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Sin, Confession, and the Immaculate Conception: An Orthodox Perspective

By Laura Jones

It has been said that it is not the dogma of the Immaculate Conception that the Orthodox Catholics find objectionable so much as Roman Catholic interpretations of this. An encyclical of Pope John II on the Holy Spirit, *Lord and Giver of Life*, presents an understanding of sin remarkably like the Orthodox teaching that we find embodied in sacramental confession in the Orthodox tradition. I believe a reflection upon this will be of value for improved mutual understanding of how the Mother of God, the Theotokos, can be referred to as the Immaculate Conception.

A pilgrim to Russia in the year 1976 gives a very moving description of a confession he witnessed there. I have observed scenes very much like it during my own trips to Russia in the past few years. In the pilgrim's narrative, confessions were being heard in a side chapel at the time of Communion. This practice was allowed when it was difficult, or even impossible, for the faithful to come to confession at a more appropriate time.

The sacristan again approached and announced that the line of communicants was coming to an end. In order not to interrupt the Liturgy, Father Kozma asked the remaining group to place their hands on each other's shoulders, and then he stretched the epitachelion over their heads and read the prayer of absolution. That entire section of the church was now empty.... We looked at Fr. Kozma ... and noticed his left hand pointing to the floor. The marble floor was wet at the spot, as if water had been poured on it. The reflection of the reddish flame of candles and vigil lamps flickered on its surface He explained excitedly: "These are the penitent tears of the Russian people. Our Church thrives on these tears."¹

I think that many coming from a Western background would have the same reaction that I had when in confession I first experienced the "gift of tears" such as that just described: I was embarrassed, and tried to check the flow of tears. Then I remembered how in the book of instruction that I had been given when I became Orthodox, it was said that we recall our sins in confession ***in order to have the right contrition for the sacrament***. I thought to myself, there is no need to stop the tears; for this priest, they are a sign that the Holy Mystery (sacrament) is doing what it is supposed to be doing! And I let them come – and come, and come!

The Orthodox confessor is typically concerned primarily with arousing in the penitent that true contrition that Pope John Paul II recognizes in his encyclical as the source of “authentic conversion of the heart: the evangelical ‘metanoia’”.²

We know that recognizing evil in ourselves sometimes demands a great effort. We know that *conscience* not only commands and forbids but also judges in the light of interior dictates and prohibitions. It is also the *source of remorse*: man suffers interiorly because of the evil he has committed.... When the Spirit of truth permits the human conscience *to share in that suffering* [of Christ on the Cross], the suffering of the conscience becomes particularly profound, but also particularly salvific. Then, by means of ... contrition, the authentic conversion of the heart is accomplished: this is the evangelical “metanoia”.... Through just such a conversion in the Holy Spirit a person becomes open to forgiveness, to the remission of sins.”³

Significantly, in his introduction to the encyclical, the Pope says that

In this [effort to draw near to the Holy Spirit as the *giver of life*] we are helped and stimulated also by the heritage we share with the Oriental Churches, which have jealously guarded the extraordinary riches of the teachings of the Fathers on the Holy Spirit.⁴

Commenting on Jesus’ words:

“And when [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:7f),

Pope John Paul says,

Through this reference to “judgment,” vast horizons open up for understanding “sin” and also “righteousness”. The Holy Spirit, by showing sin against the background of Christ’s Cross in the economy of salvation (one could say “sin saved”), enables us to understand how his mission is also “to convince” of the sin that has already been definitively judged (“sin condemned”).⁵

I believe this also opens horizons for understanding the sinlessness of the Mother of God, because she also is **saved** from sin.

But to understand just what she is saved from, I think we must ask what **all sin** has in common with the first sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve.

The Pope explains the character of this first sin.

This original disobedience presupposes a *rejection*, or at least a *turning away from the truth contained in the Word of God*, who creates the world.⁶

For in spite of all the witness of creation and of the salvific economy inherent in it, the spirit of darkness (cf. Eph 6:12, Lk 22:53) is capable of showing God *as an enemy* of his own creature, and in the first place as an enemy of man, *as a source of danger and threat to man*. In this way *Satan* manages to sow in man's soul the seed of opposition to the one who "from the beginning" would be considered as man's enemy – and not as a Father. Man is challenged to become the adversary of God!⁷

The sinlessness of the Mother of God, then, does not consist only in that she never transgressed the Law, but, more profoundly, in that she had, from the very beginning, "a converted heart"; she never placed herself in an adversarial relationship to God.

And so we sing in the service for the Entry of the Most Holy Mother of God:

Thy wonders, O pure Theotokos, surpass the power of words. For in thee I see something beyond speech: a body that was never subject to the taint of sin. Therefore in thanksgiving I cry to thee: O pure Virgin, thou art truly high above all.⁸

The term "taint of sin" used here is remarkably close to the Roman Catholic expression "the stain of original sin" which appears in the definition of the Immaculate Conception.⁹ So it is not the expression itself that we would focus on, but rather the understanding of sin which informs it.

St. Simeon the New Theologian speaks of the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit from whom we were separated by our first parents' sin:

As the death of the body is the separation from it of the soul, so the death of the soul is the separation from it of the Holy Spirit, by whom God ... had been pleased that man be overshadowed, so that he might ... remain stable towards evil.¹⁰

Against this background we see why St. Seraphim of Sarov taught so emphatically that the good of the spiritual life is the acquisition of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

If we properly understand the commandments of Christ and the Apostles, then we see that our enterprise as Christians does not consist in increasing the number of our good deeds, for they are merely means to our goal of a Christian life, but in deriving the utmost profit from them, that is, in acquiring the most abundant gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Saint Seraphim describes the role of the Spirit in the evangelical metanoia, conversion, more simply than does Pope John Paul in his encyclical, but nevertheless in quite similar terms.

In spite of man's fall into sin, in spite of the darkness surrounding our souls, the grace of the Holy Spirit granted at Baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, shines in men's hearts with the Divine light which has been, from time immemorial, the light of the priceless gifts of Christ. If a sinner does not repent, this light of Christ cries to the Father: "Abba, Father, do not harden your heart forever against this sinner." And then, at the sinner's conversion to the way of repentance, it completely erases all traces of the sins that were committed, and clothes the former sinner afresh with a robe of incorruptibility, woven from the grace of the Holy Spirit, about whose acquisition I have been talking to you, friend of God, for such a long time as the goal of Christian life.¹²

When the converted heart, clothed with this robe woven from the grace of the Holy Spirit, approaches God in holy truth and cries out in the same Spirit, "Abba, Father," the adversarial relationship to God is born away by the flow of tears of holy contrition that open the penitent to God's forgiveness, the remission of sins, and reconciliation with God the Father.

The Holy Virgin, however, never regarded God as an adversary, never withdrew from him in disobedience; rather, by her obedience she became the New Eve, and the cause of our salvation. In the words of St. Irenaeus,

Having become disobedient, [Eve] was made the cause of death both to herself and to the entire human race; so also did Mary, ... by yielding obedience, become the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race.¹³

I believe there is one Roman Catholic interpretation of the Immaculate Conception that Orthodox Catholics can find acceptable, and this is an interpretation deriving from Bernadette of Lourdes. Bernadette steadfastly maintained that the lady who had appeared to her had said, "I am the Immaculate Conception," against critics who insisted that she must have said rather that she was the immaculately conceived one, for how can a person be called a conception? And were it merely a question of affirming the Virgin's sinlessness, to say that she was immaculately conceived would suffice.¹⁴ Only as we see the Virgin Mary as, in St. Irenaeus' words, the **cause** of **our** salvation, does it make any sense to call her the Immaculate Conception. It is in her that **we** are conceived holy and immaculate. Because the Most Pure Mother of God is also our Mother, in her we are born into a participation in God's own life, as those many brethren of whom her Divine Son was the firstborn (Rm 8:29)

Footnotes

1. *Holy Russia inside the Soviet Union*, Monk Fr. Mitrofan, trans. N.D. Kostich, Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Co., 1989, p. 24.
2. *Dominum et Vivificantem*, dated Pentecost, 18 May 1986. Vatican translation, pub. Daughters of St. Paul, Boston, II, 5, para 45, p. 84.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 83f. In all quotations from this document, the emphasis is in the original.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5
5. *Ibid.*, II, 1, para. 28, p. 49.
6. *Ibid.*, II, 2, para. 33, p. 58f.
7. *Ibid.*, II, 3, para. 38, p. 66. Note the close parallels in St. Simeon the New Theologian's discussion of this same point: "Adam sinned with a great sin **because he did not believe the words of God, but believed the words of the serpent**.... When with his whole soul he believed the serpent and not God, then the divine grace which had rested on him stepped away from him, so that **he became the enemy of God** by reason of the unbelief which he had shown to his words. **Adam thought that God envied him** and did not wish that he also should know good and evil; and he thought that God had commanded him not to taste of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order that he might not become a god like unto God who had created him." *The Sin of Adam*, California: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1979, p. 35. Emphasis is mine
8. *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, London: Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 190.
9. It is worth noting that in the papal encyclical from which I have quoted here, I found the term "original sin" only once (I, 6, para. 24, p. 38), in a reference to the event of the original fall.
10. Cf. note 7, *Idem*.
11. "A Conversation with the Saint", in *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, by C. Cavarnos and M. Zeldin, Belmont, Mass.: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1980, p. 101.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 108f.
13. *Against Heresies* III, 22, 67-68, trans. R. Alexander in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (1885), 455.
14. The need to affirm the sinlessness of the Mother of God derived from theological controversy within the western tradition. For instance, Thomas Aquinas, while recognizing that Mary never sinned, and this by a singular divine gift, maintained that the **stain of sin** nevertheless remained until she was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and conceived Christ, it being at this moment that freedom from sin was first bestowed upon mankind. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, Q. 27, art. 3, corpus. It is insofar as Roman Catholic interpretations of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and, indeed, the terms in which it was promulgated, remain within the narrowly

legalistic understanding of sin presupposed in Aquinas' line of argumentation that Orthodox find the dogma unacceptable.