



REGIS COLLEGE

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March 20, 1967

Very Reverend Father General, P. C.,

I wish to thank you for your kind letter of February 11th.

Enclosed please find the requested expansion of the opinion on the Virgin Birth expressed in my letter of January 2nd.

You were good enough to inquire about my health. I may say that the doctors are very satisfied with my recovery and that periodic examinations have not revealed any recurrence of the malady. My energy, however, is not what it used to be. Serious writing or reading tire me much more quickly and, while I do ordinary things in a normal manner, walking uphill or climbing stairs leaves me short of breath.

I am glad to say that my long projected book on Method in Theology is going forward. I have one chapter pretty well done and another approaching completion. In a year's time things ought to have a fairly definite shape.

Besides this writing I give occasional lectures here and elsewhere. So after Easter I shall be at Notre Dame, the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and Loyola University in Chicago.

With every good wish and an assurance of a continued remembrance of your intentions in my masses and prayers.

Respectfully yours in our Lord,

Bernard Lonergan S.J.

Bernard Lonergan, S. J.

On the Virgin Birth
B. Lonergan
March 29, 1967

1. In a letter dated February 11, 1967 Very Reverend Father General requested that I send him before Easter a more detailed account of the view on the Virgin Birth (= *virginitas ante partum*) expressed in my letter of January 2, 1967.

At the same time he forwarded me copies of opinions of fourteen experts and invited me to take advantage of their work in stating my view.

2. In my letter of January 2nd. I made three points:

(a) there should be no question of changing traditional formulae consecrated by scriptural, credal, conciliar, and liturgical usage;

(b) that additions to such formulae should not be made without serious study;

(c) that such study had to concern itself, not with the particular issue of the Virgin Birth, but with the very large and complex issue of interpretation or hermeneutics.

3. The first statement (2, a) is not under dispute. There may be a difference of opinion about the interpretation of the formulae, but the formulae themselves have been part of the expression of Christian faith from the earliest times.

4. The reason for the second statement is that additional formulae constitute a development of doctrine. They make explicit what has been only implicit. They resolve questions that in former times were not asked. Such developments of doctrine should not occur without serious study.

5. The reason for the third statement is that a scientific theology has to deal, not with apparent issues, but with real issues.

The real issue is not the Virgin Birth. There is no new evidence on that subject. No one alleges fresh documents from Qumran or any similar source.

The real issue is a new manner or method of doing theology: new types of question are being asked; answers have to meet new exigences.

6. There does not exist among theologians any uniform awareness, still less acceptance, of the new procedures. Nor is there always in individual theologians a consistent attitude towards them. A rough indication of this state of affairs may be had from a summary comparison of the opinions on the Virgin Birth submitted to Father General.

7. The traditional mode of theological proof comes from Melchior Cano's De locis theologicis and consists in successive appeals to the doctrine ~~contained~~ contained in scripture, in church documents, in the Fathers, and in the writings of theologians.

A straightforward application of this method to the question of the Virgin Birth yields results that are overwhelmingly affirmative. In fact, any attempt to hold a contrary view seems to be simply a vain attempt to escape from the manifest truth.

No less than eight of the experts can, I think, be adduced as conforming more or less to the above analysis.

8. Another five of the experts, however, more or less diverge from the above pattern.

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There is the question of historicity. Fr. Schoonenberg does not notice in the infancy narratives ~~any~~ clear trace of a historical tradition. Fr. Rahner speaks of the narratives, not as a report on a remembered event, but as a species of theological conclusion within revelation itself. Fr. Lohfink considers that, in attempting to establish the historicity of the Virgin Birth, one can get no further than a few hypotheses.

There is the interpretation of tradition. Fr. Rahner argues that, since tradition did not add to scripture, its meaning coincides with the meaning of scripture. Fr. Schoonenberg asks whether the Magisterium extraordinarium, in its apparent intention of speaking of corporeal virginity, was motivated by divine faith or by a historically conditioned devaluation of sexual activity. Fr. Lohfink feels that a more accurate understanding of scripture calls for a more qualified interpretation of dogmatic affirmations.

There is literary criticism. Fr. Lohfink elaborates the point at some length. Fr. Ahsmann refers to it and draws a parallel between the condemnation of Galilei and what he considers an unscientific interpretation of literary forms.

There is an abundance of questions, of plans for further investigation, and a reluctance to indulge in old-time dogmatic assertiveness. Fr. Schoonenberg and Fr. Lohfink are abundant on problems. After six pages Fr. Marlé concludes that, of course, ~~he~~ he has just been jotting down topics for research and that such research does not promise conclusive results. Fr. Rahner does use the word, heresy, but about a limiting case: it would be heretical to claim that the Virgin Birth, corporeally understood, was impossible. But he has over three foolscap pages on the pedagogical difficulties involved in any ecclesiastical pronouncement, and then he goes on to doubt the possibility of finding a formula that could treat so complex and nuanced a problem in a manner at once satisfactory and efficacious.

9. What is going on?

Any account of what is going on will be ^{an} analysis that expresses some individual's understanding of the situation. It will only be in the course of time that some one analysis will be widely understood and accepted.

However, what seems clear to me is that the division of the experts has the Virgin Birth only as its materia circa quam, that the real opposition lies on the theoretical level of the aims, norms, methods proper to theology.

It may not be out of place to mention that work on such fundamental issues is going forward quietly and, I trust, effectively. I have been working on the matter for years and hope, in the not too distant future, to publish a work entitled, Method in Theology.

While the issues will not be adequately treated if considered only theoretically apart from concrete instances, still I should say that a large variety of concrete instances have to be taken into account, and I consider it quite perilous to restrict attention to the single instance of the Virgin Birth.