

Immaculate Conception after Scotus

Scotistic Mariology from Scotus to the Dogma of 1854.
The formation of a Mariological Tradition based on the Immaculate Conception.

In my previous paper, I summarised the contribution of the Blessed John Duns Scotus to the debate on the Immaculate Conception.¹ Le Bachelet points out that the influence of Scotus was powerful and efficacious because of the manner in which he simplified and clarified the debate. In consequence:

The work of the following centuries consisted principally in putting into relief the fittingness of the privilege, and in confirming its existence through the study and use of the positive elements of the dogma, found wrapped up in the Sacred Scriptures and the ancient tradition.²

It is this work of the following centuries with which we are now concerned. During this period, the “pious belief” in the Immaculate Conception gradually became accepted in theology and was finally declared by Blessed Pius IX as a dogma of the faith; in parallel, the celebration of the feast became universal and its object was specified as the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady and not her “sanctification” or simply the event of the conception of the Mother of God.

After Scotus, the doctrine gains ground

In the years immediately after the exposition of the doctrine by the Blessed John Duns Scotus, that is to say, the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, the Dominicans tended by and large to follow the teaching of their great masters in rejecting the doctrine. Among the theologians themselves, the opinions were expressed with moderation. An important question was whether the Blessed Virgin could be said to have been redeemed if she had not contracted original sin. Some Dominicans, for example Durandus of Saint-Pourçain, held that she could be said to have been redeemed but preserved from original sin; but that it was not fitting for this to be so. Hence

¹ Finigan, T. “Belief in and Devotion to the Immaculate conception in Medieval England.” In *Mary at the Foot of the Cross V*. (Acts of the Fifth International Symposium on Marian Coredeemption. Worth Abbey 2004.) Academy of the Immaculate. New Bedford MA. 2005. pp 344-359.

² Le Bachelet, X. “Immaculée Conception.” In Vacant, A., Mangenot, E. & Amann, E. *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*. Paris. Letouzey et Ané 1932. Vol 7 part 1. Col 1077

we are still here dealing with the steps of the argument “*decurit, potuit, ergo et fecit*” with the Dominicans denying one or other of the three steps.

(As I mentioned previously, the argument “*decurit, potuit, ergo et fecit*” was not the simplistic devotional “tour de force” for which it is sometimes mistaken but an outline of the structure of the argument that Scotus built in defence of the doctrine.³)

There were exceptions among the Dominicans, notably John Tauler and John Bromiard, who argued from St Thomas in favour of the doctrine. St Vincent Ferrer spoke in glowing terms of the privilege of Mary as possessing the highest degree of sanctification. However, his expression does not allow us to count him among the supporters of the doctrine since he spoke of her sanctification “in the same day and hour” in which her body and soul were formed. This expression is ambiguous on precisely the point at issue: whether Mary was sanctified at the same instant as her conception or immediately afterwards.

Generally in the first half of the 14th century, the doctrine received considerable opposition from theologians at Paris including, in their private teaching, those who were to become Avignon Popes, John XXII, Benedict XII and Clement VI. During the course of the century, however, especially among the Franciscans, Carmelites and Augustinians, the doctrine gradually gained ground though not without some initial opposition.

The Franciscans in general supported the doctrine although there were also exceptions among them to the general position of the Order, for example Bertrand de la Tour, and Alvarus Pelagius.

From those who supported the doctrine, we should note some significant developments. Peter Aureolus moved from defending the possibility and fittingness of the doctrine to asserting that it could be held without danger of error, provided that there was no contrary decision from the Church. Following him, several other Franciscan

³ Cf. Finigan *op cit*. p355

doctors provided for the gradual acceptance of the “pious belief” until by the end of the 14th century, it had become the common teaching of the Franciscans.

Initially, the Carmelites expressed reservations about the doctrine, though with moderation. For example Guy of Perpignan:

This opinion would please me much, on account of reverence for the Blessed Virgin, unless the authorities of the canons and the Saints would oppose it.⁴

In his earlier writing, John Bacon said that the doctrine went beyond the boundaries of proper devotion to Our Lady and was too adulatory. Later he changed his mind on the question and after him, the doctrine also became common teaching among the Carmelites.

A similar process happened in the case of the Augustinians. A major influence here was Thomas of Strasbourg who taught the doctrine at Paris and later became Prior General of the Order, following which, his opinion became decisive.

Condemnation of an opponent

The moderation which characterised opposition to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in the first half of the fourteenth century gave way to a more aggressive approach in the latter years of the century which were marked by a significant controversy which had important consequences for the acceptance of the doctrine.

In June 1378, John of Monzon proposed a number of theses at Paris attacking the doctrine as heretical. Among these, were the following, for example:

It is expressly against the faith to say that the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God did not contract original sin.

It is more expressly against sacred scripture to say that the Blessed Virgin was not conceived in original sin than to say that she was also at the same time both blessed and on earth (*simul beatricem et viatorem*) from the instant of her conception and sanctification.

John of Monzon claimed authority from St Thomas for his view that the doctrine of the immaculate conception was heretical.

⁴ Guy of Perpignan. *Quodlibet*. 1.3.14. (Quoted by Le Bachelet, col 1082.)

At Paris, theologians had been given the liberty to hold either view provided that they showed respect for the “pious belief” in the Immaculate Conception. Hence, after examination, the theses of John of Monzon were declared by the faculty of theology to be false, scandalous, presumptuously affirmed, and offensive to pious ears. The author was required to retract them. In making this declaration, the theologians did not affirm either theological opinion – it was the rashness and offensive character of John of Monzon’s theses that were the focus of condemnation.

John of Monzon appealed to the Archbishop of Paris who confirmed the condemnation and forbade anyone to hold or teach the propositions under pain of excommunication. John made a further appeal to the papal court at Avignon but, realising that he was unlikely to succeed, fled to Aragon and changed to the Roman obedience.

At Paris, the result of the controversy was to give greater impetus to the already growing support for the doctrine as theologians vied with each other to defend it. This is a phenomenon that we see repeated in subsequent centuries; as the doctrine was attacked, those who defended it advanced in the skill and depth of their presentation of the doctrine. An important event in this growth was the sermon of Gerson in 1401 on the theme *Tota pulchra es amica mea*, in which he gave a powerful devotional exposition of the doctrine which influenced later writers on the theme, notable Bossuet.

At Aragon, John of Monzon had the support of the inquisitor, Eymeric who was vigorously opposed to Raymond Lull. One of the propositions of Lull that he attempted to condemn as heretical was his acceptance of the Immaculate Conception. The theologians who defended Lull’s teaching were greatly helped by the declaration of King John I of Aragon that he believed in the doctrine and, after his death, a similar declaration from his successor, Martin I. At the same time, the Franciscans argued vigorously and convincingly in favour of the doctrine. The extreme opposition only helped to further theological writing in favour of the Immaculate Conception.

Growth of the feast in the 14th century

The growth in acceptance of the doctrine by theologians was paralleled by the growth in devotion to the Immaculate Conception and the

celebration of the feast. During the fourteenth century, the feast was introduced into the Carmelite, Carthusian and Servite calendars among others, and indeed, into the Dominican calendar towards the end of the century, both in the Roman and Avignonese obedience.

At a council held at London under Archbishop Mepham, the feast was made obligatory for the ecclesiastical province of Canterbury in 1328 and the province of York followed soon after.

Throughout Europe, in documents of the councils of the period and in contemporaneous breviaries, for example, there is evidence that the feast was becoming universal.

Before the fourteenth century, a liturgical argument against the feast was that it was not celebrated at the Pontifical Court. It is thought that the feast was introduced to the Pontifical Court at Avignon after having been celebrated during the temporary sojourn of the court at Anagni towards the end of the thirteenth century. In the course of the controversy during the next century, it was made clear that although the pontifical court did not celebrate the feast, it permitted the celebration widely elsewhere and did not condemn it. The feast also became a more fixed part of the calendar of the pontifical court later in the century.

It is important to understand that at this time, the feast was celebrated both by those who accepted the Immaculate Conception and by those who opposed it. For the former group, the feast was considered to celebrate the sanctification of Mary after her conception. Hence for example, in a Dominican breviary of the period, one of the antiphons for the feast of the “Sanctification of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary” read:

Fusca fit conceptione
Maria sed citius
Ex divina sanctione
Formosa fit plenius⁵

During the fourteenth century, various liturgical texts developed, increasingly giving weight to the immaculist position, though sometimes being left ambiguous – allowing the “pious belief” but also giving room for a contrary theological position.

⁵ Cf Le Bachelet, col 1103 “Mary was made dark by conception but very quickly, by divine decree, she was made more fully beautiful.”

The case of the Carthusians is an interesting example. In the General Chapter of 1333, the Prior of Luvigny was given permission to celebrate the feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin in place of the feast of the Sanctification. A few years later, perhaps in deference to the great Carthusian theologian, Ludolph of Saxony, who did not accept the doctrine, the feast was spoken of as the “sanctification”. However, this was short-lived and within a few further years, the feast of the “conception” became universal within the Order.

There is also a fourteenth century Carmelite Missal at the *Ambrosiana* at Milan which contains, as an insertion at the end of the book, a Mass for the Immaculate Conception with the following prayer:

Deus qui per immaculatam nimis virginis
Mariae conceptionem dignum filio tuo
habitaculum praeparasti: concede quaesumus;
ut sicut ex morte eiusdem Filii tui praevisa eam
ab omni labe praeservasti, ita nos quoque
mundos eius intercessione ad te pervenire
concedas. Per eumdem...⁶

This prayer, remarkably close to the prayer that is currently in use, illustrates the liturgical development that went side-by-side with the acceptance of the doctrine. It is notable that the development was an organic one, growing slowly and tentatively together with theological understanding and popular devotion. The importance given to the “pious belief” of the faithful was probably as much an influence on the development of liturgical texts as the technical discussions of theologians, although both were important.

The Council of Basle

During the council, begun at Basle in 1431, the Carmelite John of Segovia, and the Dominican John of Torquemada, published opposing works concerning both the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the feast.

John of Segovia argued strongly for both the feast and the doctrine, drawing evidence from various sources. His work has been faulted for relying on the Scotist view of the incarnation and for

⁶ Mgr Battandier “Messe de l’Immaculée Conception au XIV^e siècle” in *Notre Dame*. Paris 1945. p 45. Cited by Le Bachelet, col 1106

establishing a position that would not require Our Lady to be redeemed. Regarding the feast, he argued from its observance at the pontifical court.

John of Torquemada presented the classical Thomist objections, arguing that all men except Christ were subject to original sin, and that the feast should be that of the sanctification.

Those bishops who were left at Basle in 1438 declared in favour of the celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception on the eighth of December and that the doctrine was “pious, consonant with Catholic worship, Catholic faith, right reason, and Holy Scripture.” They also stated that it was henceforth illicit to preach or teach the contrary.

The Council of Basle was called in order to counter abuses but ended by challenging the authority of the Holy See and was effectively schismatic. Nevertheless, the affirmations regarding the Immaculate Conception were among its more happy acts and they remained influential in subsequent centuries. It may be regarded as marking an end to the theological question of whether the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception could properly be held by Catholic theologians – a question which it answered resoundingly in the affirmative.

Growth in the celebration and acceptance of the doctrine

Between the Council of Basle and the end of the eighteenth century, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was asserted with greater vigour, the feast was celebrated more widely and, eventually throughout the universal Church, and the object of the feast was more precisely determined. The magisterium of the Church intervened both to affirm the doctrine and to keep theological and devotional movements within the due limits of sound teaching.

We can identify three particular events as of major importance and they will serve as a structure for our summary of this period. Pope Sixtus IV in 1477 gave official approval to the feast of the Immaculate Conception; in 1667, Alexander VII determined the object of the feast; and in 1708, Clement XI made the feast obligatory throughout the Church.

After the Council of Basle, a number of leading figures promoted the doctrine. The decrees of the

Council concerning the Immaculate Conception were enforced at the Provincial Council in Avignon in 1457 with the penalty of excommunication for advancing the contrary. Queen Mary of Aragon, acting as regent for her husband Alfonso V who was away at war in Italy, in 1439 confirmed the same decrees, having reproved the excessive language of the Dominican theologians who had opposed the Immaculate Conception.

In Germany, Gabriel Biel, professor at Tübingen, affirmed the doctrine in a celebrated series of four sermons but also in his commentary on the Sentences. He sensibly defended St Thomas from blame for not affirming the doctrine, pointing out that he had not the benefit of a decision from a Council or from the Apostolic See. Biel in this way offered a reasonable approach for those who were devoted to St Thomas but also wished to maintain the privilege. Today perhaps we would recognise more easily that an author cannot be accused of negligence by the standards of a later age of theological development.

Also commenting on the Sentences, Denys the Carthusian said that the Council of Basle had put an end to discussion on the matter of Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception. The Carthusian order as a whole withdrew from the position of compromise and accepted the doctrine in the new redaction of its statutes at the General Chapter of 1470, stating significantly:

Festum gloriose Virginis Mariae, quod sollemniter celebratur sextus idus Decembris, amodo per totum ordinem celebretur sub nomine conceptionis, iuxta determinationem ecclesiae, statuto non obstante de sanctificatione mentionem faciente.⁷

In Italy, St Lawrence Justinian promoted the doctrine in various ascetical works and in his sermon on the Annunciation. An even greater champion was St Bernadine of Siena. Beginning with the text “Nondum errant abyssi et ego iam conceptus eram” (Prov 8.24), he argued for the eternal predestination of the Blessed Virgin as the

⁷ “The feast of the glorious Virgin Mary, which is solemnly celebrated on the eighth of December should now be celebrated throughout the whole Order under the name of the conception, according to the determination of the church, notwithstanding the statute which makes mention of sanctification.” (Cited in Le Bachelet, col 1116.)

Mother of the Incarnate Word and then proceeded to argue for the Immaculate Conception under the traditional headings of its possibility, its fittingness and its actuality. For the latter, his work offered a stylised and perhaps artificial proof from the seven seals of the apocalypse, citing seven saints, seven Franciscan doctors, seven miracles, seven Old Testament figures and so on. The oratorical device was well suited to exciting devotion and supporting belief in the doctrine and was effective in achieving its aim.

At this time, the emphasis of liturgical texts became more solidly Immaculist. One example from the Carthusian House at Cologne reads:

Sicut tres pueros Dominus protexit ab igne
Sic prorsus matrem macula praeservat ab omni
Et sicut Moysi rubus ardens non fuit ustus
Sic nec primorum vitiis est lapsa parentum⁸

At the Vatican Museum, a Franciscan breviary is preserved “*secundum consuetudinem romanae curiae*” in which, at the end of the Benedictus antiphon for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, notes:

Que in generali concilio confirmata celebratur
per multa ecclesie loca⁹

The developments of this period serve to underline the fact that although with historical hindsight we can judge the Council of Basle to have been schismatic, nevertheless, its affirmation of the Immaculate Conception was received as authoritative and as a final decision establishing that it was proper to believe in the Immaculate Conception.

During the second half of the fifteenth century, the Dominican theologian Vincent Bandinelli wrote extensively against the doctrine, using the established arguments concerning the universality of sin and redemption. He proposed the thesis that it was impious to hold that the Blessed Virgin was not conceived in original sin.

⁸ “As the Lord protected the three boys from the fire, so, even more he preserved his mother from every stain; and as the burning bush of Moses was not consumed, so nor did she fall by the vices of our first parents.” (cited in Le Bachelet, col 1119)

⁹ “Which, confirmed in a general council, is celebrated in many places in the church.” Vatican library MS Lat 4761 (cited in Le Bachelet col 1120)

The reigning pope, Sixtus IV, was himself a Franciscan and organised, probably in 1475, a public disputation on the question. Afterwards, the Franciscan Leonard of Nogarole composed an office for the feast day which very clearly affirmed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. In the Constitution *Cum Praeexcelsa* of 1477, Pope Sixtus IV affirmed that it was “fitting, even a duty” that the faithful should attend Masses and other divine offices to give praise and thanks to God for “the wonderful conception of this Immaculate Virgin.”¹⁰

Despite this, Vincent Bandinelli continued to write against the doctrine, professing to defend the singular purity and prerogatives of Christ. In 1483, Sixtus IV issued the Constitution *Grave Nimis* in which he referred to “some preachers” who asserted that those who held the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception sinned grievously – despite the fact that the Roman Church celebrated the feast and had approved an office for it. He condemned such opinions as erroneous but at the same time condemned those who asserted that the opponents of the doctrine were heretical or mortally sinful since there had as yet been no decision of the Holy See requiring the doctrine to be held.¹¹

Once again, in the providence of God, an intemperate opponent of the doctrine became the occasion for a step forward in the general acceptance of the doctrine. Pope Sixtus IV did not bind the Catholic faithful to believe the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception but forbade theologians from characterising such belief as heretical or sinful. Such a declaration from the Holy See was bound to have effects beyond the letter of the decree.

A growing consensus

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were marked by a growing consensus among theologians regarding the teaching of the Immaculate Conception, and the determination of the object of the feast day on eighth of December. In addition, theologians began to raise the question of whether the doctrine could be declared to be of faith.

¹⁰ Sixtus IV Constitution *Cum Praeexcelsa* 14 February 1477. DS 1400.

¹¹ Sixtus IV Constitution *Grave Nimis*. 4 September 1483. DS 1425-1426.

Opposition to the doctrine continued to be promoted by some of the Dominicans; Pierre de Vincence published a work resuming the arguments of Vincent Bandinelli. (Two centuries later, the work was condemned at Toulouse.) Bandinelli himself became the Master General of the Dominicans and in this role composed an office for the feast day in which the word “conception” was replaced by “sanctification” as the object of the celebration in the Invitatory antiphon and the collect.

The defenders of the privilege composed a number of works drawing upon the work of their predecessors and particularly contributed to the growth of general belief in the doctrine by producing works that were of a more popular character.

By the early sixteenth century, the doctrine was taught at the universities of Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Toulouse and Bologna. At Paris in 1497, a measure was introduced whereby students wishing to proceed to degrees were required to take an oath to defend the Immaculate Conception. Interestingly, shortly afterwards, the Sorbonne had occasion to condemn Martin Luther. It may be surprising to us, familiar with the subsequent development of the Reformation, that Luther personally believed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and taught it unequivocally in a sermon for the feast day. However, he also said that the contrary doctrine was not reprov'd and it was this opinion that the Sorbonne condemned as false and impious against the honour of the Immaculate Virgin. The university also reprov'd a similar statement of Erasmus.

In Germany, John Trithemius, the Abbot of Sponheim wrote a work in praise of Our Lady, affirming the doctrine. A Dominican, Wigand Wirth responded by saying that the doctrine was heretical. In spite of the intemperance of his expressions, the kindly Abbot called upon him in a conciliatory way to moderate his opinions and he later retracted. This and similar controversies in Germany had the effect of promoting the pious belief to the point that the universities of Cologne and Mainz followed the example of the Sorbonne, requiring an oath of students to defend the Immaculate Conception.

This period was marked by the number of saints, who promoted the doctrine. We may mention St Pascal Baylon, St Joseph of Cupertino, St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila. In 1621, the Franciscans took an oath to defend the privilege and in 1645, they took for their patron the Immaculate Virgin conceived without sin. The new congregations universally adhered to the doctrine: the Theatines, the Barnabites and the Jesuits among others.

For the Jesuits, the rules on the choice of theological opinions, issued in 1593, stipulated that the members of the Society were bound to hold the doctrine “which is in these times more common” of the Immaculate Conception.

Among the Dominicans, the doctrine was generally taken up less enthusiastically but in Italy, Ambrose Catharin became a champion of the pious belief. In a work published in 1532, he refuted the arguments of those of his order who had opposed the doctrine. In the following century, Thomas Campanella wrote defending it, his work marred perhaps by the partisan and scarcely credible assertion that the doctrine had its foundation in the writings of the Dominican school. There was a similar gradual movement among the Dominicans in France but it was in Spain where the Order moved most markedly in the direction of accepting the doctrine. In addition to writings in favour of the Immaculate Conception, the feast was observed with solemnity. In Andalusia, the feast was celebrated with a solemn octave, despite the season of Advent, and the principal bell of the house had the inscription:

Maria Virgo ab omni peccato originali
immunis fuit.¹²

In 1618, eight senior Dominicans from the Province of Spain, including the Provincial, petitioned Pope Paul V to enjoin the religious of the province to celebrate the feast according to the office used elsewhere in the Church and to preach the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception clearly.

These two centuries saw the disaster of the Reformation in Europe and its violent and disruptive aftermath. In most territories where the

¹² “The Virgin Mary was immune from all original sin.”
(Cited in Le Bachelet coll 132)

Protestantism held sway, devotion to Our Lady was swept away with many other aspects of the Catholic faith. England was a particularly sad example; having been known for centuries as the Dowry of Mary, the country saw a sustained attack on the visible marks of devotion to her. Perhaps one of the most brutal was the destruction of the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham at Chelsea under King Henry VIII. Under Elizabeth I, statues of Our Lady were included in the general attempt to wipe out all vestiges of Catholic devotion.

At the same time, those territories that remained Catholic grew in their devotion to Our Lady and in their pious belief in the Immaculate Conception. This was a genuinely popular movement, supported enthusiastically by the people through dedications and tokens of affection, and by the pastors, especially as the reform of the clergy initiated by the Council of Trent began to take root.

A notable figure is Bossuet whose sermons and devotional works had such an impact for their holiness and sound doctrine. The great orator vigorously defended the doctrine and, after becoming bishop, used his authority to promote it, particularly in the production of works intended for the catechesis of the faithful.

In Germany, the indefatigable apostle St Peter Canisius, and in Italy St Robert Bellarmine also used the medium of the catechism to teach the people about Our Lady's Immaculate Conception.

During this period, it can be affirmed that the *sensus fidelium* became a powerful element in the cause of the doctrine. Whatever may have been the theological disputes of the past, the ordinary faithful and their priests showed themselves eager not only to give a notional assent to the Immaculate Conception but to fill this out with the real assent of mind and heart shown in popular devotions, prayers and works of art.¹³

Not surprisingly, there were also some excesses. One example was the belief that Mary was conceived at the moment that St Joachim and St Anne kissed one another. Although there was never serious theological support for such

excesses, it is necessary to bear in mind that occasional reproofs needed to be offered lest the opponents of the doctrine should have further ground for their case.

Theological deepening

The Reformation presented theologians with the new challenge of defending the doctrine against Protestant thought. One of the most brilliant counter-reformation theologians to defend the doctrine was St Robert Bellarmine. His *Controversies*, written especially to teach those who were going to leave Rome for Protestant countries, included a comprehensive defence of the Immaculate Conception. In England, we are particularly conscious of the effect of St Robert Bellarmine's teaching because it was the foundation for the re-evangelisation of England undertaken by many of our martyrs. Recalling their zeal we may remind ourselves that many of them he drew much of their controversial skill from the lectures that they heard from Bellarmine at the Roman College.

Given the consensus that had grown regarding the truth of the doctrine, further detailed theological questions arose. One of these was the degree of certainty to be accorded to the doctrine and indeed whether it was a truth of the faith. At the university of Paris, the Jesuit Juan Maldonado (Maldonatus) took up the question, coming to the conclusion that it was right piously to believe the doctrine and to teach it, but that it had the status of a private opinion, not a doctrine of the faith. The university opposed Maldonatus and the dispute was taken to Rome. In view of the wording of *Grave Nimis* of Sixtus IV, the position of Maldonatus was juridically unassailable and he was not condemned.

The next question for consideration was therefore whether the doctrine *could* be made the subject of a dogmatic definition and thereby become a doctrine that had the status of a truth of the faith.

Theologically we should note here that there is a difference between the juridical status of a theological opinion and what we may, in the future, come to realise to be the truth. In the seventeenth century, it was wrong for a theologian to label another a "heretic" for denying a doctrine that had not yet been defined. Yet the definition of the doctrine does not mean that it suddenly comes to be true, as if the Holy See were to be inventing

¹³ Le Bachelet gives an extensive summary of the development of poetry and the fine arts depicting the Immaculate Conception in various ways. (Col 1141-1149)

new teaching. The definition of a doctrine declares that it is revealed by God and therefore to be believed by all the faithful. What is uncertain at one time, namely whether Our Lady was immaculately conceived, can become certainly known through the development of the life of the Church, aided by the grace of God.

Theologians who opposed the idea that the doctrine could be an article of faith argued that there was insufficient evidence in the scriptures and the tradition of the Fathers. The idea that the doctrine could be of faith was supported by Suarez and Vasquez among many others. All recognised that there needed to be evidence from the scriptures and the Fathers of the Church but they argued that there need not be an explicit awareness of the doctrine as of faith since there were examples in the history of the Church of a doctrine being defined as of faith which had not necessarily been recognised as such.

Indeed we may observe that this is a general truth in the history of theology. It is difficult to prove from the writings of the Fathers of the Church that the sacrament of Confirmation is numerically distinct from the Sacrament of Baptism but this is certainly a doctrine taught by the Council of Trent.

(During this time there also arose the question of the “*debitum peccati*”: given that Our Lady was a daughter of Adam and conceived through natural propagation, must we say that she “should” have incurred original sin – even given that in fact we say that she did not. This particular question will be dealt with extensively in another paper at the conference. The question, proposed initially by Cajetan, was important in relation to the universality of original sin.)

A discussion at this period which is of particular historical interest to us, is that of the object of the feast. Before the discovery of the biology of human fertilisation, theologians generally understood the process of generation as one in which the material body was first formed in some sense and the soul was infused some time after.¹⁴

¹⁴ As the American Bishops have recently pointed out with great clarity, there was never any question of viewing abortion at any stage of development as other than gravely sinful – although the ecclesiastical censures attached may have varied because of ignorance of the process of generation.

Some theologians therefore taught that the celebration of the feast referred to an event that took place some time later, since the affirmation of the Immaculate Conception could not refer to an inanimate embryo. Bellarmine asserted that the *principal* object of the feast was not the “immaculate conception” but the conception of the future Mother of God, thus avoiding the need to change the feast whatever might be the actual status of the embryo.

Thanks to the discoveries of human biology, we now know that there is no “inanimate” stage in human embryonic development. Everything that is necessary for later development is already in place at the moment that the single-celled embryo first comes into being through the fertilisation of the ovum by the sperm; there are no ground for positing any subsequent “animation.” The wonderful pictures that are now available of the life of the baby in the womb show us that the first “kick” that the mother feels is not the beginning of life at “animation” but the movement of an already advanced human baby who can respond to stimuli.

Therefore, the problem over the delay between conception and animation, which vexed theologians, has disappeared. The moment of the conception of Our Lady is a single unified event – at which both her material body begins to exist in the form of an embryo and her spiritual soul the form of the body, is directly created, so that at that same instant she was created a unified human person – in her case uniquely, an immaculate person, free from the stain of original sin that is contracted by every other human person.

The Reformation and Trent

In the early sixteenth century, Pope Leo X wished to investigate the question of the Immaculate Conception with the possible idea of defining it as a matter of faith. He charged Cardinal Cajetan to investigate the question. Cajetan concluded that the doctrine was not one that had to be believed as a matter of necessity and Pope Leo X did not continue with the matter.

The Council of Trent needed to deal with the question of original sin against the doctrine of the reformers. It was proposed to tackle the question of the Immaculate Conception at the same time but this proposal was opposed, particularly by the Dominican bishops. In the decree on Original Sin,

the Council gave a careful exposition of the consequences of the sin of Adam and its universal character. Unusually, after the canons, a further note was inserted. This stated that it was not the intention of the Council Fathers to include in its provisions the “Blessed and Immaculate Virgin Mary” but that the constitutions of Pope Sixtus IV were to be observed.

Nevertheless, the teaching of the Council on original sin cleared the way for theologians to explain more precisely the privilege of the Immaculate Conception with reference to the defined teaching of the Church on original sin and its effects.

After the council, Pope Pius V condemned the errors of Baius, including the following proposition:

No one except Christ is free from original sin; hence, the Blessed Virgin died because of sin contracted from Adam, and all of her afflictions in this life as well as those of other just persons were the punishments for actual sin, or for original sin.¹⁵

In 1644, the Holy Office had issued an instruction stating that the title “Immaculate Conception” should not be attributed to the Blessed Virgin but that one should speak of the conception of the Immaculate Virgin. On his accession, Pope Alexander VII told the Master of that Apostolic Palace that those who wished to use the title “Immaculate Conception” should be left in peace. At the instance of the king of Spain, in 1661, Pope Alexander VII issued the bull *Sollicitudo Omnium Ecclesiarum* which was a significant step towards the acceptance of the doctrine as a matter of faith. The bull recalled the history and growth of the devotion, and placed on the index those books which called either the doctrine or the devotion into question.

Towards the definition

From this time onwards, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was regarded by most theologians as among those truths revealed by God. The doctrine was commonly taught and the meaning of the feast as the celebration of the immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin rather than her subsequent sanctification was not generally in doubt.

A notable exception was to be found in the Jansenists. Their supposed return to the teaching of the Fathers included the rejection of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception which was seen as a departure from the primitive faith of the Church. Just as the spiritual writers who opposed the Jansenists used the opportunity to promote a deeper devotion to the Blessed Sacrament in contrast to the Jansenists’ restriction of Holy Communion, so, in response to their rejection of the Immaculate Conception, the spiritual writers of the period emphasised devotion to Our Lady as a remedy for the gloomy austerity of the Jansenists.

Further developments in the eighteenth century particularly related to the celebration of the feast. The year 1708 marked a definitive triumph as the feast of the Immaculate Conception was extended it to the whole Church by Pope Clement IX. Later in the same century, Pope Benedict XIV prepared a bull affirming the certitude of the privilege but this was not in the event published. The Popes of the first half of the nineteenth century continued the impetus of devotion, encouraging it and affirming it in various ways.

The revelations of Our Blessed Lady to St Catherine Labouré were a very significant influence in promoting devotion to the Immaculate Conception. There could scarcely have been a clearer sign from Almighty God than the instruction from Our Lady to have a medal inscribed with the legend “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee”, followed up immediately by so many signs of divine favour that the medal became known thereafter in “devotional shorthand” simply as “the miraculous medal.”¹⁶

The definition itself

The early nineteenth century saw a growing build-up of Bishops petitioning the Holy See for a definition of the doctrine, a matter that was taken up by Blessed Pope Pius IX after his accession to the Holy See.

¹⁶ Although it is beyond the period addressed by this paper, we may also note that the definition of the doctrine received striking confirmation four years afterwards when the Blessed Virgin appeared at Lourdes, announcing herself as “The Immaculate Conception” – and again giving confirmation of divine favour by numerous miracles.

¹⁵ DS 1973

Given the rise at the time of the modernist heresy in its various manifestations as a result of some theologians becoming too fascinated with the ideas of the enlightenment, it is not surprising that the opposition to the definition was marked, at times, by theological error.

Blessed Pius IX set up a theological consultation and a Pontifical Congregation to study the matter, followed by a special congregation for the redaction of the Bull which met between 1852 and 1853 to draw up the text with which we are familiar.

We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.¹⁷

The Bull offers a magnificent synthesis of the teaching of the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church and the great theologians. In its precision, it draws from the centuries long debate, giving a precise and exact summary of what the Church believes concerning Our Blessed Lady's Immaculate Conception. It is right to see the Bull as the ultimate vindication of the position for which the Blessed John Duns Scotus argued nearly six hundred years before.

¹⁷ DS 3075