

The Conception of Christ: Unanswered Questions

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by E. L. Mascall

The title of Volume 52 of the new English version of the *Summa Theologiae*, 'The Childhood of Christ', could be misleading if it suggested a biographical work.¹ As Fr Potter remarks it is 'essentially a theological treatment of some Gospel events', and these are predominantly pre-natal, though they include Christ's manifestation to the shepherds and the magi and his circumcision. St Thomas is concerned, in most of this treatise, to bring together two realms of thought of very different importance and authority, namely orthodox Chalcedonian Christology and the accepted genetics and embryology of his time. The latter have, of course, been completely superseded by later biological research, and the reader is therefore repeatedly confronted with the question of the manner and degree in which St Thomas's arguments need revision and reassessment, though this has little bearing on the strictly theological, or at any rate on the strictly dogmatic, aspects of the matter. Fr Potter devotes a little space to these considerations in his appendix on 'Jesus in his mother's womb'; one might have wished for more, even at the expense of inflating the volume and its price. It is, in fact, remarkable how little attention seems to have been paid by theologians to the embryological and obstetric aspects of the Incarnation in recent years; medieval theologians did not feel that reverence necessitated this kind of reticence. The only modern work that I know on the subject is *The Mother of God: Her Physical Maternity, a reappraisal* (River Forest, Ill., 1964) by Fr Cletus Wessels, O.P., though A. Mitterer reopened in 1952 (*Dogma und Biologie*) the particular question of the *virginitas in partu*. For there are some genuine questions in this field and, even if one cannot give confident answers to them, the discussion of them helps to clarify the mind. Thus, accepting the virginal conception of Jesus by Mary, one may ask oneself, how does Jesus acquire a full set of human chromosomes in view of the fact that the development of his embryo results from the miraculous overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit and not by the normal method of union of a spermatozoon with the ovum? In particular, how is Jesus provided with the Y-chromosome which determines his masculinity? Clearly there must be some difference between his conception and that of human beings in general and, while this is connected with the theological fact that his *hypostasis* or *persona* (in the technical sense of those words) is that of the pre-existent divine Son, it must be compatible with the completeness and the full

¹*St Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae*. Introduction, Text, Translation, Appendices and Glossary. Vol. LII: The Childhood of Christ (III, xxxi-xxxvii), Roland Potter, O.P., pp. xiv + 176. Blackfriars; London: Eyre and Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, £2.50.

reality of his human nature. Indeed, it must involve that he is even more perfectly and genuinely human than other human beings. The problem cannot be evaded by simply denying the virginal conception, for it is far more difficult to suppose the repression of the new human hypostasis, which normally results from the union of the spermatozoon and the ovum, to make room for the divine hypostasis than to suppose the divine hypostasis to be the metaphysical subject of the new human being in the absence of gametic union. Of course, this difficulty would not arise for a Nestorian or adoptionist, for whom the two hypostases exist side by side, and it is perhaps significant that those scholars who deny the virginal conception are usually found to hold an adoptionist Christology. Fr Wessels is, I think, right in saying that 'it is reasonable to hold the position that the chromosomes of the human body of Christ were taken entirely from the ovum provided by Mary presupposing the necessary mutation of the sex chromosomes in the instant of conception' (p. 156), but there may be room for further thought on this point.

One further point concerns the moment of the appearance of Christ's human soul in his embryonic body. St Thomas accepted the contemporary view that the moment of animation of a normal human embryo is not identical with the moment of conception but is considerably later. Present-day embryologists and geneticists, while using a different vocabulary, would agree on this and would say that the embryo does not become fully human until many days after the fertilization of the ovum by the spermatozoon. Now, as I have said, there are bound to be *some* differences between the case of the incarnate Son and that of other human beings, and St Thomas holds (and is not alone among Catholic theologians in holding) that in Christ conception and animation were simultaneous, on the double ground that the hypostatic union must have taken place at the moment of conception and that the divine hypostasis could not have become the subject of a nature that was not yet fully human. Fr Wessels agrees and writes:

If the human soul is ordinarily infused at a later stage of development, then [*sc.* in the case of Christ] all the intermediate stages were accomplished instantaneously. At the end of the generative action there was a perfect human nature united personally to the divine Word [p. 158].

While I agree that the hypostatic union must have taken place at the moment of conception (so that, to give a dramatic illustration, it was right that, in the Graham Street Pageant of the Holy Nativity, which some older readers will remember, Mary was preceded by an angel bearing a white light from the event of the Annunciation to that of Christ's nativity), I would raise the question whether the appearance of the human soul might not have taken place at a later moment. This would not involve the distasteful notion that, until that moment,

the divine Word was the subject of a non-human organism, for from the moment of conception the embryo was genuinely, if not yet manifestly and fully operatively, human. It was not merely potentially human, in the sense that human was one of the things that it might become while it might equally well become something else, equine or piscine or scarabean for example; it would either become manifestly and operatively human or it would become nothing at all. (This is, of course, a very relevant consideration in discussions about the moral legitimacy of abortion.) I suspect that the older view was influenced by an unduly static view of human nature, or even by the preformationist view that the fully developed physical organism was contained in a microscopic state inside the embryo. An alternative view might be that in all cases animation takes place at the moment of conception (or at any rate by the time that twinning of the embryo becomes impossible), although the soul's capacities can manifest themselves only *pari passu* with the development of the body. What I do find difficult to suppose is that in the case of Christ there was either a complete lack of co-ordination between the development of the soul and that of the body until the moment when animation would normally have taken place or that immediately on conception the body was instantaneously brought to the state of development that it would normally have attained some weeks later. Nevertheless, this difficulty may be due to a lack of imagination on my part; I find it difficult to *imagine* the instantaneous conversion of water into wine at Cana, but I have no doubt that it took place. There is in any case no question as to what is *possible* to divine omnipotence; it is only a question as to what is (as Thomas would say) *conveniens*. And we are concerned with what is, in the strict theological sense, a mystery; that it raises problems for the human intellect is not surprising. What is more important is that it should stimulate our wonder and our awe.

Closely connected with the above considerations is the question of the character and development of Christ's knowledge and especially of his awareness in the pre-natal state. It has always been accepted by Christian thinkers that consciousness is a function of the whole human being, with body and soul in intricate and reciprocal interaction, and it is in accordance with this view and not in opposition to it that one recognizes the importance of modern knowledge about the way in which mental and cerebral development go together. Catholic thinkers as different in their general outlook as Fr Karl Rahner and M. Jacques Maritain have felt obliged to face the implications of this knowledge for Christology, but I cannot do more than draw attention to the matter here. And when all has been said I would heartily endorse Fr Potter's judgment on the treatise: 'Whatever is transient and of a period long past is amply counterbalanced by the many insights which follow from the pervasive application of enduring principles at once theological and

anthropological' (p. xv).

Fr Potter's translation is readable and intelligible and the few notes and the five appendices are helpful. A few slips have been noted. P. 3, l. 7, 'question' should be 'first question'. P. 93, l. 5, 'divine and human nature' should be 'divine or human nature'. P. 96, l. 30, 'qui' should be 'quia'. P. 169, l. 36, something has gone wrong with the Greek of *prosopon*.

I have concentrated on a few points at length and have little space to express what I most want to say, namely that in its theological discussions, as distinct from the embryological, this treatise forms an admirable introduction to theological thinking and theological language, with its careful definition of terms and its conscientious drawing of distinctions, neither of which are too common in theological writing today. But it might perhaps be suggested that the Angelic Doctor was guilty of one of his rare lapses when he wrote that the magi were able to accomplish their journey swiftly 'owing partly to divine guidance and partly to the swiftness of their camels' (*partim. . . partim!*, III, xxxvi, 6 ad 3), implying a univocal view of primary and secondary causality which he would have well known how to deal with elsewhere!