

“born of the Virgin Mary...”
According to St. Ignatius of Antioch,
St. Justin Martyr and St. Irenaeus of Lyons.

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Saint Ignatius of Antioch’s¹ declaration in his *Letter to the Ephesians* that: “*The virginity of Mary, and her giving birth were hidden from the Prince of this world, as was also the death of the Lord. Three great mysteries which were wrought in the stillness of God*”,² reveals how much some second century Fathers of the Church and early Christian writers, felt at a loss of precise and orthodox formulas to express in writing some solid formulas of the Christian Faith. Not that they personally hesitated in any way to adhere to them in all faith, and to defend with

1. The exact year in which Saint Ignatius of Antioch was born is not known. He was a convert from paganism. According to the well-known historian of the Church, Eusebius of Caesarea, in his monumental work *Ecclesiastical History* 3,22: MG 20,270, Ignatius was the second successor of the head of the apostles, St. Peter, to the episcopal see of Antioch in Syria. He wrote seven letters to the various episcopal sees on his way to Rome for execution by martyrdom. The empire was at that time ruled by the pagan Roman Emperor Trajan (98 to 117CE). He is also one of the so-called *Apostolic Fathers* of the Church. He wrote letters to the sees of Philadelphia in Phrygia, to the see of Smyrna, of Ephesus, of Tralles, to the Magnesians, to the Christians of Philippi, and to the see of Rome. One of the seven letters is addressed to St. Polycarp, bishop and martyr of Smyrna. The major content of these letters reveals Ignatius’ preoccupation vis-à-vis *Docetism*, and the so-called *Judaizers*, both very active in Antioch too. His letters reveal also a strong accent on the concept of *monarchianism* with regards to the episcopacy, as well as a sound basis for the theology of *martyrdom*, especially emphasised in his *Letter to the Romans* (4,1: MG 5,687). Ignatius sees the bishop as a source of unity but also as a stand-in for Christ himself, to the extent that at one point he compares the bishop and his presbyters to Christ and his apostles.
2. *Ad Ephesios* 19,1-2: *Patrologia Graeca*. Cursus completus, Migne Jacques-Paul (MG) 5, 660. Paris 1857: “*Tria sunt mysteria clamoris. Et principium hujus mundi latuit Mariae virginitas et partus ipsius, similiter et mors Domini; tria mysteria clamoris, quae in silentio Dei patrata sunt...*”. The Greek term which St. Ignatius of Antioch uses for the kind of “silence” in which these three great acts of God, namely, Mary’s virginity, her birth-giving, and the Lord’s death, is *hesoukia*. In this case, the term used is noteworthy as it is meant to emphasize the belief of early Christian Writers that in the first case, it is was not a common type of birth that took place, but a unique one; one which was enveloped in the aura of mystery and silence (*sygyzia*). Although the source for the works of all three Early Christian Writers will be with reference to the *Patrologia Graeca*, the texts in footnote, however, for several editorial reasons, will be rendered into Latin. The English translation of the texts is that of LAKE, Kirsopp, *The Apostolic Fathers*, in two volumes, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts London 1998.

them with their lives, if the necessity arose; in some cases, they believed that they must have been divinely transmitted truths, as proof, for instance, for the belief, in the case of the above, in the complete divinity and complete humanity of the Person of Christ. His real descent on earth, though a truly humble one indeed, was yet, at the same time, one which so admirably expressed His fully perfect human appearance. In face of these seemingly low-keyed declarations of such an august mystery, one must not forget, however, the extent to which second century theology, was, after all, so deeply aware and at times influenced also by the encounters with early *Gnosis*,³ Christian, as well as unorthodox.

They declared that the Virgin Mary's birth-giving of her Son Jesus Christ, had occurred in all silence: creation, as it were, held its pace and breath until the Virgin gave birth in a cosmic silence, a *sine qua non* condition for God to act in another of His marvellous *theophanies* (or *epiphanies*).⁴ Though this previously unheard of intervention of God in the history of humanity seemed so completely mysterious, yet it all seemed as clear as daylight...but still it was so difficult to express in writing: indeed, it was also spoken of as an "*unspeakable*" mystery. One can sort of feel the caution with which these Early Christian Writers avoid supplying any further detailed explanations of how it all took place; it all seemed so natural, so normal, yet it was all such a divinely unique occurrence. They also recognized how

3. *Gnosticism*, proved to be an extremely powerful force operating alongside the Christian Church's environment in the second and third Christian centuries. It was indeed a very complex and intricate form of syncretic and secret teaching. The Greek term *Gnosis* means *knowledge*. Until some decades ago, the contents and beliefs of the Gnostic religion were known only through the usually hostile reports of some Fathers of the Church or Early Christian Writers who fought them, the so-called *heresiologists*. In the eighteenth century, in Egypt, a bedouin farmer incidentally hit on a hollow cave in which he discovered some earthenware pots containing papyri codices. Later study on this archaeological find revealed these papyri to be the famous Nag Hammadi (Upper Egypt) Library collection of 52 tractates of some ancient monastic settlement of hitherto unknown Gnostic stamp, buried in jars around the turn of the fourth century. These were found to be made up of texts translated mainly from Greek originals produced in the second and third centuries. This intricate form of knowledge (*gnosis*) was able to explain the miserable state of the world and to correct the unacceptable shortcomings of the biblical writings as to the nature of God and the human self. The superior knowledge flaunted by Gnostics was believed to have been mediated to them by messengers (Jesus Christ and his secret teaching, apostles, etc.) found expression in diverse versions of a myth depicting the phases of a theogony and cosmogony focusing on the true genesis of the human Self and on a powerful explanation of the origin of Evil. Among the more renowned of Gnostic schools the more influential was that of Valentinus (an Alexandrian who flourished around 135 and 165CE).
4. *Wisdom* 18,14-15.

dangerously so near to apocryphal and gnostic literature it could all come, given the fact that some particular writings seemed so uniquely capable of furnishing also precise and sensationally lucid exposition of these events and beliefs.

Ignatius of Antioch defines Mary’s virginity (*parthenia*) and her birth-giving (*toketos*) as “*unspeakable mysteries*”; this is as near as he could allow himself to get to in written language: “*For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary by the dispensation of God, ‘as well of the seed of David’ as of the Holy Spirit: he was born and was baptized, that by himself submitting he might purify the water*”.⁵

The following seem to have been Ignatius’ major preoccupations underlying this text: namely, the urgent need of laying an emphasis on the effects of the holiness of the sacrament of Baptism, through Christ’s birth and suffering; secondly, the expression of a Christology of Atonement, couched within a theocentric perspective;⁶ and, thirdly, that tinge of the influence of that *apocalypticism* which took hold of his environment and his theology in the second century CE.

However, J.N.D. Kelly recognizes in Ignatius one of the earliest explorer of creeds; but yet, at the same time, he also warns, that any attempt to envisage, in Ignatius, allusions to formulas, or to underlying credal forms, is doomed to failure. The prophet bishop and martyr himself never so much as breathes a hint of the existence of any such formulas.⁷

In one of those letters, addressed to the Magnesians, and written by him on his journey towards Rome where he received martyrdom, in section 13, Ignatius invites them to walk, in all their actions, “*in faith and love, in the Son and the Father and the Spirit, in the beginning and in the end*”.⁸

In the letter addressed to the *Ephesians*, he declares: “*For our God Jesus Christ was conceived by Mary according to God’s plan, of the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit; Who was born and was baptized that by His passion He might cleanse water*”.⁹

5. *To the Ephesians* 18.2: MG 5,659.

6. See: STUDER, Basil osb, *Dio Salvatore nei Padri della Chiesa*, Borla, Roma, 55.

7. KELLY, J.N.D., *Early Christian Creeds*, Longman, London 1971 (3rd edition), 69.

8. *Ad Magnesios* 13: MG 5,674.

9. MG 5,660.

In the letter to the Christian community of Tralles, in section 9, Ignatius warns: “*Be dead when anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, Who was of the stock of David, Who was from Mary, Who was truly born, ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of beings heavenly, earthly and under the earth, Who was truly raised from the dead, His Father raising Him...*”¹⁰

And, finally, in his letter to the Smyrneans, he encourages them towards “...*being persuaded as regards our Lord, that He was truly of David’s stock after the flesh, Son of God by the Divine will and power, begotten truly of the Virgin, baptized by John that he might fulfil all righteousness, truly nailed in the flesh on our behalf under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrach...that through His resurrection He might set up an ensign in one body of His Church*”.¹¹

All of the above four texts reveal the following major characteristics, namely, first, they are manifestly independent units; secondly, they are types of local catechetical teachings, based on the antithesis between the Lord’s humiliation and His exaltation, and, thirdly, they are manifestly based on the same scheme: “*according to the flesh - according to the Spirit; Son of David - Son of God*”; and, finally, they prove to be pointedly formulated in an anti-Docetic strain. The crudeness of the language adopted by Ignatius proves to be very much conscious of the menace of the teachings of those heretics who denied the reality of the Lord’s human experience.¹²

After all, the assertion of the virgin-birth of Jesus Christ, or, more precisely, of his virginal conception, originated in the New Testament itself, even though it is found only in *Matthew*, and in *Luke*. The Virgin-birth story as reported in the *Gospel of Saint Matthew*¹³ is of little help, anyway, for the deduction of any sound christological argument from such a great divine intervention. *Luke*’s¹⁴ account is somewhat more specific in showing the meaning of this divine intervention, as the use of “*therefore*” (Latin: *ideoque*; Greek: ‘*διὸ*’), indicates that the holiness and the divine Sonship of the child has some connections with the special circumstances of his conception. Otherwise, not only was it absent from all the New Testament

10. *MG* 5,681.

11. *MG* 1,1-2.

12. See: Kelly, *IND*, *Early Christian Creeds*, 69-70.

13. See: 1,18.

14. See: 1,35.

writers, except for *Matthew* and *Luke*, but even from the writings of the *Apostolic Fathers* themselves, as the only one to refer to it was St. Ignatius of Antioch. For him, Christ was “*Son of Mary and Son of God*”, and, therefore, both “*flesh and Spirit*”: the birth from the Virgin Mary was a guarantee of the true humanity. From the context of the use of this formula, it seems clear, however, that the intent was merely christological.

The main difficulties, however, were still wide open: to understand the human birth of the Person of Jesus Christ, and, at the same time, beat around the bush so as not to fall into the trap of making use of the very same expressions of so many apocryphal sensational explanations of such an august mystery. To quote one example, from the *Odes of Solomon*, we can read: “*The Spirit spread his wings over the virgin’s womb and she conceived, she gave birth and became virgin-mother through the great mercy. She became pregnant and gave birth to a child without suffering. And so as nothing futile took place, she did not even call a midwife*”.¹⁵

In the later apologetical environment, however, Justin Martyr’s¹⁶ christocentric theology of history was able to stress upon the clearly Christian character of the

15. *Odes of Solomon* 19, 6-8. This is a Greek 3rd century Jewish-Christian piece of writing consisting of 42 poems. They are a commentary on the Liturgy, especially the baptism and Easter liturgies of a Syrian Jewish-speaking Christian community. They were discovered in their Syrian original by J.R. Harris in 1907. The discovery was made up of 40 *Odes* and 18 *Psalms of Solomon*. Hence the title of *Odes of Solomon*. The two inferences in *Ode* 19, namely, the one to the *non-suffering* aspect, and the other to the *absence of a midwife*, seem to have been also a common note in other apocryphal pieces of literature. They are also found in *The Ascension of Isaiah* and in *The Acts of Peter*. It could also be a reference to the fact that during their exile years in Egypt, Jewish women were known to be very quick and strong at childbirth. It is said that they did so in next to no time. Egyptian midwives continually complained to the Pharaoh that they did not succeed in making it fast enough in order to check whether the newly-born Jewish child was a male or a female, see: *Ex* 1, 19. For a widely known English edition of *The Odes of Solomon* cf. *The Syriac Texts edited with Translation and Notes*, Oxford 1973; for the problems about this particular section, 19, see: DRIJVERS, H-J.W., “The 19th Ode of Solomon: its Interpretation and Place in Syrian Christianity”, in: *Journal of Theological Studies* N.S. 31(1980)337-355.
16. The most prominent of Christian apologetical writers in the second century CE. As a pagan intellectual, Justin had frequented the then best known of philosophical schools in search of wisdom, finally turning to Christianity. Sometime during the reign of the pagan Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161) he moved to Rome. One ought to keep in mind also that these dates fall within that period of time during which some Eastern emperors ruled and who inaugurated that time of freedom of thought and belief known as the era of *Syncretism*. Although, it seemed, as a result of this era of some *freedom* of religious expression, Justin was allowed to open a school in Rome, it all

Logos doctrine. In Christ, Justin explains, it reaches its highest significance, due to the union of *Logos* and man: "... of the whole *logos*, who is Christ".¹⁷ However, in applying this principle in its *totality*, that is, referring both to the body and *Logos* and soul in Christ, namely, this *principle* is therefore Christ about whom Justin wrote: "because the whole rational principle became Christ, who appeared for our sake (*pro nobis*), body, and reason, and soul".¹⁸ This affirmation leaves us with little possibility for speaking of any clear-cut ideas about Christ's *real* birth through Mary. His expressions as to Christ's real birth spread throughout his major works,¹⁹ are all echoes of the liturgy of teachings of the church in the second century CE, or else *christological confessions* of faith in Jesus Christ, God and man, which, according to Kelly, were actually: "developed *Christological kerygma* which already enjoyed a measure of fixity and which was still quite independent of the Trinitarian confessions".²⁰

There was then looming ahead that great risk of Catholic teaching coming too

soon fell into disfavour with the established faith. Around the year 165CE Justin was decapitated along with some adherents of his teaching. Justin's most important contribution to theology was the doctrine of the *Logos*, or Word of God, present since creation by the side of God, and who was only recently incarnated in the man Jesus Christ. It was this long ago hidden *Logos spermatikos* who had truly inspired the ancient writers to speak of the *generative Word*, later, the Christian Incarnate Word of God. Justin's theology is the earliest example of a type of ecumenical approach towards paganism in that he had a good background and education in Greek (Platonic) philosophy.

17. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 8,3: *MG* 6,458; and see also: 13,3: *MG* 6,465.
18. *Id.*, 10,1: *MG* 6,460. One has to note that the problem whether second century Early Christian Writers conceived of Christ's having a human soul – the *logos* taking the place of the human spirit – is still an open question as these terms were still yet unsystemized. All that Justin is asserting here is that *to logikon* became wholly man, namely, the whole truth of the Universe became incarnate in Christ.
19. See: *First Apology* 21,1: *MG* 6,361; *I Apol.* 31,7: *MG* 6,377; *Id.*, 42,4: *MG* 6,391; *Id.*, 46,5: *MG* 6,397; *Dialogue* 63,1: *MG* 6,620; *Id.*, 85,2: *MG* 6,676; *Id.*, 126,1: *MG* 6,768.
20. See: *Early Christian Creeds*, 75.

near to *Docetism*,²¹ or to *Ebionism*,²² against which St. Irenaeus of Lyons,²³ insists in emphasizing the *virgin birth* as proof text: “For ‘behold’ he says, ‘the Virgin shall conceive and beget a Son, and the latter, being God, is to be with us’; ... Also, concerning His birth, the same prophet says in another place: Before she who was in labour brought forth, and before the pains of labour came, there came forth delivered a man child. He proclaimed His unlooked-for and extraordinary birth of the Virgin”.²⁴ It was, above all, a means which God chose to confuse human pride.

21. The Greek term *dokein*, means *appearance*. This second-century heresy denied a human nature, and, especially any idea of attributing suffering to the person of Jesus Christ. Docetic Christology held that the Son of God could only have *feigned* suffering, and that the human weaknesses recorded in the Gospels about Christ were not befitting to Him, and therefore only seemed to be such.
22. This was a type of Christology which solved the problem of the Person of Jesus Christ as indivisibly one, namely, that he was purely *human* and begotten by Joseph (cf *Adv.Haer.* 3,16,6: *MG* 7,825, *passim*). They therefore deny with one single stroke, that Christ is God, the *Emmanuel*, and that He was born of the Virgin (cf *Adv.Haer.* 3,16,4: *MG* 7,925), *passim*. There are four texts in Irenaeus’s *Adversus Haereses* which are directly meant to confute this heretical current, namely: 3,19,1: *MG* 7,938; 4,33,4: *MG* 7,1080; and, 5,1,3: *MG* 7,1120.
23. Flourished around 130 and 200CE. A native of Asia Minor, probably from Smyrna, and who migrated to Gaul and lived at Lyons, for what reasons is still unknown. He was also a pupil of the bishop and martyr St. Polycarp of Smyrna. He is well known for the *peace* (*eirene*) which he brought about between pope St. Victor I (189-199) and the bishops of Asia Minor on the *Quartodeciman* controversy regarding the celebration of Easter Day (around 185CE). Irenaeus died a martyr. His major works are: *Adversus Haereses* (*Adv.Haer.*): *MG* 7,437-1224 (*Against Heresy* - in 5 books, also known as *On the Detection and Overthrow of the Pretended False Gnosis*) against Gnosticism, and, his *Epideixis*, FROIDEVAUX, L.M., *Irenee de Lyon. Demonstration de la Predication Apostolique*. Sources chretiennes vol.62, editions du Cerf, Paris 1959 (1971) (reprinted). The latter document only came to light in 1904. Before this date all that one knew about this title of Irenaeus came from a comment by Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Ecclesiastical History* 5,26, cf MOMMSEN, Theodore, *Eusebius Werke*, zweiter Band, *die Kirchengeschichte; Lateinische Übersetzung des Rufinus*, Leipzig 1903, t.1, 498.
24. *Epideixis* 54: *SC* 61,115: “...*id quod erat inopinatum generationis ejus significavit...et partus Virginis...*”, (“Thus He showed that His birth from the Virgin was unforeseen and unexpected”). The text is, strictly speaking, a paraphrase of *Is* 66,7 (Septuagint). I think that here we have the way in which Irenaeus of Lyons expresses the same belief of Ignatius of Antioch (*Ad Ephesios* 19,1: *MG* 5,660) that the Virgin Mary’s birth-giving of Christ took place in all *silence* (Gk. *hesoukia* - *sygyzy*). However, the Greek term which Irenaeus uses is *paradoxos*; cf also: *Adv.Haer.* 3,26,2: *MG* 7,139: “*In eo autem quod dixerit Ipse Dominus dabit signum, id quod erat inopinatum generationis ejus significavit...Quid enim magnum aut quod signum fieret in eo quod adolescentula concipiens ex uiro peperisset, quod euenit omnibus quae pariunt mulieribus? Sed quoniam inopinata salus hominibus inciperet fieri, Deo adiuuante, inopinatus (paradoxos) et partus Virginis fiebot, Deo dante signum hoc, sed non homine operante illud*”; see also: *Adv.Haer.* 2,28,1: *MG* 7,804: “...*quia hic solus vere sit Deus et Pater, qui et hunc mundum fecit, et hominem plasmavit, et in sua creatura donavit incrementum. Et de minoribus suis ad majora, quae apud ipsum sunt, vocans, sicut infantem quidem in uulua conceptum educit in lumen solis, et triticum, posteaquam in stipula corroborauerit condit in horreum*”.

The classical example of such proof lay in the prophet Isaiah's claim: "*And the Lord Himself shall forward you a sign, behold: the virgin shall conceive and give birth to a child, whom she shall call Immanuel*".²⁵ According to Irenaeus, however, the concrete fulfilment of this event took place in the New Testament, in the Gospel according to *Matthew*.²⁶ Irenaeus had obviously read the Septuagint version of the text from *Isaiah*.²⁷

Against Docetism, Irenaeus argued for the *reality* of Christ's corporeal nature. He was *truly God* and *truly man*.²⁸ If His flesh had suffered in any respect (sinlessness excepted) from ordinary human flesh, the parallel between Him and the first Adam would not have been valid, and man's sinful nature could have been reconciled to God.²⁹

The Word Himself, therefore, was believed to have fashioned His own humanity in the Virgin's womb, and if it be asked why He did this instead of creating some altogether novel substance,³⁰ the answer is that the humanity which was to be the

25. *Is* 7,14. See also: *Adv. Haer.* 2,28,3: *MG* 7,804.

26. 1,22-23.

27. It has already been noted above that the term which Irenaeus of Lyons uses is in *Epidēixis* 54, namely, *paradoxos*, which is the reading of the more precise Septuagint version of *Isaiah*, cf *Adv.Haer.* 3,26,2: *MG* 7, 968.

28. See: *Adv.Haer.* 3,21,4: *MG* 7,951: "*Propter hoc Dominus ipse dabit vobis signum. Ecce virgo in ventre accipiet et pariet filium et vocabitis nomen ejus Emanuel; butyrum et mel manducabit; priusquam cognoscat aut eligat mala commutabit, commutabit (elegit) bonum, quoniam priusquam cognoscat infans bonum et malum non consentiet nequitiae ut eligat bonum. Diligenter igitur significavit Spiritus Sanctus per ea quae dicta sunt generationem ejus quae est ex Virgine et substantiam quoniam Deus (Emanuel enim nomen hoc significat) et manifestat quoniam homo in eo quod dicit: butyrum et mel manducabit et in eo quod infantem nominat eum et priusquam cognoscat bonum et malum: haec enim omnia signa sunt hominis infantis...*".

29. See: *Adv.Haer.* 4,6,7: *MG* 7,990: "...sed unus et idem, omnia subjiciente ei Patre, et ab omnibus accipientes testimonium, quoniam vere vere homo et quoniam vere Deus, a Patre, a Spiritu, ab angelis, ab ipsa conditione, ab hominibus, et ab apostaticis spiritibus, et daemoniis, et ab inimico et novissime ab ipsa morte".

30. *Ib.* 5,14,2: *MG* 7,1161: "*Si autem ob aliam quamdam dispositionem Dominus incarnatus est, et ex altera substantia carnem attulit, non ergo in semetipsum recapitulatus est se hominem, ad huc etiam nec caro quidem dici potest. Caro enim vere primae plasmationis e limo facta est successio. Si autem ex alia substantia habere eum oportuit materiam, ab initio ex altera substantia Pater operatus fuisset fieri conspersionem ejus. Nunc autem quod fuit, qui perierat, homo, hoc salutare factum est Verbum; per semetipsum eam, quae esset ad eum, communionem, et exquisitionem salutis ejus sufficiens. Quod autem perierat sanguinem et carnem habebat. Limum enim terra accipientes Dominus, plasmavit hominem; et propter hunc omnis dispositio adventus Domini. Habuit ergo et ipse carnem et sanguinem, non alteram quamdam, sed illam principalem Patris plasmationem in se recapitulans, exquirens id quod perierat. Et propter hoc...*".

instrument of salvation had to be identical with that which needed to be saved.³¹

Irenaeus provides us also with a very interesting interpretation of Christ’s birth from the Virgin as part of a fuller extended Christological kerygma: “*Many of the barbarian nations who believe in Christ have given their assent to this order. Salvation has been written in their hearts,³² without paper and ink, by the Spirit. Preserving the ancient tradition, they believe in one God ... condescended to be born of the Virgin...*”³³ According to Irenaeus, therefore, this is how tribes of barbarians who possessed no written Scriptures, were, however, to be found as not lacking that Christian tradition, in that it was written in their hearts. They too can be considered, in a way, as believing in those same orthodox tenets particular to the salvific kerygma.

Two major pitfalls, however, lay along the road of second-century Christian Writers struggling to put over into writing these early Christological formulas; namely, on the one hand there was *Ebionism*, and, on the other, *Docetism*.³⁴ The major early Christological affirmations at stake were the following: namely, the nature of Christ’s human flesh, his virginal conception, and the Incarnation. The Incarnation confused them much more than the physical miracle of the Virgin mother. Namely, they derided some unheard of expressions such as: *The Emmanuel born of the Virgin! The Son of God being the result of God’s handling with the Virgin!* But Irenaeus derives the birth of the Son of God made man, from the virginal conception. The incarnate word took his flesh, indeed his humanity, from the virgin Mary, for if he did not take the substance of flesh from a human being then neither

31. *Ib* 3,19,3: *MG* 7,941: “*Sicut enim homo erat, ut tentaretur, sic et Verbum, ut glorificaretur: requiescente quidem Verbo ut posset tentari, et inhorrorar, et crucifigi, et mori; absorpto autem homine ion eo quod vincit, et sustinet... et resurgit, et assumitur*”.

32. *2 Cor* 3,3.

33. *Adv.Haer.* 3,4,2: *MG* 7,855: “*Cui ordinationi adsentiunt multae gentes barbarorum eorum qui in Christum credunt, sine charta et atramento scriptam habentes per Spiritum in cordibus suis salutem, et ueterem traditionem diligenter custodientes*”.

34. Against Docetism, Irenaeus invokes the doctrine of the human, and at the same time virginal birth of Jesus Christ. In order to show that the Son of God was also made Son of Man, Irenaeus affirms that the Son of God was truly made Man, born of a woman, Mary; it was the latter doctrine, Mary’s real maternity, that the Docetists opposed. In the case of Valentinian Docetism, though they seemed to uphold the doctrine of Mary’s motherhood they actually denied that it had really happened so; against these latter, Irenaeus upheld the reality of the Incarnation: the Son of God was truly born of the Virgin Mary; Jesus was born of Mary.

did he become man, nor the son of man.³⁵ The virgin birth serves as a sign of our salvation and regeneration by faith.³⁶ This implied, therefore, that: “*Christ Jesus was born of the virgin in order to unite through himself man and God.*”³⁷ *Our humanity participates in incorruption because of the union of man to God.*³⁸ *Christ is the agent, the union of man with God does not produce the person of Christ; rather, it is the mediation of Christ, which brings together God and man.*³⁹ *Opposition to Gnostic dualism leads Irenaeus to stress the unity of the divine word with the creation, in his ability to be seen and to suffer*”.⁴⁰ Thus, in Irenaeus, the existence of the Son in God the Father, author of the Incarnation, and the Son, described as the fruit of all this,⁴¹ implies no teaching of two persons in Christ.

It is clear that *Isaiah* 7,14, according to the classical *Septuagint* version, remained one of the more complicated knots to undo – and one which demanded great caution in its undoing. Later christologically-oriented formulas will simply repeat, over and over again, these same second-century formulated concepts that have been just discussed. However, around the third, and the beginning of the fourth centuries, churchmen would no longer be troubled with such precise dogmatic formulations. These dogmatic affirmations will be read in the light of a more *ascetic* and *spiritual* interpretation, in that by then, Mary and Christ Himself, and their imitators, will be considered as models of true chastity and true virginity. There is already a hint of such a re-reading process of the text of *Isaiah* going on as early as the opening decade of the third century CE, namely, by Tertullian in *De exhortatione castitate*,⁴² and, even more by St. Jerome in *Aduersus Iouinianum*.⁴³

35. *Adv.Haer.* 3,22,1: *MG* 7,958: “*Errant igitur qui dicunt eum nihil ex Virgine accepisse, ut abiciant carnis hereditatem, abiciant autem et similitudinem...si enim non accepit ab homine substantiam carnis, neque homo factus est neque Filius hominis. Et si non hoc factus est quod nos eramus, non magnum faciebat quod passus est et sustinuit*”.

36. *Ib.* 3,16,2: *MG* 7,925; 3,21,5: *MG* 7,953.

37. *Ib.* 3,4,2: *MG* 7,856.

38. *Ib.* 3,18,7: *MG* 7,936.

39. See: HOUSSIAU, A., *La christologie de saint Irenée*, Louvain-Gembloux 1955, 210-215.

40. OSBORN, Eric, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, University Press, Cambridge 2001, 112-113.

41. See: *Epidexis* 53:SC 112-113; and, *Adv.Haer.* 3,25,2: *MG* 7,968.

42. *Exh.cast.* 5,3: *CChrSL* 2,1022-1023: “*At (et) cum apostolus in ecclesiam et Christum interpretatur erunt duo in unam carnem secundum spiritales nuptias ecclesiae et Christi, - unus enim Christus et una eius ecclesia - agnoscere debemus duplicatam et exaggeratam esse nobis unius matrimonii legem tam secundum generis fundamentum quam secundum Christi sacramentum*”.

43. *Iouin.* 1,40: *PL* 23,280-281: “*Ac ne putaremus de his dici, qui scorta non moriunt, statim intulit: Virgines enim permanserunt. Ex quo ostendit omnes qui virgines non permanserunt, ad comparationem purissimae et angelicae castitatis, et ipsius Domini Nostri Iesu Christi, esse pollutas*”.

Conclusions

The theological observations of these early Christian writers, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons, however innovative they might seem to be, are, in fact, felt to be continually hemmed in by several outward circumstances. The texts of all three authors commenting upon Christ’s *virgin birth*, reveal that the function of the miraculous conception and birth of Christ was intended simply to underline the fact that: “*our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb of Mary according to a dispensation, of the seed of David but also of the Holy Spirit*”. The intent of the doctrine, according to Jaroslav Pelikan, was christological, certainly not “mariological”; much less was it anthropological.⁴⁴ In the first place, all three Early Christian Writers are very much aware of the fact that there loomed large those *Gnostic*, christian-gnostic, or heretical assertions about Christ as the Son of God and his Incarnation from the Virgin Mary. Secondly, the extremely hazy line of demarcation between what was believed to be *orthodoxy* and what was *heresy*. One ought to keep in mind that the bishop of the local church was the only guide and depositor of the *true faith*, but who was still as yet not guided by the teachings of the Occupier of the See of Rome. Thirdly, they are true *pastors*, in the sense that they are more preoccupied about providing spiritual nourishment for their flocks, than in couching their preaching in finely-cut dogmatic formulations; what they are in search of is that sound scripture-based, practical moral and ethical instruction. Fourthly, they are themselves, as theologians, actually still groping in the dark in order to find those more precise theologically refined expressions to support their own theological convictions vis-à-vis heresy. And last, but not least, there is yet another very serious crisis continually overshadowing their theological enquiry, namely, that regarding the need to identify, and interpret in an orthodox way, the still very fluctuating *Canon* of writings which the Great Church recognised as belonging to her and which were meant to be handed down undefiled to posterity. A crisis, this last one, which will only be partially solved towards the middle of the third century. Here one can certainly speak of a *crisis within a crisis* for written second-century theology and Christology.⁴⁵

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44. PELIKAN, Jaroslav, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), Chicago-London 1971, 287.

45. See: ANDRESEN, Karl, *Handbuch der Dogmen-und Theologiegeschichte*, 1, Gottingen 1988, 49

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