

A Short Primer on Mary’s Immaculateness in the Bible and History leading to a description of the Immaculate Conception by St. Romanos Melodist (c. AD 555)

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INTRODUCTION

Roman Catholics have become accustomed to referring to the event of the so-called Immaculate Conception since the cautious and humble Friar, Blessed John Duns Scotus (died AD 1308), re-proposed the idea, all but forgotten, before fellow professors in Paris in the early 1300s. While the first explicit mention of the Immaculate Conception (in what is today’s France) had been by a locally venerated saint, (St.) Paschasius Radbertus (writing around AD 850), his teaching –though he was a popular writer– failed to impact the Frankish or French scene for centuries. Paschasius originally stated the following:

Yet, indeed, if she [Mary] were not blessed and glorious, her feast [of her birth] would not be celebrated everywhere by all. Yet, because it is observed so solemnly, it is established from the authority of the Church that in no ways, at the time when she was born, did she come under transgressions, and neither –when she was sanctified *in utero*– did she contract (*contraxit*) Original Sin. (*De partu Virginis*, bk. 1)¹

It was about the year 850, too, that the feast of the conception of Mary made it to Southern Italy. St. Anne’s conception of Mary had just been officially enshrined in the Byzantine Church Calendar after it had likely been celebrated in different parts of the Eastern Roman or so-called Byzantine empire since around AD 740. Before that period, we have only hints of monasteries in Palestine celebrating the act of St. Anne’s conception of Mary in the prior century.

After the spread of the feast from Southern Italy, the feast became known in England sometime before the French-Normans invaded England in AD 1066. The liturgical feast of the (immaculate) Conception of St. Anne survived attempts by a number of Norman clergy to remove the feast that did not exist in Northwestern France. However, despite St. Anselm’s willingness to engage the question (died AD 1107), only his disciples clearly defended the English celebration of an immaculate conception of Mary.

Later, after the local schools of the bishops and monasteries surrounding Paris managed to coalesce into a full-fledged invention called a university (around AD 1215), Scholastics struggled to come to terms with two competing traditions about Mary. The first tradition was often concerned that human flesh or the genetics of humans were somehow affected by Adam’s sin. St. Augustine had given about three possible opinions on how original sin might be transmitted; one of these hypothesized (though not definitively for Augustine) that somehow passionate coitus might account for how original sin was passed on through male sperm. This opinion was exaggerated, too, by an innocent accident: Some of St. Fulgentius of Ruspe’s ideas on passion in conception and original sin were accidentally confused with or attributed to Augustine. We might say that this

¹ *Patrologia Latina*, volume 120, column 1371A-C.

“infected” Augustinian theology with original sin that was very fleshy and genetic, and distorted some aspects of his true language and ideas.

In part, because of this lingering Augustine-Fulgentius mishmash of texts, there was a hesitancy to affirm those Latin authors and the local Latin feasts of Mary’s proposed immaculate conception. However, in a highly academic and scientific climate as Paris, Blessed John Duns Scotus managed to find arguments from reason, from design of the divine mind, and even from Scripture to convince the academics of his day to give up their doubts and even opposition to Mary’s all-holiness. Many of the things holding Christians back were more due to poor Latin translations of authors like St. John Damascene (died around 753) and old relics of an exaggerated Augustine-Fulgentius mishmash that kept Christians from focusing entirely on what it meant for Mary to be “Full of grace” or “*kecharitoménē*.” At least since the time of St. Anselm, original sin in the West started to be more accurately spoken of in terms of whether a person is given the quality or characteristic of soul called “original justice” or a grace in the soul/will with which Adam and Eve were gifted and which they were required to use well to continue to be friends of God and to pass on this gift to their children. This immaterial grace (“original justice”) had nothing to do directly with the body, sperm, or even life functions. It was something that assisted or enabled the will to experience pleasantness and effortlessness in doing the right thing, just as one has pleasure and ease in eating one’s favorite cookie or desert. Once this immaterial gift of grace “original justice” was lost, then it was lost by God’s sovereign curse and decree in the garden for all Adam’s and Eve’s children too.

Yet, did Mary –as a member of the family and lineage of the accursed Adam– suffer this lack of grace “original justice” at her first moment of existence? After all the Bible (Luke 1:29) only calls her “Full of grace” when she was about twelve or fourteen years old, at about the time she was told by archangel Gabriel of her future conception of Jesus. What are we to make of this title “Full of grace” and how does it help us understand Mary immaculate or the Immaculate Conception today?

2. “FULL OF GRACE” (LUKE 1:29) IN THE BIBLE

The major challenge to the Immaculate Conception is no longer from Paris professors of the (defunct) Catholic University of Paris but typically from non-Catholic Christians following the Protestant Reformation. Protestants, or more commonly today Evangelical and fundamentalists, hold Scripture as the highest authority. Since they haven’t really had much of an exposure to or culture of Tradition in their congregations for the last decade, or hundred, or five-hundred years, at most, it is understandable that they don’t want to affirm Mary’s privilege as an immaculate person when original sin seems to be so universal or never admitting of exception.

Bible: I begin by quoting Luke 1:29 (AD 1611 King James Version): “And the Angel came in unto her, and said, Haile thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: Blessed art thou among women.” We can consult the Catholic version of Luke 1:29 (AD 1582 Douai-Rheims): “And the Angel being ent(e)red in, said unto her: “Haile, full of grace, our Lord is with thee: Blessed art though among women.”

Premises: Here we can see that two different English translations are attested: “highly favored” (1611 KJV) and “full of grace” (1582 Douai-Rheims). First, everyone agrees that the basic Greek root “*char-*” means either favor or grace. However, we do notice how funny it might sound if Paul’s typical opening lines of an epistle read thus: “The favor and peace to you from God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” (2 Cor 1:2). Everyone is used to: “The grace and peace to you from God the Father!” To settle the matter of grace/favor I take the evangelical principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture. However, let’s use the only other passage in all the Bible (of the King James 1611 version) that has the word “full of grace”; namely, Sirach 18:17 (1611, KJV): “Lo(e), is not a word better than a gift? But both are with a gracious (*kecharitôménôî*) man.”² What does gracious/gratious mean? Well, the earliest English dictionaries (1604-1617) don’t contain “grace” or “gracious” or “favor” for us to know how the King James reader would have exactly defined favor and grace. However, the next closest English dictionaries (using the King’s English), have this to say: “Gracious, endued with grace...” (Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum 1708) and “Gratious, kind, favourable ...” (Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum 1730). Also “grace” itself is defined as “favour, good-will...” (1708/1730). More interestingly, for religious texts, the Dictionary meaning of grace is as follows: “the Mercy of God in finding out means for the Redemption of Mankind, etc.” and “a Power or Disposition to yield Obedience to the Divine Law” (1708). We end with this last term: “Favour is opposed to rigour, especially in matters of justice” (1708/1730). To my knowledge these are the closest and only dictionaries to define our biblical terms.

Conclusions: As best as an English speaker can (from a dictionary), Mary received something like this message (Luke 1:29; per definitions of favor in KJV): “Greetings, woman who has been prior favored in justice [unlike rigor for other people] to personally yield by power or by your disposition obedience to the divine law.” This looks a lot like “original justice.” However, since for the KJV 1611 (in light of the 1708/1730 dictionaries), grace is favor and gracious is endued with grace, we could translate Luke 1:29 thus: “Greetings, woman who has been prior endued with grace of justice [unlike the rigor held for other people] to personally yield by power or by your disposition obedience to the divine law.” Whether we pick KJV or the Rheims version, grace and favor are virtual equivalents. Hence, both translations are correct King’s English and both suggest correctly that Mary was in position of a justice unto obedience in her will (unlike Adam and his progeny) to carry out the Divine Law in a way that Adam and Even did not.

Kecharitôménê (Luke 1:29): Is the possession of original justice or being “highly favored” or being “full of grace” before twelve years old sufficient for being conceived with original justice? We would perhaps be cautious or skeptical to say “yes” even if “original justice” was lost by Adam and Eve, and although we have no biblical event to tell us when Mary received this justice (except only that she possesses it before the Annunciation); it could hypothetically be the case that after conception but before the Annunciation some hidden restoration of original justice happened to Mary.

² LXX Sirach 18:17: “οὐκ ἰδοῦ λόγος ὑπὲρ δόμα ἀγαθόν; καὶ ἀμφοτέρα παρὰ ἀνδρὶ κεχαριτωμένῳ.”

Now, I mentioned that the term “highly favored/full of grace” is mentioned only in Sirach and in Luke. The evangelist does seem to be aware of the fact, too, that no other text in the history of Greek uses this word outside the Bible. That’s pretty significant. And, in fact, we can see hints of Sirach in Luke 1:29. This will help us understand the history of the term “full of grace” eventually meaning “immaculate.” Let’s start with Sirach 18:15-17 (KJV 1611 –adapted spelling):

My son, blemish not thy good deeds, neither use uncomfortable words when thou givest anything. Shall not the dew assuage the heat? So is a word better than a gift. Lo, is not a word better than a gift? But both are with a gracious (*kecharitōménōi*) man.

First, I should mention that King James 1611 version of this passage had to use the Greek. The original Hebrew was only found in pieces in 1898 and again at the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Sadly, the Hebrew for Sirach 18:15-17 is missing in the Hebrew that survives. So, King James and we must rely on the Greek, as did St. Luke the Evangelist. (1.) Notice: “do not mix blemish (*mōmon*) with your good deeds.” This is not clearly typological but there comes a contrast: good deed & good word. If there is a good deed it can be ruined by a bad word or blemish. It is an interesting aside that one of Mary’s traditional Greek names in the patristic period is *ámōmos* or unblemished that is translated usually as “immaculate.” We could just as well translate this as: “child, do not make maculate your good deeds.” (2.) Next, we read: “neither use uncomfortable (*lúpen lógōn*) words.” Here’s where early Christians will pick up the wordplay between Sirach and Luke and Genesis. First, Adam listened to both the bad words and followed the bad deed of Eve in Genesis (3:17). His punishment is to eat in uncomfortable/toilsome existence (*en lúpais*). Even, in the Protoevangelium (Genesis 3:15), or prediction of a child/seed of promise who will crush Satan’s head, Eve – by her explanation or word to God and her bad deed – will conceive children in discomforts (*téksēi tékna en lúpais*) (Genesis 3:16). The lesson here is that when God asks for an account of his command, Eve should say the proper and truthful responses or words and should have done the just deed so as to avoid what is uncomfortable in conceiving (for women). (3.) Next, Sirach assures his child that an immaculate/unblemished word is even better than a gift or work, but that both word and good deed/gifts happen with the “gracious man.” Per KJV 1611 in English, we could say that gracious means the “man who has been prior endued with grace of justice [unlike the rigor held for other people] to personally yield by power or by disposition obedience to the divine law.” (4.) Finally, Mary is the fulfillment of both word and deed: First, the word (*logos*) of the Lord comes to her and she responds immaculately to conceive an immaculate Christ. Secondly, she obeys the divine will by her power or disposition “Let it be done to me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38). (5.) However, Luke the Evangelist might not only play on “full of grace” due to Sirach (the only place where he could have learned the word in the Bible), but he is also probably playing on Genesis 3:16, which says that maculate speaking and doing by Eve will “conceive children (*tékna*) in discomfort,” whereas Sirach tells his “child (*téknōn*)” to avoid words and deeds of “discomfort,” and Luke sums up both sources for Mary’s conception by saying that – unlike Eve – Mary is “full of grace” or obedient by word and deed to God’s command and therefore God says through Gabriel: “you will conceive (*téksēi hiōn*)” (Luke 1:31). You might be disappointed that Gabriel doesn’t clearly refer to the Protoevangelium & Sirach with the term *téknōn*, but also

remember that Luke is weaving in Genesis 18 and Judges 13 where “you will conceive *a son*” is messianic. So, this strikes a balance, perhaps. In the end, Mary was justified before the annunciation, and then, after the announcement of her word and her good deed, she sings the *Magnificat* upon the announcement of a child being conceived in her womb. So, unlike Eve, she conceives in joy not in discomfort. All in all, the Scriptures bear witness to what the Fathers poetically develop out of Luke 1:29–42, namely, Mary has original justice and no curse or sin of Eve, unlike all other people who are not “gracious” due to the rigor of divine justice.

2. “FULL OF GRACE” (LUKE 1:29) IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The only other writing to use the word “full of grace/highly favored” is the *Protevangelium of James*, probably written in the first century or the first half of second century. Of course, this orthodox Christian is notable for underlining Mary’s holiness and sinlessness from the moment when she was conceived miraculously until the birth of Jesus. However, the anonymous (likely) Palestinian (perhaps Jewish) author does not give us anymore insights into the meaning of *kecharitōménē*. Instead we must wait for the late-second century author St. Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus*, III.11.83.3). We see only that Clement identifies a very beautiful women to the eye of a man to be “full of grace,” but this must be a, by now, colloquial use of the term when looked at in context of his writing. In one other place he does give us new information. According to Clement, it is the *Holy Spirit* who makes one “full of grace” or “having been favored” (*Stromata*, I.1.14.1). However, real progress on the use of the term “full of grace” has to wait till Origen of Alexandria who writes early and in the middle of the third century. We finally get to see, like our English dictionaries, a full definition of “*kecharitōménē*.” Origen writes:

So, as virtue is a grace, which produces someone possessing fullness of grace (*kecharitōménon*), when this [grace] has gone on prosperously by way of free choice in us, in these circumstances what is from God becomes present, and this is what is to give grace for grace from God (*Gospel of John*, fragments 11).

Finally, we have a key to understanding Luke the Evangelist fully. Mary had virtue prior to the Annunciation, which is a grace productive of making somebody “gracious” or “full of grace” or “highly favored.” Earlier in the same passage the virtue was identified as divine faith. Hence, Mary was justified by faith prior to the Annunciation, just as we would expect from the KJV 1611 translation of Luke 1:29. This all comes together in Origen’s *Fragments on Luke’s Gospel* (fragment 21a) where Origen, just as I showed above, contrasts Even’s discomfort (*lúpais*) at conception and her cursed children to the joy (*chará*) of Mary’s process and accomplishment of conception. This then becomes a standard fare for interpretation in the fourth century starting with Gregory Nyssa (*On the Canticle of Canticles*) and beyond. It is possibly in light of these associations that the early apocrypha, like the third-century *Gospel of Bartholomew* (2.2-3), know that Mary’s title “highly favored,” which it constantly calls her as if hwe proper name, “full of grace” (*kecharitōménē*) is equated to “immaculate” (*amòlyntos*). In this development, the term “full of grace” is restated by the anonymous fifth-century Ps-Ephrem as: All-immaculate (*Panáchrante*), all-pure (*Pánagne*) and even all-graced (*Pancharitòtate*). As we approach the equivalency to the immaculate conception in the sixth-century author, St. Romanos, I note that his

famous fellow citizen of Constantinople, St. Proclus of Constantinople (430s-440s), in his *Homily of the Dogma of the Incarnation* (section 14), repeats the by now truism that “full of grace” means to be free from the curses (*lúpai*) of Eve.

3. “FULL OF GRACE” (LUKE 1:29) IN ST. ROMANOS MELODIST

It is against this background that “full of grace” makes its way to St. Romanos. I cannot talk about the numerous times that *kecharitōménē* is used (too many!). However, an important one might be hymn 11.1: “Full of grace, i.e., I do reject your grace as undue [to faith].” More importantly, however, is the fact that St. Romanos sees Mary’s graceful and gracious life of virtue to be absolutely without sinful passion or the curses of Eve. However, it is completely unexpected that we should find a mention of Mary’s conception in St. Anne’s womb in the sixth century, as St. Anne’s actively immaculate conception. There are reasons for this of course: (1.) We saw that the invention of the feast of St. Anne’s conception was at best a local interest of Palestinian monks in loosely and idiosyncratically organized calendars that represented a local devotion, not a universal celebration in the Christian church. However, these monasteries had probably not been celebrating this feast when St. Romanos began writing his hymns in Constantinople in the 500s. Instead, it is the Greek and Byzantine establishment of local feasts of St. Anne’s conception that likely spurred on St. Andrew of Crete’s and St. John Damascene’s interest in the physical conception of Mary for the first time as a topic of liturgical or Mass homilies in the AD 740s, if not earlier. (2.) Secondly, the issue of ensoulment and the moment of biological conception was still in its infancy (pardon the pun!). Nemesius of Emesa (c. 400) did bring Eastern Roman or Byzantine Christians to the point of seeing conception as the joining of the male and female contribution along with the divine act of ensoulment. This Christian opinion was gaining steam by St. Romanos’s day, but really only became a point of doctrine for the Fathers of the Church in reaction to Origenism in the sixth and seventh centuries. In this controversy souls were allegedly not specially created at the moment of biological conception. Heroes of the faith like St. Sophronius of Jerusalem (died 638) and St. Maximus Confessor (died 662) standardize the ensoulment-at-conception doctrine for theologians. So, that St. Romanos dealt with Mary’s conception in Anne’s womb before either a conceptual feast day or a standardized Christian obstetrics had existed is somewhat of a surprise.

Nonetheless, recently Mr. William Albrecht drew my attention to a very interesting verse by St. Romanos that is on September 8th (the traditional month of Mary’s birthday):

Then the tribes of Israel heard that Anne had conceived the immaculate [female] (*éteken Ánna tēn áchranton*). So everyone took part in the rejoicing. Joachim gave a banquet, and great was the merriment in the garden. He invited the priests and Levites to prayer; then he called Mary into the center of the crowd, that she might be magnified.

To my amazement, Mr. Albrecht came across Luigi Gambero’s expert translation that is in every way verifiable in the Greek. For years, I have been accustomed to hearing taunts to Roman Catholics: “Show me the words ‘immaculate conception’ in the Fathers” or “Show me an early saint who said immaculate conception.” Indeed, I am shocked that the very words are used right here. The more recently coined phrase in the Roman Catholic Church is the final version used by Pope Pius IX (among many possible ways of saying it) in his declaration of the dogma 1854 as it

was put into the Roman Missal for liturgical celebration. He called it in Latin by one of its traditional names: *conceptio immaculata*. This is the use of a noun modified by an adjective just as in English. However, the original feast in the Latin Church, like the Greek Church, was the “active conception” of Anne. The concentration had been more on Ann’s physical conceiving than Mary’s passively being conceived or coming into existence. So, in the early Latin Missals of the Mass Anne’s conception was mentioned explicitly. Nonetheless, St. Romanos’s phrase “She conceived the immaculate” is exactly the immaculate conception. If I wished to take Romanos’s verb and adjective and change it to a noun and adjective, it would be quite easy. I would simply say “*téknōsis áchrantos*” or immaculate conception. However, like the older Latin feast, the Greek St. Romanos emphasizes Anne’s physical conceiving here.

A last important issue should be mentioned, Psalm 51 (or 50): 5 (KJV): “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Origen’s commentary on Psalm 51 was followed by Athanasius, Basil the Great, and Cyril of Alexandria. They all talked about the fact that, at conception, a regular person’s mother conceived in sin because of male seed or because of Adam’s inheritance. St. Romanos knows explicitly this tradition so that he understands original sin happens in utero and normally this is, per the tradition, associated with male seed. Let’s look at Romanos *Hymn 21* (section 6): “I shall make the house of the Pharisee a lighthouse, for there I was away from myself “my sins (*tàs hamartías mou*)”; there I am “cleansed of my iniquities (*katharízomai tàs anomías mou*)” (Ps. 51:5) with my tears I shall mix oil, and chrism and I am washed in the baptismal font ...” For St. Romanos, the forgiveness of being conceived in iniquity is through the baptismal font. Even so, knowing the classic patristic exegesis of male seed leading to original sin in utero, St. Romanos still explicitly refers to Anne’s conception as “immaculate.” This is all more poignant because St. Romanos understood the notions of embryogenesis or conception in utero, for he had spoken of the details of an embryo being formed, just as one instance, in *Hymn 26.17*.

St. Romanos simply made explicit the implicit message of not only Luke 1:39: “full of grace,” but also of the *Protevangelium of James*, and the definition of “full of grace” according to Origen, who was the only ancient to define the term known to exist prior to his time only in Sirach and Luke. He and his fellow Alexandrian St. Clement give us the everyday understanding of the term and we anticipated that it meant that Mary possessed by the Holy Spirit justification or a fully original justice prior to the Incarnation and now we see that St. Romanos removes all doubt that this can be said of her from the first moment of her mother’s conception.