

HISTORY OF A DOGMA

The truth of the Immaculate Conception triumphed at the Sorbonne dispute

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Kolbe**



We publish below ample excerpts from the article "A proposito del culto all'Immacolata Concezione", written in 1925 by Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe (cf. Gli scritti di M. Kolbe, Città di Vita, Firenze, 1978, vol. III).

Paris in the year 1305. A young religious [Blessed John Duns Scotus, ed.] leaves the convent of the Franciscan Friars and in great recollection heads for the most famous school of the time, the Sorbonne University. He thinks of the Immaculate Conception and invokes Her with subdued ejaculations to help him defend her privilege, so dear to Her, of the Immaculate Conception. On that very day, in fact, by order of the Pope and before his legates, a general dispute was to take place between the supporters of this privilege and its adversaries. And the dispute was provoked precisely by him....

He has recently taken over the university chair vacated by William Ware, who retired due to old age. By order of the Attorney General, he abandoned his university chair at Oxford, where he had spoken publicly and with real enthusiasm about the 'Sinless Conception'. And students had flocked from all over reaching the number of 30,000.

Now he has come to Paris. Not even here did he miss the opportunity to openly defend the Immaculate Conception. It is only since 18 November 1304 that he has taken up residence in Paris, after having left Oxford; yet complaints are already reaching Pope Clement V in Avignon about him, for the fact that he publicly upholds the privilege of the Immaculate Conception, as if he were teaching a doctrine contrary to the faith, due to an exaggerated devotion to the most holy Virgin. And precisely today he has to justify himself before all the professors and even in the presence of the Pope's legates. Could he do otherwise? He, a Franciscan, spiritual son of the holy Patriarch of Assisi? [...]

The Father St. Francis... He, in fact, sending the first friars out to conquer souls, taught them a prayer to Our Lady: "I greet you, Lady... chosen by the most holy Father in heaven, who consecrated you with the most holy and beloved Son and with the Holy Spirit the Paraclete. In Thee is and was all fullness of grace and all good. [St. Anthony, then, one of the first sons of our Father St. Francis, did he not call Mary in his sermons by the sweet name of 'Immaculate Virgin'? [...]] Yes, he [Scotus] has the right, he has the duty, as a Franciscan, to fight in defence of such a sublime privilege of the Mother of God.

The professors of Paris assert that it is a new doctrine. [...] A new doctrine? [...]

The Fathers of the Church do not, perhaps, proclaim their faith and that of their centuries in the Immaculate Conception of Mary clearly enough, when they affirm that She is most pure in every respect and totally without blemish, always pure, that sin has never dominated in Her, that She is more than holy, more than innocent, holy in every respect, pure without blemish, holier than the saints, purer than the heavenly spirits, the only holy, the only innocent, the only unblemished beyond measure, the only blessed beyond measure? [...]

The truth is that not all of those gentlemen know exactly the writings of the Church Fathers, especially the Eastern ones; let them, therefore, also read those scrolls. They claim that the assertion that the Blessed Virgin was immune from the stain of original sin is an outrage against the dignity of Christ the Lord, who redeemed all without exception and died for all. But is it not precisely because of this, because of the merits of His future death, that He did not even allow Her to be stained by any guilt? Is it not precisely for this that He has redeemed her in the most perfect manner? [...]

I have heard many and many objections of different kinds, but none can withstand criticism. Yes, God had the possibility of preserving His Mother even from the stain of original sin. He undoubtedly wanted to do so [...].

Scotus lifted his gaze; he was just passing by a palace: from the recess of one of its niches, the Immaculata, sculpted in a marble statue, looked at him benevolently. His heart palpitated with joy. He was reminded of the years of his adolescence, when he had presented himself at the door of the convent of the Franciscan Friars of Oxford; when, after being accepted, he had great difficulty in his studies for lack of ability and, having prayed to the Immaculate Virgin, seat of Wisdom, he had received that grace in great abundance and had promised the Immaculate Virgin to consecrate all his genius and all his knowledge to her glory.

For Her, precisely, he was at that moment going to fight. He took off his hat and inwardly prayed fervently: "Make me worthy to praise you, most holy Virgin. And give me strength against your enemies. And he saw that the Immaculata, with a bow of her head, promised him help. (The statue of the Immaculata with the bowed head remained on display until 1789, when the Freemasons destroyed it during the Revolution). [...]

In the university's large hall, the numerous opponents had occupied the seats on both sides. Even the modest Scotus went to his seat and humbly waited to be allowed to speak. The three envoys of the Pope also made their entrance and stood in the centre of the hall in their assigned seats, to listen to the dispute and preside over it. The

opponents came forward first. With multiple arguments, which contemporaries enumerated up to 200, they refuted the claims of the poor Franciscan. Finally, the objections having been exhausted, there was silence.

The Pope's legate granted Scotus the floor. [...] Here is how the scene is described by Pelbart of Temesvar, a near contemporary of Scotus: "These (those who denied the Immaculate Conception) were opposed by the valiant orator. Solid arguments had been presented against him, numbering 200. He listened to them all one after the other with serenity and ease, but with attention, and with an astonishing memory he repeated them in the same order, unravelling the intricate difficulties and demonstrations with great ease, as Samson had done with the bonds of Delilah [cf. Jdg 16:9-14]. Moreover, Scotus added numerous other very valid arguments to prove that the most holy Virgin was conceived without the stain of sin. His dissertation so impressed the scholars of the Parisian university that in token of approval, Scotus was awarded the honorary title of 'Thin Doctor'".

From then on, the Franciscans, scattered throughout the various localities of Europe, with ever-increasing frankness proclaimed the Immaculate Conception of the Most Pure Virgin to the faithful everywhere. By the time the courageous defender of the privilege of the Immaculate Conception left this earthly exile on 8 November 1308, in Cologne, at whose university he had taught in his last years, faith in the Immaculate Conception of Mary had by then taken such deep root that the celebrated Spanish theologian Vasquez could rightly write in the 16th century "Since Scotus' time [faith in the Immaculate Conception] has grown so much not only among scholastic theologians, but also among the people, that no one is now able to make it disappear.

[...] Faith in the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady was becoming more and more alive. What in the past was implicit in the faith in the expression: "fullness of grace", that is to say the sanctity and unblemished purity of Our Lady, was now manifested expressly, venerated in all its breadth and called by a proper name, until the day when, in the divine decrees, the moment came when Pope Pius IX [...] solemnly declared that the doctrine - which affirmed that the Blessed Virgin Mary in the first instant of her conception was preserved free from all stain of original sin, by a special grace and by a privilege of Almighty God, in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ the Saviour of the human race - had been revealed by God. [...]