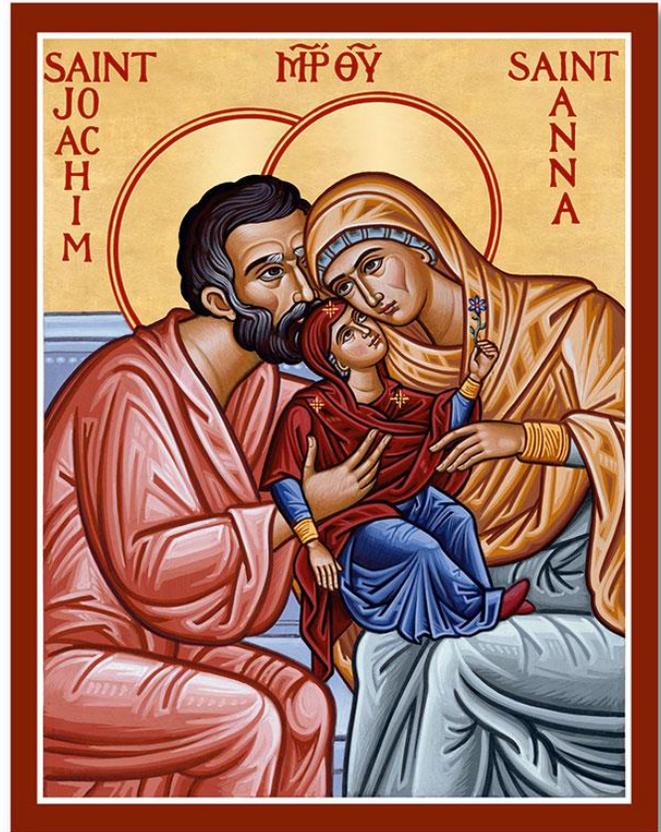


The Conception of the Most Holy Theotokos In Byzantine Theology

Background

The Byzantine Churches (both Catholic & Orthodox) traditionally celebrate the Conception by St. Anna of the Most Holy Theotokos on December 9th.¹ This feast may have been celebrated in Palestine as early as the 5th century. Roman Catholics received this liturgical feast from the East, developed it into the dogma of the “Immaculate Conception,” and moved its observance to December 8th.² There remain similarities between East and West in the celebration of this feast but there are also differences. Sometimes our Eastern Church Fathers are cited by Roman Catholic apologists as affirming the Latin understanding of St. Mary’s Conception. The Roman Catholic writer, Hilda Graef, explains why attributing such an understanding to Eastern Church Fathers is incorrect:

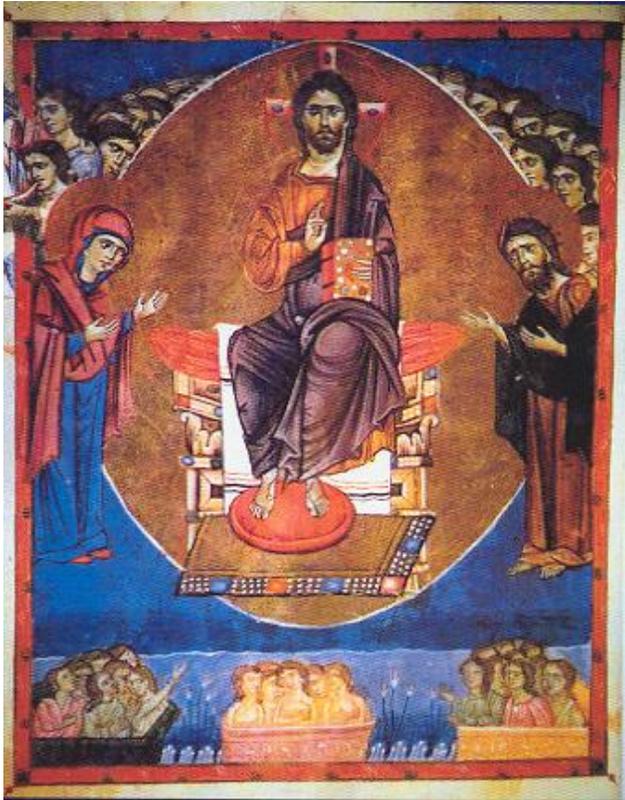


“While in the West Marian doctrine and devotion developed considerably between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, in the East they remained in some respects more static. For here the three influences that largely determined

¹ The title of the feast on the Eparchy of Parma’s Calendar is “The Conception of the Holy Theotokos by the Righteous Anna.”

² There is important significance to the original dating of this feast on December 9th which Byzantine Churches maintain. Byzantine liturgical observance of St. Mary’s gestation is from Dec 9th (Conception) to Sep 8th (Nativity). Byzantine liturgical observance of St. John the Forerunner’s gestation is from Sep 23rd (Conception) to June 24th (Nativity). Thus, these two -greatest of all saints- and key linking figures between the Old and New Testaments, who are so honored that they are depicted iconographically on the right and left of Christ’s throne in heaven, are both off of a perfect nine month’s gestation by one day. St. Mary is one day short and St. John is one day over. Thus this observance and these saints point us to Christ Who is “the Way, the Truth and the Life,” for only He has a liturgically perfect 9 month gestation from March 25th (Annunciation) to December 25th (Nativity). It is also interesting that the same Epistle (Gal. 4:22-31) is used in Byzantine tradition for both feasts of Conception (of the Mother of God and also of St. John the Forerunner), underlining their significance as linking figures between the Old and New Covenants. Finally, there is an occurrence in Latin tradition which underlines the importance of Dec 9th. It was on this day that the Theotokos appeared to Juan Diego and performed the miracle which brought about one of the most massive conversions of any people to Christianity (taking place with the Native Americans). Thus, this profound symbolism is lost when Byzantines use the Latin dating (Dec 8th) of the Theotokos’ Conception.

Western developments were absent: the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, which played such a decisive part in the controversy about the Immaculate Conception; an illiterate and often still semi-barbarian laity; and scholasticism. Most of the authors [...] extolled Mary's purity in the highest terms and are therefore frequently cited as witnesses for the Immaculate Conception by Latin theologians. In order to avoid too many repetitions I shall state at once that it seems to me that the whole question was seen by the Eastern³ Fathers in an altogether different light from that in which it was considered by Western



theologians. In the Eastern Church original sin had never played the same preponderant part as in post-Augustinian Western thought. From very early times it had been assumed as an indisputable fact that Mary was the purest creature imaginable, the highest angels not excepted. St. John of Damascus had even considered her active conception to have been without sin, but as he did not share the Augustinian view of original sin as an inherited guilt transmitted through the sexual act, the problem never presented itself to him in the way it did to Latin theologians. For the Eastern Fathers saw original sin far more as mortality with all its

implications, and as the Theotokos was subject to this, they did not exempt her from it. On the other hand, though they affirmed Mary's complete purity, they were less interested than the Western theologians in the question of the precise moment when this had been established. We might almost say that the Latins considered the question from the historical, the Eastern Fathers from the metaphysical, point of view; the former were concerned about when this purity had begun, the latter were only interested in the fact that it existed. For this reason I do not think one can claim these Eastern authors for the Immaculate Conception.”⁴

³ I have substituted the word “Eastern” for the word “Greek” in this quote. Western writers often refer to the entire Christian East as “Greek” due to the far reaching influences of what is now known as “Byzantine Theology” but this has an incorrect implication which doesn’t necessarily follow.

⁴ Excerpt from “Mary: A History of the Doctrine and Devotion,” by Hilda Graef

Thus the Latin feast of the “Immaculate Conception” focuses primarily on St. Mary’s conception as *the moment* when she became immaculate -and defines exactly what this means in the Latin theological tradition. Eastern theology focuses rather on *her person* as immaculate. Hence, we would be more likely to refer to the feast as the “Conception of the Immaculate Virgin,” rather than the “Immaculate Conception.” As Graef points out, whereas the East focuses on her metaphysical purity, the Latins focus more on the exact moment of her reception of that purity.⁵

In addition, whereas, this feast has become a celebration by Latin Catholics of the actual dogmatization of “the moment” by Pope Pius IX, in 1854, the Eastern Churches very importantly maintain the primitive emphasis on the very fact of her miraculous conception to barren parents and celebrate this feast recalling all the historical events surrounding her conception from Sts. Joachim and Anna.⁶

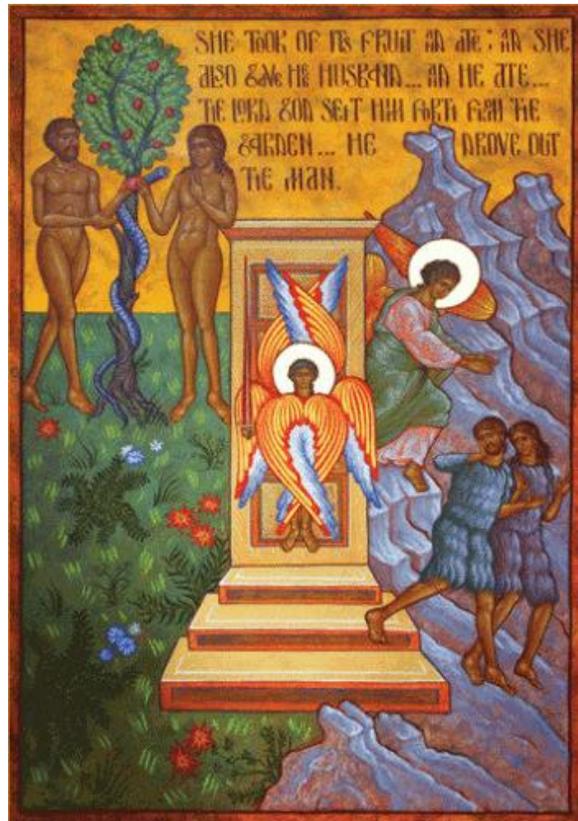
Differing Understandings of Original Sin

Another important distinction in understanding the difference between East and West in the observance of this feast is the difference in our understanding of Original Sin between the Eastern and Latin Churches. The Papal definition on the Immaculate Conception makes a differentiation between the “temporal penalties of Adam” which St. Mary still endured and the actual “stain of original sin” from which she was exempted.

These are explained as follows:

(a) Latin Catholics believe that although St. Mary was immune from Original Sin, she still suffered “the temporal penalties of Adam.” The Papal definition explains these to be: “sorrow, bodily infirmities, and death.”

(b) The “formal active essence” of Original Sin (which is what the Latins are referring to when they speak of “stain”) is referred to in the Papal definition as: “fault, all depraved emotions, passions, and debilities.” These, according to the Latin theological tradition were excluded from St. Mary when she was conceived.



⁵ The Byzantine Catholic Leaflet series notes that the Holy See's Pontifical Liturgical Commission in Rome, in 1944, called Byzantine Churches to restore the pristine way of the liturgical celebration of this feast along with its traditional name to be commemorated on December 9.

⁶ For the traditional narrative accepted in Eastern Church tradition, see the early Christian document, “The Protevangelion of St. James.”

Yet the East makes no such differentiation when explaining what is historically known in the East as the “Ancestral Sin” (rather than “Original Sin,” this title being coined by the 5th century Latin Father, St. Augustine). The East, following St. Paul, sees “death” to be the chief component or “stain” of the Ancestral Sin of our first parents (cf. Rom 5:12-21). Therefore, it makes little sense in our theology to say St. Mary was preserved from this because we believe that she, like us, was mortal and indeed died. The Orthodox Study Bible contains a definition of what Orthodox believe the “stain” of Original Sin to mean:

“The fact that every person born comes into the world stained with the consequences of the sins of Adam and Eve and of their other ancestors. These consequences are chiefly: a) mortality, b) a tendency to sin, and c) alienation from God and from other people.”

By this it is evident that the East also believes a “stain” is transmitted to us from our parents. But what this stain is, is different in Eastern theology than it is in Latin theology. What the Latins refer to as “the penalties of Adam” seem to be what Eastern theology means by the “Ancestral Sin.” And what the Latins mean by the “formal active essence of Original Sin” or the “stain” we either don’t believe in at all (e.g. transmitted guilt) or we consider to also be passed on through Ancestral and Generational Sin (e.g. depraved emotions, passions, and debilities). But it is important to note that in Eastern theology, the passing on of these defects is dependent upon the particular humanity our ancestors pass on to each one of us.⁷ St. Mary’s parents, Sts. Joachim and Anna, as a result of their profound faith and trust in God, did not pass on depraved emotions, passions and debilities to the Theotokos.⁸ They rather passed on to her a holy and immaculate humanity through their cooperation with the grace of God but she still partook of our fallen human nature, in order to pass this onto to our Lord for it to be healed.⁹

The Effects of Generational Sin

Another important distinction between Byzantine and Latin theology, as the definition from the Orthodox Study Bible stated, is that people are stained not only with the consequences of the sins of Adam and Eve (i.e. the Ancestral Sin), but also with that of *their other ancestors*. This is known in Byzantine theology as “Generational Sin.” Hence the Eastern emphasis not only on “*the*” (referring to a singular act or event) “Original Sin” of Adam and Eve but also on “Generational Sin.”

Although Latin theology does not appear to share this perspective, Eastern theology teaches that we can pass on a holier or less holy humanity to our offspring. This

⁷ For a full discussion of the effects of Generational Sin, see my essay, “The Generation of the Soul”) @ <http://www.looys.net/tradition.html>

⁸ “Birth-giver of God” is a literal translation of the Greek word “Theotokos.” This title for St. Mary was affirmed as Orthodox by the Third Ecumenical Council, in 431, and has been used ever since as a beloved title for St. Mary which expresses her profound role in our salvation.

⁹ Cf. St. Gregory the Theologian’s maxim, “Whatever is not assumed, is not healed.”

is based upon our co-operation with the grace or divine energies of God. The Papal definition points out that this is not what is meant by the Immaculate Conception. It states that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception “does not concern the immaculateness of the generative activity of her parents.”

Yet the Eastern Churches certainly celebrate and honor the holiness of St. Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anna, in our liturgical prayers. Sts. Joachim and Anna are seen as the crowning couple of Old Testament Israel. God prepared the royal line of descendants leading all the way up to them and their holiness directly affected the all-holiness and spotlessness of the Theotokos whom God found worthy to bear Christ our Lord.

Byzantine Liturgical Witness¹⁰

As an example of the common faith of the Eastern Churches regarding St. Mary, we have the words of St. John of Damascus who stated in his homily on the Conception of the Theotokos:

“O most blessed loins of Joachim from which came forth a spotless seed! O glorious womb of Anna in which a most holy offspring grew” (Homily I on the Nativity, c. A.D. 749).

Also from the Byzantine Liturgical Office of Matins

“Hearing the prayers of the just forebears, O Lord, You fulfilled what they asked for; You granted to your holy ancestors your immaculate Mother as the fruit of their loins. In her glory, Anna now conceives and shall give birth to [the one who will bear] the incorporeal Lord, who is Christ, our supreme goodness.”

“The wondrous Joachim and the God-wise Anna, both living in piety according to the Law of Moses, were fruitless. They prayed to God with their whole heart, saying, O most gracious Lord, You are the hope of everyone, and You know the pain, reproach and anguish of childlessness. Therefore, grant us fruit from the womb, and we shall offer the child as a sacred gift in Your temple. And the offering will be fulfilled, for Anna will bear the One who will give birth to the Word.”

“O holy Anna, as you conceive the source of Life, you welcome, at the same time, our joy. As you receive into your womb the holy temple who shines with holiness, extol the Creator.”

“Let us sing of the holy and blessed couple, Joachim and Anna! As the

¹⁰ See the “Homily on the Nativity of the Most Pure Theotokos,” by St. Demetrius, Metropolitan of Rostov, for a profound example, based upon Byzantine liturgical texts, of an accurate explanation of the feast of the Conception of the Theotokos in Byzantine Tradition.

forebears of the Son who was begotten before the ages and as the guardians of the Law, they now receive their child as the first fruits of joy.”

The Transmission of Guilt

As seen above the Papal definition speaks of the “penalties of Adam.” The focus in the Eastern Churches is not on a “penalty” resulting from the fall of mankind, but rather on a “condition” -which we receive through no fault of our own. Thus Orthodox Study Bible adds: “Original Sin does not carry guilt... for a person is guilty only of his or her own sins, not of those of Adam.” This is another important distinction between the Latin and Byzantine approach. We have no teaching of a “transmitted guilt” resulting from the Ancestral (or Generational) Sin. Thus there was no guilt or penalty that St. Mary needed exemption from. This is why Orthodox strongly object to the mistranslation of Psalm 50 (or 51)¹¹ which as the Psalmist state: “...remember, I was born guilty, a sinner from the moment of conception.” In Eastern theology, no man is born guilty because he can only be guilty or held accountable for what he has actually done. Therefore the Eastern Churches follow the historic Septuagint translation which states, “Behold, I was brought forth in transgressions, and in sins my mother conceived me.”¹² Whereas the sins of our ancestors can affect and hurt us, they do not make us guilty.

Conclusion:

A comparison can be made between the respective Byzantine and Latin teachings concerning St. Mary and Holy Communion. The Latin Church, through the doctrine of “Transubstantiation” attempts to define this great mystery of our faith regarding the exact moment and process by which the bread and wine become the true Body and Blood of our Lord. In contrast the Eastern Churches accept that a transformation takes place but do not define the exact *when* or *how* of this transformation. The East simply accepts it as a mystery of our faith. The same could be said of our teaching on the Holy Theotokos. Both of our Churches affirm that St. Mary was immaculate, or spotless. The Latins defined what that spotlessness entails and the precise moment she received it. The Eastern Churches simply accept the glorious mystery of St. Mary's holiness without attempting to define when she received this gift. As one writer put it, “As much as the Latin Church has a need to define, the East has a need to leave the Mysteries undefined and accept them as she always has.” More could be said, but this underlines some of the important differences between the historic Byzantine and Latin understandings of the Feast of the Conception of the Most Holy Theotokos.

Feast of the Conception of the Holy Theotokos, Dec. 9th, 2002 (rev 12/9/17)
Sub-Deacon Lazarus W. Der-Ghazarian

¹¹ It should be noted that the numbering of the Psalms in Bibles produced by Protestants (and modern Roman Catholics) are not in accord with the historic Christian usage. Thus Psalm 51 in the KJV is actually Psalm 50 in the historic Greek Septuagint, Latin Vulgate, Syriac and Armenian Versions.

¹² Although some Eastern Catholics have inadvertently followed this misleading translation of Psalm 50, in principle Byzantine Catholics follow their traditional LXX text and therefore have corrected this.