The Dominican Stance on the Immaculate Conception of Mary: Insights from Selected Sermons (13th–15th Centuries)

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Abstract: It is commonly believed that in the debate on the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, representatives of the Order of St. Francis were supporters of the Marian privilege, while the Dominicans were against it. The aim of this article is to verify this opinion by analyzing selected Dominican homilies from the 13th–15th centuries, seeking answers to the questions: has the maculist position expressed by preachers been maintained over the centuries? What caused Dominicans to remain unchanged in their views, despite the gradual spread of the opinion about the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which was finally officially accepted by the Church? What role did Saint's opinion play? Thomas Aquinas to the position of later Dominicans? The results of the analysis of medieval Dominican sermons allow us to consider the opinion that has so far been widespread as one-sided and superficial. The Dominican position is much more complex.

Keywords: Immaculate Conception, Thomas Aquinas, Virgin Mary, Dominicans, Sermons, Middle Age

While the topic of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary has garnered considerable attention in scholarly literature, it is evident that the perspective of the Dominicans on this matter remains underexplored. There has been a prevailing assumption that all Dominican preachers adhered to a maculist anti-Immaculate Conception stance. This study aims to address this gap by examining Dominican sermons to demonstrate that the commonly held view regarding the Dominican position necessitates nuanced clarification. The analysis will consider the influence of Saint Thomas Aquinas' teachings on Dominican preachers, alongside other sources that shaped their sermons, thereby highlighting the diversity of perspectives on the conception of the Virgin Mary.

1. Dominican Preachers of the 13th Century on the Conception of Mary

1.1. View of Saint Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas is renowned for his philosophical and theological works, yet his preaching remains relatively obscure. Notably, the Angelic Doctor authored 23 sermons, two of which address Marian themes: *Lux orta est iusto* and *Germinet terra* (Thomas de Aquino, *Sermones*, 264–91). Regrettably, neither homily directly references the conception of Mary. This topic surfaces only in the *Expositio super salutationem angelicam,* which, although not listed among Aquinas' biblical commentaries, is considered by some scholars to reflect his preaching endeavours. According to Jean-Pierre Torrell, the *Commentary on the Hail Mary* is a sermon that, along with its *collatio*, was delivered during Aquinas' second stint in Paris (Torrell 2021, 535–36). Conversely, Paolo Giustiniani suggests that the *Expositio* is a condensed version of a homily on Our Lady presented during Lent in Naples in 1273 (1992, 460).

The foundational aspect in elucidating the matter of Mary's conception is Christ's own conception. Aquinas delineates that only Christ's conception was immaculate, given that He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Christ stands as the sole human to enter the world devoid of original sin, thereby showcasing His incomparable uniqueness and absolute holiness. "Christ surpassed the Blessed Virgin in being conceived and born without original sin. While the Blessed Virgin was conceived in original sin, she was not born into it" (Thomas de Aquino, *In salutatione angelicam*, 240). Since the absolute holiness of Christ necessitated that the body assumed at the moment of the Incarnation be immaculate, Mary had to provide a body free from original sin, holy, and undefiled. It is for this reason that the Blessed Virgin was cleansed—not preserved—from every stain of original sin. As Aquinas asserts: "sin is either original, from which she was cleansed in the womb, or mortal or venial, from which she was entirely free" (Thomas de Aquino, *In salutatione angelicam*, 240). Therefore, according to the Angelic Doctor, Mary was conceived in original sin and subsequently cleansed from it while still in her mother's womb. His stance on this matter is unequivocal: only Christ was conceived free from the stain of original sin, while His Mother was cleansed of it. This viewpoint, as presented in the *Commentary on the Hail Mary*, was elaborated upon in the theological works of the Angelic Doctor without deviation from the commonly accepted position of other theologians: the Blessed Virgin was conceived in original sin, from which she was liberated in her mother's womb.

1.2. Opinion of Other Preachers

Similar to the stance of St. Thomas Aquinas, thirteenth-century preachers held a negative view regarding the Immaculate Conception of Mary. They collectively asserted

that Mary was conceived in original sin but subsequently cleansed and sanctified. This perspective was shared by James of Voragine (†1298), a Dominican, who maintained that Mary was sanctified in her mother's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit after being conceived in sin (Jacobus a Voragine, *Sermo De Annunciatione B.M.V.*, 143). Like Aquinas, the preacher underscores the immaculate conception of Christ from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary as a unique event. In contrast, the conception and birth of other saints are deemed to be marked by original sin. While the mother of Jesus was conceived in original sin, she was born free from it (Jacobus a Voragine, *Sermo De Assumptione B.M.V.*, 305).

A comparable viewpoint was articulated by Bartholomew of Breganze (†1270). The Italian Dominican posited that the Blessed Virgin was cleansed from original sin in her mother's womb through the purifying action of the Holy Spirit. As a result of her sanctification, the root of sin (*fomes peccati*) was eradicated, and subsequently, during the conception of the Son of God, completely eliminated (Bartholomaeus de Bregantiis, *Sermo XVII, In Nativitate*, 104).

The 13th-century group of Dominican preachers also encompasses Martin Polak (†1278), who, in his sermon for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, referenced the sanctification of the Blessed Virgin in her mother's womb. The outcome of her sanctification was a profound fortification to the extent that it rendered the commission of any sin impossible (Martinus Polonus, *Sermo De Assumptione Beatae Marie Virginis*, 185).

Nicholas of Milan (†1293) bequeathed a compendium of *Collationes de Beata Virgine*, which he delivered between 1286 and 1287 to the Dominican Fraternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Imola. Within one of his sermons, he scrutinized the theme of Mary's exceptional holiness. Employing allegory, he elucidated Holy Scripture texts from a Marian standpoint. Consequently, the passage from the Book of Genesis (Gen 24:44) was expounded in reference to the Blessed Virgin: "Ipsa est mulier, quam preparavit Dominus filio domini mei" (Nicolaus de Mediolano, *Collatio 40*, 84). The mystery of the Incarnation necessitated prior preparation of Mary through her sanctification. Likewise, the verse from the Book of Ecclesiastes: "In civitate sanctificata similiter requievi" (Eccl 24:15), pertains to the Blessed Virgin, symbolizing her as a sanctified city wherein God will reside (Nicolaus de Mediolano, *Collatio 40,* 84). In essence, Nicholas of Milan underscores that Mary's sanctification, rather than preservation from original sin, was accomplished due to her forthcoming divine motherhood.

Nicholas of Gorran (†1295), in his homily *De Purificatione*, asserted that the Blessed Virgin was conceived in original sin but was sanctified in her mother's womb (Nicolaus de Gorran, *Sermo IV, In festo purificationis beatae Mariae virginis*, 111r). Continuing his reflection, he poses the question: if her entire earthly life was marked by sinlessness, what then was the significance of her purification? In

response, he emphasized that it was her humility, rather than necessity, which led the Blessed Virgin to undergo purification.

2. The Stance of the General Chapters of the Dominicans in the First Half of the 14th Century Regarding the Opinion of St. Thomas Aquinas

To grasp the significant reliance of Dominican preachers, who proclaimed the conception of Mary, on St. Thomas Aquinas' stance on this matter, it is crucial to underscore the official position of the Order concerning the teachings of the Angelic Doctor. It appears that his doctrine had held sway throughout the Order since the early 14th century. This is evident from the resolutions of the general chapters of the Order. The Dominicans convened at the chapter in Metz (1313) acknowledged Aquinas' teachings as 'more sound and universally accepted than all others'. Moreover, it was decreed at Metz that no Dominican should "presume to teach, decide questions, or respond to objections in any manner other than in accordance with what is generally understood as his doctrine" (*ACG* 2.64–65).

However, the general chapter in Sisteron (Cistaricum) in 1329 resolved that as the doctrine of St. Thomas was beneficial to the entire world, Dominican students ought to engage in the study of his teachings. Furthermore, lecturers should structure their classes around the aforementioned doctrine of Thomas (*ACG* 2.191). This decision reflects a somewhat concerning inclination towards restricting the study to a singular philosophical and theological system, which may serve to fortify the Order's identity but could also influence its stance regarding the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

3. The Perspective of Dominican Preachers in the 14th Century

The directives propounded by the general chapters from the onset of the 14th century are discernible in the themes of the sermons delivered by the Dominicans. In adherence to the Order's mandates, they expounded on the conception of the Blessed Virgin in original sin and her subsequent sanctification. The prevailing viewpoint in most fourteenth-century sermons upheld this position. James of Lausanne (†1321) emphasized the purification and sanctification of the Blessed Virgin in her mother's womb (Lamy 2000, 426). Similarly, William of Sauqueville, who lived at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries, echoed this sentiment (Chevalier 2007, 175). William juxtaposed the conception of Christ with that of Mary, highlighting Christ's

superiority over the Blessed Virgin by virtue of being conceived and born without original sin, whereas Mary, although conceived in sin, was not born into it (Chevalier 2007, 175).

Peregryn of Opole (†1327) emphasized the unparalleled holiness of Mary, stemming from her sanctification, namely, the cleansing from original sin in her mother's womb. Citing the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, he noted that this privilege was bestowed due to the impending incarnation of the Son of God within the womb of the Blessed Virgin (Peregrinus de Opole, *Sermo in festo Purificationis Beatae Mariae Virginis*, 369).

Armand of Bellovisu (†1340), in his sermon *De conceptione seu sanctificatione Beatae Mariae*, reiterated the eternal election and preparation of Mary for the mystery of the Incarnation. He stated,

> It was thus appropriate that the reflection of Zion, symbolizing the Blessed Virgin Mary, chosen as the dwelling place of God, should undergo special sanctification, for it is her that the Psalm refers to: "You dwell in the holy place, O glory of Israel". Hence, this dwelling, as envisioned by Moses upon its completion, that is, upon her sanctification, was constructed, specifically free from original sin [...]. Therefore, just as David sought his dwelling place, so he sought purification or sanctification. For in referring to the discovery of the dwelling, he also terms it sanctification: "The Most High has sanctified His dwelling" (Armandus de Bellovisu, *Sermo 34 De conceptione seu sanctificatione Beatae Mariae*, 78)[1].

The selection of Mary, representing the fulfilment of God's eternal design, was exemplified through a metaphor drawn from the natural realm. Through the allegory employed, Mary's predestination was elucidated: akin to an eagle selecting and readying a nest for habitation, God chose and prepared Mary (Armandus de Bellovisu, *Sermo 34 De conceptione seu sanctificatione Beatae Mariae*, 78). Armand, in remembrance of the universal ramifications of Adam's transgression, highlighted that they extended to the Blessed Virgin as well, who, by the grace of the Holy Spirit (Armandus de Bellovisu, *Sermo 34 De conceptione seu sanctificatione Beatae Mariae*, 80), was sanctified to a greater degree than other saints (Armandus de Bellovisu, *Sermo 34 De conceptione seu sanctificatione Beatae Mariae*, 81).

It is noteworthy that the French preacher frequently cited texts from the Old Testament in his sermons, employing allegorical interpretations to bolster his arguments. Additionally, he invoked the authority of Saint Augustine, albeit without mentioning Thomas Aquinas.

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[1] It is important to mention that Marielle Lamy, when citing this sermon, did not have access to the complete collection of sermons by the French Dominican. Instead, she utilized a publication, which solely comprised a collection of text fragments quoted by the Franciscan editor. (Lamy 2000, 427).

A distinctive position among the Dominican sermons of the 14th century is held by the homilies of Peter of Palude (†1342). This French preacher stands as the first Dominican to advocate for the truth of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

> "Signum magnum apparuit in celo mulier amicta sole, et luna sub pedibus eius". Apoc. 12. Signum est magnae dignitatis alicuius civitatis, cui aliae civitates sunt sub tributo: et ipsa sola privilegiata est, qui sit libera et nihil tributi solvat. Spiritualiter, sic omnis creatura pure humana fuit peccato subdita, et per consequens diabolo tributaria, excepta beata Virgine, que privilegio aeterni regis dotata est, ut esset libera a censu peccati et tributo culpe (Petrus de Palude, *De conceptione Virginis Mariae. Enarratio I*, I, 210).

Regrettably, this detail eluded the attention of Marielle Lamy, who, basing her analysis solely on Peter of Palude's *Commentary on the Sentences*, asserted that he acknowledged the possibility of Mary's preservation from sin but contested the appropriateness of such a notion in reality. However, Lamy's examination overlooked his sermons (Lamy 2000, 424). A closer scrutiny of these revealed the presence of Duns Scotus' doctrine in the Dominican's Marian discourse. According to Peter of Palude, one of the common consequences of original sin was humanity's subjection to the devil. Yet, this did not apply to the Blessed Virgin, who, by virtue of an eternal privilege granted by God, remained untainted by sin. Peter of Palude's stance rested on sound reasoning, drawn not only from Holy Scripture but also from the writings of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians. In addition to the works of Augustine, Jerome, and Dionysius the Areopagite, the Dominican incorporated the ideas of Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas into his reflections. It is noteworthy that Peter of Palude did not reference Aquinas' maculist position outlined in the third part of the *Summa Theologiae* (*STh* III, q. 27, a.1–2, 1995–97), but rather cited another passage from the same work.

Delving into Mary's purity and sinlessness, the Dominican accentuated that she remained untainted by any sin. Her exceptional spiritual beauty finds expression in the words of Scripture: "Tota pulchra es amica mea et macula non est in te" (Song 4). Exploring the authority of St. Thomas, he observed that the closer one drew to the source, the more they partook in its effects (*STh* III, q. 27, a. 5, 2000). Therefore, since Christ is the source of grace both authoritatively in His divinity (*secundum divinitatem autoritative)* and ministerially in His humanity (*secundum humanitatem ministerialiter)*, then the Blessed Virgin, being intimately connected to Jesus Christ through the human nature received from her, was exceptionally pure (Petrus de Palude, *De conceptione Virginis Mariae. Enarratio I*, I, 211).

Peter of Palude, in furthering his argument, employed the Augustinian doctrine that associated the transmission of original sin with the act of marital intercourse. He emphasized that all individuals conceived in this manner entered the world in a state of sin. However, the Blessed Virgin, through a special privilege bestowed by God, was

preserved from original sin: "Beata Virgo merito fuit praeservata ab originali peccato" (Petrus de Paulde, *De conceptione Virginis Mariae. Enarratio I*, I, 212). The Dominican elucidates the privilege of the Immaculate Conception of Mary as follows: God, as the lawgiver, has the authority to establish, modify, or revoke laws. "Nam Deus potuit matrem suam a peccato originali praeservare. Similiter et decuit ratione matris et filii. Dixi, primo Deus potuit matrem a peccato originali praeservare, quia princeps statuens legem autoritate sua, eadem autoritate potest legem eandem revocare, quia lex ista habet vim ex eius institutione" (Petrus de Paulde, *De conceptione Virginis Mariae. Enarratio I*, I, 212).

Thus, He could have preserved the seed from this corrupting contamination or cleansed it afterward. When the body was being formed, God could have purified it from sin before the infusion of the soul. Thereafter, upon creating the soul, He could have united it with the body by bestowing sanctifying grace.

The proposed resolution articulated by Peter of Palude is remarkable. The preacher employs the foundational tenet characteristic of Duns Scotus' framework, namely, the omnipotence of God. God, in His omnipotence, had the ability to purify both the seed itself from sin, thereby preventing the transmission of sin, and the formed embryo (yet to attain personhood) from any impurity. Subsequently, after uniting the created soul with the embryo, He bestowed upon Mary sanctifying grace (Petrus de Paulde, *De conceptione Virginis Mariae. Enarratio I*, I, 212.). The Dominican acknowledges that only a human being, formed as a result of the union of soul and body, can be the recipient of God's grace. At the moment of the soul's union with the already formed body, a person was conceived who, though free from sin, was nonetheless devoid of holiness. Thus, God's sanctifying intervention was indispensable through the endowment of His grace.

The Dominican incorporated several additional arguments into the presented position, falling under the *ex convenientia* category. It was posited that if Mary had not been preserved from original sin, then the perfection of Adam and Eve in their innocence would have surpassed that of the Blessed Virgin, who was conceived in sin but subsequently purified and sanctified. It was reasoned that God did not intend to bestow upon the first parents a greater privilege than that granted to the Mother of Christ. Furthermore, another argument pertained to Mary's divine motherhood. Given the privilege of divine motherhood, elevating Mary above all angelic choirs, it was argued that she should be honoured with all angelic privileges. If angels were created in a state of innocence and purity, then Mary should possess similar qualities (Petrus de Paulde, *De conceptione Virginis Mariae. Enarratio I*, I, 212).

As evidenced, Peter of Palude grounded his stance on the immaculist doctrine of Duns Scotus. Among the arguments presented, the French preacher highlighted the omnipotence of God, expressed as "debuit, potuit ergo fecit." Although the sermon does not explicitly mention the predestination of Christ as the *Summum Bonum*, the exceptional holiness of Mary is expounded in the context of her

divine motherhood. The Dominican does not merely replicate the Franciscan position but endeavours to amalgamate his perspective on the Immaculate Conception with Thomistic-Aristotelian embryology. Peter of Palude delineated two phases in the process of conception: the preservation of the embryo from original sin and subsequently, following the infusion of the soul, the sanctification of the conceived individual. This approach exemplifies the adaptation of the Franciscan viewpoint within the Dominican framework.

Hence, it appears that Peter of Palude stands as the inaugural Dominican preacher who, within a few decades following the formulation of Duns Scotus' opinion, embraced his solution and endeavoured to incorporate it into the realm of Dominican theology.

4. The Stance of Dominican Preachers in the 15th Century

An esteemed and revered fifteenth-century Dominican preacher was John Herolt (†1468). Within his collection of sermons, *Sermones de sanctis*, there is one dedicated to the conception of the Blessed Virgin. The content of this homily indicates Herolt's advocacy for the Immaculate Conception. Reflecting on the liturgical observance of the feast, he expressed that on this day, the Church commemorates the manifestation of Mary and her sanctification. As the liturgy commemorates God's redemptive intervention, the conception of the Blessed Virgin is revered as the inception of our salvation.

> Quantum ad primam partem sciendum, quod hodiernum festum solenniter est celebrandum. Primo, propter gloriosam et beata virginem Mariam, quae hodie initium sumpsit, quando concepta est in utero matris suae, et hodie santificata est et preservata prae omnibus sanctis. Secundo, propter nosmetipsos, quia hodie initium nostrae salutis incipit, quando virgo beata concepta est et preservata, quae per successum temporis concipere et parere debebat filium summi patris Jesum Christum dominum nostrum. (Johannes Herolt, *Sermo V De Conceptione B.Mariae Virginis*, 11).

According to Herolt, the Blessed Virgin was preserved from original sin and sanctified in her mother's womb in anticipation of the Incarnation destined to occur within her.

In elucidating the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Dominican articulated three arguments affirming its veracity. Firstly, he invoked the words of the Psalm: "Sanctificavit tabernaculum suum Altissimus" (Ps 131:13). Secondly, falling under the category of *ex convenientia*, he referred to the Incarnation, asserting that it was fitting for God the Father not to send His Son into the virginal womb until it had been

duly prepared for such a unique event by preserving it untainted from any blemish of sin (Johannes Herolt, *Sermo V De Conceptione B.Mariae Virginis*, 12).

In the final argument presented, he noted that if the prophets Jeremiah and John the Baptist were sanctified in their mothers' wombs to prepare them for proclaiming the coming of Christ, then it follows that the Blessed Virgin Mary should be preserved from sin and sanctified to an even greater extent in order to be deemed worthy of conceiving Christ (Johannes Herolt, *Sermo V De Conceptione B.Mariae Virginis*, 12).

According to Herolt, Mary's sanctification took place upon the soul's union with the formed embryo. This occurred not at the moment of embryo formation but only after forty days, specifically at the moment of animation. It should be noted that the Dominican preacher, while referencing Aristotle's doctrine, made a certain inaccuracy. The period of forty days between embryo formation and soul union applies specifically to male embryos. In the case of female embryos, the duration between conception and animation was considerably longer (Johannes Herolt, *Sermo V De Conceptione B.Mariae Virginis*, 13). The discourse presented in John Herolt's sermon aimed to reconcile the immaculist concept of Duns Scotus with Thomistic-Aristotelian embryology. It is evident that Aristotle's framework, adopted by St. Thomas Aquinas, did not facilitate, and perhaps even complicated, the acceptance of the truth regarding the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

The discernible influence of St. Thomas' doctrine on Dominican preaching is evident in the sermons of Leonardo Matthaei of Utino (†1469). In his discourse on the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, the Dominican posed the question: was the Blessed Virgin predestined to be the Mother of God from eternity and sanctified before her birth? In addressing this query, he cited a passage from the *Summa Theologiae* (*STh* III, q. 27 a. 2, 1996). Demonstrating allegiance to St. Thomas' standpoint, the Italian preacher referenced two biblical verses: "Sanctificavit tabernaculum suum Altissimus" (Ps 45) and "Tota pulchra es amica mea, et macula non est in te" (Song 4) (Johannes Herolt, *Sermo V De Conceptione B.Mariae Virginis*, 353). His defence of the Immaculate Conception was bolstered by invoking the views of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Saint Ildefonsus of Toledo, Saint Anselm, and Saint John of Damascus.

The sanctification of Jeremiah in the womb enabled the preacher to draw the following conclusion: if Jeremiah was sanctified to become a worthy prophet of God, then it follows that the Blessed Virgin should be sanctified to an even greater degree to become a fitting Mother of God (Johannes Herolt, *Sermo V De Conceptione B.Mariae Virginis*, 353). Similarly, he elucidates the parallel between the sanctification of John the Baptist and that of the Blessed Virgin.

Hieronymus Savonarola (†1498), renowned for his activities in Florence, frequently referenced the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas in his sermons. Embracing Thomas' viewpoint, Savonarola asserted that only Christ served as the perfect mediator, devoid of any sin. However, he maintained that the Blessed Virgin was

not entirely free from sin, as she was not devoid of the *fomes peccati* at the moment of her sanctification. Although the source of sin was not eradicated from her, it was neutralized (bound) by grace. Christ, being the source of all graces, bestows upon us grace upon grace from His fullness (Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra i Salmi*, I, 292). However, in the sermons on the Books of Amos and Zechariah, he partially withdraws his position, proposing to suspend opinion on the issue of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, waiting for its clarification in paradise (Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Amos e Zaccaria*, 264).

Conclusion

The analysis of sermons delivered by certain Dominican preachers from the 13th to the 15th centuries leads to several conclusions. Firstly, the prevailing assumption that all Dominicans opposed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary requires adjustment. It is evident that individuals such as Peter of Palude and John Herolt preached in favour of the Immaculate Conception not long after Duns Scotus introduced his perspective. These Dominicans endeavoured to integrate the position advocated by the Franciscans into Aristotelian-Thomistic embryology.

It should be noted, however, that the Dominicans mentioned represent exceptions. The overwhelming majority of preachers within the Ordo Praedicatorum adhered to the stance of St. Thomas Aquinas, as prescribed by the general chapters of the Order, and disseminated his teachings accordingly. Non-compliance with these regulations could lead to disciplinary measures against the monk. Aquinas' solution gradually gained prominence in Dominican preaching over the subsequent centuries. While the direct influence of the Angelic Doctor in thirteenth-century sermons may be challenging to discern, it became increasingly pronounced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Addressing the inquiry as to why Dominican theologians and preachers maintained their maculist stance, it should be underscored that they remained loyal to the directives issued by the general chapters, which mandated the study and subsequent dissemination of the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas.

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