

The Validity of the Virginal Conception Language in the Ecumenical Dialogue

INTRODUCTION

Everyday we pray "The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary. And she conceived of the Holy Spirit..."¹ Every Sunday we profess "I believe in Jesus Christ... who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary..."² Almost every Saturday we proclaim "...through the power of the Holy Spirit she became the Virgin mother of your Son..."³ And every feast of the Annunciation we hear "...the Virgin Mary, receiving the angel's message in faith, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit..."⁴ "She conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit" is the so-called virginal conception language. Positively, it means "Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit"; negatively, it means "Jesus was conceived without human seed." It is a language used to describe Jesus' conception, which is a Christian truth and a mystery.⁵

¹ From the Angelus.

² From the Apostles' Creed.

³ From the preface of the BVM I, which is said on the votive mass of Our Lady on Saturday in Ordinary Time.

⁴ From the preface of the Annunciation.

⁵ cf. Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). p. 12.

Although the New Testament,⁶ various creeds⁷ and the Magis-

⁶ While biblical scholars are unanimous that the virginal conception is explicitly taught in the infancy narratives of Matthew (1:18-25) and Luke (1:26-38), they are divided as regards the witness of the rest of the New Testament writings. A task force of Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars on one hand, "... thought that none of those texts (Mk. 6:3; Jn. 1:13; 6:42; 7:42; 8:41; Gal. 4:4) has anything to do with virginal conception." Raymond Brown et. al., (edd.), *Mary in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978, p. 289). On the other hand, some prominent exegetes held that the virginal conception is alluded to or implied in said texts. For instance:

P. Donnelly claims "There is nothing in the Pauline corpus which excludes the virginal conception. On the other hand, there is a probable allusion to it in Gal. 4:4... and... granted that the virginal conception is never mentioned explicitly in the gospel of Mark, it is never denied; rather it is implied throughout." "Our Lady's Virginité ante partum," *Marian Studies*, Vol. VII 1956, p. 27 and p. 30.

J. McHugh says "... it is false to say that the only witnesses of virginal conception are a handful of verses in the infancy gospel of Matthew and Luke. Jn. 1:13 is certainly an additional witness to the belief of the early Church... the texts of Gal. 4:4, Phil. 2:7 and Rom. 1:3 cannot simply be set aside as of no significance, when they are considered along with Matthew, Luke and John; when one recalls the joint travels of Luke and Paul, it is hard to believe that Paul never heard of the virginal conception." *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 276.

According to M. Miguens, "By way of a summary the following may be said, conflicting with the perspective of Mary's virginal conception in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, indeed, some significant agreements can be found." "Mary a Virgin? Silence in the New Testament," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, Vol. 75, 1975, p. 18.

Lastly, R. Laurentin is convinced that Gal. 4:4 refers to the virginal conception, because otherwise Paul would have used the natural expression "born of man"; that Jn. 1:13 proves the virginal conception. Cited by R. Brown in "More Polemical than Instructive: R. Laurentin on the Infancy Narratives," *Marianum*, Vol. 133, 1985, pp. 201-202.

⁷ In the West, belief in the virginal conception is expressed in two ways, with a variation in each:

- a. *Natus est de Spiritu Sancto ex (et) Maria Virgine.* ...Cf. the Writings of St. Peter Chrysologus, Remesian, St. Augustine, Pseudo-Augustine, St. Ildephonsus of Toledo (*Codex Laudinus, Missale et Sacramentarium Florentinum*).
 - b. *Conceptus de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex (de) Maria Virgine.* Cf. Old Gallican Symbol and Missal, St. Parminus, *Ordo Romae Baptismatis*.
- In the East it is expressed in three ways:
- a. Born of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit... Cf. Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus.
 - b. Became flesh from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Cf. Symbol of Epiphanius, Symbol of Constantinople.
 - c. *Homo factus est in unitate (miraculo) incomprehensibile per (de) Spiritum Suum Sanctum (Spiritu Sancto) ex Maria sancta virgine (et ex virgine Maria) sine semini virili...* Cf. Coptic rite.

The English texts are taken from J. Neuner & J. Dupuis (edd.), *The Christian Faith* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1983); the Latin texts from H. Denzinger & A. Schonmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (25th ed.: Freiburg, 1973).

terium⁸ speak consistently of this conception in terms of Jesus being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit or of Jesus being incarnated without human seed, some biblical scholars and theologians still pose the problem "is this virginal conception language valid?"⁹ In posing this problem they question, on one hand, its meaningfulness to modern believers, and, on the other hand, its aptness to describe what happened on annunciation day.

A. Is This Problem of Validity a Valid Problem?

Biblical scholars distinguish the language of the New Testament from the reality the language describes.¹⁰ The latter is cons-

⁸ As early as the second century Ignatius of Antioch took belief in the virginal conception for granted (cf. Smyrn. 1:1; Tral. 9:1; Eph. 7:2; 18:12; 19:1). Cited by L. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 205. Later in the same century St. Justin and St. Irenaeus described as heretical the Ebionites and Gnostics, who either saw Joseph as the natural father of Jesus or denied his true humanity and birth from Mary (Justin's Dialogue 43:66-68; Apologetics I; 33, Irenaeus Adv. Haer. II, 21). *loc. cit.*

Leo the Great, in preparation for the Council of Chalcedon, wrote "...she brought him forth without the loss of virginity, even as she conceived him without its loss." Denz 291, 294. In Pope John's II letter to the Senate of Constantinople it is affirmed that the Word himself became incarnate and deigned to be born of the virgin mother (cf. J. Neuner & J. Dupuis, *op. cit.*, ND 617). Later in 649, the Council of Lateran under Martin I anathemized anyone who denied that "holy Mary... ever virgin and immaculate... conceived in true reality, without human seed from the Holy Spirit, God the Word himself..." (ND 703). Then at the general council of Florence (1442), in the decree for the Jacobites we find the expression "... from the immaculate womb of the Virgin Mary" (ND 644), the word immaculate, in this context signifying "untouched by human intercourse." Pope Paul IV, in the constitution *Cum Quorundam Hominum* (1555) condemned explicitly the rationalist view that Christ "was not conceived from the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Blessed Mary ever virgin but, as other men, from the seed of Joseph..." (ND 707).

Vatican II reaffirmed the virginal conception (cf. LG 57 & 63). Shortly after the Council, when the Dutch Catechism of 1966 expressed itself ambiguously about virginal conception as a true historical and biological fact, Pope Paul VI responded with a letter in which he affirmed that the virginal conception of Christ is a dogma of the Catholic faith. (cf. E. Kevane, *Creed and Catechetics*, Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1978), p. 65. And the most authoritative magisterial statement of this doctrine since Vatican II is found in the Profession of Faith of Paul VI. which affirmed both the virginal conception (ND 39/4) and Mary's perpetual virginity (ND 39/7).

⁹ They don't discuss the problem directly, only indirectly, i.e., when they question the historicity of virginal conception. For that which is not historical is not true and meaningless. Therefore, the language used to describe it can be dropped or substituted.

¹⁰ This distinction is proximately supported by a statement of Vatican II in its dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation: "This economy of revelation is realized by deeds and word... As a result, the works performed by

tant, while the former is variable. Variable in the sense that it may be substituted without destroying the reality it points to, or when it cannot be substituted, it can be qualified.¹¹ In this problem, the reality is Jesus' conception and the language is virginal conception.

The language is variable because its relationship to reality is pedagogic and not essential.¹² When the language renders understanding of the reality difficult, if not impossible, then it can be substituted or qualified. In the search for a substitute or a qualification, theologians, with the aid of biblical criticism, should examine the real intent of the language, and determine whether such language still conveys said intent. If it does, then it is retained; if it does not, then a language which not only conveys said intent, but also is understandable to modern believers, is looked for. In the process of searching they should bear in mind these two principles:¹³

1. Long usage of a language does not make the terminology irreplaceable; it rather makes one cautious about change.
2. In replacing a terminology, what is determinative is the New Testament evidence, not the meaninglessness of the language to modern believers. When the New Testament evidence shows that the language is an "intrinsic part" of the reality, then the language should be retained even if it now ceases to be appealing to modern believers. For what matters most is

God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works and bring to light the mystery they contain" (Dei verbum 2); remotely supported by Pope John XXIII's statement at the opening of the Council: "The substance of the ancient doctrine of deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is described is another," quoted by William Reiser, *What are they saying about dogma?* (New York Paulist Press, 1978), p. 20. The same statement was repeated almost ad verbatim by the Council "... For the deposit and the truths of faith are one thing; the manner of expressing them is quite another" (Gaudium et spes 62).

¹¹ Although R. Brown speaks of this in his treatment of the problem of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, this is also applicable to the present problem. For both deal with the problem of historicity. cf. *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 72.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ These principles were drawn from the above-mentioned book of R. Brown by way of analysis, not as formulated by him. cf. *ibid.*

"What God has done to Jesus," not "what we think God should have done." Or, as Vatican II says, "This economy of revelation is realized by deeds and words, which are intrinsically bound up with each other" (Dei verbum 2).

B. Attitudes of Theologians to the Problem

Believing theologians¹⁴ approach the problem differently. These different approaches suggest different attitudes.

1. A negative attitude: some theologians, Catholics as well as Protestants, deny the virginal conception of Jesus as an historical fact and claim that it is a symbol pointing to other theological truths, for instance the divine sonship of Jesus.¹⁵ They hold that it was a powerful and even a necessary symbol in the past; but now it has outlived its purpose, it no longer speaks meaningfully to twentieth-century man, and may therefore be discarded.¹⁶ It should be replaced with a more eloquent concept to affirm that Jesus was exclusively the Son of God, was born wholly of grace and was the gift of God.¹⁷ In other words, this group proposes the dropping of the virginal conception language and its replacement by a more appropriate one.

2. An affirmative attitude: a number of Catholic scholars opt for the historicity of the virginal conception of Jesus¹⁸ and, therefore, propose for the retention of the language.

¹⁴ I said believing because while some of them, on one hand, accept the reality of Jesus' conception, not the how (virginal) of his conception, others, on the other hand, accept both. Or as J. Fitzmyer clearly puts it "Finally, it must be stressed that the exegetes and theologians who have been involved in the debate have not denied the virginal conception of Jesus; in fact, in many instances, they have not even questioned it..." "The Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament," *Theological Studies*, Vol. 34 1973, p. 528. Among them is R. Brown. He says, "I consistently invoke the authority of the Church to resolve the inadequacy of historical-critical exegesis in this subject (historicity or non-historicity of virginal conception), affirming as I do that in my view the virginal conception is a doctrine infallibly taught by the ordinary magisterium... I accept the Roman Catholic Marian faith and church dogma on Mary..." "More Polemical than Instructive..." *Marianum*, pp. 198-199.

¹⁵ cf. Anthony Tambasco, *What are they saying about Mary?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 20.

¹⁶ J. McHugh, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

¹⁷ Quoted by R. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Tambasco, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

3. A mythological attitude: some theologians consider the virginal conception language false. They consider Jesus' being virginally conceived as a mythological way of presenting the reality of Jesus' divine sonship to the non-Christian world. It was by this clear and attractive myth that the early Church was able to proclaim to non-Christians the ineffable mystery of the incarnation.¹⁹ Myths are born and die. So is the myth of the virginal conception. Thus, they insist that it be discarded altogether.

4. A theologoumenical attitude: in Germany, the virginal conception of Jesus in the infancy narratives is only a theologoumenon, i.e., it does not directly express a matter of faith or an official teaching of the Church and hence is in itself not normative; rather it expresses in language what may prescind from factuality, a notion which is related to a matter of faith. It is a theologoumenon because theologians consider it simply as a theological assertion in the infancy narratives which says nothing about the historical or biological aspect of what they affirm.²⁰ Thus, they argue for the retention of the virginal conception language as a theologoumenon, not as a matter of faith.

5. An open attitude: some exegetes hold that Scriptures leave the historicity of the virginal conception an open question, i.e., it could develop genuinely within the Christian dogmatic and theological tradition in one direction or another, that will not be decided on biblical evidence alone.²¹ They say "... the question of the historicity of the virginal conception could not be settled by historical-critical exegesis and that one's attitude towards Church tradition on the matter would probably be the decisive force in determining one's view..."²² Or as Raymond Brown concludes "... the scientifically controllable biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of virginal conception unresolved."²³

¹⁹ McHugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-328.

²⁰ Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, p. 528.

²¹ Tambasco, *loc. cit.*

²² R. Brown *et. al.* (edd.), *Mary in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 291-292.

²³ R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), p. 527. It is worth noting that R. Brown's treatment of the problem of virginal conception has three phases. The first phase was his inaugural lecture on November 18, 1971 at the Union Theological Seminary (N.Y.C.), which lecture was published in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 33, 1972. The second

They assert that the validity or non-validity of the virginal conception language depends not on biblical evidence but on Church's tradition.

C. The Position of Raymond Brown

Is the virginal conception language still valid? R. Brown says: "The relatively conservative conclusions I have drawn from the evidence, conclusions favoring the retention of the traditional formulations of virginal conception . . . will disappoint some Catholic liberals who may even wonder whether I studied the evidence without doctrinal predetermination."²⁴ In other words, he favors the retention of the virginal conception language. Yet he cautions his readers that ". . . the situation here is more ambiguous because of the very limited New Testament evidence and the need of more examination in the context of ecumenical scholarship."²⁵

This paper attempts to analyze from the point of view of a theologian the alleged ambiguity caused by the very limited New Testament evidence and to examine some aspects of the problem within the ecumenical context.

D. Ecumenical Significance of This Study

Dialogue is an intrinsic constituent of the ecumenical movement. And it involves self-understanding of one's faith. A part of this self-understanding is one's interpretation of other religions.

The World Council of Churches says:

"One of the functions of dialogue is to allow participants to describe and to witness their faith in their own terms. This is of primary importance since self-serving descriptions

was the publication of *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* in 1973. The third was the publication in 1977 of *The Birth of the Messiah*.

²⁴ R. Brown, *The Virginal Conception . . .*, p. 132. He seems to contradict his conclusion in saying this. But he does not. For he affirmed that his biblical studies led him to appreciate all the more the importance of a teaching church (*op. cit.*, p. 66) and that the Church teaches that the virginal conception is a "doctrinal infallibly taught by the ordinary magisterium" (*op. cit.*, p. 35). In making these affirmations, he thus resolved the open-ended question by clinging to the teaching of the church.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

of other peoples' faith are one of the roots of prejudice, stereotyping and condescension. Listening carefully to the neighbors' self-understanding enables Christians better to obey the commandment not to bear false witness against their neighbors . . ."²⁶

Thus a clear and sufficient knowledge (in the biblical sense) of one's faith is necessary for participants, Catholics as well as non-Catholics, in dialogue. This applies to the Christian faith in general and to Marian faith in particular.

As regards Marian faith, the virginal conception of Jesus is a problem. Some theologians and exegetes, Catholic as well as Protestant, question its historicity and in the process question the validity of the virginal conception language. Among the Catholic exegetes is Raymond Brown. His ecumenical involvement and his influence in the American Church is such that what he says about the problem of the virginal conception of Jesus forms other peoples' self-understanding about it.

Among other things this paper tries to show that the virginal conception language is still valid and therefore, it can be a material for discussion in the ecumenical dialogue.

This study is divided into:

1. An Analysis of the Conclusion of Raymond Brown
2. The Alleged Ambiguity of the New Testament
3. Conclusion

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONCLUSION OF RAYMOND BROWN

Raymond Brown is a noted Catholic biblical scholar. His being named by Paul VI to the Roman Pontifical Biblical Commission makes him belong to a class of scholars "outstanding for their learning, prudence and Catholic regard for the magisterium of the Church."²⁷ At present he is active in the ecumenical movement. And his fame and influence are such that his writings on

²⁶ World Council of Churches, "Ecumenical Considerations on the Jewish-Christian Dialogue," 1983, p. 3.

²⁷ Quoted from the backpage of *The Virginal Conception . . .*

different ecumenical, actual or potential, topics can mould a Catholic's understanding of his or her faith. Among these topics is the virginal conception of Jesus.

As I noted earlier, one can discern three stages in R. Brown's treatment of the problem of the virginal conception.²⁸ To these stages corresponds a three-fold development of his position.²⁹ In his inaugural lecture in 1972, he concluded "...the totality of the scientifically controlled evidence leaves an unresolved problem."³⁰ This was written in plain prints. On the following year, when it was republished in book form with additions in some sections,³¹ the phrase "scientifically controllable" was italicized.³² And in 1977 when he published *The Birth of the Messiah*, his concluding remarks read as follows: "...the scientifically controllable biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of virginal conception unresolved."³³ Here two changes are glaring: the omission of the word "totality" – which was present in the first two stages – and the insertion of the word "biblical" – which was previously absent. Due to this discernible three-fold development, one can legitimately raise a number of questions: why is the phrase "scientifically controllable" italicized? Why is the word "totality" deleted? Why is the word "biblical" added?

A. The "Scientifically Controllable" Evidence

One of the contemporary philosophies which has an impact on Catholic theology is phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical methodology dealing with how to know the truth.

Its three major tenets are:³⁴

1. Presuppositionless thought: in order to know the truth, the mind must be cleared of all its inherited ideas, all its pre-

²⁸ Cf. footnote n. 23.

²⁹ His conclusion is always the same: the problem of the virginal conception is an unresolved problem. But its formulation changes: change in emphasis and change by addition and subtraction.

³⁰ R. Brown, "The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus, *Theological Studies*, Vol. 33 1972, p. 33.

³¹ Cf. *The Virginal Conception...*, p. 21.

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

³³ *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 527.

³⁴ From the unpublished notes of Fr. A. Wilder, O.P. on "The Influence of Contemporary Philosophy on Theology," 1985-1986.

conceived ideas. Failure to do so means failure to reach intellectual maturity.

2. Attend to the evidence: once the mind has been cleared of foreign thoughts, one must pay attention to what he immediately sees; what one immediately sees is that which presents in itself to the knower. All the rest he must disregard.
3. Eidetic reductions: one must look for the essence, not the existence, of what he immediately sees.

Undoubtedly Raymond Brown is influenced by phenomenology. Otherwise, he would not have subjected the virginal conception of Jesus to a scientific-critical investigation. He claimed to be successful in examining the scientifically controllable evidence. Thus, he concluded that the problem of the virginal conception is an unresolved issue. Not only his conclusion but also the fact that he called to question the virginal conception caused a major stir.

That Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, without the intervention of a man is a clear and consistent Church's teaching over the centuries and to the present.³⁵ It is a matter of faith. It is within the realm of faith. As such, it can never be subjected to scientific investigation. Much less, it can be considered as scientifically controllable.

R. Brown seemed to recognized this. For, he had the phrase "scientifically controllable" italicized. It meant that he did not examine the faith itself; rather, through the use of the phenomenological method, he examined critically various evidences: from authority, from interlocking doctrines, from early history and from the Scriptures.³⁶ In other words, he dealt with the problem objectively, without any inherited ideas, without any preconceived notions, i.e., in the same manner phenomenology searches for truth. In using the phenomenological method, however, he could be accused (in fact, he was) of doubting, even not believing in, the virginal conception. This accusation is legitimate, especially for one who is familiar with the phenomenological method.

³⁵ Cf. footnote n. 7 & 8.

³⁶ Cf. *The Virginal Conception...*, pp. 31-66.

The first step of the phenomenological method is to clear the mind of everything. And everything includes one's set of religious beliefs. Wherefore Heidegger said, "A theologian cannot be a philosopher; a theologian cannot be intellectually mature. For he always maintains his faith."³⁷ Thus, when a theologian starts questioning the faith, the usual remark is "he is wavering," "he is drifting away from the faith." But, is this true? In all cases?

To answer the question, one must distinguish formality in questioning from formality in doubting. It is impossible to doubt everything; but, it is not impossible to question everything. Thus, the formality in questioning does not necessarily include the formality in doubting. For instance, one asks whether God exists. He asks not because he does not know the answer. Perhaps, or even in fact, he knows. He asks not because he doubts, but because he wants to clarify his beliefs. If this distinction is legitimate, then a theologian can question the faith without in any moment deliberately doubting the faith. R. Brown belongs to this category. For although he called in question the virginal conception, he professed openly "... I accept the Roman Catholic Marian faith and Church dogma on Mary ..."

B. The "Totality" of Scientifically controllable "Biblical" Evidence

Three of the criticisms hurled against R. Brown's treatment of the virginal conception are: he was selective in his sources,³⁸ he did not consider Tradition and the teachings of the Magisterium as scientifically controllable,³⁹ and he had a *sola scriptura* type of mentality.⁴⁰ Indeed he examined various evidences, scriptural or otherwise. Yet, his attention seemed to focus on the scriptural evidence.⁴¹ For he said in the epilogue, "Nor do I think that modern *biblical* study favors abandoning the idea of a virginal conception, although the situation here is more ambiguous because

³⁷ Cited by Fr. Wilder in his notes.

³⁸ George Kelly, *The New Biblical Theorists* (Ann Harbor, Michigan: Servant Book, 1983), p. 50.

³⁹ G. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁰ G. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁴¹ There is an obvious disparity in his treatment of the different evidences: seven pages were devoted to evidence from authority, nine pages from evidence from early history and fifteen pages from evidence from Scriptures.

of the very limited *New Testament* evidence... *Scripturally* I judge that it is harder to explain the tradition about virginal conception..."⁴² (the italics is mine). This seemed to be more a fact than a conjecture. For in 1977 he dropped the word "totality" from, and inserted the word "biblical" in his conclusion.

Or perhaps, in 1977 he had a deeper perception of what *Dei verbum* says in n. 9: "... that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the Sacred Scriptures alone," i.e., aside from the Scriptures, she has also Sacred Tradition. Or perhaps, he already admitted that Sacred Scriptures is not the only scientifically controllable evidence. There are others.

Either or/and seems to be the case. For, in his latest statement on this matter he said, "I consistently invoke the authority of the Church to resolve the inadequacy of the historical-critical exegesis on this subject, affirming as I do that in my view the virginal conception is a doctrine infallibly taught by the ordinary magisterium."⁴³ He said substantially the same thing thirteen years ago; but, it was not as clear and explicit as quoted above. He said then:

"In particular, as a Roman Catholic whose biblical studies have led him to appreciate all the more the importance of a teaching Church, I cannot resolve the problem independently of the question of authority raised in Section II. I am not afraid that an honest discussion of the virginal conception will lead to a traumatic choice between fidelity to modern exegesis and fidelity to a teaching Church, provided that both the Bible and tradition are subjected to intelligent historical criticism to find out exactly what was meant and to the degree to which it was affirmed..."⁴⁴

In summary, the following can be stated:

1. There is a discernible three-fold evolution in R. Brown's treatment of the problem of virginal conception.
2. This three-fold evolution is marked by a change of emphasis, i.e., italicization of the phrase "scientifically con-

⁴² *The Virginal Conception...*, p. 132.

⁴³ R. Brown, *Marianum*, pp. 198-199.

⁴⁴ *The Virginal Conception...*, pp. 66-67.

trollable," by the omission of the word "totality" and the insertion of the word "biblical." The emphasis on "scientifically controllable" betrays the influence of the phenomenological method; the dropping out of "totality" and the addition of "biblical" imply that not only Sacred Scriptures, but also others, is a scientifically controllable evidence.

3. Among these other scientifically controllable evidences is Sacred Tradition.

THE ALLEGED AMBIGUITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The primary reason why "scientifically controllable biblical evidence" leaves the problem of the virginal conception unresolved is the alleged ambiguity of the New Testament. Seemingly, this alleged ambiguity is due proximately to the silence of the rest of the New Testament writings and remotely, to the use of the Vincentian canon.⁴⁵

A. The Silence of the Rest of the New Testament

It has been pointed out that, aside from the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, no New Testament writings speak of the virginal conception. Although this is a disputed statement,⁴⁶ let us grant, for the sake of argument, that it is so. What then does the silence mean? They say that the inspired writers either do not know about it or reject it.⁴⁷ Rejection, surely, is out of the question. For no inspired writer explicitly or even implicitly speak against it.⁴⁸ Ignorance is a possibility;⁴⁹ but, its contrary, i.e., knowledge, is also possible.⁵⁰ Is there another alternative? There is: they know about it, yet they still remain silent about it.

It is possible that for some time the virginal conception could have been unknown to the first Christians. That this was so was

⁴⁵ This seems implied in this statement of R. Brown: "What the silence calls into question is the theory that the memory of the virginal conception was handed down by the family of Jesus to the apostolic preachers and was *universally* accepted as a fundamental Christian belief." (the italics is mine) *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 521.

⁴⁶ Cf. footnote 6.

⁴⁷ Brown, *The Virginal Conception . . .*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ Cf. footnote 6: *The Virginal Conception . . .*, pp. 56-60.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

certainly a part of God's plan. Thus, one of the traditional reasons assigned to Mary's marriage to Joseph was to conceal from the world and from the devil the mystery of the incarnation and also the mystery of His virginal conception.⁵¹ Jesus himself guarded closely the intimate details of his human origin. He knew well that he was called the son of Joseph,⁵² but never explained that Joseph was merely his foster father. The precise manner of his human origin was one of those truths which would have hindered rather than helped the foundation of the kingdom. During his earthly life, the virginal conception would naturally remain a secret. To have spoken of it would have given rise only to slander and misunderstanding. Therefore, it would be quite understandable if the first Christians generally were unaware of it, that the New Testament writers generally, although they knew about it, were silent about it.⁵³

Therefore, belief in the virginal conception of Jesus would not suffer the least, if it were known only late in the first century (date in which the infancy narratives were written). What is actually untenable is the insinuation that the first Christians were taught positively contrary to the virginal conception by the hagiographers of the New Testament.

B. The Vincentian Canon

Related to the alleged silence of the rest of the New Testament writings is the claim that the virginal conception was not universally accepted as a fundamental Christian belief. Therefore, it is false. For, if it were held by all of the churches, then it would have been mentioned at least implicitly, if not, explicitly, by other hagiographers, especially Paul and Mark. It seems that this conclusion is based on an application of the Vincentian Canon.

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scriptures are the two bulwarks of the Catholic faith against heresies. Although, in itself, Sacred Scriptures is a sufficient norm for truth, the very existence of a variety of interpretations requires the need for recourse to an ex-

⁵¹ P. Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁵² Cf. Lk. 2:48; 4:22; Jn. 6:42.

⁵³ P. Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

ternal norm, namely, Sacred Tradition.⁵⁴ This norm is to be identified with what has been "believed everywhere, always and by everyone" (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*).⁵⁵ This is the Vincentian Canon.⁵⁶

There is a great discussion concerning the theological validity of this Canon.⁵⁷ John Henry Newman remarked that the Canon hardly "yields any satisfactory result. The solution it offers is as difficult as the original problem."⁵⁸ H. Beck opined that the Canon is "true in the affirmative sense, but not in the exclusive sense because of the development of dogma: there are Catholic truths today which have not ever, everywhere and by all been explicitly believed in the past."⁵⁹ And Gerald O'Collins said that the Canon "may not function too well as a total entity and the separable elements of 'always', 'everywhere', and 'by everyone' may have to set on their own or as pairs rather than as a triad."⁶⁰ We accept the last opinion.

O'Collins is saying that "always, everywhere and by everyone" should be taken disjunctively not conjunctively. He says:

"... the three elements ... are not only distinguishable but also separable, as Vincent of Lerins himself realized. On the one hand, he knew that Arianism had spread very widely and so he could only invoke antiquity (always) but not universality (everywhere) against that heresy. On the other hand, Donatism may have won a broad following in Christian Africa, but it remained geographically confined. Hence, Vincent appeal-

⁵⁴ Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977). Also H. G. J. Beck, "St. Vincent Lerins," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967), p. 681.

⁵⁵ Quoted by J. Kelly, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Gerald O'Collins mentioned that the Canon is "to a degree a Christianized version of the ancient argument from universality, antiquity and consent." This fact, however, does not make the Canon "automatically and totally wrong." It still has validity as long as one bears this in mind: Christian theology always modifies concepts and principles it takes over from philosophy. Cf. *Fundamental Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 214.

⁵⁷ J. Tixeront, *History of Dogmas*, (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1984), p. 319.

⁵⁸ Quoted by G. O'Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

⁵⁹ H. Beck, *op. cit.*, p. 682.

⁶⁰ G. O'Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 682.

ed to universality (everywhere) but not consent (everyone) against the Donatists."⁶¹

It is also clear from O'Collins that the elements should be taken in a qualified sense, not literal sense. What did he mean precisely, he did not elaborate. He quoted Newman who summed up this problem:

"What is meant by being taught 'always'? Does it mean in every country, or in every diocese? And does the 'consent' of Fathers require us to produce the testimony of every one of them? How many Fathers, how many places, how many instances constitute a fulfillment of the test proposed"?⁶²

This valid observation then leads us to establish only part of the test proposed. Thus, we might establish antiquity (always) without universality (everywhere) and consent (everywhere). Or, we might establish universality without antiquity and consent. Or again we might demonstrate consent but cannot do the same for antiquity and universality.

As regards the virginal conception, the case here is antiquity and consent, but without universality. Consent: the witness of the Fathers to it is unanimous and unquestioned.⁶³ Antiquity: various creeds speak of it.⁶⁴ But, seemingly not all the churches believe in it, especially the communities of Paul, Mark and John, i.e., without universality. The absence of universality, however, does not make the belief in the virginal conception of Jesus false. For its truth is proved by antiquity and consent.

Therefore, the alleged ambiguity of the New Testament can be clarified. For the silence of the rest of the New Testament

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁶³ Cf. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 205. Javier de Abarzuza, *Teología del Dogma Católico* (Madrid: Studium, 1966), p. 298. L.G. Owens, "Virgin Birth," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 693.

⁶⁴ Cf. footnote n. 7. They establish antiquity because, although they were a powerful reason against heresies, they had a continuous history since the Church's inauguration and their formulations did not materially differ from that current in the church of the apostolic age. Cf. J. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1952), pp. 97-98. The Christological formulae (to which the virginal conception belongs) carried on the ancient kerygma which had played an important role in the apostolic times. Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 94.

inspired writers may imply knowledge of the virginal conception. Only that they did not speak about it or allude to it because to do so, would hinder rather than help the spread of the kingdom of God. That it was so was part of God's plan.

The alleged ambiguity can also be clarified by a proper understanding of the Vincentian Canon. Its elements: always (antiquity), everywhere (universality) and by everyone (consent) are to be taken disjunctively, not conjunctively. Thus, although the virginal conception has not been believed everywhere, nonetheless it has been believed always and by everyone. This we know from Sacred Tradition.

C. The Importance of Sacred Tradition to Virginal Conception

In our analysis of the conclusion of R. Brown, we said that, aside from Sacred Scriptures, there are other scientifically controllable evidences. One of them is Sacred Tradition. We stated earlier that, due to a variety of interpretations of Sacred Scriptures, Sacred Tradition is necessary. This norm is identified with "what had been believed always, everywhere and by everyone." We brought this out in order to emphasize the importance of Sacred Tradition in demonstrating the truth of the virginal conception in particular and other Marian dogmas in general.

Sacred Tradition too contains in its fullness the one divine revelation. Or, as *Dei verbum* puts it: "The Church does not draw her certainty about revealed truths from the Sacred Scriptures alone" (n. 9). For, Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scriptures are identical in content; both are vehicles of one revelation. Or again as *Dei verbum* puts it: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scriptures make up a single deposit of the word of God" (n. 10). Sacred Tradition is a more trustworthy guide, so to speak, not because it comprises truths other than those revealed in Sacred Scriptures, but because the true tenor of the apostolic message is there unambiguously set out.⁶⁵ Thus, Vatican II exhorts us to accept and honor both Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scriptures with equal feelings and devotion and reverence.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ J. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 39.

⁶⁶ *Dei Verbum*, n. 9.

This, however, is easier said than done. Seemingly, Protestants still cling to their *sola Scriptura*,⁶⁷ and Catholics to either two-source theory or one-source theory but with two modes of transmission. Although Protestants recently appear to open themselves to "tradition of the churches"⁶⁸ and Catholics seem to favor the one-source theory, the problem of relationship between Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scriptures is far from over. Some important questions still need to be addressed and to be answered: what do we mean by Sacred Tradition? In what does it consist? Is there such a thing as "normative tradition?"⁶⁹ Does tradition provide a more explicit and complete expression of divine revelation than Sacred Scriptures, since Sacred Tradition can be the determining factor in some cases for arriving at an exact knowledge and understanding of what has been revealed?⁷⁰ These and other problems related to Sacred Tradition must be discussed in the ecumenical dialogue. And they should be discussed first before discussing the Marian dogmas. For the author is convinced that the role and witness of Sacred Tradition is very relevant in dealing with Mary in the ecumenical dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Shall we still continue praying "The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary. And she conceived of the Holy Spirit?" Shall we continue professing every Sunday "I believe in Jesus Christ . . . who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary?" Shall we continue proclaiming every Saturday "... through the power of the Holy Spirit, she became the virgin mother of your Son?" And shall we continue hearing every feast of the Annunciation "... The Virgin Mary . . . conceived by the

⁶⁷ H. George Anderson and others (edd.), *Justification by Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 71.

⁶⁸ Cf. R. Brown and others (edd.), *Mary in the New Testament*, p. 292.

⁶⁹ This normative tradition is described as the standard against which other traditions could be judged: as the basis on which the traditions inherited from the apostolic age were written. The written result is Sacred Scriptures. Cf. Johannes Feiner & L. Vischner, *The Common Catechism, A Book of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 555-557.

⁷⁰ This question was raised during Vatican II, but was not touched upon. Cf. Ralph Wiltgen, *The Rhine flows into the Tiber. A History of Vatican II* (Devon: Augustine Publishing House, 1979), p. 180.

power of the Spirit?" Indeed we can and we should. For the virginal conception language is still valid. There are other scientifically controllable evidences, aside from Sacred Scriptures. Among them most importantly is Sacred Tradition to which is accorded the same feelings of devotion and reverence given to Sacred Scriptures. For both form one sacred deposit of the word of God.

Indeed we can and we should. For the alleged ambiguity of the New Testament is not insuperable. The New Testament inspired writers, aside from Matthew and Luke, are silent about the virginal conception of Jesus not because they reject it, not because they do not know about it, but because they know about it. Only that prudence dictated that they should remain silent. For to act otherwise would be to hinder the growth of the kingdom. That this was so was a plan of God.

Indeed we can and we should. For the alleged ambiguity can be clarified through a proper understanding of the Vincentian Canon. The element of "always, everywhere and by everyone" must be taken disjunctively, not conjunctively. Thus, although the virginal conception was not believed "everywhere" (the silence of the rest of the New Testament writings proves this as alleged), nonetheless, it was believed "always" and "by everyone". This is clear from the testimony of the creeds and the Fathers, which are organs of Sacred Tradition.⁷¹

Therefore, Sacred Tradition plays an important role in establishing the truth of the virginal conception or other Marian truths for that matter. Thus, it is recommended that the topic "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scriptures" be included in the ecumenical dialogue. And it should be dealt with first, before talking about Marian dogmas. In this way, Mary's prophecy "that all generations will call me blessed" will gradually become a reality.

God speed that day.

RUBEN CORPUZ, O.P.
University of Santo Tomas
Manila

⁷¹ Cf. de Abarzuza, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

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