

# BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY

By ALAN C. CLARK

CANDIDATES for baptism, ever since the beginning of the third century, were required to make a profession of faith in the virginal conception of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> In the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus the candidate was asked: Do you believe in Christ Jesus the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary?<sup>2</sup> We ourselves, in the Apostles' Creed, say: 'He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary'.<sup>3</sup> Here we have an assertion of the fundamental faith of the christian community in the reality of the incarnation. No one credal affirmation, as we all recognize, can exhaust the proclamation of the christian mystery. In fact, it is perhaps only by recourse to poetry that one can find a suitable background to a fruitful discussion of one theological preoccupation of antiquity which has extended over the centuries into our own times. Hence I would quote as an introduction to my theme the beautiful words of St John of the Cross:

Then he summoned an archangel,  
Saint Gabriel: and when he came,  
Sent him forth to find a maiden,  
Mary was her name.

Only through her consenting love  
Could the mystery be preferred  
That the Trinity in human  
Flesh might clothe the Word.

Though the three Persons worked the wonder  
It only happened in the One.  
So was the Word made incarnation  
In Mary's womb, a son.

So He who only had a Father  
Now had a Mother undefiled,  
Though not as ordinary maids  
Had she conceived the Child.

<sup>1</sup> Cf McHugh, J.: *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London, 1975), p 330.

<sup>2</sup> Denzinger-Schönmetzer (DS), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Cf McHugh, note 2, p 330.

By Mary, and with her own flesh  
 He was clothed in His own frame:  
 Both Son of God and Son of Man  
 Together had one name.<sup>4</sup>

'Though not as ordinary maids had she conceived the Child' — a tender profession of faith in the virgin birth. This is not, however, the theological preoccupation of antiquity to which this paper is addressed. By some twist of history the basic doctrine of the virginal *conception* of Christ has come to be styled the doctrine of the virgin birth. Normally no confusion arises in people's minds over what, at first sight, seems inappropriate terminology. But if one enters the field of systematic theology, then it is dangerous to ignore a distinction between the virginal conception of Jesus and the virginal birth of Jesus, between the manner of his conception by the Holy Spirit and the circumstances and conditions in which his *being born* affected the virginity of his mother. It is one thing to say that our Lady conceived by the Holy Spirit and therefore without the agency of man; it is quite another to say that God intervened at the time of our Lord's birth in order to preserve the physical signs of virginal integrity in the person of his mother. Whereas the first statement is primarily a statement about the son, the second is almost totally a statement about the mother. It is an assertion that the faith of the Church in the perpetual virginity of Mary requires an intervention of God in the actual birth of his Son at Bethlehem. The conclusion of this paper is that the status of these two statements are very different and that the doctrine of *virginitas-in-partu*, as it is technically called, demands a theological reappraisal.

Most christians approach our Lady as virgin and mother without embarrassment or confusion of mind. When the position is explained to them how ecclesiastical writers and theologians have exercised their minds over the condition of our Lord's birth, their reaction is to regard the question as somewhat academic or even to reject it as unwarranted theological probing, and this with distaste. However, the question cannot be dismissed, for the great figures of the formative period of the Church discussed it without inhibition and judged it of great importance to find a way of reconciling the apparent contradiction of true virginity with equally real motherhood in the one person. One can trace a growing conviction among them that *virginitas-in-partu* belongs to the general teaching of tradition, though it is not until 649 that the

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *The Divine Office*, vol 2, appendix, p 640. The translation is by Roy Campbell.

Church felt it opportune, by conciliar decree, to express this conviction in a definitive formula which linked virginal conception and virginal birth in one statement.

If anyone refuses to confess, in agreement with the holy Fathers, that the holy and immaculate Mary, ever virgin, is properly and truly Mother of God, inasmuch as, at the end of the ages, by the power of the Holy Spirit and without the agency of human seed, she truly and in an especial manner conceived God the Word himself, who was born of God before all ages, and gave birth to him without experiencing corruption (*in corruptibiliter genuisse*), her virginity remaining ever inviolable and abiding intact after His birth, let him be condemned.<sup>5</sup>

The question that must be confronted is whether this kind of affirmation is required for the acceptance of a more basic statement about our Lady — that she was ever virgin, i.e. before, in and after the birth of Christ. The thesis which this paper puts forward is that the so-called traditional adherence to the doctrine of *virginitas-in-partu* is something to be questioned, not because of what it was trying to defend, but because the defence itself was erroneous. Whereas the opinion that the virginal conception can be licitly accepted as a mere *theologoumenon* is open to the gravest difficulties, these difficulties cannot be urged against the doctrine of *virginitas-in-partu*. By *theologoumenon* we mean 'a deduction reached by theological reasoning from other accepted religious truths, or the expression in another form of a religious truth'.<sup>6</sup> Even this may be asserting too much, and given the weight of tradition in this matter, by which I mean the constant and unvaried repetition for so long of the same argument, and its defence against attack, it is wise for the theologian to proceed with some caution.

The systematic theologian is confronted with a constant belief that the actual birth of our Lord in no way impaired the virginity of his mother, and this is a datum he cannot neglect. At the same time, at least from the end of the third century, the belief was explicit in many quarters that this required a *miraculous* preservation of the physical signs of virginity. Patristic writers who spoke to this belief regarded it not as a biological but a *theological* question, touching our understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation. Clearly they were looking at this mystery from the point of view of the co-operation of our blessed Lady

<sup>5</sup> Cited in 'The Virgin Birth: a theological reappraisal', by Alan C. Clark, in *Theological Studies* (December 1972), p 577. Cf DS 503 (256), where a variant reading is quite possible, thereby radically changing the sense.

<sup>6</sup> McHugh, p 309.

in giving to the world her Son who is God. With unswerving faith they, even as we, attested to Mary's virginity, and their appreciation of this fact was deeply religious. It was an intuition of faith and fully grounded in the scriptures. However, once further factors of a cultural kind, based on contemporary understanding, began to enter into the defence of this faith, we need to distinguish the constituents of the defence from the faith defended. It is apparent, in any study of the relevant documents, that their appeal to scripture is extremely questionable and, in any case, required a reading of the scripture in the light of a conviction already held from another source — an attitude which would not be acceptable today without severe qualification. In a desire to affirm the totality and perfection of Mary's life-long virginity, whose religious significance they clearly acknowledged, they were led into affirmations that now seem to be irrelevant. Admittedly, this conclusion may appear over-assertive. It is not impossible that they were right for the wrong reasons, but this possibility is incapable of verification. However, my immediate task is to sketch the historical development of the doctrine and to examine its credentials.

*The historical development of the doctrine*

No significant official declaration by the Church concerning *virginitas-in-partu* has been made since the first Lateran Council already noted. This was not indeed a general Council, though it was given considerable authority. Reference to our Lady's perpetual virginity is 'occasional', opportunity being taken to express traditional belief. In preparing the third Canon, where this belief is stated, no attempt was made to discuss the ingredients of the belief, presumably because none was needed. It was universally held, and it is noteworthy that almost a thousand years later Paul IV took advantage of a similar opportunity in his Constitution *Cum quorumdam* (1555), when he was condemning the unitarian doctrine according to which our Lord was conceived not by the power of the Holy Spirit but through the agency of Joseph.<sup>7</sup> As I will point out later, the Schoolmen felt the weight of this constant repetition of the same thing, and whatever their personal puzzlement about the patristic insistence on a miraculous birth as integral to the belief that our Lady is ever a virgin, they had neither the desire to question it nor did they feel free to do so. Up to recently, mariologists have felt the same way, but not without a certain uneasiness that has arisen from a growth in emphasis on the dignity of motherhood, of which Mary, the

<sup>7</sup> Clark, note 1, p 577. Cf DS 1880 (993).

Mother of Jesus, is the great and unchallengeable model. It is because Mary really underwent the common experience of motherhood that mothers feel the strength of a personal and common bond with her. Something would be lost, it is suggested, if Mary were exempt from the actuality of childbirth. If her Son were like to us in everything but sin — and we know what this implied for him — then would not his mother also accept the full experience of her humanity? It is important to comment here that we are not referring to the pain of childbirth so much as to the personal co-operation of the mother in the birth of her child. The intensely simple words of the gospel text would seem to suggest that there was no obvious difference in the birth of Jesus and the birth of any first-born: 'And while they were there the time came for her to be delivered, and she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes'.<sup>8</sup>

The Fathers and ecclesiastical writers (Ignatius of Antioch, the *Odes of Solomon*, Justin Martyr)<sup>9</sup> up to the middle of the second century, add nothing to the evidence of the gospels. The idea of *virginitas-in-partu* was not the preoccupation of the infant Church. In the latter part of the second century, however, we encounter the phenomenon of the apocryphal scriptures. These imaginary accounts include details of our Lord's birth and early life and probably witness to popular demand. From a sentence quoted in Clement of Alexandria,<sup>10</sup> we know that the story of a midwife being present at the birth was current in the second century, though Origen (185-253) is the first to mention the *protoevangelium of James*, in which it is recounted.<sup>11</sup> It is worth recalling that gnostic influence was at work in Egypt, and in any case docetism was prevalent in certain circles from an early date, involving the denial of the reality of Christ's birth. It is justifiable to conclude from these incongruous attempts to fill out the simple evidence of the scriptures that the question was beginning to be raised in some quarters of the reconciliation of Mary's virginity with the incontestable fact of her motherhood and childbearing. It will be some time before a growing concentration on the value of consecrated virginity will sharpen the issue, and influence the formulation of christian teaching of Lateran I.

<sup>8</sup> Lk 2, 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Ignatius, *Ad Smyrn.* 1, 1; *Ad. Eph.* 19, 1; *Odes of Solomon* 19 (ed. J. H. Bernard, in *Texts and Studies* 8/3); Justin, *Dial.* 100 (cf also 84). For a survey of the pertinent patristic material, cf Walter J. Burghardt, in J. B. Carol (ed.), *Mariology* 1 (Milwaukee, 1955), pp 117-32; 2 (Milwaukee, 1957), pp 100-16.

<sup>10</sup> *Stromata* 7, 16 (PG 9, 529-32).

<sup>11</sup> Cf *Protoevangelium of James*, ed. Tischendorff (Edinburgh, 1870); the story is recounted in nos 19-20. Cf also the *Ascension of Isaias*, ed. E. Tisserant (Paris, 1909), pp 202 ff.

Nevertheless, quite suddenly and quite early, we find a marked conviction among christian writers that our Lady bore her son without pain, or if one may put it so, in joy. The *Odes of Solomon* have it; the same idea is apparent in Justin and in Irenaeus.<sup>12</sup> In fact it may be that the future development of *virginitas-in-partu* is not unconnected with this simple and primary conviction. We are in fact going to face two strands in the development of belief: one that our Lady bore her son in joy, and another that this birth, by a miracle, involved no change in our Lady's body. The one can indeed be true without the other, but it is unnecessary to argue this in detail.

With the hardy Tertullian (c. A.D. 220), we have one of the first to approach the issue in clear terms. In his *De Carne Christi*, he addresses Marcion and Valentinian, both of whom deny the reality of Christ's birth.<sup>13</sup> It is a highly polemical work, well salted with rhetoric and with much appeal to detail; but he openly denies that the birth of Christ needed a miracle. With admirable clarity he asserts that the birth was 'virginal' because Mary had no prior marital relations with Joseph. He is unambiguous in his belief in a virginal conception but denies a virginal birth involving a miraculous intervention.

Origen likewise does not see any contradiction between normal birth and the preservation of our Lady's virginity, to which he attaches great importance. He is one of the first to show the preoccupation of the early centuries with the 'unopened state' of the womb to indicate physical virginity, but argues that Mary is unique in so far as the act of childbearing rather than sexual congress was responsible for the opening of the virginal womb, and this fact preserves her virginity.<sup>14</sup>

Clement of Alexandria belongs to quite another current of ideas. There can be no doubt that he explicitly holds *virginitas-in-partu*, a miraculous birth.<sup>15</sup> He realized it was not held by a great number, who wished to maintain that Christ's birth was perfectly normal and natural, but he protested vigorously against these views.

We now come to the fourth century. From the evidence of the *De recta in Deum fide*,<sup>16</sup> it is clear that the doctrine of the miraculous birth is still viewed with a certain disquietude. But there is already a growing conviction that the perpetual virginity of Mary involves something

<sup>12</sup> Cf Clark, note 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 2, p 914.

<sup>14</sup> *In Lucam hom.* 14: PG 13c. 1836c.

<sup>15</sup> *Stromata* 7, 16: PG 9, 529-32.

<sup>16</sup> *De Virginitate* 4, 14. Cf Philip J. Donnelly. 'The perpetual Virginity of the Mother of God', in Carol, *Mariology*, 2, p 273.

unique in the manner in which she gave birth to Christ. An important feature is that what was done in our Lady does not obtain in any other woman who bears a child. This action, ascribed to God, is necessary because of an insistence on what was generally accepted to be the sign of physical virginity. Human birth would destroy this: therefore God must preserve it. Here is the basic argument upon which all further speculation will focus. It is worth noting that St Jerome, writing in the second half of the fourth century against Helvidius, shows a spontaneous acceptance of the reality of our Lord's birth. While using the well-known comparison between the entry of our Lord into the upper room and his entry into his mother's womb at conception, he shows no inclination to assert any miracle at the time of birth.<sup>17</sup> But it will come as no surprise that the great champion of virginity, St Ambrose, was an unequivocal defender of the physical virginity of Mary *in partu*.<sup>18</sup>

There can be little doubt that at the end of the fourth century, *virginitas-in-partu* had come to stay. From now on all ecclesiastical writers will accept that the mere lack of sexual congress cannot be a sufficient *sign* of the virginal state of the Mother of God when she came to childbirth. There is a hardening of the position concerning the 'opening of the womb' which earlier writers were content to interpret in the general sense of coming to birth. From now on it is interpreted as necessarily causing a rupture of the virginal seal, which had to be unambiguously denied. Consequently, our Lord issues from the *closed* womb of his mother by divine intervention. Furthermore, the absence of pain would seem to be related to a particular understanding of the physical process of childbirth rather than to the reflection that, because of her sinlessness, Mary should not suffer the pain of Eve. The general position is not completely clear, but the affirmation of the birth without pain is constant. What began as a reflection on the reality of the incarnation has now become a problem in virginity, exacerbated by a

<sup>17</sup> Cf Clark, pp 582.

<sup>18</sup> 'From the beginning of his episcopate Ambrose was an ardent champion of virginity, and of the ascetical practices of Egyptian monasticism, made known to the west by St Athanasius, who spent several periods in exile in Trèves, Rome and Northern Italy. These ideals and practices were by no means received with universal favour. The west, just before the Council of Ephesus (431), had advanced far beyond the east, and had reached a settled and inescapable conviction concerning Mary's personal sanctity and her perpetual virginity. In the east nothing absolutely decisive had been accepted universally on these two fundamental points of Marian theology. There were still opponents of her virginity, who were not, for this reason alone, considered to be heretics. The primary reason for the superiority of the west was the remarkable initiative of St Ambrose, of his great disciple, St Augustine, and of St Jerome' (Donnelly, *art. cit.*, pp 282, 291).

particular concept of physical virginity which will bedevil the sober speculation of the great Schoolmen. Interwoven in all this type of thinking is the medieval idea of *corruptio*, and the mistrust of human sexuality. St Thomas sums up the position of the Masters of the thirteenth century and their followers: 'The Virgin Mother of God is exempt from this condemnation (i.e. Eve's); for, conceiving Christ without the intervention of sin and without any agency of man, she gave birth without pain and her integrity untouched, maintaining in its completeness her physical virginity'.<sup>19</sup> In beautifully tender words, in his *Commentary on the Ave Maria*, he says: 'She conceived without corruption; she found peace in her pregnancy; and she bore the Saviour with joy'.<sup>20</sup>

There is no space to discuss at length the intricate speculations of the Schoolmen regarding the compatibility of virginity with motherhood. The biological ideas of the time had their influence, but the intellectual preoccupation of theology was to maintain the totality of Mary's virginity. The speculation moves into the area of the state of innocence — a fertile field for understanding the influence of sin on human activities.<sup>21</sup> These men were too intelligent not to realize that a purely physical detail is not of the essence of virginity, perfectly aware that this detail is something normal but not necessary. But at the end of the argument the traditional datum wins the day. St Thomas, for example, finds himself in the inconsistent position that, within his bold and decisive analysis of virginity, an accidental element is still regarded as a necessary feature in the person of the Mother of God.

To sum up: from the seventeenth century onward, until very recent times, there has been no development in the Church's understanding of Mary's perpetual virginity as regards the doctrine of *virginitas-in-partu*. A fair comment would be to say that *virginitas-in-partu* does not figure expressly in the day-to-day preaching of the Church and therefore can be disregarded; but to return to a point already made, by the time of the outbreak of the second world war, men of the stature of Merkelbach were already looking for a certain room to manoeuvre.<sup>22</sup> It was at this time that a manuscript was being prepared by Albert Mitterer, which would start a process of rethinking that is still in a certain sense unresolved.<sup>23</sup> Put in the form of a question, it is this: Can one hold the

<sup>19</sup> *Sum. theol.* III, q. 35, a. 6, *ad lm.*

<sup>20</sup> Cf Clark, p 585.

<sup>21</sup> Cf Clark, pp 585-9.

<sup>22</sup> Clark, p 589.

<sup>23</sup> *Dogma und Biologie der Heiligen Familie* (Vienna, 1952).

dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity, while denying the miraculous mode of birth for Christ? I think there is little doubt that one can, and more than that, one should.

*A contemporary approach*

It is one thing to show the hollowness of the patristic defence of our Lady's virginity in so far as it is linked to a misunderstanding of biological processes. Mitterer has adequately closed that discussion. But it should be noted that his prime preoccupation is with the demands of physical motherhood, and it is to vindicate the motherhood of Mary that he dismisses the irrelevancies of the patristic defence of her virginity. His study is, of course, limited to an analysis of St Thomas Aquinas's teaching and it is only by inference that he undermines the tradition the former endeavoured to substantiate.

We can, in the light of the summary of patristic and scholastic evidence, enlarge the discussion. We need to approach the tradition with sympathy as well as with theological rigour. To put it plainly, the Fathers were confronted with facts they found impossible to reconcile with the Church's faith concerning Mary's perpetual virginity. For in Mary's case, virginal organs are behaving non-virginally. The patristic reaction seems to be based on an expectancy that these organs should retain their pristine physical state both during and after this particular and unique parturition. It was accepted that perpetual virginity is incompatible with obviously parous organs; for the latter were inevitably modified by pregnancy and birth unless God intervened. As the virginal conception was a unique intervention of God requiring only the consent of the handmaid of the Lord, the Fathers of the third century onward found no difficulty, if their understanding of virginity required it, to continue that intervention into the actual birth itself. They suspected stigma and blemish — there could be none: so the presumptive stigma and blemish must be removed. The cultural, non-theological factors, their appreciation of the unique virginity of our blessed Lady, led them to neglect what they clearly understood but which failed to influence their reasoning — that the ordinary physical signs of pregnancy, birth and lactation were *of themselves* a signal glorification of Mary's sinless body: 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked'.<sup>24</sup> As St Thomas himself formally understood, the Fall would have made no radical difference to the natural characteristics of men, male or female.

<sup>24</sup> Lk 11, 27.

The question at issue seems to be basically hermeneutical, requiring us to get inside the horizon of a former age and to decipher the argument in terms of that age. This has its difficulties, but I think the point has been made successfully.

However, mention has already been made of two strands of thinking in connection with the theme we are discussing, the first of which to appear in time concerned the 'painlessness' of our Lord's birth. We know far more about the pains of labour and childbirth these days, even of the possibility that all anguish can be absent even in a young *primipara*. We are moving, of course, in an unknowable area when, with reverence, we reflect on such possibilities regarding our blessed Lady. But it is at least appropriate that she who was full of grace, without the tensions of sin and concupiscence, should give birth to her Son with complete relaxation of mind and body, and with a great and ineffable joy of soul. That is all we can say on this point but it is, to my mind, more than enough for our reflection.

But before offering a theological appraisal of what are the demands of faith *vis-à-vis* the so-called 'common teaching' regarding *virginitas-in-partu*, a cautionary note needs to be sounded. Our deeper understanding of the basic dogma of the virgin birth (= the virginal conception) of our Lord and a growing awareness of the factuality of his entrance into our history along with a consequently profounder appreciation of the motherhood of Mary, should not bewitch us into neglecting the guidance of the great ages of patristic learning and spirituality, nor dissuade us from reflecting unremittingly on the pre-eminent mystery of Mary's perpetual virginity, and on the riches contained in Lk 11, 27. In Mary we are confronted with virginal love of a kind that is unique. Little wonder that the Fathers resorted to the only equipment they had available to defend at all costs this reality of the gospel.

In all modesty I suggest that we no longer need this equipment, for the reasons which follow.

Christ, our Saviour, accepted our humanity in all its fulness, limitations and conditionings, sin excepted. Virginally conceived, he developed before and after birth like any other child. But he accepted this nature of ours not only as it affected those closely associated with him in his paschal mystery — his mother, his friends, his enemies. Consistently, he accepted the human condition (hunger, thirst, sleeplessness, pain, death) and never protected himself from its consequences. Mary was intimately joined to her son in his redemptive mission. Nothing suggests that he sought to relieve her of its continuing cross. It would seem incongruous to demand any exemption from this

condition in his birth. Mary's *fiat* was an acceptance of his history and his humanity.

If God's special intervention does not seem required to preserve the dogma of her perpetual virginity, then we are at liberty to see the patristic evidence as one theological explanation and not pertaining to the substance of faith. This would permit the development of another theology of the virginal birth of Christ. It could be based on the following points:

1. The pregnancy, birth, and infancy of our Lord followed strictly the natural order.
2. The birth would be similar to birth in the state of innocence.
3. No suspension of natural law is required, particularly because virginity, *in its fullness*, does not require the presence or absence of the presumptive sign.
4. The dogmatic formula *virginitas ante partum, in partu, et post partum* is substantially and absolutely true. It is a clear enunciation that our Lady remained a virgin *throughout her life*. If the words *virginitas-in-partu* are taken in isolation, they are an assertion that when Mary's uterus acted maternally, this involved no impairment of her virginity. The *need* to assert this was contingent upon a particular understanding of virginity and this is not taught as of faith.
5. There is, therefore, no valid reason for the reversion of Mary's body to the condition obtaining prior to her conception of Jesus. This miracle would be pointless.
6. Our Lord's birth is the action of *his mother*, her *gift* to him even as to us.

### *Perspectives*

It is one thing to say that another theology of the *virginal birth of Christ* can be based on these points: it is another to construct that theology. Demolition work, however necessary, is a very minimal operation in ecumenical theology. What is offered now, very summarily, are two lines of thought consequent on the space created by the removal of a particular formulation of Mary's virginity as affected by the birth of her son.

In the eighteenth chapter of Dr John McHugh's magisterial work, to which reference has been made, a chapter entitled 'The Religious Significance of Mary's life-long Virginity', the author states: 'There is no reason why the Church should give her *more* honour because she was a *virgin* mother, *as long as we consider only the biological fact of the*

virginal conception on its own'.<sup>25</sup> This is equally true if we reflect on *virginitas-in-partu*. If Mary's virginity involving a virginal conception of Jesus is a precious sign of her spiritual love of Jesus, that precious sign is present when her conception comes to natural term in the birth of Jesus. Blessed indeed is the womb that bore the Saviour of the world but yet more blessed is the virginal love which will enable her to become the mother of all who love Jesus (beginning with John!). In fact the reality of Christ's birth and of Mary's motherhood is a sign of the greater reality of the birth of the new world of God and men engendered on the Cross. Hence the new birth was consequent upon the birth of Bethlehem — and Mary is a participant in both moments of salvation history, and more than a mere participant. This theme leads to a profounder understanding of her title of 'Mother of the Church' and its inter-relation with the significance of baptism.

Secondly, at Bethlehem, according to Tradition, Mary bore her son in joy. On Calvary she is involved in the new birth in anguish and torture of soul as she accepts the death of that son for the redemption of many. Her love is virginal to the highest degree, for she subordinates everything she has to the will of the Father. Virginity and motherhood co-exist at the level of profound mystery at the side of the Crucified. 'Mary is henceforth to find her children not in those closest to her by blood, but in those who share her boundless faith and remain steadfast to Jesus to the very end'.<sup>26</sup>

Rupert of Deutz, in commenting on John 13, reflects that Mary did not have to suffer pain in giving birth, at Bethlehem, to the cause of our salvation (*salutis omnium causam*); but she suffered the deepest anguish on Calvary when she 'gave birth' to salvation itself (*omnium nostrum salutem*).<sup>27</sup>

These two comments, undeveloped though they certainly are, may indicate the area where we should explore the theological implications of Mary's virginity before, in and after the birth of Christ. It is only in a christological and soteriological setting that a more profound understanding is possible of this datum of faith. It is, however, more than probable that these comments will find support in the mainstream of patristic tradition. This is never a matter for surprise, and the demolition work will have had more value than it deserved.

<sup>25</sup> McHugh, p 345.

<sup>26</sup> McHugh, p 402.

<sup>27</sup> In Jn 13: PL 169, 789-90.