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Editors' Introduction:

Eadmer (c. 1060-c. 1130), a monk of Canterbury, is best known as the biographer of his teacher, St Anselm. However, he also wrote the first full defence of the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. It is known that the feast of Mary's Conception was celebrated in England in the early part of the eleventh century, but, following the Conquest, the Normans suppressed it. The principal theological objection to the feast was that Mary had been conceived in sin, and to celebrate her conception was thus to celebrate a sinful act. Accordingly, Eadmer defends the feast by arguing that Mary was conceived without sin – that she was conceived immaculately. This argument is what is contained in his *Tract on the Conception of St Mary*.

The present translation was undertaken by Tessa Frank, an independent scholar, who worked from the text in Migne (*Patrologia Latina* 159.301-318). Sarah Jane Boss then amended her translation by reference to Herbert Thurston's critical edition (*De Conceptione Sanctae Mariae, editum ab Eadmero*, Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 1904). This journal is publishing the translation in two parts. Sections 1 to 20 appear below, and section 21 to 41 are scheduled to appear in the next issue of this journal.

Tract on the Conception of St Mary

1. On today's solemnity it is fitting that I should consider the origin from whom the salvation of the world proceeded. Today's feast is the conception of the blessed Mother of God, Mary, which is joyfully commemorated in many places. Moreover, indeed, it was celebrated from the very earliest times more frequently by those especially in whom pure simplicity and lowly devotion to God flourished. Where, though, greater knowledge, and very exalted scrutiny of things, imbued and raised the minds of certain people, despising the simplicity of the poor, they did away with this solemnity, treating it with disregard as if it were entirely without rational foundation. This opinion carried all the more weight because those who subscribed to it were preeminent in secular and ecclesiastical authority and in abundance of riches.

2. However, as I reconsider both the simplicity of the ancients and the sublime ingenuity of the more up-to-date, there come to mind the words of certain divine scriptures to place between them. When it comes to judging these views, they are to be carefully weighed, in my opinion, with pious thought, to see how far each may be approved by authority, what should be ascribed to each, and what things may be followed with greater reason by me and those like me.

According to the simple, in the very words [of Scripture] is found what is for them the Divine teaching. On the other hand, those who are illuminated by much knowledge but are without charity, are puffed up by that same knowledge rather than finding a firm foothold in the integrity of true goodness. The teaching of God instructs the former; while the latter are distended as if made flatulent by their knowledge. Let us judge things impartially and see to whom the greater attention should be paid in this matter. I beg you, make it clear whether we should cling to the words of God, or go along with the penetrating insights of that heart which is unreasonably puffed up.

3. Those who believe that no commemoration should be made of the Conception of the Virgin Mother in the church of her Son, seem to affirm, not without reason, that since her birth is celebrated by a feast everywhere, her beginning – her conception –



is sufficiently commemorated. For, as they say, she would not have been born if she had not been conceived. Since she came forth from her mother's womb into the light of day, it is clear that, once conceived in her mother's womb, she grew there into human form. The specific knitting together of her body and its manifestation to this world is venerated far and wide by all. It is therefore unnecessary to honour her in her unformed state, which often in some, before it develops into full human likeness, perishes and is annihilated. In this way, those whose souls were devoid of wisdom, and who gloried in their own strength, did not fear to abolish – by reason of their own authority – that which the simplicity of the ancients established for the mistress of things, namely, a feast of the conception of that most sacred mistress.

4. Having seen therefore the reasoning of these very great and proficient men for the abolition of the feast of the Mother of God, may we see also the charity of the simple, mourning the loss of such joys. They are simple; they seek answers to the profound arguments of the philosophers, and they perhaps do not know how to deliver them. What they do say, founded in devoted love of the Mother of the Lord, is that any human praise offered to her dignity or honour, seems of small importance if it is compared to her outstanding merits. While, as is fitting, the world everywhere venerates her remarkable gifts, who could look with an irreligious eye on the supreme origin of those gifts and yet not be amazed?

5. The fulfilment of such great good things, which came to the whole creation through the same mother of the Lord, clearly admonishes the human mind to consider the start of these things with devoted affection. In any case the whole sweep of the Old Testament reveals her coming and her future as mother of the Lord. But, whether she who is to be born soon will be foretold by an oracle or an angel – as was Christ her son, or John the forerunner and baptizer of her son – or which of these things will come about, as is clear to virtually everyone, the sacred histories most fully relate, yet the divine pages do not tell, and the canonical Scriptures do not reveal. On the question of what has been pleasing to the Holy Spirit, the steward of all things, I confess I do not consider myself worthy enough [to decide]. Still, I do not judge it to be against the faith if the start of her conception is esteemed by the simple folk of the church to be so

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sublime, so divine, so ineffable that there is no human perspicacity able to rise up to its greatness.

6. No wonder: the foundation, as it were, and the seed of the city and dwelling-place of the highest good was laid within her. And the dwelling-place of eternal light was prepared: the temple in which that bodiless and uncircumscribed spirit, who at once creates and gives life to all, would bodily abide.

7. Someone is sure to say: What then? Should the conception of the future Mother of God be considered great and more excellent than the conception of the Son of God coming in flesh? For the conception of God's son becoming incarnate by the angel, as the Gospel tells, was foretold in a heavenly way and understood in a human one. If, therefore, the conception of Blessed Mary is considered to be something more excellent, which surpasses human understanding, then a more excellent glory and greater dignity will seem to have divinely shone forth in it, because that will appear to be true. This is not what I am saying. Rather, the Son of God, the brightness of eternal light who is himself light inaccessible, emptied himself to accept the form of a servant (Phil. 2.7), and in this way adapted to human minds his advent [on earth], that it might be possible to grasp and understand it. Surely, if he had appeared coming in the essence of his divinity, none would have grasped it, none would have borne it. Truly blessed was Mary, future mother of God! As the Virgin, in an ineffable manner, was going to bear him who is above all things and is incomprehensible – as a true human being, of her own substance – and in this way was going to cross over into the unity of his divinity, it is not absurd to believe that, in the beginning of her conception, that of the sublime deity was foreshadowed, such that the conception of human minds would not have the power to penetrate it fully.

8. So this pure simplicity and simple purity of love towards God and his sweetest mother does not fear to make a judgement concerning the conception of the Mother of God herself. On that account the festive day of this conception merits to be celebrated with praise by all the faithful. Of Mary indeed, many centuries before her



rise or conception, Isaiah, inspired by the Holy Spirit declares: 'A shoot shall come forth from the root of Jesse and a flower shall ascend from his root; and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, a Spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and fortitude, a spirit of knowledge and of piety, and the spirit shall fill him with the fear of the Lord' (Isa. 11.1-3). Accordingly, this shoot which bore such a flower was the Virgin Mary – no-one will deny that. And the flower which ascended from this root was the blessed Son, upon whom and in whom all the fullness of divinity rested in its essence.

9. Therefore, who will not concede that, when the most worthy mother of such a Son was being conceived by the natural process in her mother's belly, then the wisdom of God – which reaches from end to end, fulfilling everything and ruling everything – will have flooded Heaven, earth and all that is in them, with a new and ineffable joy, and pervaded them with inestimable rejoicing for their reintegration, which, by a divine and hidden inspiration, they foresaw would come to pass?

Now, since this conception, as we have said, was the foundation of the dwelling of the highest good, what should we say if, at its origin, it drew with it the stain of some sin from the first disobedience? Certainly a divine voice said to Jeremiah: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; and before you came forth from the womb, I sanctified you; and I gave you as a prophet to the nations' (Jer. 1.5). Moreover, the angel who announced the birth of John [the Baptist] declared that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1.15). If, therefore, Jeremiah was sanctified in the womb because he was to be a prophet among the nations; and if John, who was to go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, was filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb, who will dare to say that the sweetest resting place of the Son of God almighty, should, from the beginning, in her conception, have been deprived of the light of the grace of the Holy Spirit? Indeed, Scripture bears witness: 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3.17). Free from the servitude of every sin was she who was to be the palace of the propitiator of all sins – she in whom and from whom he would personally become man, as was brought about by the presence and working of the Holy Spirit. So if someone declares that she was not free in every way from the sin of our first ancestor, when they quite correctly agree that she was conceived from

the lawful wedlock of husband and wife – if that is the Catholic opinion, I do not wish to dissent from the Catholic and universal Church for any reason. However, considering at all the magnificence of the workings of the divine strength, as if with soreness of the eyes of the mind, it seems to me to appear that, if any original sin arose in the begetting of the Mother of my God and my Lord, it was in the parents and not in their offspring.

10. Consider the chestnut: When it comes forth to be born from a tree of its own kind, its wrapping is all thorny and its covering appears with thickest prickles on all sides. Inside, the chestnut is conceived – first, however, in the manner of a milky liquid, having no thorns, no roughness nor any harmful prickles within itself, nor being affected to any degree by those around it. In all, it is gently nourished, fostered and sustained there, and, being formed according to its own kind and condition, once it is fully grown, its wrapping is torn apart and the mature [fruit] comes forth quite free from the piercing and bristling of thorns.

So consider: If God allows the chestnut to be conceived, sustained, formed among thorns whilst being separated from the thorns, could he not grant to the human body which was the temple in which he himself would bodily dwell – and from which, in the unity of his Person he would become a perfect human being – that it might be conceived among the thorns of sin, but that it should be delivered exempt in every way from the thorns' prickings? Clearly he could. If, therefore, he willed it, then he did it.

11. And indeed, whatever worthy thing he may ever have willed for anyone outside his own person, it is evident that he will have willed it for you, O most blessed of women. For he willed to make you his mother, and because he willed it he made it to be. What have I said? The Creator, Lord and governor of all things made you his mother; the Maker and Lord, I say, of all things, not only of intelligible things, but of those transcending all understanding – he made you, Lady, his only mother, and thus at once established you as mistress and empress of all things. The heavens, the earth and seas and all the elements, together with all that is in them: you emerge as mistress and empress of these. And in order that you might be such, you were created in your mother's womb from the start of your conception by the working of the Holy Spirit. Thus it is, good Lady, and we



rejoice that it is so.

Is it, therefore, likely, sweetest Lady, is it likely that you – manifestly so destined to be the only Mother of the highest good, and, after your Son, prudent and noble empress of all that has been, is or shall be – is it likely that you, whom we most certainly know to be the bearer of the Lord of all things, could be sentenced either to equality or to subjection?

12. He is the protagonist of pure truth, and your Son, now presiding in Heaven, has designated you the vessel of election, and he acknowledges that in Adam all humanity has sinned. A true opinion indeed, and I declare it is wrong to contradict it. But when I consider the eminence of God's grace in you, I perceive no-one like you among all that is; you are above all created things – apart from your Son – in an inestimable way. So it is my conviction that you were not bound in your conception by the law of nature as others are, but that you were completely free from all bondage of sin by the singular operation and power of the Godhead, in a way impenetrable to human understanding.

It was sin alone which had divided humanity from God. And so that the Son of God should be emptied out, and thus call the human race back to the peace of God, he willed to become man in such a way that nothing in him should be in any way harmonised with that which caused humanity to be out of harmony with God. Because this was so, it was fitting that the mother from whom he would be created should be clean from all sin. For otherwise, by what contract might flesh be united to that consummate purity by such a bonding, that humanity should be taken up into union with God, so that that which belongs to God should be humanity's, without differentiation, and that which belongs to humanity should be God's?

But if someone were to state that the mother of God was subject to original sin until the annunciation of Christ, and so was cleansed from this by the faith with which she believed the angel (and this might be set alongside the saying, 'by faith purifying their hearts' (Acts 15.9)), then if it is Catholic, I do not refute it. But it is permitted that a higher consideration may tear my mind away from this. For, as I have said, considering carefully

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that the mother of the Lord is above all things except God, I declare that she is irradiant with loftier graces of God than are the Apostles or any other thing which, outside God the Son, is said to be created by him. Therefore, if I consider the beginning of her creation from a standpoint that is different from others with regard to the propagation of Adam's offspring, I pray that no-one will turn away their gaze in derision – that no-one, because their sense is led by some animosity, should be tempted to turn away – unless they are inwardly certain that such things are contrary to the Christian faith.

13. Now, imagine someone wishing to build a palace, which would be specially suited to his own uses, in which he might converse in a more frequent and festive manner, as well as respond to all the needy with a meeker and more joyful face, and help them. Is it not obvious, I ask, that it would be incongruous for the builder to begin the palace and its structure with an unsound foundation, and that this would not make sense? I think it would not, if the builder knew of it and wished to realise his project. We hold with certain faith that Wisdom before all ages proposed to build herself such a dwelling, in which specifically he might live (Prov. 9.1). What this palace might be, has now become known; for this is that dwelling that we speak of as the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit, in whom and through whom the same Wisdom wished to assume human nature and be incorporated with it. He wished thereby to spare and be merciful to all who acknowledge him with a pure mind. This sanctuary, namely, the court of universal propitiation, would be built by the working of the Holy Spirit. Its foundation was, as I understand it, the very beginning of the conception of Blessed Mary, which is the name of that court. If, therefore, that conception was corrupted by any stain of any sin, the foundation of the structure of the dwelling-place of the Wisdom of God himself would not be fitting to its purpose, and would not make sense. And how could it be that sin's very propitiation itself should dwell with sin? For what association does light have with darkness?

The Wisdom of God, the strength of the world, surely was not ignorant and powerless to build himself a dwelling, utterly removed from all sinful stain of the human condition? He preserved the good angels from sin when the others transgressed; could he not avail to preserve that woman, soon to be his mother, from any share of the sins of others? In an eternal council it was decided that she should be lady and queen above the angels –



now, born below the angels. Do we believe that she was received into the company of human sinners? Let whoever wishes, think this and prove it with his arguments. Until God shows me anything which can be said to be more noble than the excellence of my Lady, of which I have spoken, I am not changing what I have written. For the rest, I commit myself and my efforts to her Son.

My Lady, mother of my Lord, mother of my heart's enlightenment, nurse of reconciliation and of him who repairs my whole substance: I beseech you, teach my heart how it ought to understand you, what it might feel that would be worthy of you, with what affection it might venerate you, with what sweetness delight in you, with what pleasure be amused by you, with what delight embrace you, with what hope commend itself to you, with what zeal serve you, with what devotion also please you, by what road reach you.

14. Nobody is equal to you, Lady, and nobody is comparable to you – all that exists, either above you or below you. Above you there is only God; what is below you is whatever is not God. Who can gaze upon your so great excellence? Who attain it? Assuredly, in order that you might arrive at this excellence, you had your tiny beginning in the most humble of places, the womb of your mother. Because if you had not been conceived and begun in such a way, you would not have risen to such a lofty height.

15. So whoever rejoices and is glad that you grew to be so great, will exult that your beginning is equal to your increase. Whoever takes from the Church of God the day of your blessed conception and the joy of that same conception, either does not direct their attention well or neglects to do so, or does not know the good that proceeds thence to every creature of God. But who will explain the immensity of this same goodness? Not I. Far from me and those like me – namely, sinners – is such blessedness. Nevertheless, as I say, it can to some extent be perceived, though mysteriously. If we fix before the eyes of our mind the evil into which human nature fell through Adam's sin; and also, to the contrary, the goodness that comes into the world through this Lady, our willing souls will be held fast bound in contemplation.

16. Indeed, every good with which humanity was created, was lost in Adam. Human nature recovered that very same goodness much more wonderfully through Mary. We know two blessings and two miseries. Of these blessings and miseries one is greater and one lesser. The greater blessing is the kingdom of heaven; the lesser what humanity was able to do before sin. The greater misery is the pain of Hell; the lesser the continual troubles in which we live and the punishment of not experiencing those same blessings, being weighed down on every side by the miseries we experience. One experience we sigh over: the other we fear may seize us. In considering the lesser evil, if we apply ourselves to study it with a watchful mind, we may be able to conjecture what the greater unhappiness is, although estimating it far below what it may in fact be. We cannot easily perceive the quality of the lesser blessedness except as a contrast to the unhappiness in which we are. It is said of the greater blessedness that 'eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the human heart to conceive, what things God has prepared for those who love Him' (1 Cor. 2.9).

17. From these blessings we were separated in every way by the disobedience of our first parent and made unhappily subject to both miseries. 'Death came into the world by the sin of Adam and so has passed throughout humanity' (Rom. 5.12). What sort of death? Death of the soul, by which the first man lost eternal life and the God in whose likeness he was clearly made. It is indeed unhappy to lose the noble and the true, without which nothing can be, or be done, well. Death of the body follows this wretched and incomparable death and every evil; death by which the soul, which had hitherto lived in the body, threw away the breath of heavenly life and perished in much wretchedness, sunk within the boundaries of Hell. There was to be no-one who could escape this terrible damnation, no-one who might thence be freed; the ability to liberate fell in no way to any human creature. Only God, who made humanity and against whom humanity had sinned, possessed this power of setting free. But consider! He was the offended one, he was scorned – no-one asked that God might worthily be spared. From day to day, crimes multiplied and the wrath of God was provoked to punishment rather than mercy. But God's merciful love is not exhausted. His mercy does not fail, and his goodness is never lacking; his majesty effects whatever it wills. He purposed to liberate humanity and all things He had made, lest they should perish in eternal damnation. And,



by the freest possible ordinance, God, who acted through Himself, willed to become man: not in the same way as other men, but so that He himself, having assumed human nature in one Person, might be both perfect God and perfect man, with a rational soul and human flesh.

Yet all human nature had been vitiated and corrupted at its root, and God could not associate Himself with the corruption and wickedness of sin. Therefore it was necessary that the nature through which he wished to become man should be both human and yet free from the contagion of every sin. So where would it be found, since, as I said, nothing incorrupt existed, with all things corrupted at their root? But the virtue of God and the wisdom of God named the one who was to come to the aid of human perdition. He came to help all whom he wished to; his wisdom is immeasurable, reaching from end to end, disposing all things (Wisdom 8.1). Therefore he was able, from the mass of human sinfulness, to make one human nature immune to every stain of sin. From this nature He would take up his humanity in one Person, so that he would be wholly human while nothing of his Divinity would be diminished. Predestined and pre-ordained to this wonderful work, Mary stands out, incomparable among all God's works, she who is that most noble star of the great sea. She is the enlightenment of the whole world, the unfailing help and consolation of the wavering in all the tempests of divers events. She is, moreover, the help and redemption of those who fear the destruction of eternal death and who fly to her safe protection.

18. He predestined you, O Lady, to such a great height and lifted you up by His divine power. He endowed you with so many prerogatives, disposing all things by his Wisdom. He chose you as his mother when he came to the help of the world to save all by that same ineffable mercy of his. Surely it is credible, I ask, that in your conception you were able to throw off the death of sin, which, through the envy of the devil, had seized the whole earth? Again and again, when I consider those reasons which I have called to mind above, the soul shuns to believe, the mind abhors and the tongue dares not say [that this is not credible].

19. What if it is said of you that, although before the birth of your blessed Son you were

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preserved from bodily death, you could not avoid the law of original sin, customary for others? It is a foolish remark and as such does not need answering.

In what way were you, God's mother-to-be, pre-ordained, if God who pre-ordained you was not preparing you for this position? In God there is no *is* and *is not*: only a simple *is*. Can death be stronger than God from whose hand no-one avails to seize anything?

In God's eyes you are above every creature; in order that you might merit to become most worthily his mother, you had to be like him not only wholly chaste and pure, but with his own chasteness and purity. Since you were about to give birth to true man in the flesh, you had of necessity to be purer than all others. Holy Church must venerate you from the very moment of your creation; she believes you to be, through the merits of your Son, so holy, so chaste, so far removed from any blemish of sin or corruption.

20. Let those who feel differently believe what they approve to be better. I, O most loving Lady, I, your little servant of whatever degree, I know, believe and confess that you came forth far removed from the wound of any sin which could stain you in any way. Wholly intact, you bore the most exquisite flower from the beautiful root of Jesse; that flower and no other upon whom the sevenfold Holy Spirit rested – the Spirit who sprinkled and filled every creature with the perfume of eternal life and the odour of eternal salvation, by the grace of his Godhead. Through that flower we were liberated from the sin of our first parent and escaped the death that had thereby entered the world. All mankind was redeemed by the blood of that flower, who is the only beloved Son, he who trampled underfoot, either in reality or in hope, those miseries which oppressed all flesh on account of that first transgression. Through him, too, we were not only restored to Paradise whence Adam was expelled, but were also carried with greater joy and worthiness into the kingdom of Heaven, which Adam did not possess, though he would have possessed it if he had not sinned. If Adam had not disobeyed God, the Son of God would never have become man. By suffering death as man and for man, and rising again, he entered the kingdom of Heaven in the substance of our flesh, reigning by right.



Now, then, what glory, what honour, what rejoicing of heart and joy of mind, what eternal certainty of happiness there will be for human nature – one flesh with him whom all the heavenly armies above adore, himself true God, reigning with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ruling all things, commanding everything, consubstantial and co-omnipotent with his eternal Father!