In the sixth volume of the new *Marienlexikon* the article on the "Immaculate Conception," almost at its beginning, warns readers in these words:

From the start a misunderstanding which is encountered over and over again must be cleared away. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception has no relation to the act of the incarnation of Christ in the womb of Mary.¹

Likewise Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, when authoring an article on the "Immaculate Conception," in their first line present a similar caution: "This [Immaculate Conception] must not be confused with Christ’s virgin birth of Mary."²

But why do so many Catholics (also non-Catholics who hear the terms) confuse these two truths “over and over again”? Maybe their misunderstanding is understandable? For just one example, does not the same word “conception” appear in each? Are not “immaculate” and “virginal,” though not identical, close in meaning?

This brief study, therefore, though admitting that the confusion can never be fully eliminated, will attempt to throw some light on its complexity.

A first section offers a visual aid diagram, in which the two truths are set side by side and differences succinctly displayed. A second section will explain certain points of the diagram, those followed by (1) to (10), because some "succinct" statements, necessarily condensed for the diagram, require additional data. A third section will suggest some practical paths toward clarification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who was conceived?</th>
<th>IMMUNATE CONCEPTION</th>
<th>VIRGINAL CONCEPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where conception?</th>
<th>in womb of Anna (1)</th>
<th>in womb of Mary 1 A.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 B.C. (2)</td>
<td>without male seed of human father; creative act of Holy Spirit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ordinary husband-wife conception by Anna and Joachim</td>
<td>to show absolute initiative of the Father in redemptive plan; no human father began this family (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Why thus? | to prepare Mary to be the Mother of the Son of God, never under power of original sin (3) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did conceive know?</th>
<th>Anna, no passive; the child generated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did conceive know?</td>
<td>Mary, yes active; generating a child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning of conception?</th>
<th>when an embryo in womb of Anna</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time of life of Mary?</td>
<td>when a young woman to become mother of Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How in Mary?</td>
<td>fundamentally in her soul, preserved from original sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How in Mary?</td>
<td>fundamentally in her body, to bear a son in her womb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infallibly taught?</th>
<th>yes, defined in 1854 by Pope Pius IX (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infallibly taught?</td>
<td>yes, by constant teaching of Church through centuries (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Scripture? no; but nothing against yes, in Matthew and some remote (1:18-25) and texts (7) Luke (1:26-38; 3:23) (8)

Understanding harder to understand easier to understand (10) (9)

B. FURTHER EXPLANATIONS OF DIAGRAM

1) Anna. This name of Anna is not in Scripture. It first appeared around 150 A.D. in the apocryphal gospel of James. Although the Latin Church, influenced by Augustine and Jerome, generally rejected such apocryphal writings, somehow the name Anna gradually entered into use in the Christian faith. Why? The parents of so great a person as Mary deserve recognition. Since they surely had some names, Anna and Joachim simply represent a real wife and mother, a real husband and father, whose exact names are unknown. First traces of the liturgical veneration are found in the sixth century; it continues until today. The present liturgy designates the feast of Anna and her husband Joachim on July 26.³

2) The dates 15 B.C. and 1 A.D. Concerning these dates a one paragraph quotation from Jaroslav Pelikan synthesizes pertinent history:

But in the sixth century a Scythian monk living in Rome, Dionysius Exiguus ("Little Denis"), proposed a new system of reckoning. It was to be named not for the pagan myth of the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus, nor for the persecutor Diocletian, but for the incarnation of Jesus Christ, specifically for the day of the annunciation of his birth to the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel, 25 March, in the year 753 A.U.C. [ab urbe condita or from the founding of Rome]. For reasons that seem still to be somewhat obscure, Dionysius Exiguus miscalculated by four to seven years, producing the anomaly by which it is sometimes said that Jesus was born in 4 B.C. Such trifles aside, however, Dionysius’s identification of "the Christian era" gradually established itself, even though the process of establishing

it required many centuries, and is now universal. Henceforth the dates of history and biography are marked as A.D. and B.C., according to "the years of Our Lord."4

The use therefore of 1 A.D. here, even if not mathematically exact, stresses that the central year of all history was the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Further, because experts concerning the era surmise that Mary was probably about fifteen when she conceived him, 15 A.D. is likewise maintained to preserve that balance.

3) To prepare Mary to be the Mother of God, never under power of original sin. That God prepared Mary for such an exalted role should not surprise anyone. He also chose, for example, Jeremiah and Paul for determined tasks. To Jeremiah Yahweh declared: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you" (Jer 1:5). St. Paul says of himself: "God . . . from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace" (Gal 1:15). Still more, the letter to the Ephesians expands God's plan to immense proportions: "He [the Father] chose us in him [Jesus Christ] before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him" (Eph 1:4).

How much more then would God prearrange everything for Jesus' mother Mary, who because of her exalted vocation is far more important than any prophet, Apostle, saint, pope or bishop in history.5 This preparation Luke signifies by the words: "Rejoice, highly favored one! The Lord is with you" (1:28).

4) To show the absolute initiative of the Father in the redemptive plan; no human father began this family. What were the Trinity's motives for the virginal conception of the Son? Through the centuries experts in Scripture and theology have proposed various reasons. Because the diagram above cannot list all of them, one preferred today was included, namely, the absolute initiative of the Father, because no human father here was able

5. For all the above, see A. Ziegenaus, "Heilsplan Gottes," ML (1991) 3:115-16.
to claim credit, as in all other families, for the birth of a son.

Expressing the same truth more positively and with deeper theological insight, the purpose is to bring to light Jesus’ unique Sonship, as portrayed in the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, the Creed, etc. Jesus is not an “adopted son.” He is the only begotten Son.

A similar yet distinct reason can be added as follows. Anyone who reflects on the gospels must discover the supereminent role of the Father throughout the life of Christ, almost from his first recorded words: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49) until his last cry on the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit” (Lk 28:46). If Jesus had also a human father to whom he owed the normal obedience of a son, this dedication to his heavenly Father alone could definitely be obscured, compromised and confused.6

In the two reasons immediately above, the focus on the Father and Son does not intend to forget the Holy Spirit, who is the creative power of the Incarnation. The Spirit must always be in balance with Father and Son, as recent approaches to the Trinity stress in developing a more adequate Pneumatology.

5) The Immaculate Conception infallibly taught? Yes, by Pope Pius IX in 1854. The following is the official text of the definition itself:

By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, and our own authority, we declare, pronounce and define: the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin, is revealed by God and, therefore, firmly and constantly to be believed by all the faithful.7

6) Virginal Conception infallibly taught? Yes, by constant teaching of the Church through centuries.

From St. Ignatius of Antioch about 110 A.D. until today, numerous documents have testified to the belief of the virginal conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary through a creative act of the Holy Spirit.  

7) Immaculate Conception in Scripture? No, but nothing against and some remote texts. Certainly no scriptural texts directly prove Mary’s Immaculate Conception. Yet in the total bull of definition in 1854 some texts are utilized. For example, one is “I will put enmity between you and the woman” (Gen 3:5). How is this to be understood?

Vatican II (LG 55) offers a comprehensive interpretation:

The books of the Old Testament describe the history of salvation, by which the coming of Christ into the world was slowly prepared. The earliest documents, as they are read in the Church and are understood in the light of a further and full revelation, bring the figure of a woman, Mother of the Redeemer, into a gradually clearer light. Considered in this light, she is already prophetically foreshadowed in the promise of victory over the serpent which was given to our first parents after their fall into sin (cf. Gen 3:15).

8) The narratives on Jesus’ incarnation without a human father in the first chapters of Matthew and Luke. These accounts, as the dilemma of Joseph on learning of Mary’s pregnancy and the dialogue of Mary with the messenger Gabriel, are familiar to all. But less familiar is the text of Luke (3:23) in his genealogy of Jesus outside the Infancy Narratives: “He [Jesus] was the son, as was thought, of Joseph.” In other words, says Luke, though fellow citizens perceived him as the son of Joseph, actually he was not.

9) Virginal conception, easier to understand. The words used here are significant: it is not easy to understand, but easier than the Immaculate Conception.

It is not easy to understand, for how is it possible for the Son

8. See references to some classic documents in ND, p. 214, “without loss of her virginity.”

of God to become also fully human and live a human life in this world from womb to tomb? In fact, Mary is called “woman of faith” because at the moment of the incarnation she had to believe two truths which had never happened before in the history of the world, namely, that she would conceive a son without the normal human father and that this son would be divine.

But it is easier than the Immaculate Conception. It simply means that Joseph was not the real father of Jesus; he did not contribute the usual male seed to the reproductive process. This conception was therefore singular, incomparable. Because of the intervention and power of a creative act of the Holy Spirit, everything necessary in any normal generation was likewise accomplished in Mary and Jesus; he was carried in her womb and after nine months was born.

10) The Immaculate Conception is harder to understand. The main reason is that the Immaculate Conception demands a prior knowledge of original sin and its complications.

One such complication crucial for this study is the question: how is original sin transmitted from generation to generation? St. Augustine taught “by human generation”; other theologians and Church documents followed him in affirming that as soon as a child is conceived in the womb of the mother, original sin is present in the embryo. This explains why the definition of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 so insists on “from the first instant” of her conception. It would not be sufficient, as some theologians had maintained, that Mary would first receive original sin and then later be sanctified in the womb before birth; in such a situation Mary would then be infected by original sin, even if briefly. The “first instant of conception” therefore demands that the word conception enter into the very title of the Immaculate Conception; this in turn causes the confusion with the same word in the virginal conception.

C. SOME SUGGESTED PRACTICAL PATHS TOWARD CLARIFICATION

THE MEANING OF “IMMACULATE”

Perhaps an analysis of “im-macula-te” can help to link one’s
understanding of the Immaculate Conception permanently with original sin, and therefore not confuse it with the virginal conception.

In Latin the word *macula* means "a stain." The prefix *im* in scores of similar adjectives negativizes the word, as mature and immature, moral and immoral, perfect and imperfect, polite and impolite. Therefore "im-macula" means "no stain" [of sin] and this straightway identifies it with the definition of 1854, "preserved from the stain of original sin."\(^{10}\)

**STRESS THE POSITIVE, NOT THE NEGATIVE**

One problem in interpreting correctly the Immaculate Conception is precisely its negative formulation of "no stain" of original sin. Yet far more substantial is its positive perspective of Mary's unequalled sanctity. As Vatican II teaches, Mary was "enriched from the first instant of her conception with the splendor of an entirely unique holiness" (LG 56; italics added). Mary dedicated herself totally to the person and work of her Son (LG 56), never said no to anything God asked of her, loved God with perfect adoration and ardor. By stressing more these positive characteristics of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which are the results of the "no stain of original sin," one limits the physical conception explanations and avoids the literal, negativistic aspects of the doctrine that leave the listener deprived, for example, of the rich content of Luke's portrayal of Mary as "highly favored one" (1:28), "the Lord is with you" (1:28), "blessed are you among women" (1:42), and similar truths that affirm the brilliance of her holiness.

Intimately connected with Mary's holiness, of course, must be its source and cause, the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Since the essence of original sin is taken to be the "privation of sanctifying grace," being conceived with and in the Holy Spirit means freedom from original sin.\(^{11}\)

10. The "te" at the end of immaculate merely identifies the word as an adjective.
11. For a comprehensive but brief synthesis of this positive approach to the Immaculate Conception, see Herbert McCabe, "None with Thee Compare," *The Tablet* (Jan. 18, 1997) 93.
Yet in no way does Mary's sublime freedom from sin and freedom for God isolate her aristocratically from ordinary men and women. Selfless, with no trace of that humiliating selfishness which drags humanity down into sin, Mary is

... anchored to earth, to history, to the concreteness of the human condition. Mary Immaculate, though immune from sin, was not exempted from the most intense and vital human sentiments, from cultural limits and conditions, from suffering, from the pathway of maturation and the pilgrimage of faith.12

THE PROBLEM OF "CONCEPTION"

The first few paragraphs of this article conceded that "the confusion can never be fully eliminated." Such a statement seems true, because of the word "conception" and all that it implies.

For without at least some accurate knowledge of what human conception is and how it happens, it is difficult to understand Mary's virginal conception or the first instant of Mary's immaculate conception by Anna and Joachim. Yet how can catechists explain conception adequately to children in a class, or in homilies how can bishops and priests expand the theme for an ordinary Sunday assembly? Reverence and justified embarrassment on both sides forbid this, more especially when dealing with Mary. Consequently Catholics often grow up with vague ideas, and these in turn contribute to bringing about the confusion "over and over again."

To avoid this word and reality of conception, some groups and individual authors have preferred to use "virgin birth" rather

12. De Flores, "Immacolata," NDM, 703. These truths lead straightway to another similar truth. Often one hears that men and women are sinners because they are "only human." From this viewpoint Jesus and Mary, who were not sinners, would not be human like us. But this error confuses the "universality of sin" with human nature. The fact, of course, is that both Jesus and Mary are more perfectly human than we sinners are. Sin is not part of human nature; by sinning we are less human. Moreover, both Jesus and Mary because of their sinlessness can better understand sin and can be more intensely compassionate with sinners than we sinners can.
than virginal conception. Other theologians and scripture scholars have pointed out, however, that this only adds confusion. For the Catholic Church, following a long tradition from the Patristic era, teaches three stages of Mary’s perpetual virginity, namely, before, during and after birth. If virgin birth therefore supplants virginal conception, then the second stage, during, is being discussed, not the first stage, before, and this second stage has its own quite distinct questions and answers.

Ultimately all must realize that God’s infinitely wise salvific plan for Jesus’ coming into the world had to involve conception, with its consequent pregnancy and birth. Analogously this is true also of Mary. If therefore the two dogmas discussed in this study are confused “over and over again,” it will always remain the task of the Church to explain over and over again, as best it can according to circumstances, their clear meaning.

13. E.g., the Fundamentalist Protestants around a century ago made one of their fundamental doctrines “the virgin birth.” Some Catholics also used the same expression.

14. It is helpful to observe how Catholic liturgy tries to integrate conception, pregnancy and birth realistically. Jesus’ conception is March 25; his birth is December 25, or nine months. Mary’s conception is December 8; her birth is September 8, or nine months again.

15. Further possible readings on the Immaculate Conception are the following: John Macquarrie, Mary for All Christians (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990) 51-76. Macquarrie, an Anglican theologian generally in favor of this Catholic dogma, presents in twenty-five pages its history, explanations, how and why Protestants can accept it. Concerning the various new theories about original sin and their implication for the Immaculate Conception, see De Flores, “Immacolata,” NDM, 699-702, and in Maria nella Teologia Contemporanea (Roma: Centro de Cultura Mariana “Mater Ecclesiae,” 1987) 452-77.