

Queen Conceived Without Subjection? A Defence of the View that the Law of Original Sin did not Apply to the Mother of Christ

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1. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception and the question of Mary's subjection to the law of original sin

The purpose of the essay is to examine a peripheral question of Mariology, which is not settled by official Catholic teaching, but is considered to be a matter of dispute among theologians: If God had not miraculously intervened to ensure that Mary was conceived in a state of grace, would she have fallen into a state of original sin? Or, to put it another way, was Mary subject to the law of original sin, even if it is the case that God intervened to prevent her from falling into a state of original sin?

To this end I begin with a brief summary of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception – the official Catholic teaching that Mary was conceived in a state of grace and so free from original sin and its effects. This is followed by an outline of the issue in question and the two main positions taken on the matter: the so-called debt position (that Mary was subject to the law of original sin) and the no-debt position (that she was not subject to such a law). I defend no-debt view from the so-called redemption objection: that if Mary was exempt from the law of original sin, she would be an exception to the universal application of Christ's redemptive death on the cross. I show that the advocate of the no-debt position has at least two feasible options for addressing this objection. The first approach involves showing that the relevant sources of authority can be interpreted in such a way that these do not require that Mary's Immaculate Conception be an effect of the redemption. According to the second approach the sanctified state of Mary at her conception can still be an effect of the redemption despite her being exempt from the law of original sin.

The Blessed Virgin was conceived without original sin. This was declared as revealed dogma by Pope Blessed Pius IX in his encyclical *Ineffabilis Deus*:

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.¹

The dogma is the culmination of an unbroken tradition that has held Mary as all holy and full of grace – reaching back before the composition of the Gospels.² Of course, it has not always been the case that everyone has understood this *gratia plena* to entail that Mary was conceived in a state of sanctified grace, and indeed some have explicitly rejected the doctrine. But wherever objections have been made, these have been considered by Catholics to be cogently answered – most famously by the late thirteenth century scholastic theologian Bl. John Duns Scotus.³

Both revelation and experience testify that the rest of humanity is not as fortunate as the Mother of Christ, for we contract original sin upon our conception i.e. we lack sanctifying grace at the first moment of our existence. Or, to put it another way, we are conceived in a state of debt to God – we lack something that is owed to God and this creates a debt that requires payment. That we do contract original sin upon our conception and are in a state of debt is no accident, for we are subject to a law that makes this, in some sense, inevitable.⁴ This is the law of original sin, and it ensures, *ceteris paribus*, that the first sin of Adam is, in some sense, passed on to any given descendant at the moment of their conception. There is a law of inheritance built into human nature that ensures that Adam's lack of sanctifying grace is passed onto all his descendants apart from Mary and her divine Son.

Although Catholics hold it as infallibly certain that Mary did not inherit original sin and so owes no such debt to God, the Church does not have a position on whether she was subject to this same law of original sin

¹ Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (December 8, 1854).

² Luke 1:28 relates the words of the angel at the Annunciation. Presumably he received the account from Mary herself.

³ See his *On the Fittingness of the Immaculate Conception Distinction 3; Question 1*.

⁴ Inevitable but not natural. Human nature is so constructed that a hereditary law holds with regards to its members. If Adam had not sinned in the Garden of Eden, then this law would have ensured his descendants a sanctified conception. As is readily apparent, Adam did sin, and the result is regrettable.

that we are – the law that ensures our conception is tarnished with the sin of Adam. Of course, if she was so subject, then it must be the case that God intervened in a miraculous way to suspend this law in the case of her conception.

The question of whether the Mother of God was subject to the law of original sin has been debated by Catholic theologians for some time, especially from the Counter Reformation onward, although since the Second Vatican Council, as with many topics in Mariology, interest in the issue has waned. It is fair to say that the majority position is that Mary was subject to the law of original sin and that God miraculously intervened at her conception to suspend the law. This is appropriately known as the debt position because she was subject to a law of debt, with the debt being fully paid from the first moment of her existence. But a minority of theologians have taken the view that Mary was not subject to this law at all.⁵ This is known, naturally enough, as the no-debt position. According to this view, Mary is not subject to the law that ensures an inheritance of debt generated by Adam (albeit with the debt being paid at the first moment of her existence). Given that she is not subject to the law of original sin, there was no need for God to miraculously intervene at the moment of her conception to ensure she is preserved from original sin. Each of these positions can be considered as alternative explanations for the Immaculate Conception.

That the majority of theologians have rejected the no-debt view is not surprising given the main objection levelled against it. Pohle/Preuss puts the matter thusly:

Theologians generally hold that, though she was *de facto* exempt from original sin, Mary incurred the *debitum contrahendi*, because else her Immaculate Conception would not be an effect of the atonement.⁶

The objection, of course, has its foundation in scripture: “Wherefore as by one man sin entered into this world ... in whom all have sinned.” (Rom 5:12 Vulgate). In some sense, all humans are implicated in the sin of

⁵ And some have considerable clout such as Saint and Doctor of the Church, Alphonsus de Liguori – see his *The Glories of Mary*, Part 2, Disc. 1.

⁶ Pohle-Preuss 1922, 40.

Adam. And so, in some sense, all of us require the saving effects of Christ's atoning death on the Cross. The Blessed Virgin is thought to be no exception to this: she is implicated in the sin of Adam – original sin – and so she too requires redemption from her Divine Son. The only difference between Mary and the rest of us, is that her redemption came at the very first instant of her existence, whilst ours happens, if at all, at a later time in our lives.

2. The redemption argument against the no-debt position

The argument against an exemption from the law of original sin, and which is hinted at in the above quotes, can be fleshed out in the following form.⁷

- (1) If Mary is exempt from the law of original sin, then Mary's state of grace is the original grace lost by Adam.
- (2) If Mary's state of grace is the original grace lost by Adam, then the source of Mary's grace is not the redemptive death of Christ.
- (3) But the source of Mary's grace is the redemptive death of Christ.
- (4) Therefore, Mary's grace is not the original grace lost by Adam.
- (5) Therefore, Mary is not exempt from the law of original sin.

Premise (1) is just another way of spelling out the no-debt position. Adam was created in a state of grace which, if he had not sinned, would have passed onto his descendants – such is the solidarity intrinsic to human nature. As it so happens, he did sin and so lost this grace for both for himself, his spouse Eve, and their descendants. To say that Mary was exempt from the law of original sin is just to say that the loss of grace caused by the sin of Adam did not apply to her, and so she ends up inheriting this state whilst the rest of us do not. Proposition (4) follows from (2) and (3), and (5) follows from (1) and (4).

The key premises are clearly (2) and (3), and in what follows I examine both, and show that neither is obviously true, and that the arguments in their favor are less than compelling. Before doing so it would be opportune to say a few things about premise (1). Above I presented (1) almost as if it were true by definition. But strictly speaking this is not so – it is possible for

⁷ Disclaimer: I have not seen the alleged problems with the no-debt view spelt out in the English literature in this manner. Usually the argument is not made as explicit as this and many of the premises are merely suggested. The best discussion in English I have come across is Carr and Williams 2019.

an advocate of the no-debt position to deny (1). After all, what if Mary simply had her own special source of grace independent of Adam? On such a view, Mary may be a special creation of her own, such that she is not a descendent of Adam in a sense that would allow her to be subject to any law of inheritance. Perhaps one way of achieving this would be to have Mary virginally conceived rather than as a descendent of Adam in the normal sense of the word.⁸

I do not intend to examine the denial of premise (1) any further. This is because doing so will not in itself address the major issue that faces the no-debt position: the question of whether the no-debt position amounts to the denial of the universal applicability of the redemption of Christ. Even if Mary had her own special source of sanctifying grace independent of Adam, we can still ask the question: was this source the redemptive act of Christ or not? This is the issue that is dealt with in the critiques I offer of premises (2) and (3), beginning with the latter. Fortunately, much of the theological speculation I articulate below can be applied in defence of a version of the no-debt position that rejects premise (1).

3. A critique of premise (3)

Why do advocates of the debt position insist that the source of Mary's sanctifying grace specifically be the redemptive act of Christ as opposed to some other source? After all, whatever grace Mary does receive at her conception, it obviously came from God. It's not as if the advocate of the no-debt position would take the heretical view that Mary has a state of grace that is entirely of her own doing or that it has some non-divine source. Rather, all the no-debt advocate would be calming is that God supplied this grace *sans* the instrument of Christ's redemptive act. Why then accept then that premise (3) is true?

⁸ The doctrine of the virginal conception of Mary is usually combined with the doctrine that original sin is transmitted through the procreative act. Mary avoids original sin precisely by not being the product of the act of human procreation. The belief can be found in the Apocrypha New Testament and private revelation. Some versions of the Protoevangelium of James espouse a virginal conception (Rush 2018: 251). The view is also found in the private revelations of Anne Catherine Emmerich and Maria Valtorta. I further discuss the doctrine of the virginal conception of the Virgin in my discussion of premise 3 below.

The reason most usually cited in support of premise (3) is that it is entailed by Divine Revelation. Pohle-Preuss cites the opinion that the rejection of (3) is inconsistent with Infallible Papal teaching:

The view of some older Scotist theologians, that she had not even so much as a *debitum remotum incurrendi peccatum originale*, cannot be reconciled with the solemn formula by which Pope Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.⁹

The ‘solemn formula’ referred to here is the dogmatic definition of the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, which is commonly interpreted as claiming that the redemptive act of Christ is the cause of the grace that Mary receives at the first instant of her existence.

One could also argue that (3) is supported by biblical teaching as well. As stated by St Paul: “Wherefore as by one man sin entered into this world ... in whom all have sinned” (Rom 5:12 Vulgate). Paul appears to be teaching that *all* of us, including Mary, are implicated in the sin of Adam in some sense. The advocate of the debt position would have us interpret the passage in this manner: *Mary has sinned in Adam in the sense that she too is subject to the law of original sin and would have been conceived without sanctifying grace if not for a special miracle*. Understood in this sense, the passage is difficult to read in a manner consistent with the no-debt position.

Response to the claim that (3) is entailed by biblical revelation

How might the advocate of the no-debt position respond to what appears to be a decisive argument? Let’s take the passage from Romans to begin with. The obvious response is to deny that this passage has unlimited scope. When the passage claims that *all* have sinned in Adam, it is not literally quantifying over every single human that has or will ever exist. Rather, the passage is using hyperbole to emphasize how thoroughly widespread and entrenched is sin in the human race as a result of the devastating choice of Adam. On this reading the passage is *not* to be read as applying universally to all humans, precisely because there is a single exception, namely the Mother of Christ, who does not require redemption.

⁹ Pohle-Preuss 1922, 40.

How plausible this alternative reading is will depend on whether St Paul makes use of this literary device in similar contexts elsewhere in his Epistles. Fortunately there appears to be a number of such examples, including Col 1:6, Col 1:23, and 1Thess 2:15 – all of which appear to be an exaggeration in scope. According to the first of these: “Which is come to you, as indeed in the whole world ...” What is it that has come to the Catholics of Colossae that is also in the whole world? Answer: the hope in heaven and the truth of the Gospel. But if we take the phrase ‘in the whole world’ as literally unrestricted, the claim is obviously false. There are a number of other feasible interpretations, based on well understood literary devices, which would render Paul’s claim to be true, which do not require an unrestricted reading of the phrase. Perhaps Paul is using hyperbole in order to emphasise how successfully the word of God has spread throughout the Roman Empire. Or perhaps the phrase translated as ‘whole world’ was commonly understood at the time to mean something like ‘the world with which we are familiar or the world as we know it’.

Response to the claim that (3) is entailed by dogmatic definition

What though is to be done with the dogmatic definition contained in *Ineffabilis Deus*? The relevant passage is this:

... 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 ...

The key to the response of the advocate of the no-debt view is to be found in the meaning of the phrase ‘in view of,’ which is the translation of the original Latin word *intuitu*.¹⁰ One could read the phrase “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race” to mean the redemptive death of Christ plays a role in the *efficient cause* of the grace bestowed in the soul of Mary. The idea here is that God transfers the grace produced by Christ’s redemptive death onto Mary’s soul, at the moment of her conception.

¹⁰ The English version of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* translates *intuitu* as ‘by virtue of’ (Part 1, paragraph 491). This might be thought to be more congenial to the debt position. However, the English phrase ‘by virtue of’ would normally be a translation of the Latin word *virtute* and not *intuitu*.

But this strikes me as a rather forced reading. The term “in view of” reads far more naturally, not as denoting a role as the efficient cause, but rather a final cause. On this reading, the passage is asserting that the ultimate *purpose* of the Immaculate Conception is to achieve the redemption of the human race through the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross. It is as if it is saying that God sanctifies the soul of the Blessed Virgin with an eye to achieving the redemption: the idea being that the sinlessness of Christ (a necessary condition for performing the redemptive act) is achieved by ensuring His mother is sinless.

If there is an efficient cause referred to in this passage it is by the phrase “by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God.” It is noteworthy that there is no reference in this specific phrase to a redemptive act. Rather, it reads most naturally as an act of creation rather than that of redemption: God *creates* Mary in a state of grace. Understood this way, the passage is clearly consistent with the no-debt position.

So I think that the advocate of the no-debt position could feasibly reject premise (3) and take the view that divine revelation can be plausibly interpreted in a way that is consistent with this. Moreover, there is no need to advocate the heretical position that Mary receives her grace from a non-divine source. All the advocate of the debt position would be saying is that in the case of Mary, God does the sanctifying, but without using the instrument of Christ’s redemptive death on the cross. But surely this is no more problematic than the commonly held view that Adam was so sanctified at his creation. And this comparison with the creation of Adam gives us a basis for understanding how Mary avoids the law of original sin. Like Adam, she is a special creation that avoids the hereditary laws of human nature that allow the fall from grace to apply to all of Adam’s descendants. How does she avoid this? She does so by not being a descendent in the relevant sense – by being virginally conceived.¹¹

¹¹ This assumes that original sin is transmitted through the procreative act - a view that has considerable support from some of the heavyweights of theology. It was, for example, advocated by Augustine and Aquinas – but denied by Scotus. The claim that Mary was virginally conceived is less popular among theologians, and those who have advocated the view have not always agreed on its basis. Whatever the justification for the doctrine, it certainly coheres well with a specific reading of the New Eve motif: given that Eve was virginally created in a state of grace, it follows that Mary too was so created. After all, Mary (along with Christ) is supposed to be the beginning of a new humanity, just as Eve (along with Adam)

4. A critique of premise (2)

But in the event that the above reinterpretation of biblical teaching and the dogmatic definition is not feasible, the advocate of the no-debt position has a further response to make to the argument from redemption, namely a rejection of premise (2). The advocate of the no-debt position is entitled to ask for a justification of premise (2), and it takes little reflection to see that premise (2) is assuming the truth of premise (2a):

(2a) the source of Adam's original grace is not the redemptive death of Christ.

As intuitive or obvious as (2a) sounds, I do not believe the advocate of the no-debt position is compelled to accept it. To begin with it appears incongruous with the debt position itself. The advocate of the debt position is committed to the view that the redemptive death of Christ is the source of the sanctified grace that Mary received at her conception. But if the death for Christ can be the source of grace Mary receives at her conception, why not Adam at his creation? Moreover, the debt advocate cannot raise an issue about the timing of the redemptive death of Christ in this regard. The problem can't be that the death of Christ occurs after the creation of Adam in a state of grace and therefore can't be source of this grace. After all, it is held by the debt advocate that the cause of Mary's grace at her conception is the later historical event of the death of Christ on the cross. The debt advocate is cognisant that God, being beyond time, and able to see all of history in one intuitive vision, is able to make use of any good work at any point in time as an instrument for His effects. The sacrifice of the cross is no different in this regard.

Is the function of Christ's redemptive death on the cross purely propitiatory?

It seems to me that the advocate of the debt position might defend (2a) by the claim that the effects of the death of Christ on the cross were purely propitiatory and so redemptive – that is to say, that the effects serve to replace a grace already lost and they are not the source of grace at the

was the beginning of the old humanity. Of course there are alternative ways of understanding the motif that do not requiring a commitment to the virginal conception of Mary. Never mind – I am merely trying to establish the feasibility of this approach.

origin of the human species. What is the response of the no-debt advocate? That the death of Christ has this function is no doubt true and is explicitly taught in scripture. But it does not follow from this that the death of Christ cannot have effects other than replacing the lost grace caused by the sin of Adam.

Catholic theologians understand that the redemptive and atoning effects of the death of Christ stem from the fact that it is a *sacrifice* to God the Father. A sacrifice consists essentially of the offering of an object (also referred to as the victim) to God by setting it aside (i.e. consecrating it) and ensuring the destruction of that object, or at least rendering it unusable, so that no one else can claim it. The destruction of the consecrated object can be offered as satisfaction to assuage the justice of God in the face of sin – the object offered is accepted by God in order to make up for the sin. This act of propitiation is the basis for the redemptive aspects of the Crucifixion of Christ. Christ is offered up to the Father as a satisfaction for sin.

But sacrifice clearly has effects that go beyond propitiation. Under both natural and revealed religion, an additional purpose to sacrifice has been recognised, and this has often been seen as the ideal and primary purpose of sacrifice: to offer praise and adoration to God. To adore God is to form an attitude in which we acknowledge our utter and total dependence on God. Sacrifice is eminently suitable for the purpose of publically expressing this attitude: an object (the victim) is set aside for God (i.e. consecrated to God), and either completely destroyed, or rendered useless, so that no one else can benefit from it. The idea being expressed is that everything is ultimately owned by God and not us. Note that this purpose of sacrifice is independent of its propitiatory function. Adoration is owed to God by a person even if they have no sin for which they must make satisfaction. Even in a sinless world, it is obligatory to offer adoration to God and express that adoration through sacrifice.¹²

¹² That the sacrifice of the cross serves as more than just as an act of propitiation and is, in addition, adoration, is supported by more than just the nature of sacrifice under natural religion. The Roman Catechism teaches that the sacrifice of the Mass is, in addition to a sacrifice of propitiation, a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Given that the Mass is a commemoration of the sacrifice performed on the cross, it is reasonable to infer that the sacrifice of the cross is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving as well (McHugh and Callan, p. 238).

Now for mere humans, offering adoration to God is obligatory and so does not generate merit – we have no choice in the matter as we already owe such adoration to God. But if someone were to offer a sacrifice of adoration to God *who did not already owe this as a matter of obligation*, then such an act would constitute a good work and generate merit. And if the victim were especially valuable, then such an act would generate considerable merit. And if such a victim were of infinite value, then such an act would have no limit to the merit it would generate. Indeed Christ is just such a person, as he does not owe God adoration as he is divine himself. And if he were to offer himself as the victim, then such a sacrifice would generate limitless merit – again due to his divine nature.

But how exactly does this sacrifice of adoration and praise generate the original grace of humanity? What exactly is the mechanism by which it is applied for this purpose? Given the infinite merit generated by this sacrifice on the cross, it is entirely appropriate for God the Father to bestow a reward on Christ for such an act. And it seems feasible to think that God the Father, from the infinite love He has toward his Son, would bestow such a reward. The reward? Whatever Christ wants – after all that is the most generous gift that can be offered. What would Christ request? I speculate that he requested that humanity be created in a state of original grace.¹³

A further problem and solution

The debt advocate might now raise a further difficulty, namely that the no-debt advocate would appear to be committed to (2b):

(2b) if Adam had not fallen, then the sacrifice of the cross would have taken place.

This would seem to follow from the claims that (i) the source of Adam's original grace is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and (ii) it is possible that Adam had not fallen. But surely it is absurd to think that the sacrifice of the cross would have taken place even if Adam had not sinned.

¹³ Note that this idea is consistent with the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception cited above, which uses the phrase "... in view of the merits of Christ, the redeemer of the Human race." It is worth noting that the word 'merit' and not 'satisfaction' is used – perhaps suggesting that the grace received at her conception is not caused by an act of propitiation but some sort of good work that requires a reward.

Indeed it would appear to be outright contradictory, for the death of Christ on the cross surely presupposes a fallen humanity – not just because it was an event replete with suffering, betrayal, torture, murder and so forth (all of which are the result of a fallen world), but because the death of Christ had as one of its functions the redemption of a fallen world (2b) clearly entails *if Adam had not fallen, then Adam would have fallen*. This condition is clearly inherently contradictory and so fails to make sense. Given that it is entailed by (2b), (2b) also fails to make sense. Given the assumption that the no-debt advocate is committed, to (2b), the no-debt position should be rejected.

The response of the no-debt advocate: It is simply not the case that (2b) follows from the claim that the source of Adam's original grace is the cross. This is because in worlds in which Adam remains steadfast to God's will, there is a different method by which God applies original grace to Adam. It is only in worlds in which Adam falls that God makes use of the method of the cross in applying original grace to Adam.

God can ensure that this is the case, because God knows how Adam would choose if he were created in a state of grace.¹⁴ Using this knowledge, God can then make a decision as to *how* He will apply that grace to Adam. If it were the case that Adam would fall when in a state of grace, then God would decide to apply this grace using the method of the cross. If it were the case that Adam would persist when in a state of grace, then He would decide to apply that grace via some other method. Of course it is true that if Adam were created in a state of grace, then he would fall. God knew this to be the case and so decided to apply that grace via the method of the cross.

Counter-reply and final response

Now this response is open to a possible objection from the opponent of the no-debt position, which can be presented as follows. In order for the above analysis to be sound, God must decide his method of applying original grace subsequent and in response to the choice that Adam makes to

¹⁴ This of course assumes the truth of the doctrine of middle knowledge: that there is a fact of the matter of what Adam would choose in a given set of circumstances logically prior to the divine will; and that God knows this fact. Although controversial, there is available a sufficiently robust defence of the doctrine to give the benefit of the doubt to my assumption. For two rather thorough defences see Flint 1998, and Molina and Freddoso 1988.

either fall or persevere. If it were the case that God established the method of applying grace prior to knowing Adam's choice, then there would be no way for God to *ensure* that the method appropriately matches the choice that Adam has made. The only way for God to ensure the appropriate correlation would be for him to be prepared to override the free choice of Adam – which is problematic for well-known reasons. But short of that, getting the correct match between choice and application of grace would be a matter of luck for God. It is conceivable, for example, that God might institute the cross as the means of applying original grace and yet Adam not fall. Such a world might be broadly metaphysically possible, but it would be theologically absurd. It would seem to require the simultaneous presence of sinlessness and natural bliss alongside sin and suffering: a violent death in the form of the crucifixion, alongside a humanity affirmed in original grace.

But it would appear that God cannot designate the method for applying grace in response to the choice of Adam. This is because God knows how Adam would choose if in a state of grace, and such a state of grace cannot exist without being applied in some way or another. There is no state of grace that is independent of God causing it via some method. But that means the question of the source of that grace must already be determined prior to Adam making a choice. It follows that God cannot decide on the source of grace based on Adam's choice. Rather He must already establish the source prior to this choice – along with the absurd consequences described above.

The obvious response to this objection is to point out that it misunderstands the sense in which a state of grace is dependent on its source. It is true that there is no state of grace that is independent of the fact that God bought it about in some way. But that dependence is causal and not conceptual. Grace is fungible, which is to say that grace is grace regardless of how it is applied. The method of applying the grace does not change its character in any way. Grace applied through the cross is the same as grace applied through some other method. Grace is like water. It does not matter much if I am wet because it has rained or because my brother has tossed a bucket of water upon me – it is still water with which I am drenched. Of course, the water must have come from somewhere: it is not as if my being wet is a brute fact without a more fundamental explanation. But the fact that I am wet is conceptually distinct from how the water soaked me. It follows that it is quite meaningful to speak of Adam being in a state of grace independently of the method of how that grace was applied.

And it follows that God can know how Adam would respond to being in a state of grace independently of deciding on the method of applying such grace.

A theological speculation

Of course this analysis raises the question as to the method God would choose if Adam had decided to persevere in grace. This is highly speculative, but I wonder if a sacrifice that is purely of adoration and praise, and with no propitiatory aspects at all, would have been the source of grace.

The characteristics of the historical sacrifice of the cross presuppose a fallen world full of sin and suffering, as is testified by the hideous pain and betrayal experienced by Christ in His death on the cross. But there is nothing about the essence of a sacrifice that requires it to have such characteristics. It is feasible to think that a sacrificial act for an unfallen world would have been very different indeed. It is likely that it would have been an unbloody act, as the shedding of blood seems to be peculiar to the propitiatory purpose of a sacrifice. Likewise it seems that it would not require the death of Christ in the way this occurred in history – merely a public act in which Christ undergoes a complete dedication to and expression of ownership by the Father. A sacrifice does not necessarily require destruction of the victim in order to express the creator’s complete ownership over it. What I have in mind can be illustrated in the Gospel of Matthew (3:13-17 and 17:1-5) in the account of the Baptism and Transfiguration of Christ. Here we have a public, unbloody act in which the Father responds with “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased ...”¹⁵

¹⁵ This account of sacrifice in a non-fallen world presupposes that the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity would have occurred even if Adam did not sin. A minority of theologians, among them Scotus, have held the view that the Incarnation of the Word was not primarily a response to the fall of humanity. Rather, it is logically prior to the fall in the divine plan and so would have occurred even if Adam had not sinned. Sans the fall, the Incarnation would have served primarily to unite creation to God in a perfect act of worship of the Father. Of course, such an Incarnation would not have involved passible flesh. Rather, the Incarnate Word would have had a glorified body – possibly like that observed during his transfiguration.

But if a sacrifice does require a destruction of some sort, this need not involve shedding the blood of the victim and his suffering. Destruction of that sort is merely the most expressive way of doing this in a fallen world. A good example of such a non-bloody sacrifice can be found in the Catholic theology of the Eucharist. In the Sacrifice of the Mass, Christ offers himself (Incarnate in a resurrected and glorified body) to the Father in the form of the transubstantiated bread and wine. The consumption, and therefore destruction, of the transubstantiated elements by the officiating Priest brings to completion the sacrificial act in an unbloody manner that involves no suffering for the victim.¹⁶

5. Conclusion

So there we have it: two feasible strategies that the advocate of the no-debt position could take in responding to the argument from redemption. On the first, based on a rejection of premise (3), Mary receives her sanctified state from God, but not via the instrument of Christ's redemptive death on the cross. According to the second approach, based on a rejection of premise (2), Mary did not require redemption in the technical sense, as there was no possibility of her incurring original sin. However, she was still a beneficiary of the fruits of Christ's redemptive death on the cross in the same way that all humans were originally such beneficiaries. Most importantly, both of these options have the advantage of consistency with the wording of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, provided this is interpreted in a suitable manner.

¹⁶ For a defence of this theology see Bellarmine 2020 especially pp. 150-8. One may wonder how the Mass constitutes a sacrifice. Specifically, what constitutes the destruction of the victim in this context? There is no settled agreement by Catholic theologians on this matter, but Bellarmine argues that in consuming the transubstantiated bread and wine, the Priest destroys the victim. In being consumed and digested, the real presence of Christ in the elements ceases. Thus the transubstantiated state of the elements is destroyed. This is, of course, a controversial view. An alternative, and well received, view is that the destruction of the victim is mystical rather than literal and occurs with the double consecration: whatever else is made present at the consecration of the host, it is the presence of the body of Christ that the words of consecration cause and nothing else. Likewise for the consecration of the wine: the words of consecration only bring about the presence of the blood of Christ. Hence there is a mystical separating of the body and blood and so a mystical slaying of the victim. Of course, the remainder of Christ is made presence through each via concomitance.

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