



Who Are You, O Immaculate Conception?

by Fr. Albert, O.P.

¹ *Konferencje Swietego Maksymiliana Marii Kolbego* (Niepokalanów: Wydawnictwo OO Franciszkanów, 1990), Conference, K 103, Sept. 25, 1937.

“In general, it can seem that we already know, that we are already acquainted with who the Mother of God is, but in reality we must confess that we know very little about her. There are a few books about it, but all that isn’t much, they are just little first tries. It is like an unknown world.”¹

Thus spoke St. Maximilian Kolbe in a conference to his community in 1937. The mystery of Mary exercised upon him a fascination that lasted his whole life and inspired him to seek constantly to understand it better—and yet we see him here, near the end of his life, confessing that, in fact, in spite of all his efforts she remains “like an unknown world.”

This confession of ignorance, however, is a sign of a deep, intimate knowledge. St. John of the Cross, in his *Spiritual Canticle*, explains this with regard to the knowledge of God, and what he says can be applied also to knowledge of Mary:

“Sometimes God favors advanced souls with a sublime knowledge by which they receive an understanding or experience of the height and grandeur of God. Their experience of God in this favor is so lofty that they understand clearly that everything remains to be understood. This understanding and experience that the divinity is so immense as to surpass

² *The Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 7, The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Keran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., revised edition (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), p. 502.

³ *Scritti di Massimiliano Kolbe* (Rome: Editrice Nazionale M.I., 1997), SK 1286, before Jan. 1938.

⁴ K 71, April 25, 1937.

⁵ K 103, Sept. 25, 1937. A witness in the process of canonization relates an incident which shows how Fr. Kolbe insisted on this point with his brothers: “Just before his last imprisonment the Servant of God called together some brothers and spoke to us of the relations of the Immaculate with the Holy Trinity. One day the Servant of God asked me, alone: ‘My son, do you understand this?’ I answered that I didn’t. Then the Servant of God knelt down and told me to do the same. We bowed down our heads to the ground, and I repeated, together with the Servant of God, ‘O Maria.’ The servant of God wanted to show me in a practical way the necessity of prayer in order to understand the truths of the faith.” Br. Rufinus Majdan, *Maximiliani Mariae Kolbe Positio super virtutibus* (Rome, 1966) Vol. II, p. 657.

⁶ SK 1318.

⁷ Already when he was a seminarian in Rome Fr. Kolbe had been deeply struck by these words, as can be seen in a letter written to his brother at the time which reveals why his habitual name for Our Lady was “the Immaculate”: “She willed to call herself at Lourdes ‘Immaculate Conception’; therefore, we invoke her often by this name” (SK 21, after Sept. 26, 1918). In a conference much later he insists on this again: “The name ‘Immaculate Conception’ is very important and proves that the Immaculate is all beautiful, without any sin. This is her very first

complete understanding is indeed a sublime knowledge...This understanding is somewhat like that of the Blessed in heaven, where those who understand God more understand more distinctly the infinitude that remains to be understood; those who see less of him do not realize so clearly what remains to be seen.”²

Fr. Kolbe had received, to an eminent degree, this gift with regard to the Immaculate Virgin Mary. At the end of some notes he had written to prepare a conference he gives the fundamental reason for this obscurity: “The cause of the Immaculate is a mystery in the strict sense because she is the Mother of God, and God is infinite while our mind is finite.”³

And thus at the end of another conference on Our Lady he says: “This is a mystery which surpasses our intelligence, therefore we cannot fathom it. We will not learn it in books, but only on our knees.”⁴

He often speaks of this necessity of prayer in order to obtain this precious knowledge of who the Immaculate is. He concludes the conference we quoted at the beginning saying:

“What can we do in order to know, with such great profit, who the Most Holy Mother is? First of all, we must not trust in our own intelligence. The intelligence is too weak to be able to manage on its own. Here it is not sufficient to think for oneself. Reasoning can lead astray. Grace is necessary, supernatural light is necessary, prayer is necessary. Only prayer can obtain this knowledge of who the Most Holy Mother is. This is the efficacious means to arrive at this knowledge.

“...Obviously, humble prayer doesn’t exclude thinking about this, reading about it, meditation about it. Read much about the Most Holy Mother, think about her often, meditate about her often. But the foundation, as it were, is prayer, humble prayer. And not only read, but also pray before reading, and in the meditation ask her to enlighten us, because we are not worthy of the grace of knowing who she is.”⁵

A summary of what Fr. Kolbe was able to learn in this way about the mystery of the Immaculate is found in a text he dictated on the very morning of his arrest by the Gestapo on February 17, 1941.⁶ This final text, which is often called his “last testament,” can be divided into three parts.

Our Lady Is the Immaculate Conception

The first part shows why Our Lady at Lourdes could say “I am the Immaculate Conception.”⁷

“These words,” he says, “came out of the mouth of the Immaculate herself. They must indicate, then, with the greatest precision and in the most essential manner, who she is.”

And he goes on to explain how this name applies uniquely to Our Lady, and contains her essence in the strict scholastic sense of the term, since it gives her genus and species:

“Who are you, O Immaculate Conception?”

“Not God, for he has no beginning; not an angel created without





privilege, and that which is first is most dear" (K 92, Aug. 10, 1937).

any intermediary from nothing; not Adam formed out of the dust of the earth, not Eve taken out of Adam, neither the Word incarnate, who existed from eternity already and thus is conceived rather than a conception. The children of Eve did not exist before their conception, thus they can be called conceptions, but You are distinguished from them all, because they are conceptions stained with original sin, but You are the one, unique Immaculate Conception."



The Holy Ghost Is Also an Immaculate Conception

The second part of the text explains how the name Immaculate Conception can be applied as well, nonetheless, in a certain way, to the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity, the Holy Ghost. Fr. Kolbe begins by posing

⁸ "Exivi a Patre," as Our Lord says: "I came out, I exited from the Father" (Jn. 16:28). St. Thomas, in his commentary on this text, refers it to the eternal procession of the Son from the Father.

a principle, namely, that everything that exists outside of God has imprinted in it a certain resemblance to its Creator, since everything in it comes from Him. But this Creator, this God that all creatures resemble, is, as our faith teaches us, the Most Holy Trinity. Thus he writes: "All the perfections found in creatures...are nothing but a multi-natured echo, a hymn of praise in multi-colored tones of the first and the most beautiful mystery, the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity."

But if this is true, if all creatures must necessarily resemble their Creator, the Most Holy Trinity, then this must be true as well of the created reality that we call "conception," for, as Fr. Maximilian writes: "Here, there are no exceptions at all."

So the conceptions of life that we see in the universe—and we must remember that life itself is the highest thing in creation, and that its conception is the most wonderful thing there is about life—these conceptions must be a reflection of the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. But of what are they a reflection exactly? Of the procession of the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity, answers Fr. Kolbe, the procession of the Holy Ghost. He explains:

"Who is the Holy Ghost? [He is] the fruit of the love of the Father and the Son. The fruit of created love is a created conception. The fruit, then, of that love that is the prototype of this created love is also nothing else than a Conception. The Holy Ghost, therefore, is an uncreated, eternal conception, and the prototype of all conceptions of life in the universe...The Holy Ghost is a most holy conception, infinitely holy, immaculate."

The Holy Ghost, then, can also be called Immaculate Conception, this name which, as we saw previously, distinguishes Our Lady from everything else in the universe—everything else but, as we see now, the Holy Ghost. In the third and final part of his meditation Fr. Kolbe explains the intimate union between Our Lady and the Holy Ghost that makes them share this name.

The Union between the Holy Ghost and the Immaculate

Again he starts by stating a principle:

"In the universe we find everywhere an action and a reaction equal to that action but contrary to it, a going out and a coming back, a distancing and a drawing close, a division and a unification. But the division is always for the unification, which is creative. This is nothing but an image of the Most Holy Trinity in the activity of creatures. Unification is love, creative love."

This physical law of action and reaction, then, is just another reflection of the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Action reflects the procession of the Son from the Father and reaction the procession of the Holy Ghost that follows this action but in the opposite direction. By the procession of the Son, God, as it were, goes out from Himself,⁸ and then by the procession of the Holy Ghost He comes back to Himself by the love that unites the Father and the Son.

⁹ In some notes, written a few years earlier, he says: "God said, *Fiat*, and creation existed. A creature, Mary, said, *Fiat mihi*, and God became present in her. Also the creatures repeat, *Fiat*. They accord their will with the will of the Immaculate. Action and reaction of love" (SK 1283 before the end of 1937).

He then goes on to say that in a similar way, when God creates the universe there is a sort of action by which He goes out of Himself which is followed by a reaction by which the creatures He has made return to God by trying to perfect themselves and thus become similar to Him.⁹

"And it is not otherwise that proceeds the activity of God outside of Himself. God creates the world—this is like a separation. The creatures, then, by the natural law given them by God, perfect themselves, they become similar to God, they return to Him, and the rational creatures consciously love and by this love unite themselves more and more to Him, they return to Him."

At the head of this movement of return to God, however, is the most perfect of creatures, the Immaculate Conception, the creature who most resembles God and comes back to Him in the most perfect fashion and leads all the rest of creation back to Him.

"But the creature," he says, "completely full of this love, of the divinity—is the Immaculate, without even the slightest stain of sin, she who never deviated in anything from the will of God, united in an ineffable manner to the Holy Ghost as His Spouse."

The Immaculate Conception is an image, then, of the Holy Ghost; she does in creation what He does in the bosom of the Trinity. The Holy Ghost, the love uniting the Father and the Son, is the reaction in the Most Holy Trinity that responds to the action that is the procession of the Son: Our Lady, the Immaculate Conception, is the reaction of creation, returning by love to its principle by perfecting itself, which corresponds to the action of God by which it was originally created.

Thus Fr. Kolbe writes: "In the union of the Holy Ghost with [the Immaculate], not only does love unite these two beings, but one of them is all the love of the Most Holy Trinity and the other is all the love of creation, and thus in their union heaven is united to the earth, all of heaven with all the earth, all Eternal Love with all created love. It is the summit of love."

"This union," he explains, "is eminently interior: it is the life of love of the Holy Ghost in the soul of the Virgin. He produces in her an image of what He is Himself in the Most Holy Trinity: love."

"What is this union like? It is above all interior, it is the union of her being with the being of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost dwells in her, lives in her and does this from the first moment of her existence, always and forever."

"In what does this life of His in her consist? He Himself in her is love, the love of the Father and the Son, the love by which God Himself loves Himself, the love of the Whole Blessed Trinity, a fertile love, a conception...The Eternal Immaculate Conception immaculately conceives in the soul of her who is His Immaculate Conception divine life."

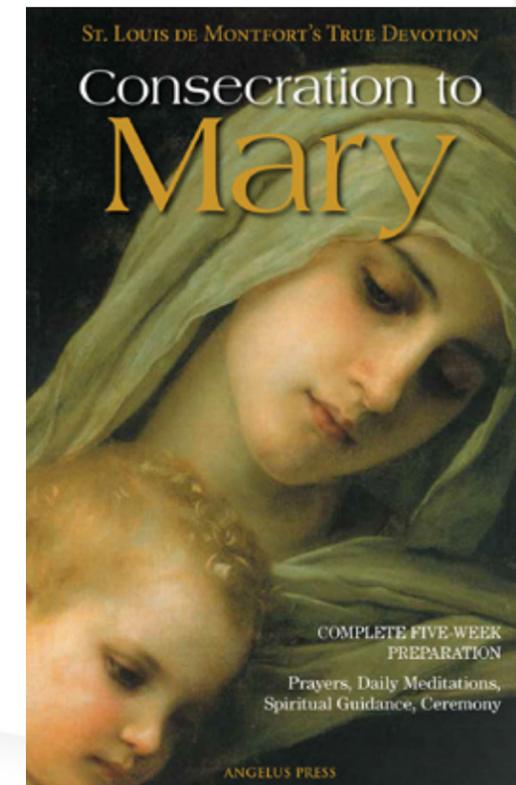
And thus he concludes, saying that all this explains why Our Lady, Spouse of the Holy Ghost, is called "Immaculate Conception":

"If in creatures the spouse receives the name of her spouse because she belongs to him, is united to him, becomes similar to him, and in union with him becomes a creative agent of life, how much more the name of the Holy Ghost, Immaculate Conception, is the name of her in whom He lives by a love that is fertile in the entire supernatural order."

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