God’s Human Partner: Engaging Sergii Nikolaevich
Bulgakov on Mary’s Immaculate Conception
after Vatican II

by

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Abstract

In his book *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, Sergii Nikolaevich Bulgakov vigorously rejects the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception and its scholastic defenders. However, in light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, together with a historical survey of the development of both Eastern and Western Christian understandings of Mary’s conception and sinlessness, we find that many of Bulgakov’s positions critiquing leading pre-conciliar understandings of the Immaculate Conception can not only be reconciled with a contemporary Catholic understanding of the dogma but can even offer key elements that can help to elaborate a renewed understanding of the place of the Immaculate Conception within a Biblical narrative of salvation history.
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Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary,
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# Table of Contents

**Chapter 1 Introducing the Issues** ................................................................. 1  
1.1. Overview ................................................................................................. 1  
1.1.1. Methodology ...................................................................................... 3  
1.2. Historical Understandings of Mary in Salvation History ......................... 4  
1.2.1. The Immaculate Conception in the Christian West .............................. 4  
1.2.2. Mary’s Sinlessness in the Christian East ............................................ 9  
1.2.3. Mary’s Sinlessness and Russian Orthodox Sophiology ...................... 14  
1.3. Developments in Orthodoxy and Catholicism since Bulgakov’s Death ....... 17  
1.3.1. From Neo-Scholastic Systematics to the Biblical Vision of Vatican II .... 18  
1.3.2. Orthodoxy and the development of doctrine ....................................... 25  

**Chapter 2 Engaging Bulgakov’s Marian Vision Today** .................................. 29  
2.1. The Creation of the Soul and Solidarity across Generations ................. 29  
2.2. Mary’s Sinlessness and Human Nature ............................................... 35  
2.2.1. A Critique of Scholastic Anthropology ........................................... 35  
2.2.2. An Anthropology after God’s Likeness .......................................... 40  
2.2.3. Mary: One of a Kind or One with Humankind? ............................... 43  
2.2.4. Purification at the Annunciation? ...................................................... 47  
2.2.5. Death, therefore Sin? ....................................................................... 49  

**Chapter 3 An Integrated Vision** .................................................................... 52  
3.1. Receiving Bulgakov into a Catholic Vision............................................. 52  
3.2. Mary: the Crowning of Israel, God’s Human Partner ............................. 59  
3.3. Concluding Remarks ............................................................................. 67  

**Bibliography** ................................................................................................. 69
1 Introducing the Issues

1.1 Overview

Over the course of a millennium, the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary under the title of the “Immaculate Conception” had been steadily growing in prominence within the Roman Catholic Church, leading up to the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* in 1854\(^1\), wherein Pius IX formally declared that Mary was conceived “without spot or stain.”\(^2\) This teaching has become a source of polarization between Catholic\(^3\) and many non-Catholic Christians, and especially since its dogmatic definition by the pope, the issue has become even more divisive than it had been in the past. Among Orthodox Christians, belief in Mary’s Immaculate Conception was far more widespread prior to its proclamation as dogma by Pius IX, and while such belief is not authoritatively proscribed today, official skepticism towards the Immaculate Conception by Orthodox Church authorities has largely marginalized or excluded this understanding from contemporary Orthodox Christianity.\(^4\)

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, relations among separated Christian bodies have warmed greatly because of the significant openings in Catholic theology encouraged by the Council, which have empowered Catholics to deepen their own theology and to engage more positively the insights of other Christians. The fruit of this ecumenical spirit can be discerned in recent authoritative Catholic understandings of religious freedom, justification, and ecumenism itself. This spirit animates many other Christian bodies as well, leading to an increasing


\(^2\) “Immaculate” simply means “without spot or stain.”

\(^3\) For the purposes of this paper, “Catholic” refers generally to those Christians in union with the See of Rome, “Orthodox” refers to those Christians who affirm the faith professed by the seven ecumenical councils up to the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 and who historically have been in full communion with the patriarch of Constantinople. When we leave “catholic” uncapitalized, we use it to mean “universal” in the more traditional, non-sectarian sense of the word.

convergence among these bodies in their understanding of key doctrinal issues. Although this common deepening of theological understandings has certainly enriched theological reflection on Marian doctrines, much of this conversation has failed to engage the dogma of the Immaculate Conception more profoundly, as if doing so could only lead to an ecumenical impasse. The result is that—aside from a few notable exceptions—the Immaculate Conception is rarely engaged in a positive manner outside of Catholic theological circles and conversely, that Catholics have done little to deepen their own understanding of the Immaculate Conception as they have done more broadly in other areas since the Second Vatican Council.\(^5\)

Sergii Nikolaevich Bulgakov’s book *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God* is an example of both the vigorous rejection of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception that could be found among non-Catholic Christians just prior to the Council and the type of polemics which contemporary ecumenical dialogue has largely sought to avoid.\(^6\) It still stands as one expression of a rejection of this Marian doctrine that continues to dominate the Orthodox world today. It may be, however, that in light of *Lumen Gentium* and the reflection opened by the Second Vatican Council, many of Sergii Bulgakov’s positions critiquing leading pre-conciliar understandings of the Immaculate Conception can not only be reconciled with a contemporary Catholic understanding of the dogma but can even offer key elements that can help to elaborate a renewed understanding of the Immaculate Conception within the broader narrative of salvation history. In fact, when properly understood, both Bulgakov’s negative critique and his positive Mariological project can help Catholics to enrich and deepen their comprehension of the Immaculate Conception insofar as a Catholic understanding of the Immaculate Conception need not depend on the neo-scholastic framework that Bulgakov rejects—perhaps the Catholic conception is even stronger without it. Moreover, Bulgakov’s own Mariology may help to

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indicate a way by which *Lumen Gentium*’s vision of salvation history can more robustly ground a theology of the Immaculate Conception while making it more patently relevant for the living out of ordinary Christian life. Thus, a contemporary engagement of the work of Sergii Nikolaevich Bulgakov may indicate one way for Catholics and other Christians to begin to more constructively engage the broader theological tradition in a way that can enrich a theological understanding of the Immaculate Conception.

1.1.1 Methodology

With regards to Roman Catholic theology, our project concerns an appropriate understanding of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception found in Pius IX’s bull *Ineffabilis Deus* in light of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The primary text that concerns our engagement of Bulgakov’s understanding of the Immaculate Conception is *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*. Our contention is that Bulgakov’s criticisms of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception need to be reconsidered in light of the new situation of Catholic theology following the Second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium* and other conciliar texts will be used to indicate both this changed situation and the emphases that distinguish theological schools that flourish in the wake of the Council from the neo-scholastic vision that Bulgakov critiques. We will thus demonstrate that certain theological positions that Bulgakov considers alien to Catholic thought are held by prominent Catholic theologians, such as Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar, and are even embraced by some of the Council documents. After having identified and engaged the most significant Mariological critiques and contributions that Bulgakov offers in response to the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, we will integrate all those elements which we have demonstrated to be compatible with a contemporary understanding of the Immaculate Conception in a concise, synthetic Mariological vision which seeks to honor both Catholic dogmatic commitments and the theological commitments of Mariological tradition that Bulgakov represents.

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7 Pius IX, “Ineffabilis Deus.”
1.2 Historical Understandings of Mary in Salvation History

1.2.1 The Immaculate Conception in the Christian West

It has not always been evident to Catholic theologians that Mary was free of spot or stain of sin from the first instant of her conception. Perhaps the most famous Catholic opponent of the Immaculate Conception is Thomas Aquinas, who argues in his Summa Theologiae that Mary is gradually purified of original sin and that it is only at the moment of the conception of her Son with the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit that Mary is fully released from what remains of the fomes peccati. Nonetheless, the doctrine that Mary was immaculate from her conception was already gaining ground in Thomas’ time, such that Thomas finds it necessary to acknowledge its supporters and to marginalize their arguments in his Summa Theologiae. Among Western Christians the devotion to Mary’s Conception seems to have developed first in England, where it may have been brought to the island sometime at the end of the first millennium or the beginning of the second by monks who may have had some contact with the Greek monastery of Saint Sabas in Rome. Even before the Norman conquest in 1066, the feast was celebrated on December 8 on the calendars of Winchester, Worcester, Exeter, and Canterbury. In its early years in Western Europe, especially among its detractors, the feast had the reputation of being English, and of being Byzantine.

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8 See the third part, question 27 of Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae (Lander, Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute, 2012). Together with the nearly unanimous tradition of his time, Thomas rejects the idea that Mary ever committed an actual sin. Thomas argues that the fomes peccati (“tinder of sin”) that remain until her full sanctification at the Annunciation are effectively “lettered” such that she never commits a sin (STh, III, q. 27, a. 3). As we shall see, Thomas’ teaching encountered resistance in the Christian east, where a number of thinkers promoted Mary’s presanctification, though others came to adopt the very schema that Thomas proposed in opposing the Immaculate Conception.


11 Benoit, “L’Immaculée Conception. Une affaire anglaise et un grand signe dans le ciel.”
The earliest English liturgical witnesses to this feast, however, simply indicate it as the feast of Mary’s Conception without explicit reference to Mary being immaculate at her conception.\(^{12}\) Nonetheless, it seems that many who celebrated the feast there did so because of the holiness that they presumed that Mary had at her conception. Thomas Aquinas observes this, noting: “no feast is celebrated except of some saint, but some keep the feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin. Therefore it seems that in her very Conception she was holy; and hence that she was sanctified before animation.”\(^{13}\) Of course, Thomas will argue later in that same article that the celebration of the feast of Mary’s conception is misguided precisely because he thinks that Mary is not yet sanctified from sin at the moment of conception.

Decades before Thomas grappled with the problem, Alexander Neckham, a twelfth century Oxford scholar, writes about the competing theories concerning the moment in which a human being was first freed from the stain of sin, which was “regarded by some to have taken its beginning from the conception of the blessed virgin; by others, from the birth of the glorious virgin; by certain men from the birth of the Baptist; by others it is said that the day had its origin from the birth of the Saviour.” Neckham recounts in the same text that he had been opposed to the feast of the Conception and intended to lecture on that day every year to prevent students from honouring the feast. Instead, he found himself sick on that same day every year such that he could not lecture as he had planned. This pattern only ceased when, at the prodding of others, he made up his mind to observe the feast one year instead of lecturing. Neckham regained his health, and the annual sickness ceased.\(^{14}\) Notably, the devotion to the Immaculate Conception, even in the early years of its development in the Western Church, seems to have spread more through wonders and signs—such as Neckham’s “conversion” to its observance—than through academic ratiocination. This primacy continues in the nineteenth century: though Pius IX’s dogmatic declaration in 1854

\(^{12}\) In relation to these liturgical celebrations, Eadmer of Canterbury (c. 1160-c. 1128) seems to have been the first in England to have formulated an understanding of Mary’s conception as being immaculate. See Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 83–89.

\(^{13}\) See the third part, question 27, article 2 of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*.

might have been decisive so far as the Catholic magisterium was concerned, Catherine Labouré’s visions at Rue de Bac (Paris) in 1820 and Bernadette Soubirous’s visions at Lourdes in 1858 exercised significant influence in reinforcing devotion to the Immaculate Conception among the Catholic faithful. Nonetheless, the theological debate surrounding the Immaculate Conception also plays an important role in its development in the Western Church. Many of the early scholastics argued against the Immaculate Conception; Thomist opponents of the doctrine argued against it until its solemn proclamation as dogma in 1854. But the doctrine also had a prominent champion among the early scholastics in John Duns Scotus; his Franciscan brothers have been numerous among the promoters of the doctrine.

Assent to the doctrine grew across Europe in the Middle Ages so much that in 1439 the thirty-sixth session of the Council of Basel formally affirmed the Immaculate Conception to be dogma:

“the doctrine that maintains that the glorious Virgin and Mother of God, Mary, by the power of a single prevenient grace and the working of divine will, was never subject to original sin but was always in a state immune from actual and original fault, holy and immaculate, is to be approved by all Catholics…”

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16 An important and detailed study of this development can be found in Marielle Lamy, *L’immaculée conception : étapes et enjeux d’une controverse au Moyen âge, XIIe-XVe siècles* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000).


However, this proclamation occurred after Pope Eugenius IV had already dissolved the Council and reconvened it at Ferrara.\(^{19}\) As a result, questions surrounding the canonical status of this and other sessions of the Council of Basel seriously undermined the authoritativeness of its definition. Since the Immaculate Conception had been defined as dogma by what they considered to be a schismatic conciliar body, papal partisans—led by the Dominican Priests Juan Torquemada and Giovanni de Montenero—stepped up their attacks on the doctrine, which they considered heretical.\(^{20}\)

Curiously, the Byzantines at the Council of Florence, especially Metropolitan Mark Eugenikos of Ephesus (who famously resisted the union that resulted from the Council of Florence), were more favourably inclined toward teachings concerning Mary’s Immaculate Conception than its Roman detractors at the Council. Even before Mark attended the Western Council, this champion of Eastern Orthodoxy had written in favour of the doctrine of the “pre-purified (προκαθαρθείσα) Virgin,” which corresponds in Byzantine theology to what Basel had intended to dogmatize in the Immaculate Conception.\(^{21}\) In part because of the polemics surrounding the Immaculate Conception in the western church in the wake of Basel-Ferrara-Florence, in 1476 Pope Sixtus IV decided to promulgate an indulgence attached to the Mass and office for the feast in order to show his approval for the feast’s celebration, while also avoiding any definitive judgment regarding the doctrine itself.\(^{22}\) Thereon, even in the face of lingering opposition, devotion to the Immaculate Conception spread and developed over the following centuries, aided especially by its support at the University of Paris and certain other centres of learning as well as by groups

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\(^{20}\) Sebastian, “The Controversy over the Immaculate Conception from after Scotus to the End of the Eighteenth Century,” 228–238.


\(^{22}\) Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1400*. 
such as the Society of Jesus, the Sodality of our Lady, and many other confraternities and lay religious movements which enthusiastically promoted it.23

By the time Pius IX began his inquiry among the faithful in the mid-nineteenth century with the question of whether the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception should be proclaimed a dogma, the overwhelming majority of the Catholic faithful supported such an act with only a small group of intellectuals expressing opposition to the proposed dogma.24 Finally, on December 8, 1854, Pius IX solemnly declared Immaculate Conception a dogma through the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*:

> We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.25

Even though many of the brightest intellects had taken a stand against the doctrine during its controversial history in the West, the Immaculate Conception had captured the hearts of simple believers in England at the turn of the first millennium, and from there it gradually won over the hearts of the faithful across the Christian West. For this reason the Holy See has indicated the Immaculate Conception as an example of the consultation of the faithful regarding Church doctrine by the papal magisterium as well as an illustration of a genuinely Catholic development of doctrine within the Church.26


25 Pius IX, “Ineffabilis Deus.”

1.2.2 Mary’s Sinlessness in the Christian East

Our survey of some of the key moments leading to the Roman proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception has thus far centred on developments in the Christian West, but already figures from the Christian East have figured prominently. From the arrival of the devotion in England, which the eleventh century historian Eadmer attributes to Greek monks,27 to Byzantine support for Mary’s purity in every moment of her existence at the time of the Council of Florence, it would seem that the Eastern Church played a crucial role in the development of what would become the Roman dogma of the Immaculate Conception. It may come as a surprise, then, to Western Christians, that no Orthodox prelate of note has spoken publicly in favour of the Immaculate Conception since its dogmatic definition by Pope IX in 1854.28 In fact, Anthimos VII Tsatsos, Patriarch of Constantinople, seems to have identified the Immaculate Conception as one of the errors of the Roman Church in his encyclical letter of 1895.29 This encyclical letter, however, cannot be considered binding upon the Orthodox faithful in the way that the Roman dogma binds Catholic faithful.30 Especially given earlier opinions by significant Orthodox figures in favour of Mary’s sinlessness at every moment of her existence, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware expresses a moderate contemporary Orthodox position: “if an Orthodox wishes to believe

27 Eadmer, Tractatus de conceptione sanctae Mariae, ed. Herbert Thurston and Thomas Slater (Friburgi Brisgoviae: Herder, 1904); in translation: Eadmer, La conception immaculée de la vierge Marie (De conceptione Sanctae Mariae) (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1923).


30 Some of the other Roman “innovations” that Anthimos condemns in this encyclical letter, such as the Roman use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist or his contention that Romans “sprinkle” instead of properly baptizing (by immersion) are no longer seen by many Orthodox hierarchs or faithful as church-dividing errors. Those who would oppose the Immaculate Conception on the authority of this letter might take into account that it no longer represents the mainstream Orthodox position on all the issues that it mentions. Furthermore, unlike the Holy See, which claims for itself a certain assurance of rectitude in its teaching office through its understanding of the Petrine office, the Orthodox make no such claims for the See of Constantinople, since the Orthodox have deposed and condemned, without subsequent rehabilitation, a number of the patriarchs of this see, including Nestorius and Peter of Constantinople.
in the Immaculate Conception, he is free to do so, even though he should recognize that he is going against the main body of opinion in his Church at the present time.”\(^\text{31}\) Ware notes, for example, that many Orthodox faithful go on pilgrimages to Lourdes, where Mary calls herself the “Immaculate Conception.”\(^\text{32}\) On the whole, however, Eastern polemicists today are much more likely to attack the Immaculate Conception as a Roman innovation that is alien to their tradition. How does one reconcile this with the Western medieval notion that this doctrine is Eastern in origin?

The Byzantine Divine Liturgy addresses Mary as “the immaculate, spotless one (άχραντος).”\(^\text{33}\) The question for Eastern Christians, therefore, is not whether Mary is immaculate but whether she was immaculate even from the moment of her conception.\(^\text{34}\) On this point Orthodoxy has no dogmatically binding position. It is clear that devotion to the Immaculate Conception was more common in the Eastern Churches prior to the Papal definition of the dogma in 1854 than it is now.\(^\text{35}\) Byzantine liturgical texts in use for much of the second millennium (and which may reflect a more ancient first millennium witness) seem to affirm her immaculateness: “‘this day, O faithful, from saintly parents begins to take being the spotless lamb, the most pure tabernacle, Mary; ‘she is conceived... the only immaculate one;’ or ‘having conceived the most pure dove, Anne filled...’”\(^\text{36}\) What complicates matters are the linguistic differences between the Eastern


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 91–92.

\(^{33}\) References to Mary as “achrantos,” meaning “immaculate one” are surprisingly frequent. See Kucharek, The Byzantine-Slav Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, 355–357.

\(^{34}\) Related to this is the problem of the first sin and its relationship to subsequent sins, which is conceived of in different terms in Eastern and Western Christianity, but which equally forms part of the dogma as defined in Ineffabilis Deus, which makes explicit reference to “original sin.”


\(^{36}\) These texts come from the Byzantine office of matins for the feast of the Conception of Mary; see Kucharek, The Byzantine-Slav Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, 355.
Church, which mainly theologized using the Greek language and Greek patterns of thought, and the West, which theologized using the Latin language and Latin categories. Where Latins, building upon more Augustinian notions of sin, emphasize more Mary’s freedom from original sin in a negative expression (“immaculate” meaning “without spot”), early Byzantine theologians assert the same reality through the positive affirmation that Mary is “pre-purified (προκαθαρθείσα).” Gregory of Nazianzus asserts that Mary is “pre-purified” such that her human nature is sinless in a manner like unto the sinless human nature of her Son, who is likewise “pre-purified.” 37 Later Latin theological categories would call such a grace “prevenient,” emphasizing that it was obtained in view to her Son. 38 Gregory’s contemporary Rufinus of Aquileia does not hesitate to translate “προκαθαρθείσα” as “immaculata” in his translations of Gregory’s work. 39 This understanding of the “pre-purified one” will be further developed in successive centuries by Byzantine theologians, including St. Sophronius the Hagiopolite (758-828) 40 and St. Nicephorus of Constantinople (758-828). 41 In addition we have a witness to a more devotional tradition in St. Theodore the Studite (759-826) who asserts in a homily on Mary’s nativity:

“Mary is the earth on which the thorns of sin did not grow. […] She is an earth which was not cursed as was the first earth, fertile in thorns and thistles, but was blessed by the Lord and her fruit also is blessed, as says the word of the Lord. […] She is the new dough that has been remade by God, the holy first-fruits of the human race, the root of that stem spoken of by the prophet.” 42

Patriarch Photius of Constantinople (810-893), revered as a saint in the East in part due to the grief that the Roman Pontiff gave him, praises Mary’s freedom from concupiscence from the

38 Ibid., 21.
39 Ibid., 22.
40 Ibid., 30–37.
41 Ibid., 62–63.
start, saying, “she prudently composed and adapted herself in divers ways against all the storms of life’s temptations and those which were roused by the violent hurricane of evil spirits, never allowing any of her pliant [emotions] even to touch the brink of evil.”\textsuperscript{43} Such witnesses to Mary’s sinlessness at every moment of her existence are so numerous in the Byzantine tradition that John Meyendorff, a prominent twentieth century opponent of the Roman dogma, found himself constrained to declare,

quotations can easily be multiplied, and they give clear indications that the Mariological piety of the Byzantines would probably have led them to accept the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary as it was defined in 1854, \textit{if only} they had shared the Western doctrine of original sin.\textsuperscript{44}

And yet some Byzantines have held a doctrine of original sin that is sufficient to affirm the Immaculate Conception, and perhaps a greater number than Meyendorff would like to admit, especially in the early modern period. Gennadius II Scholarius, a champion of Orthodoxy who took up the anti-Roman polemics of his mentor Mark of Ephesus, simultaneously affirmed the reality of original sin (without considering this to be alien to Orthodoxy) and argued strongly \textit{against} Thomas’ rejection of the Immaculate Conception, insisting that Mary “was completely liberated from the ancestral guilt and punishment—a privilege which she is the only one of the human race to have received.”\textsuperscript{45} From this historical period onwards, as Meyendorff is constrained to admit, there are many references to what he calls “the characteristically Western concept of ‘guilt’” in the work of Orthodox theologians, who “begin to think in the categories of Western Scholasticism.”\textsuperscript{46} In fact, though this supposedly “Western-influenced” tradition of

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{46} Meyendorff, \textit{Byzantine Theology}, 148.
Orthodox theology continues into the early twentieth century,\textsuperscript{47} Meyendorff says nothing more about it in his classic introduction to Byzantine theology, even though it arguably becomes dominant in many places.

The great Russian Orthodox Slavophiles of the Russian Religious Renaissance—including Solovyov, Florensny, and Bulgakov—saw themselves in continuity with Orthodox thinkers that preceded them but also embraced the idea of doctrinal development, especially with regards to an understanding of Holy Wisdom which they believed was emerging organically from the Christian piety of the Russian people. Even if they were critical of some Western habits of thought, they were convinced that their own (Slavic) mission would not be overcome by Western thought and could even be enriched by an engagement with it.\textsuperscript{48} More intriguingly, some of these thinkers seem to have an understanding of the fall of humankind that is compatible with Western notions of original sin,\textsuperscript{49} and some of their leading thinkers affirm Mary’s Immaculate Conception.\textsuperscript{50} These thinkers are actually more representative of the Russian Orthodoxy of their time than is often acknowledged today.\textsuperscript{51} For example, while it is not necessarily surprising that Ukrainians in union with Rome historically supported the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (even in a time when there were prominent “Romans” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who opposed it), it is telling that Martin Jugie is able to provide an impressive list of seventeenth century Ukrainian Orthodox thinkers and prelates in and around Kiev who—while rejecting the 1595 Union of Brest—nonetheless gladly affirm that Mary was preserved from original sin from

\textsuperscript{47} Dvornik, “The Byzantine Church and the Immaculate Conception,” 105–111; Kucharek, The Byzantine-Slav Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom; cf. Ware, “The Mother of God in Orthodox Theology and Devotion.”


\textsuperscript{49} On Bulgakov’s understanding of original sin, see note 136 below.


\textsuperscript{51} Cf. Jean Xavier Gagarin, L’Église Russe et l’Immaculée Conception (Paris: E. Plon et Cie, 1876).
the moment of her conception.\textsuperscript{52} Citing Makary Bulgakov’s landmark \textit{History of the Russian Church}, Russian Orthodox Archimandrite Lev Gillet notes that in 1666 the Council of Moscow approved Simeon Polotsky’s \textit{The Rod of Direction}, which explicitly affirms “Mary was exempt from original sin from the moment of her conception.”\textsuperscript{53} Gillet offers other witnesses to Russian Orthodox devotion to the Immaculate Conception, including the Russian Orthodox Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception established at Polotsk in 1651 and the explicit affirmation of the Immaculate Conception in an 1841 Old Believer declaration of faith.\textsuperscript{54}

The Slavophiles did not need to look to Rome for the origins of the Immaculate Conception, which some of their number affirmed: they found it within their own Slavic Orthodox tradition. Although the Slavophile tradition within Orthodoxy has been largely eclipsed by its repudiation by the heirs to a certain “neo-patristic” theology in the twentieth century, it shows new vigour since the turn of the twenty-first century, especially as contemporary Christians discover the genius of the Slavophiles’ last major theologian, Sergii Bulgakov.\textsuperscript{55} Since Bulgakov rejects the Immaculate Conception—unlike Soloviov and Florensky, who were more favorable towards it—we would like to better comprehend his understanding of Mary’s sinlessness and consider whether what Bulgakov proposes in his Marian vision and what the Catholic Church teaches about the Immaculate Conception could actually mutually enrich one another instead of being mutually exclusive.

\subsection*{1.2.3 Mary’s Sinlessness and Russian Orthodox Sophiology}

Behind Sergii Bulgakov’s understanding of Mary’s place in the relationship between God and humankind stands his conception of Sophia, or Holy Wisdom, which he considers to be an

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{52} Martin Jugie, “L’Immaculée Conception chez les Russes au XVIIe siècle,” \textit{Échos d’Orient} 12, no. 75 (1909): 66–75.

\textsuperscript{53} The text that Gillet cites has yet to be translated into English from Russian. It is Makary Bulgakov, \textit{History of the Russian Church}. 1890, t. XII, p. 681. Cited in Lev Gillet, “The Immaculate Conception and the Orthodox Church,” \textit{Chrysostom} 6, no. 5 (Spring 1983): 151–159.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

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essential part of an integral Christian understanding of the cosmos. Bulgakov follows in the footsteps of the man who could be called the father of modern Sophiology, Vladimir Solovyov, as well as Solovyov’s disciple and Bulgakov’s friend, Pavel Florensky. However, Solovyov would have vigorously rejected the idea that he was the originator of Sophiology. If we bracket for the moment these men’s shared conviction that Sophia (Wisdom) pre-exists the created universe and permeates it, what stands out is their sense that Russian Christianity is providentially positioned to intuit the reality of Sophia, to which the great Novgorod cathedral icon bears witness.\(^56\) This *Sophia is the expression of the relationship between the created and the uncreated*; it is expressed in the correspondence of creation to its divine image.\(^57\) These three sophiologists agree that, besides Christ, there is no higher expression of this correspondence than the Virgin Mary. But how do they situate this understanding in relation to their understanding of the Immaculate Conception?

In *Russia and the Universal Church*, Solovyov asserts, “[h]umanity united with God in the Most Holy Virgin, in Christ, and in the Church is the realization of the essential wisdom or absolute substance of God; this humanity is the created form of the essential Wisdom, her incarnation.”\(^58\) Solovyov claims that Orthodox Christians confess the “threelfold realization of essential Wisdom in humanity” through their liturgy and that the recognition that all that is said of Wisdom applies in a special way to the Holy Virgin “has in our own time received the sanction of church doctrine in the bull of Pius IX concerning the immaculate conception of the Most Holy Virgin.”\(^59\) Near

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56 The Orthodox Cathedral in Novgorod is dedicated to Holy Sophia. Bulgakov describes its most famous icon as featuring “Sophia, depicted in the guise of a fiery angel, with the Mother of God standing on the right, and the Forerunner on the left. These two would seem here to depict created Wisdom in conjunction with the symbolic figure of heavenly Wisdom.” Sergii Nikolaevich Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (Hudson, N.Y: Lindisfarne Books, 1993). See also Solovyov, *Divine Sophia*, 225f.


59 Ibid.
the end of his life, Solovyov would reiterate this identification of Sophia with the Immaculate Conception in his *Idea of Humanity in Auguste Comte*, where he presents the Most Holy Virgin as the purified and transformed World Soul who is “Wisdom herself,” a reality which he confirms by noting that “in Rome the thousand-year-old cult of the Madonna recognized its theological apex with the dogmatic decree of Pope Pius IX on the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Virgin.”

Far from opposing the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception in opposition to Sophia, Solovyov exalts the Immaculate Conception as her crowning triumph.

Sophianic reflections permeate Pavel Florensky’s epistolary theodicy *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. Florensky observes that, through their lives, the virgin saints “honor in the Mother of God the Bearer of Sophia, the Manifestation of Sophia, and feel that their spiritual organization comes precisely from Sophia.” Among these saints Florensky singles out especially St. Seraphim of Sarov and others like him who “are the pure *par excellence*, fragments of the shattered primordial world, as it were, whose image has been distorted less than that of other creatures. These are those who honor Everlasting Virginity, and the first among them, the Bearer and Center of edenic purity, is the Ever-Virgin Mother of God.”

This purity of Eden which the Mother of God bears is the purity that Adam and Eve had before the fall, a truth that, according to Florensky, “Catholics have expressed in their crude and rationalistic way in the dogma of the immaculate conception.” Florensky, with Solovyov, affirms the truth of the Immaculate Conception, even if he couches this affirmation in a critique of the dogma’s formulation.

Bulgakov seemingly breaks with his sophiologist forebears in his rejection of the Immaculate Conception, which he claims, “annihilates the Sophianicity of humankind.” Given the vehemence with which Bulgakov argues against the Immaculate Conception in this work and the

60 Ibid., 224.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 551, n. 640.
fact that he continues to offer passing critiques of this Catholic dogma in many of his subsequent works, one might be led to believe that the refutation of the Immaculate Conception stands as a foundation for his Sophiology. We may take Bulgakov at his word in his rejection of the dogma, but when one examines what he affirms, one finds that it stands much closer to a Catholic understanding of the Immaculate Conception than one might suspect. In fact, Bulgakov calls the dogma of the Immaculate Conception “a presentiment of the correct idea […] although in an incorrect dogmatic formulation.” For Bulgakov, the dogma’s great flaw arises from scholastic categories like “pure nature,” which he associates with it. He observes that “with the elimination of these school teachings from the dogma, nothing remains except the general pious and fully correct idea about the sinlessness of the Virgin Mary.” If Bulgakov is able to affirm this belief, then perhaps he, in fact, still affirms the substance of what his sophiologist forebears affirmed in the Immaculate Conception. Florensky, as we have seen, registers his dissatisfaction with the formulation of the Catholic dogma even as he affirms its basic truth. Solovyov’s affirmation was much more enthusiastic, but it was no way predicated on Western scholastic categories but on the recognition that his own Russian sophianic understanding indicates the same reality as that which Western Christians indicate in the Immaculate Conception.

1.3 Developments in Orthodoxy and Catholicism since Bulgakov’s Death

Although Sergii Bulgakov rejects the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, he does so on the basis of a certain Roman Catholic understanding of the dogma that can no longer claim to be authoritative or even dominant after the Second Vatican Council. What Bulgakov rejects most especially in his arguments against the Immaculate Conception is the “pure nature” scholasticism that was once prominent in Catholic theological faculties, which he considers to be the basis of the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Although this type of neo-scholastic understanding seems to be making a comeback in some Catholic faculties, the Second Vatican Council very clearly indicates other theological approaches which may illuminate the mystery of

65 Ibid., 95.
66 Ibid., 50.
the Immaculate Conception in a way that is much more akin to Bulgakov’s vision than to the theologies that he rejects. But if the Catholicism of the Second Vatican Council has opened a path whereby Bulgakov’s theology might be more fully received by those who affirm the Roman dogma of the Immaculate Conception, it can seem that the work of Bulgakov and other Slavophile heirs to the Russian Religious Renaissance is increasingly marginalized within the Orthodox world. Before engaging Bulgakov’s Marian thought directly, we ought to briefly consider these more recent shifts in the Catholic and Orthodox theological landscape, which have largely occurred since Bulgakov’s death in 1944. The developments within Catholic theology are of greater relevance to our own project, but the shifts in the Orthodox theological landscape are also noteworthy insofar as they indicate the current place of our primary interlocutors within their own ecclesial tradition.

1.3.1 From Neo-Scholastic Systematics to the Biblical Vision of Vatican II

“The whole mechanical quality of the Catholic outlook is displayed in [an] anti-historicism, which cancels the power and sense of the Old Testament preparation of humanity for the incarnation of God, and essentially repudiates freedom for humanity.” We can use this scathing critique by Bulgakov of the neo-scholasticism proposed by leading Catholic theologians of his time as a starting point as we indicate the fundamental change in stance with which we intend to receive Bulgakov’s work in a Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic framework. Three elements are particularly relevant to our Post-Vatican II stance in this conversation with Bulgakov, elements that Bulgakov would not have found evident among the Catholic theologians whose understanding of the Immaculate Conception he contests. Contemporary Catholic theology does not wed itself to the neo-scholastic categories that Bulgakov critiqued as “mechanical.” It claims to have a greater concern for the unique contribution of Eastern Christianity rather than asserting a self-enclosed fullness in what Bulgakov calls “mechanical” Western theological understandings, and it shows a greater concern for a biblical anthropology as it restores pride of place to the notion of salvation history, indicating Israel as God’s uniquely chosen people,


68 Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 54.
through which God chooses all people by means of the Church. Though each one of these three developments merits its own extended examination, we will briefly touch on each one so that when we engage Bulgakov’s work, we will be better able to distinguish between attacks that touch the substance of the Catholic faith in light of Vatican II and those attacks which actually do not challenge anything essentially Catholic at all, and may even assist in further clarifying and enriching Catholic Mariology today.

The most important of these three shifts, and perhaps the one that enables the other two, is Roman Catholicism’s decisive move away from neo-scholastic theologies toward more biblical theological understandings. Bulgakov does not distinguish between scholasticism and Catholic theology; for Bulgakov, scholasticism is simply the method of Roman Catholic theology from the Middle Ages up through his own time. Such a distinction can most definitively be made after Vatican II, since, while scholastic theologies still exist within Catholicism, they cannot claim to be uniquely Catholic, but form a subset of a vibrant Catholic theological conversation. Thus, Bulgakov’s critique of the Catholic theology of his time can, more often than not, be read today more precisely as a critique of neo-scholastic understandings within Catholicism rather than a critique of Catholic understandings more broadly. Bulgakov’s greatest frustration was with the mechanical understandings of human anthropology and especially of nature and grace, which he found within the Catholic scholastics.

The idea of a “natural end” that is attainable within humanity’s “pure nature” stands among the most pernicious scholastic errors identified by Bulgakov, since he cannot accept any attempt—even in the abstract—to conceptualize the human person apart from God as having a “pure nature” with a “natural end” apart from God because it is constitutive of the human person to be in the image of God, which God declares to be “very good” (Gen 1:24-31). Whereas many scholastics normally affirm death to be part of humanity’s “pure nature,” the scriptures affirm rather that death enters into the world through sin (Gen 3, Rom 5). Insofar as Bulgakov believed the Immaculate Conception to be a dogmatization of this “pure nature” and other scholastic doctrines, he was bound to reject it. It would have been easy for Bulgakov to think that

69 Ibid., 16.
this supposed doctrine of pure nature was, in fact, the teaching of the Catholic Church because it was so widely held by Catholic scholastics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Resistance to this “doctrine” arose even within Catholicism, however, and it was led by a theologian who would see his position vindicated by Vatican II and the popes that followed it. This was the Jesuit Henri de Lubac, who vigorously opposed the “pure nature” scholasticism even in the face of stiff resistance and censure from many scholastics, Church authorities, and his own superiors. Most famously, the Dominican Thomist Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, an influential advisor to Pius XII, worked actively towards having Henri de Lubac censured by the Jesuit order. Nonetheless, de Lubac and his allies opposed to “pure nature” were rehabilitated when many of them were invited as periti to the Second Vatican Council and subsequently had their position vindicated by the Council’s affirmation that “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” and “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.” Likewise, Gaudium et spes vindicates Bulgakov’s theological claim that death is alien to human nature when it affirms that it is in the face of death that the riddle a human existence grows most acute. […] He [humankind] rightly follows the intuition of his heart when he abhors and repudiates the utter ruin and total disappearance of his own person. He rebels against death because he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter. […] In addition, that bodily death from which man would have been immune had he not sinned will be vanquished, according to the Christian faith, when man who was ruined by his own doing is restored to wholeness by an almighty and merciful Saviour.

72 Ibid., 18.
Brandon Peterson’s examination of the historical record concerning the redaction of Schema VIII at Vatican II makes clear that there was an undeniable and successful movement among the Council Fathers to exclude “pure nature” understandings from the council texts. Peterson notes that Joseph Ratzinger especially was concerned that such a theology would conceive of Christ through a “‘deep freeze,’ related to humanity only in an extrinsic, superadded way.”73 This Vatican II position has become so dominant that the Holy See’s International Theological Commission’s 2007 document on “the Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized” favors an approach that understands the natural to be ordered to the supernatural, observing that “pure nature” understandings of the human person are a scholastic development that occurs after Thomas Aquinas.74 Though even today “pure naturists” may claim that theirs is the correct Catholic position, they must now contend with the reality that the texts of the Second Vatican Council and the magisteria of Roman Pontiffs since the Council suggest otherwise.75 Thus, while the “pure nature” scholasticism that Bulgakov attacks still finds supporters among some Catholics, it cannot be considered the only possible Catholic theological approach, nor can


it even claim to be the more authoritative one since the Vatican II documents and their redaction history support other approaches.

Bulgakov believed that a properly Orthodox understanding of the relationship between God and humankind would “clear away like a cobweb the constructions of scholasticism concerning what is owed to the human and what is not owed.” Insofar as Bulgakov believes this foundational relationship between God and humankind to be indicated by the history of salvation found in the scriptures, he suggests as an antidote to scholasticism the very same vision that the Second Vatican Council made its own in *Lumen Gentium*. From the beginning *Lumen Gentium* affirms, “God’s plan was to raise human beings to a participation of the divine life,” a participation which “was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant.” Even more to Bulgakov’s point in *The Burning Bush* that Mary can only properly be understood in union with humankind through the strivings of Israel we find in *Lumen Gentium* the radicality of the solidarity by which human beings are saved:

> God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness. He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. With it He set up a covenant. Step by step He taught and prepared this people, making known in its history both Himself and the decree of His will and making it holy unto Himself. All these things, however, were done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ, and of that fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God Himself made flesh.

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76 Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 16.


The Council thus provides a Catholic basis for receiving some of Bulgakov’s most important affirmations concerning the relationship between Mary and Israel into the Catholic understanding of the Immaculate Conception.

These developments prepare the way for a key shift since the Second Vatican Council: the eagerness of Western Roman Catholics to receive theological developments from outside their own tradition. Sergii Bulgakov, together with Vladimir Solovyov and Pavel Florensky, all believed that Russian religious thought had something distinctive to offer Christianity, something which developed first in Russian Christianity and could not be found with the same depth elsewhere in Christendom, whether Orthodox or Catholic. Would Roman Catholicism be open to receiving this novum? Not only did Bulgakov find Catholic neo-scholastic theology ill-suited for the Russian understandings that he wished to share, but also the Catholics whom he encountered seemed to evince a triumphalist smugness regarding the self-sufficiency of their tradition and its doctrinal formulations. 79 The situation after the Second Vatican Council has changed, however, especially as regards Roman Catholic attitudes towards the Christian East. The Council Fathers committed themselves in principle to work for the reunion of all Christians in their decree on ecumenism, Unitatis redintegratio, which affirms a special concern for “the restoration of full communion hoped for between the Churches of the East and the Catholic Church,” emphasizing that “the very rich liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches should be known, venerated, preserved and cherished by all.” 80 Furthermore, in contrast to the monopoly that some scholastic theologians seemed to claim upon Catholic truth, the Council affirmed:

What has just been said about the lawful variety [in ecclesiastical law and custom] that can exist in the Church must also be taken to apply to the differences in theological expression of doctrine. In the study of revelation, East and West have followed different methods, and have developed differently their understanding and confession of God’s truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from


time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage. In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting. Where the authentic theological traditions of the Eastern Church are concerned, we must recognize the admirable way in which they have their roots in Holy Scripture, and how they are nurtured and given expression in the life of the liturgy. They derive their strength too from the living tradition of the apostles and from the works of the Fathers and spiritual writers of the Eastern Churches. Thus they promote the right ordering of Christian life and, indeed, pave the way to a full vision of Christian truth.  

Identifying in East and West different legitimate traditions in theological expression of doctrine, the Council Fathers continue to affirm that “from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other.” This suggests that people belonging to different—and yet legitimate—theological traditions can benefit from listening to one another and being open to areas where other traditions might have a fuller appreciation of particular aspects of a mystery of revelation. In the years following the Council, Pope John Paul II made this point even more emphatically by indicating the East and West as the “two lungs” of the Church, stating that the Church must breathe through both of her lungs to be healthy. The pontiff especially encouraged Eastern and Western Christians gathered to study Vladimir Solovyov’s thought, “to compare their reflections on the truth of the one Gospel of Christ and to see the reciprocal fruitfulness that can result,” so as to confirm “the Church's need to be able to breathe with both her lungs: the Eastern Tradition and the Western Tradition.” John Paul II notes that the “the Catholic Church has irrevocably committed herself at all levels” to the ardent desire of Solovyov that the churches of East and West would “enter into a perspective of

81 Ibid., 17.
82 Ibid.
encounter and communion, each one contributing the treasures of her own tradition and feeling mutually responsible for the unity of the faith and for ecclesial discipline.” It is in this spirit, so different from that condescension which Bulgakov encountered among Catholic scholastics of his time, that we wish to engage Bulgakov’s work, bringing it into further dialogue with the essential content of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception as it can be understood by Catholics today with a genuine concern for the “unity of the faith” that God offers through the Church.

1.3.2 Orthodoxy and the development of doctrine

Even though after Vatican II the Catholic theological conversation shifted in a manner that should make it more receptive to the thought of Bulgakov and other Slavophile thinkers, Orthodoxy seems surprisingly less receptive to their thought today. Tracing out the fortunes of this theological tradition within Orthodoxy goes beyond the scope of our present project: Solovyov and his theological heirs were controversial even while they were alive, and for good reason. Rather, we will indicate a recent trend regarding Orthodox attitudes to the development of doctrine which could be problematic not only for conversation between Catholic and Orthodox interlocutors regarding the Immaculate Conception but also for Orthodox reception of its own Slavophile tradition.

In his 1898 lecture and essay on “the Idea of Humanity in August Comte,” Solovyov notes the particularly Slavic development of the devotion to Sophia, the Wisdom of God, which is depicted in the Russian Orthodox Novgorod Cathedral. Curiously, Solovyov notes that the Slavic Christians only gradually came to understand what they were venerating in Sophia, who in some images resembled Christ and in others the Theotokos without ever being in complete identity with either one of these figures. Crucially, Solovyov notes that it is through the genius of the Russian people that Orthodoxy received this particular spiritual insight:

Our ancestors did not take this idea from the Greeks; all available evidence shows that for the Greeks in Byzantium, the Wisdom of God was understood either as a general abstract attribute of Divinity, or was accepted as a synonym for the eternal Word of God: Logos. The icon of the Novgorod Sophia has no Greek model; it is a matter of our own religious creative work. The meaning was unknown to the 14\textsuperscript{th}-century bishop, but we can guess at it now.\textsuperscript{85}

In this text Solovyov sees the Church’s understanding of Sophia as emerging organically from within the spiritual genius of a people. Bulgakov builds on this idea, stating emphatically that the present time has a “peculiar call” to deepen and develop the Church’s understanding of Sophia and that “it is holy tradition which lays such tasks upon us.” Bulgakov goes on to observe that while “Western theology constantly hovers on the brink of sophiological problems,” in this area it was, especially after the reformation “on the whole unfavorable to further dogmatic development, and particularly to a consideration of anthropology in its connection with cosmology.”\textsuperscript{86} While both Bulgakov and Solovyov are aware that they must convince some of their fellow Orthodox concerning the meaning and importance of Sophia, they take it for granted that the Church can and must deepen her understanding of various aspects of the faith which she hands on. This perspective is consistent with the attitude that is indicated by Vatican II and John Paul II regarding the need for those in different theological traditions to listen to one another in order to come to a deeper understanding of the mysteries of revelation. This conversation can lead to the development of doctrine within the Church, a process which John Henry Newman considered in a systematic manner in An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine.\textsuperscript{87}

Vatican II’s dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, Dei Verbum, affirms that the “tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit, for there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down” and that, “as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the

\textsuperscript{85} Solovyov, Divine Sophia, 225.

\textsuperscript{86} Bulgakov, Sophia, 5.

fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.”  

Without such an understanding of doctrinal development, it would never have been possible for a Catholic pope to proclaim the Immaculate Conception to be a dogma.  

If Roman Catholicism and the Slavophile tradition of Solovyov and Bulgakov have similar conceptions concerning the development of doctrine—even if this understanding is applied to different realities with different conclusions—it is not at all clear that the idea of the development of doctrine is quite as welcome in the broader Orthodox theological world today. Paul Valliere proposes that the most important difference between certain Russian theologians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—including Solovyov and Bulgakov—and many of the leading Orthodox theologians today is that the latter group rejects the idea of doctrinal development, which the earlier Russians embraced. In his 2005 essay “Is Development of Doctrine a Valid Category,” Andrew Louth critiques John Henry Newman’s essay on the development of doctrine and suggests that there is an established Orthodox consensus against the idea that doctrine can legitimately develop within the Church. Daniel Lattier lists Vladimir Lossky, Olivier Clément, and Thomas Hopko among those prominent Orthodox theologians who


90 Valliere, Modern Russian Theology, 373–403.

91 Louth argues that accepting the idea of the development of doctrine that Newman propounds leads to a sort of hubris that supposes that we can surpass the Fathers in our understanding of the faith, but that to claim such a thing would make the Fathers no longer our “fathers,” who are forever “closer to the Source of Life” than we are (Andrew Louth, “Is Development of Doctrine a Valid Category?,” in Orthodoxy & Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday, ed. Valerie R Hotchkiss and Patrick Henry (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 55.). A Catholic alternative to Louth’s understanding of the Fathers can be found in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s article “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” which likewise values the privileged place of the Fathers in our understanding of the Faith, but also sees that place in providential relationship to the changed situation of the scholastics, and the further changed situation of the present day (Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” Communio: International Catholic Review 24, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 347–396.). Though Bulgakov may not necessarily agree with all of von Balthasar’s points in this essay, he nonetheless agrees with Balthasar’s basic premise, affirming, “each historical period, not excluding our own, participates in the theological inspiration by which the authority of the Fathers’ writing is established” (Sergii Nikolaevich Bulgakov, “Dogma and Dogmatic Theology,” in Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time, ed. Michael Plekon (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 72.).
have contested the legitimacy of doctrinal development within the Church alongside the Orthodox hierarchs named by Louth.\textsuperscript{92} Lattier challenges the basis upon which many contemporary Orthodox thinkers reject doctrinal development, arguing that the understanding of doctrinal development that Newman proposes accords entirely with a genuinely Orthodox understanding of Tradition.\textsuperscript{93} For Lattier, Solovyov and his heirs clearly belong to a tradition within Orthodoxy that was entirely comfortable with the notion of doctrinal development.\textsuperscript{94} The preservation of an important part of their heritage within Orthodoxy is part of what is at stake in this issue, but also—as concerns our own study—the openness of Orthodoxy to the type of doctrinal development that Catholics affirm implicitly by having proclaimed the Immaculate Conception to be a dogma. In our study we will not resolve this internal Orthodox debate. On the basis of the Post-Vatican II context that we have indicated above, our intent is to listen attentively to the Orthodox Mariology proposed by Sergei Bulgakov, whose voice represents a genuine—if contested—school of thought among the Orthodox today so that Bulgakov’s Mariology might enrich a Catholic Mariology and perhaps ultimately help Catholic and Orthodox traditions converge in their affirmation of Mary’s sinlessness and its theological importance for our time.


\textsuperscript{93} Lattier, “The Orthodox Rejection of Doctrinal Development.”

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 389–395.
2 Engaging Bulgakov’s Marian Vision Today

What Bulgakov finds objectionable in the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception is not Mary’s sinlessness but two premises that he finds within it: first, “the Catholic doctrine concerning the operation of original sin in humankind in conjunction with the doctrine concerning its original state” and second, “the doctrine concerning the origin of human souls by means of a new creative act, creationism.” Bulgakov’s objections relating to the origins of the soul are lateral to his more central objections to what he considers to be the Catholic teaching regarding original sin and prelapsarian humanity. We will treat the lateral objections first, however, since Bulgakov’s position on the creation of souls is one which may already stand more within the realm of Catholic belief today than he thought it to be when he was writing *The Burning Bush*. Once we have clarified this point, we can grapple at greater length with Bulgakov’s central concerns regarding the original and fallen states of humankind.

2.1 The Creation of the Soul and Solidarity across Generations

One of Bulgakov’s principle objections to the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception concerns an affirmation regarding the origin of human souls that Bulgakov considers to be implicitly dogmatized through *Ineffabilis Deus*. The larger part of the Church Fathers and the Christian tradition favours the position that God creates each spiritual soul immediately, a position known as “creationism.” In general these Fathers affirmed the creationist position against “traducianism,” also known as “generationism,” a minority view in the tradition that claims that souls are generated by parents. Whereas the traducianists stress the fundamental unity of humankind by seeing the composite human being (body, soul, and possibly spirit) as produced by the union of that person’s parents, the creationists seek to defend the free action of God in willing and creating each human person by asserting that even if the person’s body is the product of the parents’ bodily union, the person’s soul is a unique creation of God. While Bulgakov does not want to deny the truth of the creationist position, he feels that there is a truth

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96 Ibid., 56.
in the traducianist position that Christians may be overhasty in rejecting: the truth that there is a fundamental solidarity in humankind across generations, a solidarity that is not just physical but spiritual as well.  

Bulgakov finds solidarity among generations fundamentally undermined by the creationism found in Matthias Joseph Scheeben’s four volume *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, whose theology may be considered representative of the leading Catholic scholastic theology of its day. Bulgakov points to Scheeben’s claim that, so far as original sin is concerned, the soul, which is pure from the perspective of its origin from God, as a result of its being poured into the body which has been shaped by the generative principle and stands under its direct influence, is stained and infected by this as by a filthy and spoiled vessel and as by an attached lead weight is weighed down and bound.

Scheeben’s logic seems straightforward enough: since God would not create an impure soul, it stands to reason that the soul acquires original sin when God “pours it into the body,” which Scheeben calls a “filthy and spoiled vessel.” Bulgakov critiques this understanding at several levels. First of all, can it be that the reality of original sin is transmitted only materially and not spiritually even though that reality is no less spiritual than material? Furthermore, is spiritual solidarity to be understood simply in physical-corporeal terms as Scheeben’s understanding

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97 Ibid., 56ff.

98 At the time that Bulgakov was writing *The Burning Bush*, Scheeben stood out as a recent (19th century) theologian whose work was considered by many to be an example of some of the best of Catholic dogmatic theology. Our task in this paper is not to evaluate Scheeben’s arguments per se; we will only present Bulgakov’s reading of them insofar as this allows us to come to a better understanding of what Bulgakov opposes (without evaluating to what extent this accurately represents Scheeben’s positions) so that we may more properly see that which Bulgakov supports. For this reason, references to Scheeben and the scholastics in this paper should always be understood to be a reference to Bulgakov’s reading of them. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine how faithful Bulgakov’s reading of Scheeben is to Scheeben’s actual intentions. Since our discussion here is with Bulgakov, his understanding of Scheeben is what we must consider in order to better understand what core commitments and understandings Bulgakov wishes to defend, and what he considers to be in opposition to those core commitments and understandings. The positions that Bulgakov critiques are found in Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbuch Der Katholischen Dogmatik*, vol. 2 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1877).

99 Ibid., 2:660. The translation provided here may be found in Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 164 n. 4.
suggest” Or is there some sort of spiritual solidarity across generations at a more deeply ontological level? Bulgakov notes that if one were to apply this reductionist creationism to the relationship between Mary (and therefore Israel) and Jesus, then “the doctrine of the divine incarnation […] proves to be the assumption merely of a body. One comes to the conclusion that even the Theotokos cannot be called by that name, for she gave only flesh to her Son.”

Bulgakov vehemently rejects the idea that God “pours in” the soul in a moment that is subsequent to the embryo’s physical generation. In fact, to even pose the question of the time of the soul’s creation by God is problematic for Bulgakov since doing so incorrectly applies the category of time to God, who is supra-temporal. Bulgakov looks for a way out of the impasse by suggesting that a recovery of the scriptural trichotomous structure of the human person as body, soul, and spirit (mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and alluded to in Hebrews 4:12) as opposed to the classic dichotomous structure of just body and soul (which the Christian tradition receives from Greek philosophy). One can preserve the truth of creationism (that the Divinity participates in the creation of each person such that in that person’s composition “in its very nature, there is a supraworldly principle which cannot arise by earthly forces, even if by the power of heredity”) while also affirming the ontological spiritual solidarity across generations that traducianism proposes to maintain. Bulgakov does this by affirming within a tripartite anthropology that one receives both a corporeal and spiritual reality from one’s parents (the human body and soul) and that one receives an even more profound spiritual reality directly from

100 Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 57.

101 This idea arises in part from Aristotelian science, where “the soul is given by God when the body is formed and made fit to receive it.” Ibid., 167 n. 20.

102 Ibid., 57f.

103 Ibid., 60.

104 Ibid., 60ff. A tripartite anthropology should not be seen as peculiarly Orthodox, since as Bulgakov himself notes, Orthodox Christians frequently think in terms of a bipartite anthropology, which has largely eclipsed the more scriptural tripartite anthropology in Christian thought. Bulgakov intends to promote the recovery of a more robust tripartite anthropology within Orthodoxy. In the 20th century, Catholic scholars have also sought to recover this tripartite anthropology, notably Henri de Lubac in the second part of his Theology in History. See Henri de Lubac, Theology in History (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996).
God (the human spirit). Within this framework Bulgakov rejects the notion that God “pours in” a spiritual reality from outside but asserts rather that from the beginning in each human being “the [human] form is realized, God’s pre-eternal behest and intention for every human being is fulfilled.”

Bulgakov’s scriptural tripartite anthropology appears to provide a more theologically satisfying basis for the physical and spiritual solidarity found in salvation history while preserving what seems to be essential in the Church’s insistence that each human being is in some sense directly created by God. It may be possible to assert what Bulgakov wishes to affirm concerning the spiritual heredity across generations from within a bipartite anthropology and not just the tripartite one that Bulgakov proposes. Regardless of which anthropology one adopts, Bulgakov’s main concern is the ability to affirm a solidarity across generations in salvation history at both a corporeal and a spiritual level. This type of proposal seems to be one that Catholic theology ought to be more receptive to in light of the indications of Vatican II, which we have already mentioned. In fact, through the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1987 instruction Donum vitae, the Holy See itself seems to have already distanced itself from the idea that the soul is “poured into” the embryo subsequently from the generation of that body by the embryo’s parents, an idea that one finds in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Thomas had based his understanding of the ensoulment of the human being on the Aristotelian science that was available to him, a science which presumed that the material substrate (body) of an early embryo was not sufficiently developed in its early stages to receive a human soul. By affirming the soul’s direct creation by God, the Church did not mean to endorse any particular scientific understanding of the human person but rather sought to affirm God’s immediate creation of the spiritual reality of each person in the best scientific terms available at the time. Donum vitae notes that our scientific understanding today no longer allows Christians to entertain the notion—long held by scholastics—that human personhood begins subsequent to conception

105 Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 60.

106 See, for example, Summa Theologiae, part 1, question 118 in Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae.

when God creates the human soul and “pours” that soul into the body. Rather, *Donum vitae* bases its enunciation of Catholic teaching on “recent findings of human biological science which recognize that in the zygote resulting from fertilization the biological identity of a new human individual is already constituted.” This confirms that “from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a new life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth.” Though “no experimental datum can be in itself sufficient to bring us to the recognition of a spiritual soul,” *Donum vitae* not only opens the door for a Catholic understanding in which God’s creation of a human person’s spiritual reality is simultaneous with that person’s corporeal generation by the person’s parents, but it seems to even suggest that this simultaneity may be the best solution to the problem.\(^{108}\) This is, of course, what Bulgakov had suggested in observing that the very question of the “moment” in which God “pours in” the soul improperly attributes time to a supra-temporal God.

We see, then, that Bulgakov’s understanding of the contemporaneous generation and creation of the human being accords better with the dominant Catholic understanding of the question as it is authoritatively expressed *today* than it did with a dominant Catholic understanding *of his time.* Bulgakov had rejected the Immaculate Conception because he believed that it dogmatized the neo-scholastic understanding of creationism with regards to the soul, which one finds in Scheeben’s work. But is this so? Bulgakov wryly notes that if the soul were created by God in a moment that is subsequent to the human generation of the body—as many scholastics assert—then Mary’s body conceived in natural conditions remained not purified and not blessed with grace for a certain time, even if in an embryonic state.\(^{109}\) For Bulgakov this idea is absurd, manifesting the absurdity of this scholastic affirmation of the Immaculate Conception. But has Bulgakov on this point actually rejected the truth of the Immaculate Conception properly understood? What Bulgakov has actually done is indicated that the scholastic vision is not that of an Immaculate Conception at all but of an Immaculate Ensouling! Yet the Catholic dogma does


not proclaim an immaculate ensouling of Mary but rather her immaculate conception. Here, Bulgakov does contemporary Catholics a service by indicating that certain scholastic understandings fail to correctly portray the truth of the Immaculate Conception.

Since Bulgakov is concerned that a uniquely creationist position regarding the origin of the human soul fails to recognize the genuine spiritual solidarity that exists across generations, he considers the Immaculate Conception to be an arbitrary *deus ex machina* privilege that removes Mary from a genuine spiritual solidarity with those who precede her in Israel. Bulgakov affirms instead that Mary’s sinlessness was acquired through the sophianic striving of humankind towards God, expressed most especially through the striving of Israel and even a personal striving (i.e. merit) by Mary against a power of original sin which she had to resist heroically.  

Whereas it seemed to Bulgakov that, according to the logic employed by scholastics in explaining the Immaculate Conception, God could have arbitrarily chosen to make Christ’s mother immaculate in any time and from any people “to such a degree that the whole human side of the preparation for God’s incarnation becomes insubstantial and unimportant,” Bulgakov insists instead that what God works through Mary could only have come “in the fullness of time” which cements Mary and the incarnation of her Son to a specific time and place in God’s historical relationship with humankind. Whatever the scholastics of Bulgakov’s era may have affirmed, in the wake of Vatican II a Catholic must affirm the radical unity of human nature and its fundamental solidarity through salvation history. *Lumen Gentium* affirms this unity when it declares, “[i]n the beginning God made human nature one and decreed that all His children, scattered as they were, would finally be gathered together as one.” We have seen that *Lumen Gentium* asserts the centrality of the very spiritual solidarity through salvation history that Bulgakov wishes to defend. Even if the scholastics did not tend to present the Immaculate Conception in terms of this spiritual solidarity of humankind across salvation history, the Second

110 Ibid., 62f.
111 Ibid., 54.
113 Ibid., 9.
Vatican Council suggests that Roman Catholics ought to seek to do so today. In fact, the spiritual solidarity across generations that Bulgakov wished to defend against the scholastics is what Hans Urs von Balthasar highlights in his presentation of the Immaculate Conception on the basis of the relationship between the Mother of God and her Son:

The Child who will be given the name Jesus is to grow in the womb of this Mother and be brought up by her after he is born. Even physiologically, the relationship between mother and child is much more intimate than that between father and child; it is more than physiological: it is spiritual, that is, of the totality of human nature. A mother does not only give her flesh and blood to the child but also something of her soul and spirit.\[114\]

Von Balthasar is able to affirm on the Catholic side the same spiritual solidarity across generations that Bulgakov affirms as an Orthodox Christian. For von Balthasar, the spiritual union between mother and child both during pregnancy and through childhood necessitates an immaculate mother for the child who, as Godman, is to entrust himself to her without reserve.\[115\] Bulgakov’s insistence on the spiritual solidarity of human beings across generations appears in our day to no longer be an objection to the Immaculate Conception but the expression of a truth that—if understood as von Balthasar proposes—could make the Immaculate Conception all the more convincing.

2.2 Mary’s Sinlessness and Human Nature

2.2.1 A Critique of Scholastic Anthropology

Bulgakov’s main objection to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception arises from his understanding of original sin and the prelapsarian state of humanity, which he believes to be fundamentally different from the presuppositions implicit in the dogma that he rejects. However,


as dogmatic formulation of *Ineffabilis Deus* makes few explicit claims with regards to original sin, what Bulgakov seems to be objecting to once again is the neoscholastic understanding of the dogma that he encountered. Bulgakov observes that for the Catholic scholastics, with the fall, “human nature in itself did not change, only the supernatural aid, graciously regulating human nature, was removed, as Bellarmine says concerning the integrity of the first human.”

For the scholastics, human nature in its pure state—*status naturae purae*, the state of “pure nature”—does not change with the fall; the only thing that changes is that humanity loses grace, the extraordinary gift (*donum superadditum*) of sharing in God’s life, which in no wise belongs to humanity’s nature. Again, Bulgakov turns to Scheeben for a representative view of Catholic theology on this point. Like many in the scholastic tradition, Scheeben’s consideration of the purely natural state of the human being seems to proceed from an Aristotelian attentiveness to the conditions that one finds in the world. Bulgakov observes:

A modern theologian [Scheeben] plainly says that the character of animal life with all its imperfections is inherent in the human being in keeping with the weakness of the body, *infirmitas carnis*—not owing to the fall but according to his very creation. In other words, the human being is an animal and like all animals is subject not only to the possibility but even to the necessity of the diminution and cessation of life, unless the food, created for him by God, preserved him from this forever; which is why the presence of the tree of life in the midst of paradise was required.

Bulgakov indicates texts from the second volume of Scheeben’s *Dogmatics*, which argue that sickness, death, and birth pangs are part of the human being’s natural state, attributes of the human body as *corpus animale*, which were only restrained by God so long as the human being refrains from sinning. Scheeben says that none of these expressions of mortality come from God because they would not have been part of human existence if the human being had not sinned.

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117 Ibid., 15.

118 Ibid., 51.
Once the human being sins, God allows sickness and death to rise up from the constitution of his human nature, where God had previously held them back. But if in Scheeben’s system these expressions of mortality rise up from the very constitution of a God-created nature, Bulgakov questions whether it can really be true that they are not of God? Bulgakov finds Scheeben’s references to the bodily origin of human weakness, whether as the \textit{infirmitas carnis} or the \textit{concupiscientia carnis} of the corpus animale, deeply troublesome. It seems as if “the human inclination to sin and the weakness of his nature flow out of his being joined with a body that obscures the divine image in the human being.” This neo-scholastic vision asserts that without the superadded gift of God’s grace, which is \textit{not} part of the human person’s pure nature, the human person is not that different from the animals since “neither immortality nor freedom from lust (\textit{concupiscientia carnis}) is proper to ‘the pure nature’ of the human: the natural human being was created by God free from neither death nor lust.”

Bulgakov rejects the premises of this account, finding no foundation in the scriptures or in the patristic tradition for the “pure nature” of the scholastics. What is at stake for Bulgakov is the constitutive metaphysical reality of the human person, which God declares to be “very good,” because that reality is created—and not just redeemed—as God’s very image (Gen 1:24-31). Likewise, the scriptures attest that death is not proper to the nature of the human person but that it was through sin that death entered into the world (Gen 3, Rom 5). Furthermore, for Bulgakov, it is inconceivable that the lustful condition of animals and fallen human beings,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[119] Ibid., 164 n.7; cf. Scheeben, \textit{Handbuch Der Katholischen Dogmatik}, 2:218–226.
\item[120] Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, 51.
\item[121] Ibid., 15.
\item[122] Ibid., 16ff, 50ff.
\item[123] Ibid., 16. \textit{Gaudium et spes} 18 points to this when it affirms that “[i]t is in the face of death that the riddle a human existence grows most acute. [...] He rightly follows the intuition of his heart when he abhors and repudiates the utter ruin and total disappearance of his own person. He rebels against death because he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter. [...] In addition, that bodily death from which man would have been immune had he not sinned will be vanquished, according to the Christian faith, when man who was ruined by his own doing is restored to wholeness by an almighty and merciful Saviour.” Second Vatican Council, “\textit{Gaudium et Spes}.”
\end{footnotes}
**concupiscentia**, can have a part in human nature in any ultimate sense. While Scheeben and other scholastics argue that none of these deficiencies are actually present in man until the fall since it is not until the fall that humanity loses the superadded gift of grace which does not belong to its nature, Bulgakov forcefully responds that, on the contrary, these characteristics of scholasticism’s humanity in the state of pure nature

in fact remove the power of the divine image in the human, since it reduces him, even in the original outline, to mortal life in lust. Even if this condition is concealed and stripped of power in the primordial human being by the *donum superadditum*, still in relation to human nature it happens super, forcibly, counter-naturally, and thus even super naturam, like some *Deus ex machina*. 124

The scholastic *deus ex machina* that Bulgakov indicates makes it hard to understand how the fall could even be possible if the God of the scholastics were a Christian one. The scholastics taught that through the divine assistance (*adjutorium divinum*) of the *donum superadditum*, Adam was able to bridle his lust and maintain a natural equilibrium that corresponds to original righteousness (*iustitia originalis*). But if Adam were powerless before his natural *concupiscentia* except for the support of God’s *donum superadditum*, a support which “coerces, changes human nature and gives it powers that do not belong to it, then it becomes incomprehensible how the human being could sin, how it could repudiate this *coercion* of grace. Or has grace itself proved to be powerless?” 125

It would seem that the fall would then be more God’s fault (through a withdrawing or failure of the *donum superadditum*) than that of the human person (whom God seems to have created as concupiscent in the state of “pure nature”) “since it was not his own freedom that preserved the human from sin but a supernatural divine power.” 126 It is precisely in the face of this aporia that Bulgakov asserts that Catholic scholastics are “forced in essence to understand original sin as *carentia or nuditas justitiae debita*, that is, as a mechanical and

125 Ibid., 52.
126 Ibid., 17.
arbitrary removal of the *donum superadditum.*"\(^{127}\) The arbitrary nature of this removal of the graced state for Adam’s decedents—a removal which only for Adam could barely be conceived of as punishment—corresponds to what Bulgakov sees as an equally arbitrary restoration of this state for Mary in the Immaculate Conception."\(^{128}\)

In the scholasticism that Bulgakov opposes, the fall results in no intrinsic change in human nature. All that is lost in the fall is the *donum superadditum* (grace) which God offers as a reality extrinsic to human nature. It is, in fact, only after the fall that one discovers humanity’s created being in a state of “pure nature.” In other words, humanity’s created reality even before the fall is the same as that which we see after the fall, only that we see it better after the fall when it is, as it were, “purified” of the *donum superadditum* that never intrinsically belonged to it in the first place but was always “superadded.” The scholastics, wishing to insist upon the proper integrity of humanity in the state of pure nature, even imagine a state of intrinsic righteousness that a virtuous human being could live without extrinsic “superadded” grace, which remains an arbitrary gift of God to which the human person has no right. Righteousness, which is then possible in a state of pure nature, is therefore not the same as blessedness, which can only come about through grace, the *donum superadditum.* Only righteousness, not blessedness, is proper to the nature of the human person.\(^{129}\)

For Bulgakov, it is inconceivable that God would wittingly create such a defective nature and treat it so arbitrarily. Even more unacceptable is the “incarnation of God in a lower creature, mortal and concupiscent, in some sort of half-animal, not only by reason of its given sinful condition but also by reason of its nature.”\(^{130}\) An incarnation in a creature whose nature is fundamentally defective would be an act of violence by the divine upon that nature.\(^{131}\) The

\(^{127}\) Ibid., 52f.

\(^{128}\) Ibid.

\(^{129}\) Ibid., 37.

\(^{130}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 51.
divine could only become incarnate in a creature whose created nature reflects the perfection of the divine without doing violence either to the divine or to the created nature. Such a creature does not seem to exist in the Catholic scholasticism that Bulgakov engages, but Bulgakov finds this creature in the Bible, beginning with Adam.\textsuperscript{132}

\textbf{2.2.2 \hspace{1em} An Anthropology after God’s Likeness}

While the scholastics consider human weakness—including death and concupiscence—to be part of the human condition in the state of pure nature, Bulgakov rejects this idea as being unworthy of a being to whom God gives dominion over all of creation and is but “little less that the angels” (Heb 2:7; Ps 8:5) and “the joy of Divine Wisdom.”\textsuperscript{133} Whereas for the scholastics, the weakness of the human person is proper to that person’s human body as the “weakness of the flesh,” Bulgakov counters that this demonstrates “a characteristic unawareness of the body as the fullness of the Divine image in the human being.”\textsuperscript{134} Bulgakov notes that “[h]uman nature according to this [scholastic] opinion is defective owing to its being joined with a body; the primordial, immanent harmony and natural grace that is based in the sophianicity of the human is not inherent to it.”\textsuperscript{135} For Bulgakov, human nature and the human race cannot be properly conceived without Sophia, and the sophianic vision that Bulgakov proposes cannot be properly understood on the basis of the scholastic categories that we have seen.

Surprisingly, original sin plays a more fundamental role in Bulgakov’s account of human nature and the fall than it does in that of the Catholic scholastics whom he opposes.\textsuperscript{136} Bulgakov notes

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{132} This same biblical vision is proposed by the Second Vatican Council. Cf. \textit{Gaudium et Spes} 22 and \textit{Lumen Gentium }2.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, 51.
\item \textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{135} Ibid. Let us recall that for the purposes of this paper we understand “sophia” to refer to a particular understanding of a divinely willed correspondence between uncreated and created, which is most perfectly manifest in the relationship between God and humankind. See p. 21.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Eastern Christians do not have a single dominant understanding concerning Adam’s sin and its effects; even in the patristic era, one finds a diversity of opinions. Nonetheless, given the great influence of Augustine’s thought concerning this sin in the West, Eastern Christians have often sought to contradistinguish their own understanding of Adam’s sin and its effects to Augustine’s, especially in the last century. Bulgakov, as usual, has a much more
\end{itemize}
that for the scholastics, the fall results in the loss of nothing essential to human nature but only yields a punishment which removed the “something extra” that human beings enjoyed through grace.\textsuperscript{137} For Bulgakov, however, the loss of grace in the fall was not merely the loss of an extrinsic fullness but “a consequence of the human's deviation from its [intrinsic] norm, that is, from Sophianicity with its chastity.”\textsuperscript{138} Whereas the scholastics attribute \textit{concupiscentia carnis} to the created nature of humanity, Bulgakov ascribes purity and sophianic chastity to that same nature. The opposition between the two visions could not be more striking. It was in this context of virginity and sophianic purity that Pavel Florensky in the tenth letter of his \textit{Pillar and Ground of Truth} made reference to the truth of the Immaculate Conception.\textsuperscript{139}

Whereas the scholastics can seem to begin their reflections on the basis of an Aristotelian observation of the world around them, Bulgakov plunges himself into the heart of Christian revelation and finds God’s Wisdom to be at the source of all created reality, which manifests its transcendent source.\textsuperscript{140} The fullness that God promises humankind is not extrinsic to human nature but proper to it.\textsuperscript{141} Having been created in the image of God, humankind has the task of nuanced approach. While still critical of certain excesses in “blessed Augustine’s” understanding of original sin, Bulgakov does not hesitate to declare that “[t]he dogma of original sin is the axis of Christian soteriology” (Bulgakov, \textit{The Bride of the Lamb}, 164.). Building on the works of the Church Fathers and engaging scripture directly alongside the thought of later thinkers, Bulgakov enunciates an understanding of original sin that both Eastern and Western Christians might be able to comfortably situate within their own theological traditions. For our purposes, it is significant that Bulgakov not only insists on the reality of original sin, but even, in the passage we cite above, calls it a \textit{dogma}! Bulgakov and those in his theological tradition not only affirm the reality of original sin and its effects, but indeed do so with a vigorousness and depth that one rarely finds even in Western Christianity. Aspects of Bulgakov’s understanding of original sin will emerge in our considerations insofar as they are relevant to Bulgakov’s understanding of Mary’s sinlessness and its place in salvation history. For a more thorough exposition of Bulgakov’s understanding of original sin, see Ibid., 164–192.

\textsuperscript{137} Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, 37.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{139} Florensky, \textit{The Pillar and Ground of the Truth}, 259, 551, n. 640.

\textsuperscript{140} Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, 16. Note that the “Catholic theology” that Bulgakov refers to is part of the same scholastic “pure nature” system that we discussed above, which can no longer be presumed to be a unique or even dominant understanding within Catholicism after Vatican II.

\textsuperscript{141} “[T]he ontological basis of the \textit{fullness} of human nature consists in his sophianicity. His creatureliness is not at all revealed in the defectiveness of his creaturely nature \textit{according to}
freely acting in such a way that he also realizes in himself God’s likeness. “Now, this image was given not only as its sophianic basis, but also as a task toward the realization of the likeness: to say it in another way, the appropriation of the Divine image was itself entrusted to the freedom of humankind.”  

Up until the fall, the blessedness of humankind was not something “superadded” but was proper to it as the fullness that God intends for humanity, which humanity lives out intrinsically in the fulfillment of its task. In other words, human nature is created to be divinized—that is, to be “therefore a God-receiving, natural vessel of grace.” It is this task—a task for which humanity was created, and which is therefore proper to it—and the genuinely given capacity to carry it out which constitute the sophianicity of humanity, which is humanity’s true possession.  

Insofar as the task by which humanity fulfills its nature is that of striving after an ever-greater likeness of the divine image, Bulgakov can affirm that not only is concupiscentia carnis not part of human nature but that sin itself goes against human nature insofar as sin only distances human beings from the true fulfillment of their genuine nature.  

Though this sophianic anthropology seems poles apart from the anthropology that Bulgakov finds in scholastics, it does not appear to contain anything that would be fundamentally opposed to the faith affirmed by Vatican II. Indeed, Lumen Gentium seems to summarize one of the key intuitions of Bulgakov’s sophianicity: “[t]he eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own essence, as Catholic theology teaches, ascribing to him both mortality and concupiscence precisely by virtue of this creatureliness, but only in the image of possession of this his fullness.” 


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142 Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 38. See Gaudium et Spes 22 and Lumen Gentium 7. Gaudium et Spes could be properly read in the spirit of what Bulgakov intends to affirm through this statement.

143 By virtue of its sophianicity, this task is always oriented outside of humanity to God. Ibid.

144 Ibid.
wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation of
the divine life.” Human beings were created for nothing less than sharing in the divine life of
God.

2.2.3 Mary: One of a Kind or One with Humankind?

Though Bulgakov’s anthropological vision may be at odds with that of many scholastics on key
points, there is no reason why it should not find a home in Catholicism, for it actually seems
closer to the vision of the Second Vatican Council than the theology that Bulgakov critiques.
Nonetheless, many Catholics continue to conceive of the Immaculate Conception in a way that
isolates Mary from the reality of the rest of humanity since they continue to reflect on this dogma
on the basis of scholastic understandings wherein the sinlessness arbitrarily denied to humanity
is arbitrarily restored in her. This is, for Bulgakov, the sense of the “privilege” that he considers
to be dogmatized in the Immaculate Conception, a “privilege” which, according to Bulgakov,
denies any fundamental solidarity between Mary and the rest of creation. If, for Bulgakov, this
solidarity within humankind is expressed in original sin, then the “prevenient grace” which
supposedly exempts Mary from the dominion of original sin likewise removes her from the
solidarity in creation that original sin manifests. Bulgakov’s objection is a serious one; in order
to evaluate it, we need to clarify further what Bulgakov intends to refer to when he speaks of
original sin.

For Bulgakov, the original sin is that of Adam, which is inherited by all his descendants.
Bulgakov observes that

the primordial human was neither mortal nor concupiscent according to his
nature, for in his very nature was included a life of grace in God and with God,
for he was created in the world for God. But, as a creaturely being, he had in
himself the creaturely weakness and instability of nature; in it lay the possibility
of life not only in God and for God but also in the world and for the world. And


146 Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 62.
in original sin the human extinguished the life of grace within and tore asunder his direct graced communion, “conversation” with God; he committed homicide against himself, ceased to be a human, a friend of God, and instead became a natural being, and plunged into cosmism.\footnote{Ibid., 18.}

The catastrophe of original sin within Bulgakov’s theological anthropology is that it “tears asunder” the “graced communion” with God which is the life proper to the nature of the human person. After the fall humanity struggles to make do in an unnatural state, a “cosmism” in which humanity no longer lives for the end for which humanity was created—life in communion with God—but rather for other ends which cannot fulfill humanity’s true nature. Humanity, which stands at the ontological centre of the created world as the full expression of God’s image within it, instead loses dominion over the world, which groans without a master.\footnote{Ibid. Cf. Romans 8:19-22.} “If the fallen human being, according to the word of the apostle, has ‘another law which is in our members, a sinful law’ (Rom 7:11, 20), then this disorder extends into the whole world.”\footnote{Ibid., 19.} Though at odds with the scholastic account he presents, thus far Bulgakov’s understanding of original sin seems fairly traditional. What is a bit more out of the ordinary is Bulgakov’s linking of the individuality of discrete human persons with original sin. Bulgakov notes that “before the fall into sin there was no individuality, separating [Adam] from others, and Adam really was the representative of the entire human multi-hypostatic race. In him and his person every human hypostasis lived and acted harmoniously.”\footnote{Ibid., 25.} Though Bulgakov makes no reference to it, this idea is not unlike one found in Israel prior to the Jews acquiring a more developed understanding of the afterlife. For these early Jews, God’s relationship with a person continued through that person’s seed. That Adam contains in himself the whole human race is not an unusual idea, but the idea that there was no human individuality prior to the fall seems rather novel. Since Bulgakov distinguishes between hypostases and individuals, he might admit, as a positive reality, a potential
multiplication of hypostases within the body of humanity that might have been possible without
the fall. However, it seems that the multiplication of individuals within humanity is not, for
Bulgakov, a generally positive reality. In fact, in one of his most enigmatic passages, Bulgakov
asserts that the principle of individuation is itself original sin:

In this [fallen] case the soul is self-determining, as humankind in general, as
ancestral humanity, and in this self-determination all are one, all are equal. But
at the same time this self-determination is fully individual, for along with sin and
in a certain sense even thanks to sin, individuality is born: *principium
individuationis* is original sin. By becoming cohesive in sin, which essentially is
the chaotic and corrupted state of integral existence, its decentralized condition
and the resultant multi-centricity and eccentricity that corresponds to it,
humanity itself loses the wholeness of its consciousness, and is scattered into
individuals.\(^\text{151}\)

Sin somehow isolates the human person from his proper life in God, and in the process isolates
humanity from the “wholeness of [human] consciousness” scattering humanity into isolated
individualities. Nonetheless, there is a cohesive aspect that binds these individualities: a
“cohesive[ness] in sin.”

For Bulgakov, original sin joins all people in both reprobation and salvation.\(^\text{152}\) This spiritual
heredity is expressed through the generations of individual families and family lines, among
which the sons of Israel hold a unique place. The movement after original sin is not necessarily a
descending one. Unlike the scholastic conception where the human person loses the *donum
superadditum* at the fall, in Bulgakov’s anthropology the fall
did not abolish in him the image of God as the interior bases and norms of his

dimension.

\(^\text{151}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^\text{152}\) Ibid., 62f.
by sin, or his self-creativity, although this was already in a weakened state. Humankind changed after sin in its whole condition, but it did not lose anything essential, nothing was removed from it as an externally imposed punishment, except what it could no longer receive: the fullness of blessedness and communion with God, as well as immortality, which is incompatible with a sinful life, as something needless and improper for it.”

Thus, individual human persons as well as whole families and groups can freely choose, on the basis of the sophianic nature and task which they retain, to move closer to God or to move away from God, to make more manifest the likeness which is given for them to strive after, or to further obscure it.

For Bulgakov, the Mother of God and her particular holiness cannot be separated from the sophianic striving of all humankind to which she belongs and within which she holds a privileged place. Bulgakov actually vehemently defends the personal sinlessness of the Theotokos: in fact, he dedicates the first chapter of *The Burning Bush* to this defense. Only a creature who was a perfect image of the Divine Wisdom which created her could be a worthy mother through whom the Godman could receive his humanity. And since sin is not part of human nature but in fact goes against it, this creature could have no sin. Furthermore, in the “fiat” which Mary was to give God for all humanity at the Annunciation, “the inadmissibility of personal sin in the Virgin Mary […] becomes axiomatically trustworthy provided we understand what kind of answer was demanded here of Mary. This was not the particular agreement of her will to a particular action, relating only to a given moment of life; no, this was the self-determination of her entire being.” In his own defense of Mary’s personal sinlessness, Bulgakov admits that in some sense

the Most Pure by a special grace of God was preserved from every sin, whether committed in deed or by intention. By the grace of God which filled in her own

153 Ibid., 38f.
154 Ibid., 41.
personal effort, no sinful assault whatsoever, no sinful desire, ever touched her most immaculate soul. She was accessible to temptations only as trials [...] but not as transgressions entering inside and poisoning her heart with their venom and staining it.\textsuperscript{155}

Bulgakov admits that Mary’s personal sinlessness would not be possible without an extraordinary grace which providentially supported her and her effort. This is in essence what the Immaculate Conception affirms. Nonetheless, let us not forget that, for Bulgakov, original sin is the glue that binds all people, whether in reprobation or salvation.\textsuperscript{156} Bulgakov does not wish to remove Mary from this fundamental solidarity by removing her from the power of original sin; he merely affirms that this power was never sufficient to lead her to actual, personal sin. A Catholic response to Bulgakov’s objections will need to explain how Mary effectively remains in the most profound union with the rest of humankind even if she is removed from the power of original sin.

2.2.4 Purification at the Annunciation?

Whereas Bulgakov affirms Mary’s personal sinlessness, even while rejecting the idea that Mary is immaculately conceived, he does identify a moment in which she is finally released from any trace of original sin: the annunciation made to Mary by the angel Gabriel. Bulgakov’s understanding of Mary’s purification is temporally almost identical to that proposed by Thomas Aquinas.\textsuperscript{157} Even before the Annunciation Mary “is in such a degree holy and pre-cleansed through the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, beginning with her conception and continuing throughout her life, that in her the life of sex is completely paralysed, and receives no kind of development and expression.”\textsuperscript{158} Aquinas likewise recognizes Mary’s holiness in the womb, though he understands this holiness to begin more properly at ensoulment rather than conception.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 62f.
\textsuperscript{157} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, pt. III, q. 27.
\textsuperscript{158} Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, 95–96.
since, for Thomas, “the rational creature alone can be the subject of sin.”¹⁵⁹ Like Bulgakov, Aquinas affirms that Mary never commits an actual sin but states that from the womb Mary retains the “fomes peccati” (i.e. the “tinder of sin”), “a certain inordinate, but habitual, concupiscence of the sensitive appetite.” Thomas affirms, however, that this fomes peccati is “fettered” such that Mary never falls into actual sin. Aquinas states that Mary remains under the shadow of the fomes peccati until the Annunciation when a “second purification effected in her by the Holy Ghost was by means of the conception of Christ which was the operation of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁶⁰ Bulgakov likewise affirms that Mary is “removed from under the dominion of original sin, not in her conception, but precisely in the Annunciation.”¹⁶¹

Although, for Aquinas, it is the conception of Christ which purifies his mother—for it is through the flesh of the newly incarnate Christ within her that she is fully saved in the flesh—Bulgakov insists that “it is impious to allow that the contact of sin with the generation of the Lord, even in its most remote consequences, was possible in any degree at all. For its sake the sinless state of humankind in paradise before the fall must be completely restored.” Thus, Bulgakov suggests that even before Christ can become incarnate within her Mary must be fully purified from original sin by the Holy Spirit “not mechanically or automatically, apart from her, before her birth, but with the participation of her freedom, personal heroic effort, and faith, her complete self-surrender to the Divine will” which she expresses finally, fully, and forevermore through her “yes” to the angel at the Annunciation.¹⁶²

Bulgakov’s timeline for Mary’s progressive purification does not initially seem very helpful for a Catholic who wishes to receive Bulgakov’s Mariology into a contemporary understanding of the Immaculate Conception. However, perhaps the comparison with Aquinas’ view, which once was

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, pt. III, q. 27, art. 2.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pt. III, q. 27, art. 3.
¹⁶² Ibid. Where Bulgakov speaks of Mary’s “purification,” Thomas speaks of Mary’s “sanctification,” which Thomas believes to be completed through the action of her Son’s bodily incarnation in her womb at the Annunciation. While Bulgakov affirms Mary to be entirely purified at the Annunciation, he sees the “crowning sanctification of her human nature” at the moment of Pentecost. See Ibid., 101.
the dominant western understanding of Mary’s sanctification, is instructive. Just as the Roman magisterium evolved away from Aquinas’ understanding of Mary’s sanctification while continuing to esteem key elements of Aquinas’ vision, so also it may be possible for people who wish to remain within Bulgakov’s more essential Mariological vision to distance themselves from the precise chronology that Bulgakov proposes for her purification. Already Bulgakov is closer to the contemporary understanding of the Immaculate Conception than Aquinas because Bulgakov affirms that Mary’s purification through the Holy Spirit was complete prior to Christ’s incarnation in her womb. Through the scriptural chronology of Mary’s purification that he sets forth, Bulgakov wishes to safeguard most especially the free participation of humankind in its own preparation for the Incarnation. Can a Catholic safeguard the free participation that Bulgakov wishes to affirm through a Catholic understanding of the Immaculate Conception’s place in salvation history?

2.2.5 Death, therefore Sin?

The reality of Mary’s death is, for Bulgakov, another argument against the Immaculate Conception. Bulgakov affirms that Christ’s humanity was capable of accepting death but not constrained to death since Christ in no wise inherits original sin. Christ thus freely accepts death out of love for humankind, which is constrained to accept death as the wages of its own sin. For Bulgakov, a proof that Mary stands under the dominion of original sin is that, unlike her son, Mary must undergo death, which her Son is not constrained to do. 163

Bulgakov’s “proof” seems convincing enough at first glance, but its logic is essentially tautological because one can affirm the opposite position with precisely the same logic. This, in fact, is exactly what Hans Urs von Balthasar does when he affirms on the basis of Mary’s Immaculate Conception that Mary freely chooses to die, for she wants nothing other than to follow her Son, who freely submits himself to the law of death:

All the old documents speak of her “death”, and rightly so, but what kind of death was it? Jesus died suffocated under the weight of the world’s sin, and his

Mother shared in this event; it was not to be repeated. All the same, like her Son, she is subject to the law of mortality; she is no goddess (Theodosius, John Damascene, Germanus). But it is not as a sinner that she is subject to it, and to that extent Damascene can speak in the same breath of the deaths of both of them.”^164

Not only does von Balthasar note that John Damascene links the death of Mary to the death of her Son but also, he notes that Andrew of Crete compares Mary’s dormition not with the death of sin after the fall but with that prelapsarian slumber of Adam during which God fashioned Eve from Adam’s rib, a slumber in which God can fashion humanity even more unto God’s own likeness. Von Balthasar, therefore, insists that Mary’s death was not constrained by sin but was a free necessity of love, “even if externally, as befitted the whole life of the ‘lowly handmaid,’ there may have been nothing extraordinary about it.”^165

Von Balthasar’s affirmation concerning Mary’s death provides a helpful corrective for those Western Catholics who believe erroneously that the Roman teaching concerning Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven means that Mary does not die. In fact, on this point Bulgakov affirms that the Orthodox and Catholic traditions are united in their affirmation of Mary’s ascension into heaven (which Catholics call her “Assumption”) and her heavenly glorification.^166 There is no opposition in either tradition between Mary’s dormition and her ascension into heaven. This clarifies and affirms that in both Catholicism and Orthodoxy one finds robust affirmations of the reality of Mary’s death, but it does not resolve whether this death was imposed upon her by original sin or whether it was freely assented to by the immaculate Virgin, who desires not to exempt herself from those burdens of fallen humanity under which her sisters and brothers toil and which her Son freely bears. The logic that von Balthasar applies with regards to Mary’s death is not unlike the logic which Bulgakov applies to her glorification: “the Mother is inseparable from her own giving birth, and where the Son is, there too is it fitting for the Mother

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^165 Ibid.

to be.”167 Von Balthasar and Bulgakov use the same logic to undergird opposing positions: both positions find support in Church tradition, and neither argument can disprove the other. One cannot affirm or refute the Immaculate Conception on the basis of Mary’s death, for in the final analysis what one affirms about her death is necessarily linked to what one already affirms about the dominion that sin has over her.

167 Ibid., 100.
3 An Integrated Vision

Having identified Bulgakov’s principal objections to the Immaculate Conception and having considered to what extent these objections may have been directed more to a particular scholastic vision than the substance of the dogma as it can be understood in light of Vatican II, we now wish to propose a contemporary Catholic affirmation of Mary’s Immaculate Conception with Bulgakov’s Mariological insights in the spirit of complementary dialogue between East and West indicated by *Unitatis Redintegratio* and Pope John Paul II.¹⁶⁸ We will begin by engaging what we consider to be the central theological commitments that Bulgakov wishes to assert through his Mariological vision and which we believe can be incorporated into a Catholic understanding of the Immaculate Conception, even if Bulgakov did not believe this to be the case. We will then concisely offer the Catholic understanding of the Immaculate Conception toward which we have been working, one that integrates Bulgakov’s contribution into a Mariology informed by the theological vision of Vatican II. Finally, we will reflect on the relevance of this integrated vision to the spiritual lives of Christians today.

3.1 Receiving Bulgakov into a Catholic Vision

Let us briefly review what we bring to this project from our engagement with Bulgakov in the last chapter. In *The Burning Bush* Bulgakov objects to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception because he believes that it dogmatizes both a defective understanding concerning the origin of souls and a defective anthropology concerning sin and human nature.¹⁶⁹ We have already seen that in his reflection concerning the origin of the soul what Bulgakov wishes to defend is the reality of a spiritual solidarity which is passed from one generation to the next. We have also seen that in light of statements released by the Holy See since Vatican II, such a solidarity can be affirmed by Catholic theologians in a way that is entirely compatible with a Catholic understanding of the Immaculate Conception. Bulgakov’s concerns regarding the relationship between sin and human nature have occupied the larger part of our engagement with Bulgakov’s

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¹⁶⁸ See pages 30ff above.

Mariology. We have shown that many of the criticisms of Catholicism that Bulgakov offers in this area can now be understood to be more particularly critiques of a scholastic theology of his time, elements of which many leading Catholic theologians and church authorities consider to be superseded in light of Vatican II. Even so, some of Bulgakov’s positions are not reconcilable with a Catholic affirmation of the Immaculate Conception even after Vatican II. The principle of non-contradiction prevents someone who affirms the Immaculate Conception from embracing Bulgakov’s assertion that Mary was not purified from any shadow of original sin until the Annunciation. This position, espoused by Thomas Aquinas, was once dominant within Western theology as well, but Catholic doctrine developed in a different direction, as we have already seen in our historical survey. The other irreconcilable position concerns the theological understanding of Mary’s death which, as we have discussed, is necessarily tied to one’s understanding of the dominion that original sin has over Mary at the moment of her death. As we have demonstrated using von Balthasar, Bulgakov’s own logic can be used to support not only Bulgakov’s position concerning Mary’s death but its precise contrary as well.

Though Bulgakov opposes the sophianic striving of humankind through Israel towards the sinlessness of Mary to what he perceives to be an arbitrary in-breaking of grace in the extraordinary privilege conferred upon Mary in the Immaculate Conception, all that is needed to remove the opposition between the two conceptions is to remove the arbitrariness that Bulgakov imputes to the dogma, which in any case does not constitute part of the dogmatic definition at all. One can remain faithful to Bulgakov’s central intuitions without necessarily going as far as Bulgakov does in his “sophianic” understanding when he opposes the intrinsic creaturely ascent to God from below (though not without some reference to the assistance from above) to the extrinsic divine in-breaking from above that he finds excessive on the Catholic side. The solution that we propose emphatically involves both movements in an essential way.

If we may presume that Christians today participate in the same sophianic movement of divinization that Bulgakov finds throughout salvation history, then we can reflect on our experience of the ascetic demands of Christian life to help us out of this quandary. Let us

170 A Catholic can affirm the same reality, without necessarily making reference to Sophia, simply by affirming that God calls each human being to “participate in the divine life” (LG 2), not through an extrinsic union, but by
Imagine that a Christian is addicted to a particular vice for a reason that she knows is mediocre, but which she finds herself unable to overcome. The Christian recognizes her own lack of virtue and resolves time and again to overcome her baser passions, but every time she is faced with the challenge in question this resolve seems to disappear. Perhaps some progress is made, but it seems like a trifle compared to what the Christian knows she ought to be capable of. Then, after much effort, one day the interior barriers that prevented the Christian from overcoming this vice unexpectedly fall away and the Christian—to her own amazement, perhaps—is able to love or overcome the particular vice almost effortlessly, when it is most needful for her to do so. If the Christian were to reflect on the experience, she would have to realize that, in a sense, what had been acting in her was not so much her own virtue as it was God’s grace working in her, since, having tried and failed time and again, she knows that “on her own power” she would not have been capable conquering the vice as she had wished to. On the other hand, by God’s grace, it really was she herself who was able to conquer the vice and thus love her neighbour in his moment of need, and she also knows that without the ascetical exercise of having tried and failed time and again to overcome this vice so as to love as she ought, she would not have been able to do so in the critical moment. God’s grace had “broken in” to crown her efforts. In the foregoing illustration one finds both an ascetical ascent and a descending in-breaking of grace, not as opposing movements but as paradoxically complementary movements that require each other. And yet if one had to ask which of the two movements plays the more determinative role, one would have to insist that it is the in-breaking of grace, through which the sophianic striving is supported by grace in a prevenient way.  

If we apply this theological schema to Bulgakov’s difficulties, we find that it essentially resolves many of the issues that had impeded Bulgakov from being able to support the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. There is no necessary opposition between a sophianic striving from below and an in-breaking of grace from above. Bulgakov himself considers sophianic ascent and


171 We find this balance between ascent and in-breaking, with the priority on the latter, in the “true divine pedagogy” through which God simultaneously teaches human beings who God is and who they are through salvation history (Second Vatican Council, “Dei Verbum,” 13–15).
in-breaking of grace to be complementary in The Bride of the Lamb when he presents the reality of humankind as one in which there is a sophianic/evolutionary ascent “from below” in creation, but which nonetheless does not obviate the need for what Bulgakov calls a “catastrophic” intervention by God to offer what nature could not have produced on its own.\(^\text{172}\)

While affirming the evolutionary processes that “phylogenetically connect [humankind] with the animal world by his animal nature,” Bulgakov absolutely insists—on the basis of the revealed truths found in Genesis—that “his origin is not merely an evolutionary achievement, but an express and new divine creative act that is outside the evolutionary process. It is something new in creation.”\(^\text{173}\)

And yet, Bulgakov does not see this as a deus ex machina but a meeting of ascending and descending movements: “between man’s animal nature and his humanity lies an ontological hiatus, an abyss that cannot be overcome by any evolution.”\(^\text{174}\)

Bulgakov forcefully avows that “man is not a product of evolution; evolution could have produced only a manlike animal.”\(^\text{175}\) But is this pattern of necessary-but-not-sufficient “striving from below,” crowned by a catastrophic “in-breaking from above,” simply limited to the unique creation of humankind from out of an animal nature, or does it not rather permeate (“sophianically,” as Bulgakov would say) all of God’s creation? We find this very pattern in the in-breaking of grace in the life of the Christian striving to overcome vice so as to love as God calls her to. Why should it be any different within humankind’s striving to offer the most perfect human mother to the Godman so that he would be truly man with her humanity? Could one not affirm, using Bulgakov’s own logic in The Bride of the Lamb, that “Mary’s sinlessness is not (merely) a product of Israel’s progress; Israel’s progress could only have produced a mother who approaches sinlessness”?\(^\text{176}\)

\(^{172}\) Bulgakov, The Bride of the Lamb, 175.

\(^{173}\) Ibid., 174.

\(^{174}\) Ibid., 175.

\(^{175}\) Ibid.

\(^{176}\) These are not Bulgakov’s words, but a new assertion that appropriates the language and logic of Bulgakov’s claim at the beginning of this paragraph, referenced in note 175. The quotation marks simply indicate and delineate this new propositional statement. Cf. Ibid.
Where Mary’s sinlessness is concerned, it seems that the most appropriate solution is to see the privilege that Mary receives as a *crowning* (from above) of the strivings (from below) of Israel, who seeks to be a genuine human partner for God in all the he would ask of his chosen people. One can discern a sort of progress in Israel’s relationship with God, especially within the “faithful remnant” that exemplifies the “poor of Israel.” Nonetheless, on her own Israel would have never succeeded in being the perfect humanity that the Theotokos passed on to her son. Through her many generations of striving, Israel had come closer to God than any other people, but an infinite gap remains. Nonetheless, God honours Israel’s genuine progress and instead of arbitrarily choosing just any woman for the privilege of the Immaculate Conception, God crowns the striving of Israel by crowning her progress with its desired goal, filling the infinite gap that separates the two with his own *donum superadditum*.¹⁷⁸

Let us consider original sin and the Immaculate Conception in a different light to see if we may further address Bulgakov’s difficulties. Von Balthasar recognizes original sin primarily in fallen humanity’s tendency to set limits: “Yes, but… yes, so long as,” and so on. Fallen humanity does not want to give an unreserved “yes” to anything but constantly seeks to maintain some control, setting the terms when and insofar as this is possible. By setting limits through the refusal to give an unreserved “yes” to the love God offers them, individual human persons erect barriers between themselves and God and each other.¹⁷⁹ This action recalls the isolating spiritual reality found in Bulgakov’s understanding of original sin as *principium individuationis*, though without affirming Bulgakov’s ontological claims regarding the actual individuation of human beings.¹⁸⁰ Von Balthasar likewise sees a solidarity among generations as Israel approaches the Immaculate Conception through a “stairway of obedience” that Israel ascends by the increasing fidelity of its

¹⁷⁷ It seems quite appropriate to use Bulgakov’s own terms to describe this distance; it is truly an “ontological hiatus, an abyss that cannot be overcome by any evolution.” Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Though he rails against the *donum superadditum* elsewhere in *The Burning Bush*, Bulgakov does come quite close to affirming this very point, observing that “the ascetic feat of human holiness, hands lifted up and opened towards heaven, does not remain without its reward, and by this, really, *donum superadditum*, fallen nature is restored to such a degree that is completely inaccessible to human powers.” Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 40.

¹⁷⁹ Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness*, 266.

¹⁸⁰ See p. 51.
“faithful remnant,” but he does not ground this solidarity in sin but rather in the co-responsibility for sin that is proper to love.\textsuperscript{181} We may understand this on the basis of the behaviour of Adam and Eve in the garden when God begins to question them. Instead of confessing his own responsibility for what he has done, Adam “passes the buck” to Eve, who likewise refuses responsibility and blames the snake. In refusing responsibility each was committing a new actual sin on the basis of original sin. However, this increased sinfulness does not increase any sort of genuine solidarity among them but only further alienates them from God and one another. There can be no authentic solidarity in sin, only the appearance of solidarity in a common and growing estrangement.\textsuperscript{182} Therefore, the solidarity of human beings under original sin is rather one that God provides by maintaining the unity of humankind in spite of sin, a unity which ensures that the sin of one will be a problem for all and that all will have to cooperate in order to overcome this problem. When a human being refuses this responsibility, that human being “passes the buck” and creates barriers once again. On the other hand, a genuine love for God and for one’s fellow human beings recognizes the fundamental unity of humanity and does not draw limits around one’s own guilt but rather willingly admits one’s own fault and even is willing to be identified, out of love, with the sin of someone whom one loves, without ever participating in the sinful action oneself. One stops passing the buck and takes responsibility for one’s own actions without seeking to condemn one’s neighbours constantly. This co-responsibility manifests the lack of barriers that Christ himself shows when “he who knew no sin was made sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21). This is the lack of barriers that Mary manifests to God in her unreserved “let it be done unto me” at the Annunciation (Lk 1:38). It is not original sin that expresses the deepest solidarity among human beings but the willingness to bear its consequences. For this reason the Godman, whose immaculate conception Bulgakov admits, is by no means constrained in his solidarity by a divine “incapacity” to be under original sin. For the Catholic, the same is true for his mother. After Christ there is no human being in deeper solidarity with humankind than the mother of God, and this not because she is under the dominion of original sin but because, like


\textsuperscript{182} Sin isolates individuals from one another, as Bulgakov himself affirms (Bulgakov, \textit{The Burning Bush}, 22–24.).
her Son, she does not protect herself from suffering its consequences and bearing responsibility for them. 183

One difficulty remains: Bulgakov’s temporal concerns regarding the Catholic dogma’s declaration that Mary is pre-redeemed “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race.” 184 We have already touched on another one of Bulgakov’s temporal concerns in our consideration of the origin of the human soul, having affirmed with Bulgakov a certain supra-temporal action of God which is expressed temporally in a certain simultaneity with human actions. 185 If we simply apply Bulgakov’s own logic of time and simultaneity as regards the origin of the soul to the reality indicated by the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception found in Ineffabilis Deus, when this dogma is understood along the lines that we have indicated in the preceding pages, then we see that any idea that Mary is “purified” in a temporal moment, even one which coincides with her physical conception, is erroneous, even if this is the way that some interpret the dogma. Thus, if one understands the Catholic dogma using a temporal logic that Bulgakov himself proposes for the soul, then one can affirm that there is never any point at which Mary is not pure, whether as a pre-existent intention in God or in her corporeal existence. Mary’s conception is immaculate not only in her mother’s womb but also from all eternity in God’s inscrutable and surpassingly wonderful designs. 186 But this is not at all isolated from the “fullness of time” and the generations of salvation history that pave the way to the Immaculate Conception: it is this corporeal reality that is crowned through the Immaculate Conception, which God intended from the beginning.


184 Pius IX, “Ineffabilis Deus.”

185 See pp. 26-29 above. There, on the basis of Bulgakov’s own objections to the successive ensoulment of the human being, we affirmed, with Bulgakov, “God’s pre-eternal behest and intention for every human being” (Bulgakov, The Burning Bush, 60.).

186 To assert that Mary is pure in this way simply returns us to the title of “prepurified” (προκαθαρθείσα), which some of the Church Fathers used with reference to the Mother of God. See pages 16-17.
In the next section we will gather together these elements, which have already been considered individually in this paper, into a concise and synthetic Catholic vision that seeks to place Mary’s Immaculate Conception within the divine-human relationship that Bulgakov discerns in salvation history. Although we will not adopt the language of Sophia—which can imply more that we intend to assert—the vision that we propose will be very much in the spirit of the central theological commitments that Bulgakov wishes to defend in *The Burning Bush* with regards to theological anthropology, original sin, salvation history, and the place that the Theotokos holds at the nexus of these issues. Though this may not be the *only* way to approach the mystery of the Immaculate Conception—the heirs of the neo-scholastics are only too happy to remind us of this—we believe this proposal not only to be a legitimate Catholic way of understanding the Immaculate Conception but even one that enters more deeply into the direction that the Holy Spirit may be indicating to the Catholic Church today, whether through Vatican II or through Catholic dialogue with Bulgakov that the great council facilitates.

3.2 Mary: the Crowning of Israel, God’s Human Partner

“The eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation of the divine life.”\(^{187}\) It is through this human sharing in the divine life of God that we discover the glory that God intends for creation from the start. When human beings live from the life of love that God offers them, they are not characterized merely by their creaturely need for God—though this dependence always remains—but what shines forth even more brilliantly is the degree to which they live that life that is so breathtakingly like unto God’s own life that a human being can even give birth to God. This greatness is not one that is limited to the Christ, who is true God and true man; it shines forth also in one who is an entirely created being, the Theotokos. She is the one whom God intends his creation to be from the beginning, the one who can say “yes” to God without reserve: not on her own, but in a way that is intimately bound up with the life of every human being and the striving of all humanity towards the divine life that God shares with us through Jesus Christ. Mary does not stand alone but emerges out of the hiddenness of Israel, the people that God called

forth to be a blessing for all humankind. Mary is the crowning of Israel, through whom God finds a partner that will help humankind as a whole fulfill its vocation to live the life that God shares with humanity, a life which in its fullness makes humanity worthy of giving birth to God, as the Theotokos does.

The human person is so profoundly created in God’s image that it is impossible to conceive of humankind correctly except in relationship to the God who shares the divine life with this beloved creature. The human creature is made for no other life than God’s own life: a freely chosen life of love. It is a testament to the greatness of this creature that in Jesus the life of God can be lived fully by a man without doing any violence whatsoever to that man’s humanity. What does violence to our human nature, in fact, is sin. If sin is even possible, then this possibility exists only to ensure that the life of love that humankind is offered is genuine. The life that God offers humankind must be freely chosen if it is to be truly a full sharing in God’s own life, since God always loves with a supremely free love. This means that human beings, too, must be free if their life is to be a genuine sharing in God’s life of love. Love cannot be coerced or constrained. And yet, in God’s supreme freedom God never ceases to love, God never sins, even for an instant. This is the truest freedom: the freedom to love whereby one freely chooses to love with such purity that—while sin remains a possibility—it is one that is so far from one’s own love that one never opts for it.188 Hard though it may seem for us to fathom, this pure life of love is not only the life that God lives but also the life that God would wish all of humankind to share with God. Nonetheless, when humankind uses its freedom to choose some other life besides the divine life of love, this choice—which images something of the gravity of God’s own choices—bears great consequences. Having “unbound” itself from the divine life for which it was created, humankind finds itself “bound” to the life that it has chosen for itself and experiences concupiscence for the first time. Concupiscence has no proper place in human nature; it is an experience proper to the fallen state. Jesus, who is not only true God but also true

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188 A parent who loves her newborn child would consider it absurd to capriciously throw the child out of the window of a high-rise building, but cannot be accused of a lack of freedom in her refusal to even consider this possibility. Likewise, it stands to reason that the human being who most profoundly lives the freedom of love in the way that God ultimately intends for humankind would see any betrayal of love (i.e. sin) as a possibility that she would never entertain, and yet this would not in the least be a reduction of her freedom but a shining embodiment of it. In precisely this way, the sinless Lady who gives birth to God is most profoundly free.
man, has no personal experience of concupiscence; and the redeemed humanity that Jesus offers to humankind, and to his mother in the first place, also is free of it. In the new heaven and the new earth, where every tear will be wiped away and death will be no more, we will have no further experience of concupiscence and sin; but we will not thereby cease to be human, but rather we will be more human than we will have ever been (cf. Rev 21).

Through humankind’s dominion over the earth, creation itself was to be ordered from within by a life of love that was a genuine reflection of the uncreated life of God (Cf. Gen 1). For this reason, once humankind turns away from this life, which is the source of all genuine communion, all of creation suffers from this disorder (cf. Rom 8:19-23). Whereas the divine life of love desires to unite all of creation to itself through a genuine sharing of goods, the life of sin calculates and separates: it wishes to claim goods for itself and fears giving up what it has in favour of another. We witness this when God calls out to humankind after the fall, asking if it has eaten from the tree from which it ought not have eaten. Instead of simply surrendering his fault and taking responsibility, Adam accuses both God and neighbour for his new condition, declaring, “the woman you gave me, she gave me to eat, and I ate” (Gen 3). Though the life they have chosen separates sinners from God and from one another, God does not abandon the divine image that God has imprinted in humankind, for this image undergirds an even deeper solidarity among members of the human race, which sin cannot undo. Through this solidarity, not only God, but also each human person, bears an ontological co-responsibility for carrying every other human person. This means that the sin of the parents of the race thus becomes the co-responsibility of all who are to follow, whether they wish to accept this responsibility in love as Christ does or flee from it as the first parents did.

God does not leave humankind without resources to return to the life that humanity had turned away from. The Catholic liturgy states in a prayer to God the Father,

> when through disobedience he [humankind] had lost your friendship, you did not abandon him to the domain of death. For you came in mercy to the aid of all, so
that those who seek might find you. Time and again you offered them covenants and through the prophets taught them to look forward to salvation.\textsuperscript{189}

God does not coerce humankind to return but rather helps it to understand ever more deeply the misery that results from any other life which humankind might choose when it is made to share in the divine life alone. Even the difficulty that humankind confronts as it seeks to return to the divine life that can only come from God testifies to the nobility of humankind’s being created in God’s likeness. Humankind must bear the consequences of its choice, and when it bears these consequences freely and with God’s help, it already participates genuinely in its own return to the life that God offers it.

It is not initially clear, however, that humankind wishes to return after the fall (Gen 4-11). God woos the beloved creature, but humankind turns away time and again. So God chooses a partner from within humankind, Abraham, through whom God hopes to deepen a relationship, continuing through his descendants, through which God hopes to save all of humankind. This covenantal relationship will be freely entered into by both parties, and it will be taken up by Abraham’s descendants, who will be called upon time and again to renew their free decision to follow God and strive after the divine life that God gradually educates them into through a “divine pedagogy.” When God sends an angel to wrestle with Abraham’s grandson Jacob, through whom the covenant will be carried forward, God has the wrestling match end in a draw rather than pinning Jacob to the ground. Jacob receives the new name “Israel,” for he has “striven with God and with men and have prevailed” (Gen 32:28). This name contains within it the greatness of the vocation to which this people is called for all of humankind. God desires to make Israel a partner in God’s desire to save humankind, and yet Israel is also part of that humankind which needs to be saved. Israel shares the alienation of humankind from God, and so Israel will struggle in his own relationship to God. With the help of God’s grace, Israel will grow in this relationship, but this growth will also be hard-won on Israel’s part. Through the people that comes from Israel, humankind must learn to choose life-in-God in place of the autonomous

life-in-oneself of sin. This requires a struggle, and it will be expressed as a “wrestling” with God. God desires this struggle, for this struggle manifests a genuine engagement of Israel’s freedom.

This struggle passes through the generations of Israel who are united, by blood and by the covenant, as a single people brought together in their relationship to God and in their halting attempts to live, for all of humankind, the life that God offers them. At times it seemed that the entirety of the promise of Israel rode on a few individuals as the people as a whole turned to worship other gods, just as they had done while Moses was with God on Sinai. But in every age God rose up faithful people (the “poor” of Israel, also known as the “anawim”) within Israel so that, even in the midst of infidelity, God’s faithfulness could be reflected in the faithfulness of those who were open to the life that he offered them. These few, and especially the prophets, will call Israel to repentance time and again. And Israel does repent, and people return to the covenant that God made with them and strive to live on the basis of it. But time and again also they fall away, and God chastises the people—even severely, as in the exile—to try to bring them back to the life that they have abandoned.

Even as many of the children of Israel seem to grow in their infidelity (though this is hardly uniform), God can demand ever-greater tasks and renunciations from the prophets, besides whose fidelity the struggles of Saul or David pale in comparison. Jeremiah resists and wrestles with what God offers him but ultimately prophesies in the humiliating way that God asks of him, knowing that his prophecy will be rejected. Jeremiah even obeys God when God forbids him to mourn for his wife, even though this harsh obedience contradicts his most worthy human desires. Likewise, in Hosea Israel offers to God a representative of humankind that is so given over to God’s will that God can even dispose of his most intimate relations with other men and women, telling Hosea to marry a prostitute who will not be a faithful wife and to beget children with her whom he must name according to God’s will. There is no doubt that in these children of Israel and those who are like them, God has a human partner that strives to do God’s will in a way that is markedly different from the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In these few examples one can see that, at least within a remnant of Israel, humankind has made some real progress back to God and that God’s work in humankind has not been in vain. Israel has grown more faithful in and through this remnant even as the challenges to faith have grown greater.
God’s relationship with Israel develops over time as Israel becomes more open to the **life that God offers** so that God can reveal through Israel what this life entails. In Israel’s great faithful ones, especially towards the end of the prophetic period, one sees more and more of an assent that recalls the Son’s affirmation, “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). Likewise, the linguistic field used in scriptural references to Israel shifts. Beginning with Jacob “Israel” had been referred to as male in earlier scriptures (even as a people), but in later writings, especially during the prophetic period, “Israel” begins to appear as a woman called to a nuptial union with God. Whereas God spoke of “Israel” as a son in the time of Moses (Ex 4:23), in the later prophetic period God laments the fall of “virgin Israel” (Amos 5:2; Jer 18:13), Jeremiah speaks of her “adulteries” (Jer 3:8), and Hosea of her whoring (Hos 4:15, cf. Ez 16); but through Jeremiah God offers an invitation to live out the life that God offers her. God truly offers her this life, for God gives the grace to live out the life that he invites “Israel” to live (Jer 31). God does not make false offers or set traps for his beloved to fall into. God exhorts his “faithless daughter,” the “virgin Israel,” to stop wavering, for “the Lord has created a new thing on the earth: a woman protects a man” (Jer 31:22). Could this be an allusion to the promised one of the line of David, whose kingdom God will make firm for all ages? Could Israel be the woman who protects him?

No matter how much progress Israel has made in her long battle to live this life that God offers her, no matter how much more radically in God the later prophets live in their obedience, an infinite gap remains between the life that these holy ones of Israel live and the infinite fullness of the divine life that God wishes to share with his creation through humankind. The distance becomes even more apparent when one realizes that Israel’s vocation is to be the **Theotokos**, or “God-birther.” Can Israel ever progress to the point in which she can actually be a mother to God in a real way and not through some merely mechanical way which would demean the true nobility that God inscribed in the beloved creature that is in God’s image and likeness? Can Israel’s will be perfectly and freely engaged so that Israel will love in a way that would be fitting for God’s mother? It is the Son of Man who will reveal and bring about this fullness, but is humankind capable of playing a worthy role in the incarnation of the one who is true God and true man such that humankind’s role is genuinely in the likeness of God’s own role?
Israel, by God’s grace, has made much progress from Jacob to the *anawim* that remain faithful as the coming of this Son of Man approaches. God does not discard this progress, but rather God crowns it by offering Israel the grace that will make up the distance that yet remains in her striving so that she can be a true mother to the Son of Man. This “crowning” of Israel’s efforts is what we celebrate in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Mother of God. Through the Immaculate Conception the eternally Begotten Son receives a mother from God’s own creation who bears in every respect the likeness of his Father in heaven in a manner appropriate to a creature and yet surpasses what anyone might ever have dared hope for from God’s creatures. God’s creaturely likeness in this mother is far more like the uncreated God than creation would ever dared to imagine, even if from the moment it came into existence creation has inchoately yearned for this likeness. Mary is not only conceived from God’s eternal intention from humankind, she is also conceived through Israel’s own pondering of God’s word in her heart: indeed, Mary is that very pondering (cf. Lk 1-2). The likeness of God the Father that Jesus encounters in his mother is so great that just as the Son can entrust himself without reserve to the will of the Father, so Jesus as a boy can entrust himself to his mother’s care without reserve, observing her and *learning* as a boy to imitate all that she does, since nothing that she thinks, does, or desires is tainted with even the least spot of sin.

The crowning of Israel is an act that respects Israel’s freedom since the desire of the faithful *anawim* has been, in fact, to correspond ever more perfectly to what God asks of them. Mary’s perfect “yes” does not “drop from heaven;” she inherits it from her people, but their striving is perfected by God’s grace into that perfect “yes” that God intended to offer humankind from the beginning. Mary stands in perfect continuity with the striving of those who go before, and in her their striving is perfected into the perfect created likeness, as a human mother, of what the divine Father offers his eternal Son in his incarnation. And their striving has, from the beginning, been borne up by God’s grace: indeed, the life that God intended to offer Adam from the very

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190 For an existential example of the logic that we propose here, please see pages 63-64.

191 If this were not so, then Jesus would not have a truly human childhood, for he would constantly have to evaluate every one of his mother’s actions on the basis of his divinity so as not to learn those things which would not correspond to the life that he lives eternally with the Father. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Abolishing the Boundaries,” in *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 264–269.
beginning was always an abiding in God’s grace. As God helped the faithful remnant live the life that it lived, so now God provides it with the grace that it needs to correspond perfectly in exactly the moment and way that God and “Adam” need on the eve of the Incarnation.¹⁹²

The striving of Israel does not end with Mary’s Immaculate Conception any more than the divine life of God does not merely consist in the forgiveness of sins. Mary, too, will strive and be stretched by the demands of grace; only now this striving will be perfectly pure, and the solidarity will be most profoundly genuine, for there will be no residual rejection of love in Mary that would cause her to try to hold for herself any of the grace that God offers her. The Immaculate Conception does not reduce Mary’s solidarity with humankind in the least but only magnifies it. Mary owes her “yes” not only to God but also to the people whose striving God crowns through Mary’s “yes.” And just as it was sin that first shattered—though it did not eliminate—the genuine solidarity that humankind has within itself, with God, and with creation, so also in her immaculate “yes” Mary places no limits on the solidarity that she has with the least of her brethren, with creation, and with God. As a man the Christ lives out perfectly the divine life that he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit from all eternity. The man who lives that life was first a child who lived that life. He contemplated and imitated his mother in time just as he contemplates and imitates his Father for all eternity. And in doing so he truly contemplates and imitates the divine life as perfectly as it can be lived out by a human being who is not God, in the Theotokos who holds nothing back of the grace that she is filled with but lets it flow through her to her Son, whom she births, and to all of humankind that shares in this grace that is the perfection of its striving and yet strives anew in the ever-greater life of love that God shares with humankind. In Mary’s Immaculate Conception we dare to hope not only that we might be saved in Christ, as Mary was, but also that our own strivings, with the help of God’s grace, might be so elevated and purified that, in the fullness of time—which the Immaculate Conception manifests for Israel—we, too, might even have the grace of sharing in the “birthing” of God through God’s perfection in us of these strivings.

¹⁹² This is exactly what God does for us in our own lives of faith, as well. What God offers “Adam” as a whole, God also does for each individual human being as well. See pages 46 to 50 above.
3.3 Concluding Remarks

After an overview of relevant understandings of Mary’s sinlessness through the history of Christianity in the East and West, we have sought to integrate key insights from the traditions that we have presented through a narrative understanding of salvation history in which the Immaculate Conception finds its proper context. Bulgakov’s critique of a certain neo-scholastic Mariology anticipates directions affirmed at the Second Vatican Council and helps to lay the foundations for a proper understanding of Mary’s sinlessness in God’s plan for the redemption of humankind. Though Bulgakov was personally opposed to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, we have indicated a path by which Catholics can affirm Bulgakov’s central theological concerns in a way that even more robustly supports this dogma, especially in light of the vision of salvation history that Lumen Gentium proposes. The theological narrative that we propose here builds upon robust resources found in Eastern Christianity, including Bulgakov’s own understanding of creation, the fall, and his insistence on the genuine mutuality of the relationship between the uncreated Trihypostatic God and the creation that God made in God’s own image, which God calls through Adam to live a life that reflects God’s own likeness. Just as God does not discard our halting attempts to do the good but crowns them with his grace so that we might actually be able to accomplish a task that he gives us in obedience at the appropriate time, so one can also find this dynamic in the history of Israel, whose strivings are not discarded but crowned so that God might offer his son a truly human mother with a humanity worthy of his Son. This offers us the hope and assurance that what God has done for humankind through Israel in Mary’s Immaculate Conception, God will do for each one of us, enabling us to give an ever more perfect “yes” to God, a “yes” that will not be the end of our strivings, but a beginning to the ever-greater and eternal sharing in God’s life of love that is offered to us through Jesus Christ.

This Mariological vision is just a beginning, however. Following the emphases on solidarity salvation history found in The Burning Bush and Lumen Gentium, we have sketched out an integrated vision which demonstrates that such a vision can inform and strengthen a contemporary Catholic understanding of the Immaculate Conception. If the vision remains unexplored, however, the Immaculate Conception risks being seen as uniquely an arrival point, whereas it is no less a point of departure for not only Mary’s life, but also Christ’s life, and that of the Church. Building upon the foundations we have indicated here, a further developed vision
would need to grapple further with the divine life that God shares with Mary and all of humankind through Christ and would need to indicate the primacy of love over knowledge in the life of faith.
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