

QUESTION 33

The Manner and Order of Christ's Conception

Next we have to consider the manner and order of Christ's conception. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Was Christ's body formed in the first instant of its conception? (2) Was Christ's body animated [by a rational soul] in the first instant of its conception? (3) Was Christ's body assumed by the Word in the first instant of its conception? (4) Was the conception in question natural or miraculous?

Article 1

Was Christ's body formed in the first instant of its conception?

It seems that Christ's body was not formed in the first instant of its conception (*corpus Christi non fuerit formatum in primo instanti conceptionis*):

Objection 1: John 2:20 says, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple ." While expounding this passage in *De Trinitate* 4 Augustine says, "This number fits in with the perfection of our Lord's body." And in 83 *Quaestiones* he says, "It is not without reason that the temple, which prefigured His body, is said to have been built in forty-six years, so that our Lord's body was completed in as many days as the years it took to build the Temple." Therefore, it is not the case that Christ's body was completely formed (*perfecte formatum*) in the first instant of its conception.

Objection 2: What was required for the formation of Christ's body was a local movement by which the Virgin's purest bloods arrived at the place appropriate for generation. But no bodily thing can move locally in an instant, because, as is proved in *Physics* 4, time is divided according to the division of the moveable thing. Therefore, Christ's body was not formed in an instant.

Objection 3: As was established above (q. 31, a. 5), Christ's body was formed from the Virgin's purest bloods. But the matter in question could not be both blood and flesh at the same instant, since in that case the matter would have existed simultaneously under two forms. Therefore, there was an instant in which it was blood for the last time and another instant in which it was flesh for the first time. But there is time in the middle between any two instants. Therefore, Christ's body was not formed in an instant, but was instead formed during some temporal interval (*per aliquod tempus*).

Objection 4: Just as the power to grow (*potentia augmentativa*) requires a determinate temporal interval (*determinatum tempus*) in its act, so too does the power to generate; for each is a natural power that belongs to the vegetative soul. But Christ's body grew over a determinate interval of time, just like other human bodies; for Luke 2:52 says, "He grew in age and in wisdom." Therefore, by parity of reasoning, it seems that His body's formation, which belongs to the generative power, did not occur in an instant but instead occurred over the determinate interval of time in which the bodies of other human beings are formed.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 38 Gregory says, "As soon as the angel announced it, as soon as the Spirit came down, the Word was in the womb, within the womb the Word was made flesh."

I respond: In the case of the conception of Christ's body there are three things to consider: first of all, the *local movement* of the blood to the place of generation; second, the *formation* of the body from such matter; and, third, the *growth* by which the body is taken to its complete quantity (*ad quantitatem perfectam*). The nature of the conception (*ratio conceptionis*) consists in the second of these, since the first is a leadup to the conception, whereas the third follows upon the conception.

Now the first cannot exist in an instant, since this is contrary to the very notion of the local movement of any sort of body, the parts of which enter a given place in succession. Similarly, the third

has to be successive, both because growth does not exist without local movement, and also because growth proceeds from a power of the soul which (a) is operating in a body that has already been formed and which (b) does not operate except over time.

By contrast, the body's formation itself, in which the nature of the conception mainly consists, existed in an instant—and this for two reasons:

First of all, because of the infinite power of the agent, viz., the Holy Spirit, through whom, as was explained above (q, 32, a. 1), Christ's body was formed. For a given agent can dispose the matter more quickly to the extent that it has greater power. Hence, an agent of infinite power can in an instant dispose the matter for the appropriate form.

Second, on the part of the person of the Son, whose body was formed. For it was not fitting that He should assume a human body without its having been formed. But if some temporal portion of the conception had preceded the completed formation [of the body] (*si ante formationem perfectam aliquod tempus conceptionis praecessisset*), then it would have been impossible to attribute the whole conception to the Son of God, since the conception is not attributed to Him except by reason of His having assumed the body (*nisi ratione assumptionis*).

And so in the first instant in which the unified matter reached the place of generation, Christ's body was both formed and assumed. And it is because of this that the Son of God Himself is said to have been conceived—something that could not otherwise have been said.

Reply to objection 1: In the case of both of these passages, what Augustine says refers not to just the formation of Christ's body, but to its formation along with its determinate growth up to the time of birth. Hence, given the reason for the number in question, the time is said to be completed by the nine months that Christ spent in the womb of the Virgin.

Reply to objection 2: The local movement in question is not included within the conception itself, but is instead a leadup to the conception.

Reply to objection 3: It is not possible to designate a last instant in which the matter in question was blood, but it is possible to assign a last temporal interval, which is continuous, and without anything intervening in the middle, up to the first instant in which Christ's flesh was formed. And this instant was the terminus of the matter's local movement to the place of generation.

Reply to objection 4: Growth is effected by the power of growth that belongs to that which grows, but the formation of the body is effected by the generative power that belongs not to that which is generated, but to the father's generating power by means of the semen in which the formative power derived from the father's soul operates. But as was explained above (q. 31, a. 5), Christ's body was formed not from a male's semen, but by the operation of the Holy Spirit. And so it was appropriate for such a formation to be as befits the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, the growth of Christ's body was effected by the power of growth that belonged to Christ's soul, and since this power was in conformity with the species of our soul, it was fitting for His body to grow in the same way that other men's bodies grow, in order that the genuineness of His human nature might thereby be shown.

Article 2

Was Christ's body animated [by a rational soul] in the first instant of its conception?

It seems that Christ's body was not animated [by a rational soul] in the first instant of its conception (*corpus Christi non fuit animatum in primo instanti conceptionis*):

Objection 1: In *Epistola ad Iulianum* Pope Leo says, “Christ’s flesh was not of a different nature from our flesh; nor was the soul infused in Him with a different beginning from other men.” But in other men the soul is not infused in the first instant of their conception. Therefore, neither was it fitting for the soul to be infused into Christ’s body in the first instant of His conception.

Objection 2: The soul, like every natural form, requires a determinate quantity in its matter. But in the first instant of its conception Christ’s body did not have as much quantity as the bodies of other human beings have when they are animated; otherwise, if His body had grown continuously afterwards, He would either have been born too soon or had greater quantity at His birth than other infants. The first of these alternatives is contrary to Augustine in *De Trinitate* 4, where he proves that Christ spent a period of nine months in the womb of the Virgin; the second alternative is contrary to Pope Leo, who, in a sermon on the Feast of the Epiphany, says, “They discovered the child Jesus as wholly indistinct from the general condition of human infants.” Therefore, it is not the case that Christ’s body was animated in the first instant of its conception.

Objection 3: Wherever there is something prior and something posterior, there has to be more than one instant. But according to the Philosopher in *De Generatione Animalium*, the generation of a human being requires something prior and something posterior; for he is first *alive*, and afterwards an *animal*, and afterwards a *human being*. Therefore, Christ’s animation could not have been complete in the first instant of His conception.

But contrary to this: In *De Fide Orthodoxa* 3 Damascene says, “At the same instant it became flesh, the flesh of the Word of God, and flesh animated by a rational and intellectual soul (*simul caro, simul Dei verbi caro, simul caro animata anima rationali et intellectuali*).”

I respond: In order for the conception to be attributed to the Son of God Himself—as we confess in the creed when we say, “... who was conceived of the Holy Spirit”—it is necessary to claim that the body itself was assumed by the Word of God when it was conceived. But it was shown above (q. 6, aa. 1-2) that the Word of God assumed the body by the mediation of the soul and the soul by the mediation of the spirit, i.e., of the intellect. Hence, it had to be the case that in the first instant of its conception Christ’s body was animated by a rational soul.

Reply to objection 1: There are two possible ways to think about the beginning of the soul’s infusion:

In one way, according to *the disposition of the body*. And in this sense it is from no other beginning that the soul is infused into Christ’s body and into the bodies of other human beings. For just as the soul is infused as soon as the body of some other human being is formed, so too it was in the case of Christ.

In the second way, one can think about the beginning in question *just with respect to the time*. And in this sense, since Christ’s body was completely formed prior in time [to the bodies of other human beings], it was likewise animated prior in time.

Reply to objection 2: The soul requires an appropriate quantity in the matter into which it is infused, but this quantity admits of a certain latitude, since the requirement is satisfied by greater and lesser quantities. The quantity that a body has when the soul is first infused into it is proportioned to the complete quantity that it will reach through growth, so that, more specifically, the bodies of bigger human beings have more quantity when they are first animated.

Now Christ at a mature age had a becoming and middle-sized quantity, to which was proportioned the quantity that his body had at the time when the bodies of other human beings are animated; however, He did have less quantity at the beginning of His conception. However, that small quantity was not so small that the character of an animated body could not be preserved; for the bodies of certain small men are animated in this much quantity.

Reply to objection 3: The claim that the Philosopher makes has a place in the case of the

generation of other human beings because their bodies are formed and disposed toward the soul. Hence, at first, as imperfectly disposed, they receive an imperfect soul, and afterwards, when they are fully and perfectly disposed, they receive a perfect soul. By contrast, Christ's soul, because of the infinite power of the agent, was perfectly disposed in an instant. Hence, He received a perfect form, i.e., a rational soul, in the first instant.

Article 3

Was Christ's flesh assumed by the Word in the first instant of its conception?

It seems that Christ's flesh was first conceived and [only] afterwards assumed (*caro Christi prius fuit concepta, et postmodum assumpta*):

Objection 1: What does not exist cannot be assumed. But Christ's flesh began to exist through the conception. Therefore, it seems that it was assumed by the Word *after* it had been conceived.

Objection 2: Christ's flesh was assumed by the Word through the mediation of the rational soul. But it received the rational soul at the endpoint of the conception. Therefore, Christ's flesh was assumed at the endpoint of the conception. But at the endpoint of the conception the flesh is said to be already conceived. Therefore, the flesh was first conceived and afterwards assumed.

Objection 3: As is clear from the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 9, in the case of every entity that is generated, what is imperfect or incomplete is prior in time to what is perfect or complete. But Christ's body is something that is generated. Therefore, it did not immediately arrive in an instant at its final perfection, which consists in its union with the Word of God; instead, the flesh was first conceived and afterwards assumed.

But contrary to this: In *De Fide ad Petrum* Augustine says, "Hold most firmly, and do not doubt in any way, that Christ's flesh was not conceived in the womb of the Virgin before it was taken up by the Word (*priusquam susciperetur a verbo*)."

I respond: As was explained above (q. 16, aa. 6-7), we properly say *God was made a man*, but we do not properly say *A man was made God*; for God assumed to Himself what belongs to a man, but what belongs to a man did not preexist, in the sense of subsisting in its own right (*per se*), before it was taken up by the Word.

However, if Christ's flesh had been conceived before it was taken up by the Word, then at some time His flesh would have had an *hypostasis* other than the *hypostasis* of the Word of God. But this is contrary to the notion of the Incarnation, according to which we posit that the Word of God is united to the human nature and to all its parts in a oneness of *hypostasis*; nor was it fitting that the Word of God should, by assuming the human nature, destroy a preexisting *hypostasis* or any of its parts. And so it is contrary to the Faith to claim that Christ's flesh was first conceived and [only] afterwards assumed by the Word of God.

Reply to objection 1: If Christ's flesh had been formed, i.e., conceived, not in an instant but over a temporal interval (*per temporis successionem*), then one of the two things would have to follow, either (a) what was assumed was not yet flesh or (b) the flesh's conception existed before the flesh was assumed. But because we claim that the conception was completed in an instant (*conceptionem in instanti esse perfectam*), it follows that in the case of that flesh, *being conceived* and *having been conceived* occurred simultaneously. And so, as Augustine says in *De Fide ad Petrum*, "We claim that (a) the Word of God Himself was conceived by taking on His flesh, and that (b) the flesh itself was conceived by the incarnation of the Word."

Reply to objection 2: From this the reply to the second objection is clear. For while the flesh in question is being conceived, it has simultaneously been conceived and animated.

Reply to objection 3: In the mystery of the Incarnation one does not, as the heretic Photinus claimed, think of an *ascent*, as in the ascent of someone preexisting who rises up to the dignity of union [with a divine person]. Instead, one thinks of a *descent*, according to which the perfect Word of God assumes for Himself the imperfection of our nature—this according to John 6:38 and 51 (“I have come down from heaven”).

Article 4

Was Christ’s conception natural [or miraculous]?

It seems that Christ’s conception was natural (*conceptio Christi fuerit naturalis*):

Objection 1: It is according to the conception of His flesh that Christ is called the Son of Man. But He is the true and the natural Son of Man, just as He is likewise the true and the natural Son of God. Therefore, His conception was natural.

Objection 2: No creature produces a miraculous work. But Christ’s conception is attributed to the Blessed Virgin, who is a mere creature; for we say that a virgin conceived Christ. Therefore, it seems that the conception is natural and not miraculous.

Objection 3: As was established above (q. 32, a. 4), in order for a given transmutation to be natural, it is sufficient for its passive principle to be natural. But as is clear from what was said above (q. 32, a. 4), in the case of the conception of Christ, the passive principle on the part of the mother was natural. Therefore, Christ’s conception was natural.

But contrary to this: In *Epistola ad Caium Monachum* Dionysius says, “Christ does in a super-human way those things that belong to man (*super hominem operatur Christus ea quae sunt hominis*), and the virgin conceiving supernaturally demonstrates this.”

I respond: As Ambrose says in *De Incarnatione*, “In this mystery you will find many things that are in accord with nature and many things that are beyond nature.” For if we think about what there is on the part of the *matter* of the conception, which the mother supplied, everything is natural. By contrast, if we think about what there is on the part of the active power, everything is miraculous. And since a thing is judged more on the basis of its form than on the basis of its matter—and, similarly, more on the basis of what acts than on the basis of what is acted upon—it follows that Christ’s conception should be called miraculous and supernatural absolutely speaking, but natural in a certain respect.

Reply to objection 1: Christ is called the natural Son of Man insofar as He has a genuine human nature through which He is the Son of Man, even though He obtained that human nature miraculously—just as the blind man who has been given his sight sees naturally through a visual power that he received miraculously.

Reply to objection 2: The conception is attributed to the Blessed Virgin not as an active principle, but because she provided the matter for what was conceived and because the conception took place in her womb.

Reply to objection 3: A natural passive principle is sufficient for a natural transformation when it is moved in a natural and customary manner by a proper active principle. But there is no room for this in the case under discussion. And so that conception cannot be called natural absolutely speaking.