

Saint Anselm and the Development of the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception: Historical and Theological Perspectives

John Janaro
Christendom College

This paper outlines Saint Anselm's contribution to the development of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Although Anselm himself did not teach that Mary was immaculately conceived, his analysis of original sin contains two theological insights that are crucial for the subsequent affirmation and articulation of this unique Marian privilege. The first, in "Proslogion"-like fashion, states that "it was fitting that this virgin should shine with a degree of purity than which no greater can be imagined apart from God." The second and more subtle insight, however, is Anselm's emphasis on the objective character of the transmission of original sin in Adam, which went against the attitude that the immediate sinful lust of the parents in the conjugal act was the cause of original sin. This opened the door for Western theologians in the Middle Ages to acknowledge that it could be fitting for God to preserve the Blessed Virgin from original sin, even though she herself was conceived within a normal conjugal union.

Strictly speaking Saint Anselm denied that the Blessed Virgin Mary was free from sin from the first moment of her "conception," i.e., from the first moment of her reception of a rational soul and a human nature in the womb of her mother—to put it in words that more accurately reflect the biology and philosophical anthropology of his time. Indeed, the precise issue of Mary being *entirely untouched* by original sin did not even become a major theological consideration in the West until shortly after Anselm's time. The primary focus of his theology of original sin and sin in general is its relationship to the necessity of the redemptive death of God Incarnate.¹ Anselm's views on Mary—though rich and fruitful in their own right²—largely mirror those of his contemporaries.

By the beginning of the second millennium there was universal agreement in the Christian tradition (both East and West) on Mary's singular sanctity, and indeed on the fact that she was uniquely "prepared" by God, who had bestowed on her a "paradisiacal" holiness that made her a *worthy* dwelling place for He who was both Son of God and the New Adam. By this point, the idea that Mary had ever *committed* any sin (even a small indiscretion like those attributed to her by a few of the Fathers³) was no longer a matter for discussion by orthodox theologians, and it was clear above all that the Blessed Virgin was uniquely splendid in holiness at the time of the Incarnation, when the angel Gabriel addressed her as *gratia plena*.

¹ This, of course, is the central theme of *Cur Deus Homo*.

² We can see this especially in the spiritual posture and existential urgency that Anselm expresses in his deeply poetic *Orationes V, VI, and VII*, addressed specifically to Mary. These prayers will have a rich influence on later development of the medieval appreciation—both theological and devotional—of Mary's intercessory role in the spiritual life.

³ For example, Saint John Chrysostom, who seems to interpret Mary's concern at the wedding feast at Cana as a small indulgence in vanity (see his *Homilies on John XXI:2*). Some of the earlier patristic writers attributed even greater flaws to Mary's character.

It was not until the ensuing centuries—the period that saw both the full flowering of a contemplative “monastic theology” and the development of scholasticism with its distinctively Western modes of theological reasoning—that so many Christian thinkers would take up vigorously the very precise points of whether or not Mary was *entirely* free of *any kind* of sin at *every* moment of her existence, and—if so—how one could overcome certain apparently insuperable theological barriers against such an assertion. The proposal I wish to outline here is that Saint Anselm—whose seminal thought contributed so much to the development of both monastic theology and scholasticism in the western Middle Ages—gives a pivotally important impetus to the development of the theology of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. Although Anselm does not assert that Mary was free from original sin at the very beginning of her existence, he lays important foundations for the affirmation of this view by his immediate disciples and indeed for the whole tradition that will follow—leading up to the very text that presents the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception in the Roman Catholic Church.⁴

It was neither monastic *lectio divina* nor logical speculation that initially sparked the rapid rise in consideration and debate over the issue of the Immaculate Conception in the Western world. Rather, it was historical circumstances; and a large part of Anselm’s significance stemmed from his influence on the immediate environment in which they arose. The “controversy” over this point began over the introduction (or more precisely the restoration, but on a larger scale and in vastly changed cultural circumstances) of a “peculiar” practice in monasteries of England in the eleventh century, namely, the celebration of an *Eastern* liturgical feast: the Conception of Saint Ann.⁵

Virtually unknown in continental western Europe, the commemoration of Mary’s conception was already familiar to pre-Norman Anglo-Saxon England, which had been exposed to many traditions through the influence of the great and widely traveled Irish missionaries. The culture of England, however, was altered in many respects by the Norman conquest of 1066 and the events surrounding it. The suppression of this commemoration was one of many changes in the physiognomy of what had been a distinctively Anglo-Saxon Catholic “culture,” one that had flourished from the time of Saint Bede the Venerable until the tumultuous upheavals of the eleventh century.

⁴ See Pius XI, *Ineffabilis Deus* 13, where he states that Mary “approaches as near to God Himself as it is possible for a created being.”

⁵ The feast of the Conception had been celebrated in the Greek liturgy for hundreds of years, and its content was expounded on at length by the later Greek Fathers, though—with perhaps the exception of Saint John of Damascus—somewhat more vaguely regarding the issues that would become the focus of Latin theologians, such as “at what moment was Mary cleansed of the stain of sin?” In any case the theological approach of the East to Mary’s sinlessness—rooted above all in the ecstatic celebration of Mary as the “All-Holy” (Panagia) so frequently expressed in the liturgy, hymnography, and homiletics of the Greek Fathers in the second half of the first millennium—is more accurately grasped through what might be called a “hermeneutic of doxology” rather than an analysis based on either contemplative exegesis or Aristotelian logic. The Greek feast of the Conception of Saint Ann also celebrated the miracle by which, according to the Protoevangelium of James, Saint Ann’s barrenness was removed and she conceived a child by the power of God.

It was not long, however, before the practice of honoring Saint Ann—and the genesis of her unique child—returned to the British Isles with an even more intense theological and devotional vividness. This feast of the Conception was brought back from Rome and popularized in English Benedictine monasteries by Anselm of Bury, the nephew of Saint Anselm of Canterbury.⁶ Anselm of Bury had spent many years in Rome at the monastery of Saint Sabas, which had been founded originally in Jerusalem. The monks of Saint Sabas, however, had taken refuge in Rome some years previously, re-establishing their monastery there when successive Islamic regimes no longer tolerated its presence in the Holy Land. It is particularly significant that the monastery of Saint Sabas in Anselm of Bury's time was still imbued with the theological and poetic inspiration of its most famous monk, who dwelt there while the monastery was still in Jerusalem some 300 years before: Saint John of Damascus. John was, arguably, the first theologian to draw together the whole rich tradition of the Christian East regarding the "All-Holy" Theotokos and express it in terms that we can clearly recognize today as corresponding fully to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.⁷

Given the considerable tension that still existed between the new Norman ruling class and their Anglo-Saxon subjects, it is not surprising that the reintroduction of the feast among the English Benedictines was greeted with both joyful acceptance and a considerable amount of controversy, both in England itself and across the channel.

We do not know what Anselm's attitude would have been toward this "new" liturgical feast since he died before his nephew became abbot of Bury and restored the celebration.⁸ What we do know, of course, is the subtle theological analysis that he made regarding the mystery of

⁶ See Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, vol. I (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 218. For further information on Anselm of Bury and his relationship with the monks of Saint Sabas, Graef cites the important study of J. S. Bruder, *The Mariology of St. Anselm of Canterbury* (Dayton: 1939), p. 46f.

⁷ Although one must exercise care in the transposition of the Eastern Fathers's mystical and liturgical "praises" into the categories common to Western theology in the second millennium, one must also not be overly hesitant in acknowledging the common faith and Christian life from which both spring. An appropriate application of a "hermeneutic of doxology," to which I have already referred and which I hope to present in greater detail elsewhere, would make it clear that Saint John of Damascus's "Marian praises" correspond essentially to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

The fact that his most vivid teaching on this point is found in a homily for the feast of the Nativity of Mary (rather than for the feast of the Conception of Saint Ann) should not be an obstacle to our recognition of the significance of his expressions. His cry, "O blessed loins of Joachim, whence the all-pure seed was poured out," clearly goes beyond even Scotus' theory in its implications. Above all, his exclamation regarding Saint Ann's womb—"O womb in which was conceived the living heaven, wider than the wideness of the heavens"—must indicate that Mary's very creation was nothing other than a pure divine work, indeed a "charis," above and beyond the whole reality of the first creation. Mary's whole existence is a *divinized* existence.

⁸ An underlying theme that this liturgical event exemplifies—a theme worthy of greater exposition in its own right—is the extensive interpenetration of ecclesial life that still existed between the Byzantine world and the West through the twelfth century. Histories of "western" Europe all too often oversimplify the complex circumstances and struggles that led to the "estrangement" (to use Louis Bouyer's term) between East and West. It is too often overlooked that the famous "excommunication" of the Patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerelarius in 1054 was directed against him *personally* and not the entire Byzantine tradition. Interaction between the Eastern Churches and the West continued—indeed some Greek monastic communities in southern Italy have maintained communion with Rome unbroken to this day. Thus, it was perfectly natural in the early part of the twelfth century for Anselm of Bury to link his Byzantine experience at Saint Sabas with the former pieties of Anglo-Saxon England.

original sin through two works in particular: his famous *Cur Deus Homo* and his treatise *De virginali conceptu et de peccato originali*. Both of these works were written between 1097–1098, while Anselm was traveling to Italy to participate, at the request of Pope Urban II, in the important Synod of Bari, an early attempt to overcome misunderstandings with the Byzantine Church.⁹ In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm denies Mary’s Immaculate Conception.¹⁰ However, in the other treatise, which regards the virginal conception of Christ and original sin and thereby treats

⁹ The conquest of Bari by the vastly expanding Normans in 1071 would mark the final end of Byzantine imperial rule on the Italian peninsula more than five centuries after Justinian had re-established these domains of the “Roman Empire.” After only a generation, however, Greek southern Italy was far from reconciled to the new political and cultural situation, not to mention the ecclesiastical Latinization that they feared would accompany it.

The newly conquered Greeks of southern Italy were faced with a Norman “occupation” of complex physiognomy: alternately fascinated with Byzantine culture, and rudely and ruthlessly ambitious—desiring to dominate on the one hand and being conciliatory toward Greek customs on the other. Latinization, of course, would eventually take hold over the course of the next hundred years, but this complex relationship between the Greeks and the Normans was how the situation looked when Pope Urban summoned Anselm to the Synod of Bari at the end of the eleventh century. See A. A. Vasiliev’s magisterial *History of the Byzantine Empire*, vol. I (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), esp. pp. 359–361. See also Steven Runciman, *Byzantine Civilization* (first published 1933; cited here from the New York Meridian Ed., 1956): 42–43.

In my own opinion, the diplomatic efforts of Urban II in attempting to effect reconciliation with Byzantium, which included his primary motivation for calling the First Crusade, have been under appreciated. Anselm’s participation in these efforts at Bari led him to write his own treatise on the *filioque* controversy—a dialogue marked by a respect for the dignity of the Greeks and serious consideration of their objections that would be too often lacking in the polemics on both sides after the division hardened in the ensuing centuries. Both in this insightful treatise and in his *Letters on the Sacraments*, where he recognizes with ease the legitimacy of diverse liturgical practices, Anselm reflects the ecumenical spirit of the Bari Synod.

¹⁰ To be more precise, and keeping in mind the often overlooked dialogue structure of *Cur Deus Homo*, which was more than a literary genre, springing as it did from the real life conversations that characterized Anselm’s relationships with his disciples and others, it is actually the insistently inquiring and sometimes impetuous Boso, Anselm’s partner in the dialogue, who flatly articulates this denial. In so doing, Boso articulates the mentality that I have outlined above; he grants that “the actual conception of [Christ] was untainted and devoid of the sin of carnal pleasure” but then goes on to assert that “the Virgin from whom he was taken was conceived ‘amid iniquities’ and her mother ‘conceived’ her ‘in sin.’” He is presumably basing this assertion on the Vulgate text of Psalm 50:7 (51:5 in current nomenclature), for it would seem that Boso is arguably painting here with a rather broad brush; it is one thing to follow the common interpretation of this text as a reference to original sin, but quite another to define the “sin” specifically in terms of carnal pleasure.

Anselm appears to pass over in silence the particulars of this assertion regarding the Virgin; he is more interested in Christ’s sinlessness because “the man we have in mind is God and the reconciler of sinners.” Interestingly, it is this point that Anselm prefers to stress the basis for there being “no doubt that [Christ] is completely without sin.” He is not preoccupied with the objection that the humanity of Christ was “produced...out of sinful matter.” Instead he first counsels that we ought not to be surprised “if we cannot understand the reasoning whereby the Wisdom of God did this,” but rather that we ought to be filled with awe by “the fact that in the hidden recesses of so surpassingly great an actuality there is something which we do not know.”

Further on, he gives a little more attention to this objection, but even here his interest is not that the human nature of Christ somehow needs to be taken from a “purified” virgin, but rather that Christ’s redemptive power is comprehensive and therefore the Virgin Mary (and others) can be cleansed from sin “in advance” by virtue of His anticipated merits. This is significant not only because it represents an example of how Anselm helps Western theology shift its assumptions about sexual relations being inescapably sinful, but also because Anselm here approaches one of the key points that will ultimately justify belief in the Immaculate Conception: the fact that Mary is purified from sin “in advance” by virtue of the merits of her Son. “That Virgin ... [was] cleansed of sins through him, and he was received from her in the state of cleanness which was hers.” This does not mean, however, that Christ’s humanity depended on the purity of His mother for its own freedom from sin. Rather, Anselm hastens to add that “His mother’s cleanness, whereby he is clean, would not have existed if it had not come from Him, and so He was clean on His own account and by His own agency.” See *Cur Deus Homo*, Book II:16 [emphasis mine]. This entire discussion weaves in and out of chapter 16.

more precisely the nature of original sin itself, Anselm puts forth two very important principles that prove to be fundamental for understanding and working out the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception.¹¹

The first is what might be called the Marian *Proslogion*. This title is perhaps a bit awkward, or even potentially misleading, given that Anselm gave his treatise on the one single argument for the existence of God the name *Proslogion* as a literary title intended to distinguish it as his definitive “resolution” from what he viewed as the more ponderous and provisional series of meditations of the human mind searching for God, the *Monologion*.¹² Nevertheless, I will risk identifying this great and simple Marian text as the “Marian *Proslogion*” because it points to the affinity between the two arguments and therefore may serve its own literary purpose by assisting us to recollect its form and structure with ease. What I am calling the Marian *Proslogion* is Anselm's statement, well known in the study of Mariology but perhaps not so well known generally, that “it was fitting that this virgin should shine with a degree of purity than which no greater can be imagined apart from God.”¹³ This principle articulated by Saint Anselm, as I have noted, will have a marked impact on the development of medieval Marian theology and piety.

The second insight is also important in that it paves the way for removing one of the principal objections raised by many theologians to the possibility that Mary could have been conceived without sin, given that she came into existence through the ordinary process of a human generative act. Anselm clarifies that original sin consists in nothing more than the absence of the state of original justice that man ought to have possessed if Adam had not sinned. Original sin is indeed transmitted “by propagation” but the transmission of original sin consists in the transmission of a rational human nature deprived of original justice.¹⁴ Indeed, the human person becomes marked with original sin at the moment in which he or she receives a rational human soul. As noted above, neither Anselm nor his contemporaries held the theory of “immediate animation” as it is understood today.¹⁵ Although he does not express it in simple terms, his emphasis on the objective and so to speak essential character of how original sin is inherited clearly implies a very important point. Unlike the positions of many of his predecessors and contemporaries, Anselm's account of original sin does not stress nor even require for conceptual coherence the widely held attitude that the proximity of lust was intrinsically connected to the transmission of original sin. Frequently one encounters the assumption that there was some kind of flaw inherent in each particular sexual act, so that even the conjugal act

¹¹ Luigi Gambero gives a superb summary presentation of these insights and selected texts in the second volume of his outstanding survey and collection of readings in Mariology, *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005; original edition published in Italian as *Maria nel pensiero dei teologi latini medievali* by Edizioni San Paolo [Milano], 2000). See in particular pp. 110–111 and 115 of the English edition.

¹² See the preface of the *Proslogion* for Anselm's own explanation of his intent.

¹³ *De Conceptu Originali*, 18.

¹⁴ See especially *De Conceptu Originali* 3, wherein Anselm, after acknowledging that original sin is in a genuine and formal sense “injustice,” clarifies further that such “injustice is nothing but the absence of due justice—injustice being manifested only in a nature which *lacks the justice it ought to have*” [emphasis mine].

¹⁵ Indeed, Anselm himself clearly denies it (see again *De Conceptu Originali* 7).

did not entirely escape the taint of sin. We have already seen this assumption on the part of Boso.¹⁶ The same attitude tends to assume that the lustful act of the parents was directly bound up with the passing on of original sin to the child. Human beings were conceived in original sin, at least in part, because they were conceived in lust, i.e., by the sinful act of their parents, which is at least venially sinful in the case of pious Christian parents.¹⁷

Anselm, however, focuses on the fact that original sin consists formally in the transmission/reception of a human nature bereft of the sanctity that God originally intended that nature to have, by virtue of its being from Adam. Thus, human beings are conceived in original sin because their parents transmit to them human nature, which, without the concrete intervention of Christ's grace, remains Adam's fallen nature.¹⁸ This insight opens up the possibility for Western theology to distinguish the inheritance of original sin from the whole issue of whether or not there is anything inherently sinful about particular spousal acts in man's fallen state.¹⁹ The distinction of these two issues gradually but unmistakably frees up the

¹⁶ N. 10 *supra*.

¹⁷ The terms "attitude" and "assumption" are used deliberately here, since it was more a matter of *mentality*, ambiguous assertions, or unreflective presuppositions such as we have seen articulated by the likes of Boso, and expressed with particular fervor—but no significant justification—by Saint Bernard in the text quoted toward the end of this paper. There is not really a developed and extensively argued anti-sexual theological position in the mainstream of Catholic theology at any time. The fundamental Christian tradition always affirmed the essential goodness of marriage, based on Jesus's own words (e.g., Mark 10:6–9). The ambivalent mentality regarding conjugal relations was thus held in check and had little room to bloom into dualistic theories. Such theories, on the contrary, were in medieval Christendom a clear marker of sectarian tendencies at the least, and usually outright heretical or even revolutionary groups.

In the West, the tension between the affirmation of the goodness, indeed the "blessing" of marriage and a discomfort with the unambiguous affirmation of the possibility of a rich experience of purity in the use of marriage rested greatly on the ambivalence of Saint Augustine. On the one hand, Augustine laid out the foundations for the theology of the married vocation and many of its positive directions; on the other hand he sometimes spoke as if the marital act itself can never be entirely free from sin because of a disordered lust that can never be entirely shaken free in man's fallen state. Thus, it is not surprising that in one place he states quite directly that "lust transmits original sin to the child" (*On Marriage and Concupiscence* I:23). Unfortunately, in this particular case, as in some other issues, the great authority of Saint Augustine will muddy the waters in the West for many centuries.

¹⁸ Thus, Anselm states that "man can be said to be conceived of impure seed in iniquity and sin, not because his seed contains the uncleanness of sin or iniquity, but because from that seed and that conception from which he began to be a man he took on the necessity that when he gained a rational soul he would gain it with the uncleanness of sin" (*De Conceptu Originali* 7).

The foundation for this inheritance, however, is that we were all in Adam by virtue of the nature that each of us possesses from Adam. Therefore, when Adam lost original justice he lost it for everyone who would possess the human nature originally entrusted to him "because we were to be born from him" (*De Conceptu Originali* 7). These arguments may seem very basic and familiar to us, but what we often do not appreciate is that Saint Anselm was something of a pioneer in their clear articulation. See also *De Conceptu Originali* 10 and 27. We should also note that what we might refer to today as "solidarity in Adam" is a crucial fact for Anselm's theory of the redemption, see, for example, *Cur Deus Homo* II:8.

¹⁹ Thus, Saint Thomas Aquinas will say that original sin is transmitted not because the sexual act is corrupt or even because the bodily components involved in the act of generation are corrupt, but rather because it is "an act proper to nature" and is ordered to the transmission of human nature which in itself is a fallen nature (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, 81, 1).

Still, even Aquinas links the transmission of original sin to the insurmountable disharmony between reason and the passions, which is habitual in fallen man. Nevertheless he clearly states that it is not "actual lust that transmits original sin, for—supposing God were to grant a man to feel no inordinate lust in the act of generation [and here perhaps Aquinas reflects the widespread mentality of which we are speaking in assuming that a special intervention of God would be necessary for this to happen]—he [i.e., said man in his lust-free action] would still transmit original sin" (I-II, 82, 4 ad. 3). It must be noted that what Aquinas means exactly by habitual lust, which is "equally

atmosphere in Western theology not only for a more proper and developed understanding of the holiness of the married state and the possibility of chaste conjugal acts, but also for a wider acceptance of Mary's Immaculate Conception. The disengagement of the transmission of original sin from the proximate moral circumstances of particular generative acts allows theologians in the West to perceive that it could be fitting for God to preserve from original sin a person conceived through the normal process of sexual intercourse, even after the Fall.²⁰

Meanwhile, Anselm of Bury began celebrating the feast of the Conception of Saint Ann at Saint Edmund's Abbey in 1127. The freshly re-imported devotion spread rapidly among the common Anglo-Saxon people in England. It also circulated widely in the Benedictine monasteries, and, thanks to the established connections between Britain and Normandy, it was not long before the feast began to cross the channel and find welcome in the monasteries and Cathedral canonries in France. At the same time, strong opposition arose in powerful centers of the Church. Objections were levied against the English liturgical practice as novel, unfounded in Scripture or ecclesiastical tradition. Indeed, in the West, the recognition of Mary's unique conception first appeared on the scene as "lex orandi" and for this reason it was denounced as a dangerous distortion and excess.

But one of the principal objections that immediately arose in discourse was rooted in the mentality I have sketched above regarding the sexual act. Since Mary was conceived through the union of a man and a woman, she must have inherited original sin. It could not be the case that something perfectly pure should arise from that which was essentially impure. A generation after Saint Anselm's death, the great Saint Bernard himself, in his famous letter to the canons of the

in all [human beings]," is not easy to grasp and, therefore, should not be interpreted in a superficial way. Aquinas is clearly grappling with standard assumptions and probing a mystery, seeking to do justice to what he perceives to be the factors that must be taken into account.

²⁰ Nevertheless, in the final analysis, as Duns Scotus will point out in part by drawing out the implications of Saint Anselm's understanding of original sin and its transmission, the whole conundrum that prevented so many great thinkers and saints from affirming the Immaculate Conception is ultimately irrelevant, since God has the power to preserve from the Fall even someone conceived by a sinful generative act. See the reference below to *Contra Secundum Argumentum*, paragraph 1. Here I refer the reader to the excellent translation and notes with facing page Latin texts by Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M. entitled "John Duns Scotus, *Four Questions on Mary* (Saint Bonaventure, New York: The Franciscan Institute, 2000)." Thanks to the efforts of this great Franciscan scholar, the original Scotus has been dusted off the obscure shelves of theological libraries and rendered accessible to scholars, professors, and students.

It should be said that, even though the problem indicated is in fact a non-problem for the consideration of Mary's complete holiness, there is no denying that the appreciation of the fittingness of the Immaculate Conception helped correct in the long run the aberrant tendency, never truly justified by revelation or ecclesial tradition, to look down on human sexuality and the body and aided the development of a more adequate theology of the married vocation.

It is also significant to remark on the degree to which Scotus, in his breakthrough treatment of the question "De Immaculata Conceptione Beatae Virginis" (*Ordinatio* III, dist. 3, q. 1), draws directly on both of Anselm's points in the course of his argument. See, for example, the initial *Contra*, wherein he quotes directly the text I have termed the "Marian Prosligion," and in the *Contra Secundum Argumentum*, wherein he cites Anselm's treatment of original sin as an authoritative refutation of the idea that every sexual act must inevitably be a lustful act and that original sin follows as a consequence of this. Scotus refers to Anselm, usually in supportive manner, several times in the various turns of his complex but thorough treatment of the issue.

Cathedral of Lyons, would speak in the strongest terms of what he saw as this insurmountable objection to the theory of and therefore to devotion to Mary's Immaculate Conception. He asks:

Was sanctity present in the act of her conception, so that she would be holy at the same time as she was conceived? But reason cannot accept this, for how can anything be holy without the presence of the Sanctifying Spirit, and how can the Holy Spirit have any part in sin, and how can there not be sin where there is carnal lust?... [She could not have been sanctified] in the act of her conception, *because of the presence of sin*; it remains that she was sanctified after her conception, when she was already in the womb, and that this sanctification excluded sin and rendered her birth, *but not her conception*, holy.... This being so, what reason can there be for a feast of the Conception? How, I ask, can a conception be holy which was not of the Holy Spirit, *not to say that it was of sin*; and how can a feast be kept in honor of what was not holy? Gladly will the mother of God forgo an honor by which either sin is honored or by which a false holiness seems to be implied. A novelty, the mother of rashness, the sister of superstition, the daughter of levity, presumed against the practice of the Church, can in no wise at all be pleasing to her.²¹

It would remain for Eadmer of Canterbury (1064-1124), Saint Anselm's original biographer and most astute disciple, to write the first theological tract in the West proposing in an integral manner the preservation of Mary from original sin. Eadmer, no doubt, as an Anglo-Saxon monk, had an interest in defending the English liturgical practice, but his motivation is above all that devotion to the truth that he learned from his master. His *Tractatus de conceptione Mariae* utilizes primarily Anselm's first principle, what I have called the "Marian Prosligion." Eadmer reasons that if Jeremiah and John the Baptist were purified in the womb, then it is not enough to say the same of Mary, much less that she was purified at the Annunciation, which would make her inferior to these former prophets. Mary is rather the most perfect being that can be conceived apart from God. Thus, God must have done something greater with respect to the purification of Mary than of the prophets, something greater than which no purity can be conceived apart from God Himself.²² And although Eadmer does not develop the implications of Anselm's crucially important second insight, which would have answered directly the strongest critics, such as Saint Bernard, it is already evident to him that the fittingness of Mary's perfection and the adequacy of God's power to bring it about seem to render objections based on some sin inherent in the conjugal act irrelevant.

It is worth noting, in conclusion, that for both Saint Anselm and Eadmer, the principle of Mary's super-eminence, even as it is articulated via dialectical argument, is deeply rooted in the prayerful love for Christ and His mother that both possessed as the vital wellspring from which

²¹ *Letter 215: To the Canons of the Church of Lyons*, 7–9, in Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Bruno Scott James (first edition, London: Burns and Oates, 1953); present Edition with New Introduction, Bibliography, Numerical Index, Table of Letters, Recipients and Dates by Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1998), pp. 292–293 (emphases mine). *Letter 215* begins on p. 289.

²² See Eadmer's *Tractatus de conceptione*, PL 159, 305A, cited here from Gambero, p. 118.

their faith set out upon the road “in search of understanding.” Their contemplative Marian theology is, therefore, not so distant from the jubilation in which Saint John of Damascus and with him the whole Eastern tradition praises Mary as “all beautiful, all near to God. For she, surpassing the cherubim, exalted beyond the seraphim, is placed near to God.”²³ Here East and West find a common ground of unity in wonder, in faith and love, and in theology.

In the final analysis, it is not surprising that Pope Urban II brought the Archbishop of Canterbury, one who sought understanding so ardently from the Lord, one of the greatest monastic theologians of the West, who is at the same time called “the Father of Scholasticism,” who represented a critical turning point in the history of the Latin Christendom and of Western theology, all the way from England to the Adriatic shore, to a Synod with the Byzantine Church, to share the papal burden, this task of seeking the medicines and binding the wounds that were separating East and West. For Anselm was a man who lived an integral life of faith, reason, prayer, the loving posture of worship and awe before the glory of God, and the contemplation that is the hymn of the soul. In the end, his whole soul carried him further than his reason. His Marian ideal of preeminent purity rang true in the hearts of the Christian people, not unlike the praise of Byzantine hymnographers and the litanies in the Marian homilies of the Eastern fathers. Both, ultimately, grasp the splendor of the All-Holy, Immaculate One.

²³ Saint John of Damascus, *Homily on the Nativity of Mary* 9.