a soul. This further reveals the mind of St.

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<sup>12</sup> ST, III, Q 14, Art 3, *ad.* 1.

<sup>13</sup> ST, III, Q 14, Art 4, *sed contra.*

<sup>14</sup> ST, III, Q 27, Art 1, *sed contra.*

<sup>15</sup> ST, III, Q 27, Art 2, *ad.* 2. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> ST, III, Q 6, Art 1.

<sup>17</sup> Latin, “*Prius est esse quam esse tale.*”

<sup>18</sup> ST, III, Q 27, Art 2, *sed contra.*

<sup>19</sup> Just as the soul must exist before it can be sanctified, the body must exist before it can be animated. This ordering of nature does not preclude Our Lady’s conception, animation and sanctification from occurring simultaneously in the order of time, according to St. Thomas’ teaching.

Thomas. He says, “Now sin cannot be taken away except by grace, the subject of which is the rational creature alone. Therefore, before the infusion of the rational soul, the Blessed Virgin was not sanctified.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, when St. Thomas says, “But in us the body is begotten before the rational soul comes to it” and thus “we are conceived before being animated,”<sup>21</sup> he does not preclude conception and animation from occurring simultaneously, which is consistent with the dogmatic definition.

If we are to understand conception and animation in the order of time, this would mean there is an actual temporal sequence of conception followed by animation, and several explanations of St. Thomas also favor this interpretation. For example, St. Thomas suggests three temporal stages of bodily conception in a succession of time, along with a temporal succession of animations: “first, the local movement of the blood to the place of generation; secondly, the formation of the body from that matter; thirdly, the development whereby it was brought to perfection of quantity. Of these, the second is the conception itself; the first is a preamble; the third, a result of the conception.”<sup>22</sup> In regard to animation, St. Thomas says: “first, as being imperfectly disposed, it receives an imperfect soul; and afterwards, when it is perfectly disposed, it receives a perfect soul.”<sup>23</sup>

In describing the temporal phases of conception and animation, St. Thomas makes a distinction between the seminal corruption of original sin and the infusion of a rational soul. He does this to uphold the doctrine of Original Sin while maintaining that Our Lady was prevented from contracting this sin. In other words, he does this to emphasize that Our Lady *was truly saved by Christ*. This is why, St. Thomas explains, Our Lady was not sanctified before animation. He says: “And thus, in whatever manner the Blessed Virgin would have been sanctified before animation, she could never have incurred the stain of original sin: and thus she would not have needed redemption and salvation which is by Christ.”<sup>24</sup> St. Thomas says “this would be derogatory to the dignity of Christ, by reason of His being the universal Saviour of all.”<sup>25</sup>

In making these distinctions, it is critical to note that St. Thomas never denies that Our Lady was sanctified in the first instant of Her perfect animation, that is, the moment when She received a “perfect soul” and was able (“perfectly disposed”) to receive grace. To the contrary, St. Thomas says “the Blessed Virgin was not sanctified *until after all in her was perfected, viz., her body and soul.*”<sup>26</sup> Because “all in her was perfected” in the first instant of Her perfect

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> ST, III, Q 6, Art 4, *ad* 2.

<sup>22</sup> ST, III, Q 33, Art 1, *sed contra*.

<sup>23</sup> ST, III, Q 33, Art 2, *ad* 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. That St. Thomas says “But it is not known when she was sanctified [meaning it is not revealed in Scripture]” definitively proves he did not deny the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, but rather left the question of the timing of animation to the judgment of the Church. ST, III, Q 27, Art 2, *ad* 3.

<sup>25</sup> ST, III, Q 27, Art 2.

<sup>26</sup> ST, III, Q 27, Art 2, *sed contra*. Emphasis added.

animation (infusion of the rational soul), it can be said that St. Thomas teaches Our Lady was sanctified *in the first instant She was capable of grace*. This is precisely the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

Thus, St. Thomas' teachings on the sanctification of Our Lady are consistent with the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception, whether we understand them either in the order of nature or time: (1) in the order of nature, Our Lady's soul existed before it could be animated; (2) in the order of time, Our Lady's soul was sanctified "in the first instant of her conception," that is, when She was perfected body and soul in St. Anne's womb. Hence, the dogmatic foundation of the Immaculate Conception is the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Universal Doctor of the Church.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> We note how, after the dogmatic definition in 1854, Popes Leo XIII, St. Pius X and Pius XI continued to exalt St. Thomas above all the doctors of the Church and expressly exhort the faithful to adhere to his teachings. We also note how the 1917 Code of Canon Law required seminary professors and religious to formally study the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas (canons 589 and 1366.2).