

QUESTION 32

The Active Principle in Christ's Conception

Next we have to consider the active principle in Christ's conception. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Was the Holy Spirit the active principle of Christ's conception? (2) Can it be said that Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit (*conceptus de Spiritu Sancto*)? (3) Can it be said that the Holy Spirit is the father of Christ with respect to the flesh? (4) Did the Blessed Virgin do anything by an active power (*aliquid active egerit*) in the conception of Christ?

Article 1

Should effecting Christ's conception be attributed to the Holy Spirit?

It seems that effecting Christ's conception should not be attributed to the Holy Spirit (*efficere conceptionem Christi non debeat attribui spiritui sancto*):

Objection 1: As Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 1, "The works of the Trinity are undivided, just as the essence of the Trinity is undivided." But effecting Christ's conception is a particular divine work. Therefore, it seems that it should not be attributed to the Holy Spirit more than to the Father or the Son.

Objection 2: In Galatians 4:4 the Apostle says, "When the fullness of time had come, the Father sent His son made of a woman." While explaining this passage in *De Trinitate* 4 Augustine says, "The One by whom He was sent is the One by whom He was made of a woman." But as was established in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 43, a. 8), sending the Son (*missio filii*) is attributed principally to the Father. Therefore, the conception by which He was made of a woman should likewise be attributed principally to the Father.

Objection 3: Proverbs 9:1 says, "Wisdom has built a house for herself." But the wisdom of God is Christ Himself—this according to 1 Corinthians 1:24 ("Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God"). But the house of this wisdom is Christ's body, which is also called His temple—this according to John 2:21 ("He was talking about the temple of His body"). Therefore, it seems that effecting the conception of Christ's body should be attributed principally to the Son. Therefore, not to the Holy Spirit.

But contrary to this: Luke 1:35 says, "The Holy Spirit will descend upon you, etc."

I respond: The whole Trinity effected the conception of Christ's body, but there are three reasons why this work is attributed to the Holy Spirit:

First of all, because it fits in with *the cause of the Incarnation considered on the part of God*. For as was established in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 37, a. 1), the Holy Spirit is the love of the Father and the Son. But what proceeded from this maximal love on the part of God was that the Son of God would assume flesh in a virginal womb; hence, John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son."

Second, because it fits in with *the cause of the Incarnation on the part of the assumed nature*. For one is thereby given to understand that the human nature is assumed by the Son of God into a unity of person not because of any merits, but only because of grace, which is attributed to the Holy Spirit—this according to 1 Corinthians 12:4 ("There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit"). Hence, in *Enchiridion* Augustine says, "The way in which Christ was born of the Holy Spirit suggests to us the grace of God, by which a man without any previous merits was, from the very beginning of His nature when He began to exist, joined to the Word of God in so great a unity of person that He Himself was the selfsame Son of God."

Third, because it fits in with *the endpoint of the Incarnation (congruit termino incarnationis)*. For the Incarnation was terminated in the man who was conceived being (a) holy and (b) the Son of God. But

both of these are attributed to the Holy Spirit. For it is through the Holy Spirit that men become sons of God—this according to Galatians 4:6 (“God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’”). Again, He is “the Spirit of sanctification,” as Romans 1:4 puts it. Therefore, just as others are sanctified by the Holy Spirit in order to become adopted sons of God, so Christ was conceived in holiness by the Holy Spirit in order to be the natural Son of God. Hence, according to one Gloss on Romans 1:4, what comes first, viz., “... who was predestined as the Son of God in power,” is made clear by what immediately follows, viz., “according to the Spirit of sanctification,” that is, “through being conceived by the Holy Spirit.” What’s more, the announcing angel himself, after having begun with, “The Holy Spirit will descend upon you,” draws the conclusion, “and therefore the Holy One to be born of you shall be called the Son of God.”

Reply to objection 1: The work of the conception is, to be sure, common to the whole Trinity and yet is attributed to the individual persons in a certain way. For to the Father is attributed authority with respect to the person of the Son, who acceded to this authority through a conception of the sort in question (*qui per huiusmodi conceptionem sibi assumpsit*); and to the Son is attributed the very assuming of the flesh; but to the Holy Spirit is attributed the formation of the body that is assumed by the Son. For the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son—this according to Galatians 4:6 (“God sent the Spirit of His Son”).

Now just as, in the case of the generation of other men, the soul’s power, which exists in the semen, forms the body through the spirit that is contained in the semen (*per spiritum qui in semine concluditur*), so God’s power, which is the Son Himself—this according to 1 Corinthians 1:24 (“Christ is the power of God”)—formed, through the Holy Spirit, the body which He assumed.

And this is likewise demonstrated by the words of the angel when he says, “The Holy Spirit will descend upon you,” so as to prepare and form the matter of the body of Christ, “and the power,” i.e., Christ, “of the Most High will overshadow you”—that is, as Gregory puts it in *Moralia* 18, “The body of the human nature within you will receive the light of the divine nature; for a shadow is formed by light and a body.” The Most High is understood to be the Father, whose power is the Son.

Reply to objection 2: The *mission* has to do with the assuming *person*, who is sent by the Father, but the *conception* has to do with the assumed *body*, which is formed by the operation of the Holy Spirit. And so even though the mission and the conception belong to the same subject, nonetheless, since they differ conceptually, the sending is attributed to the Father, and effecting the conception is attributed to the Holy Spirit, whereas assuming the flesh is attributed to the Son.

Reply to objection 3: As Augustine says in *De Quaestionibus Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, “This question can be understood in two ways. For, first, Christ’s house is the Church, which He built for Himself by His blood. Second, His body can likewise be called His house, just as it is called His temple. And what is done by the Holy Spirit is done by the Son of God, because of the oneness of their nature and will (*factum autem spiritus sancti filii Dei est, propter naturae et voluntatis unitatem*).”

Article 2

Should Christ be said to have been conceived of the Holy Spirit?

It seems that Christ should not be said to have been conceived of the Holy Spirit (*Christus non debeat dici conceptus de Spiritu Sancto*):

Objection 1: A Gloss by Augustine on Romans 11:36 (“All things are from Him (*ex ipso*) and through Him (*per ipsum*) and in Him (*in ipso*)”) says, “Notice that He does not say ‘of Him’ (*de ipso*), but instead ‘from Him’ (*ex ipso*). For heaven and earth are from Him (*ex ipso*), since He made them.

However, they are not of Him (*de ipso*), because they are not of His substance.” But it is not of His own substance (*de substantia sua*) that the Holy Spirit formed Christ’s body. Therefore, Christ should not be said to have been conceived of the Holy Spirit (*de Spiritu Sancto*).

Objection 2: An active principle by which something is conceived behaves like semen in the act of generation (*se habet sicut semen in generatione*). But the Holy Spirit did not behave like semen in Christ’s conception. For in *Expositio Catholicae Fidei* Jerome says, “It is not the case, as some very impious people think, that we claim that the Holy Spirit took the place of the semen (*fuisse pro semine*). Instead, we claim that He effected, i.e., formed, the body of Christ by the power and strength of the creator.” Therefore, it should not be said that Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit (*conceptus de Spiritu Sancto*).

Objection 3: Nothing that is unified (*nihil unum*) is formed of two things (*de duobus*) unless those things are mixed together in some way. But Christ’s body was formed of the Virgin Mary (*de virgine Maria*). Therefore, if Christ is said to be conceived of the Holy Spirit (*conceptus de Spiritu Sancto*), then it seems that a mixture was made of the Holy Spirit and the matter supplied by the Virgin—which is clearly false. Therefore, Christ should not be said to be conceived of the Holy Spirit.

But contrary to this: Matthew 1:18 says, “Before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit (*in utero habens de Spiritu Sancto*).”

I respond: The conception is attributed not only to the body of Christ, but to Christ Himself by reason of His body. Now in the Holy Spirit there two relations to consider with respect to Christ. For with respect to the Son of God Himself, who is said to be conceived, the Holy Spirit bears the relation of being of the same substance with Him (*habet habitudinem consubstantialitatis*), whereas to Christ’s body the Holy Spirit bears the relation of being its efficient cause (*habet habitudinem causae efficientis*). But the proposition ‘*de*’ (of) designates both of these relations, since we say that a given man is of his father (*de suo patre*). And so we can appropriately claim that Christ is conceived of (*de*) the Holy Spirit in the sense that (a) the Holy Spirit’s efficient causality is referred to the assumed body and that (b) His being of the same substance is referred to the assuming person (*consubstantialitas referatur ad personam assumentem*).

Reply to objection 1: Since Christ’s *body* is not of the same substance with the Holy Spirit (*non est consubstantiale spiritu sancto*), it cannot properly be said to be conceived of the Holy Spirit (*de spiritu sancto*). As Ambrose puts it in *De Spiritu Sancto*, “What is ‘from’ (*ex*) something is either from its substance (*ex substantia*) or from its power (*ex potestate*): from its substance, as in the case of the Son, who is from the Father; by its power, in the way that all things are from God. And it is in this latter way that Mary was with child by the Holy Spirit (*ex spiritu sancto*).”

Reply to objection 2: On this topic there seems to be a difference between Jerome and certain other doctors, who assert that in the conception the Holy Spirit took the place of the semen. For instance, in *Super Matthaenum* Chrysostom says, “When God’s only-begotten was about to enter into the Virgin, the Holy Spirit preceded Him, in order that, with the Holy Spirit preceding, Christ might be born unto sanctification with respect to His body, with the divine nature entering in place of the semen.” And in *De Fide Orthodoxa* 3 Damascene says, “The wisdom and power of God overshadowed her like a divine semen.”

But this difference is easily resolved. For Chrysostom and Damascene compare the Holy Spirit—or even the Son, who is “the power of the Most High”—to semen insofar as an active power is understood to exist in semen. On the other hand, insofar as what is understood to be in semen is a corporeal substance that is transmuted in conception, Jerome denies that the Holy Spirit took the place of the semen.

Reply to objection 3: As Augustine explains in *Enchiridion*, it is not in the same way that Christ

is said to have been conceived of (*de*) the Holy Spirit and of (*de*) the Virgin Mary. For He was conceived of the Virgin Mary *via material causality (materialiter)* and of the Holy Spirit *via efficient causality (effective)*. And so a mixture did not have any place here.

Article 3

Should the Holy Spirit be called the father of Christ with respect to Christ's human nature?

It seems that the Holy Spirit should be called the father of Christ with respect to Christ's human nature (*spiritus sanctus debeat dici pater Christi secundum humanitatem*):

Objection 1: According to the Philosopher in *De Generatione Animalium*, “The father provides the active principle in generation, whereas the mother supplies the matter.” But the Blessed Virgin is called the mother of Christ because of the matter which she provided in His conception. Therefore, it seems that the Holy Spirit should likewise be called Christ's father, since He was the active principle in Christ's conception.

Objection 2: Just as the minds of other holy people are formed by (*per*) the Holy Spirit, so, too, Christ's body was formed by (*per*) the Holy Spirit. But the other holy people are, because of this formation, called children of the whole Trinity and, as a result, of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it seems that Christ should be called a Son of the Holy Spirit insofar as His body was formed by the Holy Spirit.

Objection 3: God is called our father insofar as He made us—this according to Deuteronomy 32:6 (“Is He not your father, who possesses you and made you and created you?”). But as has been explained (aa. 1-2), the Holy Spirit made Christ's body. Therefore, the Holy Spirit should be called Christ's father insofar as Christ's body was formed by Him.

But contrary to this: In *Enchiridion* Augustine says, “Christ was born of the Holy Spirit not as a son and of the Virgin Mary as a son.”

I respond: The names ‘fatherhood’ (*paternitas*), ‘motherhood’ (*maternitas*), and ‘sonship’ (*filiatio*) follow upon generation—not just any sort of generation but, properly speaking, the generation of living things and especially of animals. For we do not say that a generated fire is the son of the generating fire, except perhaps as a metaphor; instead, we say this only in the case of animals, whose generation is more perfect and complete (*quorum generatio est magis perfecta*). Hence, as Augustine explains, we do not say that a hair growing on a man is the man's son; nor do we say that a man who is born is the son of the semen. For it is not the case that the hair bears a similarity to a man; nor does a man who is born bear a similarity to the semen, but instead he bears a similarity to the man who generated him. Indeed, if the similarity is perfect, then the sonship will be perfect, both in divine affairs and in human affairs. On the other hand, if the similarity is imperfect, then the sonship will be imperfect. For instance, in a man there is a certain imperfect or incomplete similarity to God (*quaedam similitudo Dei imperfecta*), both insofar as he is created to the image of God and insofar as he is created with the likeness [of God] that belongs to grace. And so in both of these ways a man can be called a son of God—that is, because he is created to God's image and because he is assimilated to God through grace.

However, one must take into account that what is said of a thing in accord with its perfect or complete nature should *not* be said of it in accord with an imperfect or incomplete nature. For instance, since Socrates is called a man naturally in accord with the proper nature of a man, he is never called a man with the signification by which a picture of a man is called a man—even though he might be assimilated to this other man. Now Christ is called the Son of God in accord with the perfect and complete nature of sonship (*secundum perfectam rationem filiationis*). Hence, even though He was

created and justified with respect to His human nature, He nonetheless should be called the Son of God not by reason of His having been created, or by reason of His having been justified, but only by reason of His eternal generation, in accord with which He is the Son of the Father alone. And this is why Christ should in no way be called the Son of the Holy Spirit or, again, the Son of the whole Trinity.

Reply to objection 1: Christ was conceived of the Virgin Mary, who provided the matter for a likeness of species. And this is why He is called her son. But insofar as He is a man, Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit as by an active principle—though *not* according to a likeness of species in the way that a man is born of his father. And this is why Christ is not called the son of the Holy Spirit.

Reply to objection 2: Men who are formed spiritually by the Holy Spirit cannot be called sons of God in accord with the perfect or complete nature of sonship. And so they are called sons of God in accord with an imperfect or incomplete sonship, which has to do with the likeness that belongs to grace and which is from the whole Trinity. But as has been explained, it is different in the case of Christ.

Reply to objection 3: Something similar should be said in reply to the third objection.

Article 4

Did the Blessed Virgin do anything by an active power in the conception of Christ's body?

It seems that the Blessed Virgin did something by an active power in the conception of Christ's body (*beata virgo aliquid active egerit in conceptione corporis Christi*):

Objection 1: In *De Fide Orthodoxa* 3 Damascene says, "The Holy Spirit descended upon the Virgin, purifying her and bestowing on her the power to receive and, along with this, to generate the Word of God." But by nature she had passive generative power, just as all females do. Therefore, He bestowed active generative power on her. And so she did something by an active power in Christ's conception.

Objection 2: As the Commentator explains in *De Anima* 2, all the vegetative powers of the soul are active powers. But the generative power, both in the male and in the female, belongs to the vegetative soul. Therefore, both in the male and in the female, this power operates actively in the conception of offspring.

Objection 3: For the conception of offspring the female supplies the matter from which the body of the offspring is naturally formed. But a nature is an intrinsic principle of movement. Therefore, it seems that there was some active principle in the very matter which the Blessed Virgin supplied for the conception of Christ.

But contrary to this: The active principle in generation is called the seminal nature (*ratio seminalis*). But as Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 10, "It was in the corporeal matter alone that Christ's body was taken from the Virgin, and it was taken by the divine power of conception and formation and not by any human seminal nature." Therefore, the Blessed Virgin did not do anything by an active power in the conception of Christ's body.

I respond: Some claim that the Blessed Virgin did something actively in the conception of Christ—both (a) by an active natural power and (b) by an active supernatural power:

By a natural power, since they claim that in every instance of a natural matter there is some active principle. Otherwise, they believe, there would not be a natural transmutation.

But they are deceived in this. For a transmutation is called natural not only because of an intrinsic active principle, but also because of an intrinsic passive principle. For instance, in *Physics* 8 the Philosopher explicitly claims that in the case of heavy and lightweight things, there is a passive principle, and not an active principle, of natural movement. Nor is it possible for matter to actively contribute to its

own formation, since it is not actual [but merely potential] (*non est actu*). Nor is it possible for something to move itself unless it is divided into two parts, one of which is the mover and the other of which is what is moved—something that, as is proved in *Physics* 8, occurs only in animate things.

(b) By a supernatural power, since they claim that a mother is required to provide not only the matter, i.e. the menstrual blood, but also [female] semen, which, when mixed with the male semen, has an active power in generation. And since in the Blessed Virgin there was no release of semen, because of the absolute integrity of her virginity, they claim that the Holy Spirit supernaturally bestowed on her an active power in the conception of Christ's body that other mothers have through the released [female] semen.

But this position cannot stand. For since, as *De Caelo* 2 says, "Each thing exists for the sake of its own operation," nature would not distinguish between the male and female sexes in the work of generation unless the operation of the male were distinct from the operation of the female. But in the case of generation, the operation of what acts is distinct from the operation of what is acted upon (*distinguitur operatio agentis et patientis*). Hence, it follows that the whole active power belongs to the male, whereas the whole passive power belongs to the female. This is why in the case of plants, in which these two powers are mixed together, there is no distinction between male and female. Therefore, since the Blessed Virgin accepted being the mother of Christ and not his father, it follows that she did not receive any active power in the conception of Christ—regardless of whether (a) she is supposed to have done something, in which case it follows that she would have been Christ's father, or whether (b) she is supposed to have done nothing at all, as some claim, in which case it follows that active power of the sort in question would have been conferred on her in vain.

And so one should respond that in the conception itself of Christ, the Blessed Virgin did nothing by an active power, but provided the matter alone. Still, before the conception she did do something by an active power by preparing the matter so that it would be apt for the conception.

Reply to objection 1: The conception in question contained three privileges, viz., (a) that it would exist without original sin; (b) that it would be the conception not of a mere man, but of God and man; again, (c) that it would be a virginal conception. And it had these three privileges from the Holy Spirit. And that is why Damascene says, with respect to the first, that "the Holy Spirit descended upon the Virgin, purifying her," i.e., preserving her from conceiving with original sin. And he says, with respect to the second, "bestowing on her the power to receive the Word of God," i.e., to conceive the Word of God. And, with respect to the third, he says, "and, along with this, the power to generate," so that, namely, while remaining a virgin, she would be able to generate—not, to be sure, by an active power but by a passive power (*non quidem active sed passive*), just as other mothers accomplish this by means of male semen.

Reply to objection 2: The generative power in the female is imperfect in comparison to the generative power that exists in the male. And so, as *Physics* 2 explains, just as, in the case of crafts, the lower craft disposes the matter while the higher craft induces the form, so, too, the generative power of the female prepares the matter while the active power of the male forms the already prepared matter.

Reply to objection 3: As has been explained, in order for a transmutation to be natural, it is required not that there be an active principle in the matter, but only a passive principle.