

Commentary

Fully Human and Fully Divine: The Birth of Christ and the Role of Mary

Ann Milliken Pederson ^{1,*}, Gretchen Spars-McKee ^{2,†}, Elisa Berndt ^{1,†}, Morgan DePerno ¹ and Emily Wehde ¹

¹ Department of Religion, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD 57105, USA; E-Mails: emberndt11@ole.augie.edu (E.B.); mddeperno@ole.augie.edu (M.D.); erwehde11@ole.augie.edu (E.W.)

² Sanford School of Medicine, The University of South Dakota, 1400 W. 22nd Street, Sioux Falls, SD 57105, USA; E-Mail: gmspars@gmail.com

† These authors contributed equally to this work.

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; E-Mail: pederson@augie.edu; Tel.: +1-605-274-5489; Fax: +1-605-274-5288.

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Abstract: The task given to us for this article was to offer theological responses to, “Can modern biology interpret the mystery of the birth of Christ?” by Giuseppe Benagiano and Bruno Dallapiccola. We are female Protestant theologians and respond to the issues from this perspective. The Christian confession of the virgin birth of Jesus (stated within the Apostles and Nicene creeds) is a statement of faith that God became incarnate through the power of the Holy Spirit in the flesh of the human Jesus and, likewise, that God continues to become incarnate in our flesh and in the messy details of our lives. The mystery and miracle of the birth of Jesus has much more to do with the incarnation of God in human flesh and in God’s spirit at work in and with Mary, than to do with Mary’s gynecological or parthenogenical mechanisms. The language of mechanism and miracle, in the ways used by the authors, can reduce the mystery and power of the incarnation. Consequently, we would like to offer a theological interpretation of the birth of Jesus and the role of Mary that expresses the mystery and grace of God’s incarnation not only in human nature, but also in all of nature. Our world is God’s home. We cannot comprehend all the ramifications of what is happening in the sciences and technologies of reproduction and

development. However, what we do know is that we cannot stop asking questions, seeking answers, and remaining open to being both critical of, and appreciative of, what the sciences are teaching us about being human and creatures of God.

Keywords: incarnation; miracle; myth; Mary

1. Introduction

The task given to us for this article was to offer theological responses to, “Can modern biology interpret the mystery of the birth of Christ?” by Giuseppe Benagiano and Bruno Dallapiccola. We are female Protestant theologians and respond to the issues from this perspective. The following theological and religious assertions were made in the article [1]: (1) That science and religion both “aim at finding the same truth, whether by evaluating natural processes or through revelation ([1], p. 1).” (2) That a scientific analysis of this mystery of the virgin birth would “present knowledge of parthenogenic mechanisms ([1], p. 4)” and that it might “stimulate a debate among theologians and advance the search for truth ([1], p. 4).” (3) That revealed truth comes from the Bible, and that the Bible should be analyzed, “including attempts to provide a scientific explanation of the miraculous events described in it ([1], p. 1).” (4) That the “most miraculous and fundamental ([1], p. 1)” event described in the New Testament is the incarnation and that the incarnation is the framework in which the virgin birth is interpreted or explained; (5) That taking scripture as the primary witness or authoritative statement for the virgin birth, can lead scientists to ask: “Is it at all feasible to investigate through which biological mechanisms this ‘miracle of all miracles’ might have taken place? ([1], p. 1)” (6) That miracles from the Catholic tradition are defined as “wonders performed by supernatural power as signs of some special mission or gift and explicitly ascribed to God ([1], p. 1)” or from a Protestant perspective as “divinely natural phenomena experienced humanly as the fulfillment of spiritual law ([1], p. 1).” (7) That if the categories of miracle are “not an infringement of physical or biological laws, it should be possible, if not to understand them, at least to investigate their underlying mechanisms ([1], p. 1).” (8) That the starting point for investigating the underlying mechanisms is the biology of parthenogenesis; (9) In conclusion, the authors agree that they “cannot enter any discussion about the meaning of the Incarnation in theological terms for the simple reason that we lack the competence to do so ([1], p. 1).”

Our response to Benagiano and Dallapiccola is: That the Christian confession of the virgin birth of Jesus (stated within the Apostles and Nicene creeds) is a statement of faith that God became incarnate through the power of the Holy Spirit in the flesh of the human Jesus and, likewise, that God continues to become incarnate in our flesh and in the messy details of our lives. The mystery and miracle of the birth of Jesus has much more to do with the incarnation of God in human flesh and in God’s spirit at work in and with Mary, than to do with Mary’s gynecological or parthenogenical mechanisms. The language of mechanism and miracle, in the ways used by the authors, can reduce the mystery and power of the incarnation. Consequently, we would like to offer a theological interpretation of the birth of Jesus and the role of Mary that expresses the mystery and grace of God’s incarnation not only in human nature, but also in all of nature. Our world is God’s home. We cannot comprehend all the

ramifications of what is happening in the sciences and technologies of reproduction and development. However, what we do know is that we cannot stop asking questions, seeking answers, and remaining open to being both critical of, and appreciative of, what the sciences are teaching us about being human and creatures of God. We begin our discussion where many Christians do: with the credal affirmations.

2. Scripture and Creeds

Why does the Virgin Birth matter to Christians? The textual evidence in the Bible for the Virgin Birth is sparse—it is noted only in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. However, throughout the centuries, Christians confess in worship that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary in the words of the Nicene and Apostles Creed. The statement in the Apostles Creed is, “And in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary [2].” The Nicene Creed puts it this way: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human [2].”

What do we learn from this confession of faith? (1) That the birth of Jesus has to do with Jesus’ relationship to God as child and parent; (2) That the birth was a result of the power of the Holy Spirit working within a human mother and within the life of Jesus; (3) That the incarnation is an affirmation of what it means to be created by God; (4) That the incarnation is a revelation of God’s gracious and saving power. The credal statement that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary is not a contradiction to the first article of the creed and to God working in creation, but is a confession of the fulfillment of God’s purposes in nature itself. Finally, the incarnation and birth of Jesus is also an affirmation of the creative power of the Holy Spirit.

The creative power of the Holy Spirit was with, and within, Mary. The creative power of the Holy Spirit allows for a margin of mystery that challenges believers to dwell in ambiguity while confessing their faith. This same mystery challenges some, such as the authors, to scientifically dig in the ambiguity until proven factual. We believe the reality that there is still much to learn in reproductive endocrinology, even for the medical professionals within the field, must be recognized. Thus, a scientific approach to revealing truth, to understanding Mary as both a virgin and the mother to a very human Jesus, might uncover elements of mystery. As far as Biblical texts, Benagiano and Dallapiccola claim that revealed truth comes from the Bible, and because the Bible is the primary witness to the virgin birth the Biblical texts could be analyzed, “to provide a scientific explanation of the miraculous events described in it ([1], p. 1).” However, we do not understand the revelation of scripture as truth in quite the same way as Benagiano and Dallapiccola do. We do not necessarily view the primary witness to the birth of Christ as coming from scripture. According to many biblical scholars, that witness is ambiguous at best. Often the creativity of the Holy Spirit is, in fact, ambiguous.

That said, we acknowledge that it is difficult to dwell in ambiguity. Some Christians might say that the truth of the Virgin birth is like the truths of the creation account in Genesis 1: they are factual, inerrant, literal, and historical statements. While we tend not to interpret texts literally we surely understand in part why it is important to so many Christians to struggle with the historicity of the texts. If the Christian faith has no grounding in the way things really are, if Christianity is simply a “myth” in a

simplistic way, then it will not matter to the flesh and blood of creation. For this reason we understand myth as: “stories that deal with fundamental or primordial realities, and thus are sacred. They deal with beginnings and serve to place the persons and groups that are spoken of in the stories, as well as providing grounds for rituals and ethical action [3].”

We recognize that creeds and Biblical texts have power for Christian believers and have provided guidance and theological boundaries for the understanding of beliefs and dogmas. However, if what is important about the virginal conception is that it is a miracle, or something unbelievable that we must believe, then we have missed the point of the myth. The confession of faith has then become a kind of theological litmus test that can create separations between the orthodox and the heretic. We choose, instead, to embrace a confession of faith that allows unity and radical newness as God’s grace opens up receptivity to God’s call/vocation through a powerful incarnation narrative. To us, the myth of the virgin birth is more about God’s mysterious love for and affirmation of human flesh than it is about a kind of supernatural intervention into the mechanisms of nature. The limits of a supernatural miracle divide, therefore we claim that the events of Mary’s role in the birth of Jesus might be interpreted in such a way that they promote unity and invitation. Instead of closing off the claims of the Christian faith to others, what if Mary’s role in the birth of Jesus actually invites and opens the window into the mysterious and gracious way that God becomes incarnate. Our claim is supported as we seek to illumine the human side of both Mary and Jesus through the incarnation narrative. Nonetheless, since Benagiano and Dallapiccola use the category of miracle to describe the incarnation and the virgin birth we must first address their understanding, or perhaps what we might suggest as their “misunderstanding”, of what miracle is.

3. Miracle and Myth

When something extraordinary happens, when the event cannot be explained by any seemingly rational explanation, people in our modern era, especially Christians, will often label the event as a “miracle”, that is, something done outside of the natural world by a supernatural force (God). This seems to fit with the authors’ claims that miracles from the Catholic tradition are defined as “wonders performed by supernatural power as signs of some special mission or gift and explicitly ascribed to God” ([1], p. 1) or from a Protestant perspective as “divinely natural phenomena experienced humanly as the fulfillment of spiritual law” ([1], p. 1). In both definitions, a dualistic interpretation of nature and supernature, of God and human render the pairs in utter opposition to each other. This interpretation is often rooted in an Enlightenment approach that places miracle within a Humean or Cartesian framework. For example, David Hume claims that miracles are a violation of laws of nature, which are unbreakable and absolute principles. In the “presumably perfect order of laws that God has ordained”, Hume implies that it would be an imperfection in God’s work if God interfered ([4], p. 742). In his skepticism of miracles, Hume maintained that the laws of nature would outweigh any claim of a miracle (a violation of that law), and believed that evidential claims about them did not need to be taken seriously ([4], p. 745; [5], p. 751).

However, theologians and scientists within the current religion and science dialogue offer alternative explanations of what a miracle is and how to interpret events like the mystery of the birth of Jesus. Instead of viewing God’s action in nature as supernatural or outside of nature, we can interpret

God's action inhering in nature. Miracles do not violate the intentions that God has for the creation, but instead fulfill God's relationship with nature. John Polkinghorne, an Anglican priest and physicist, defines a miracle as "simply an astonishing event that induces amazement in those that behold it or come to learn about" ([5], p. 752). He outlines this amazement in three different ways. First, normal human powers are enhanced in a particular instance, *i.e.*, mentally calculating big numbers quickly. Second, significant coincidences can produce wonder and amazement. In this situation, God works with creation "within the normal grain of nature rather than in any contradiction to it" ([5], p. 753). Third, radically "unnatural" events consist of events that are completely opposite of the way nature normally operates. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an example. At this point, Hume might disagree with Polkinghorne calling these events miracles. In the example of the virginal conception, Polkinghorne states that it was a miraculous event, and concludes that miracles must be rare events ([5], p. 756).

Keith Ward, an Anglican theologian and philosopher, believes that miracles are "part of a web of rational belief fully consistent with science" ([4], p. 741). Ward defines miracle as a "matter of degree, of the extent to which a divine action transcends the normal powers of natural objects and functions as a disclosure and realization of a divine purpose" ([4], p. 744). In the context of the laws of nature, miracles vindicate, not violate, them [4]. Science cannot make claims for the unique events; the real problem is theological. Divine consistency does not keep God from doing something radically new and different [5]. To understand miracles, we also need to understand our claims about divine power. For example, when miracles are spoken of as divine interventions in the world, this implies that God steps in and out of creation, and is only present at certain times. This does not coincide with an incarnational and sacramental notion of divine power, in which God's power and presence fulfill and transform nature. The incarnation of God in creation and specifically in Jesus Christ promises that God is always present and working in the world for creation's benefit.

4. Incarnation: Fully Human and Fully Divine

The incarnation of God in Christ is the starting point for our theological interpretations of the virginal conception of Jesus and the role of Mary in his birth. The language of miracle, as used by Hume and others to define it as a violation of nature, does not help Christians to interpret the event of Jesus' birth. For theological and consequently biological reasons, the birth of Jesus must be fully human—Jesus must have had a human mother and a human father. Otherwise, Jesus is not fully human. To confess that God is fully incarnate in the world is to claim that the divine and human come together fully in the person of Jesus. The virgin birth is thus a fulfillment of nature and of God's incarnate power. The powerful truth about the birth of Jesus is: that God was incarnate not only in creation, but also in human flesh, that our bodyselves as female and male matter to God, that the way we "come to be" is not as important as the fact that we are created, and that God loves and works within the vulnerable moments and places of our lives to create something new.

Here, however, we must acknowledge that the idea of God incarnate is not unique to the virgin birth. In fact, God appears in the flesh many times throughout Biblical texts. Upon closer look, we found that the theme of deliverance is arguably present every time God comes to humans in the flesh. It seems God is always "showing up" in the flesh to give a message of deliverance, no matter if that concerns a baby or the whole body of Israel. God came to Moses in the flesh to tell him to deliver the

Israelites from Egypt, God came to Abraham and Sarah to inform them of the birth of their son (that goes beyond their biological abilities), and God came to Mary to inform her that she will carry, nourish, and deliver Jesus. It is interesting to note that the writers of these passages often have surreal ways of describing the body of God, some describe God as “brightness of amber” (Ezekiel), while others use more exact body-language, and mention talking with God face-to-face (Numbers) or washing God’s feet (Genesis). We found the text to wash over these appearances; the language used is not attention-catching for readers today, nor does it imply a sense of miraculous happenings—it most often states “the form of the Lord” or “they beheld the Lord” or “the Lord ate and drank with them”, as if God shows up and eats and drinks and wrestles with humans on the daily. Thus, if incarnation is defined as a person who embodies the flesh of a deity, spirit, or abstract quality, then there are many stories of God incarnate. What, then, makes the myth of God incarnate in Christ so unique when God has shown up in human form before?

Thus, there are many stories of incarnation and the fact that God showed up in human flesh starts to look rather normal. Still, we believe the virginal conception encapsulates a significant incarnation narrative away from virginity and sexual mechanics. The incarnation is an affirmation of creation. This narrative of incarnation, of which humans are a part of and birthed from, is the proper place from which to interpret the Virgin birth. If we believe that God created this world then incarnation and creation are in a sense, one and the same. Or, to put this in the words of the early church fathers and mothers: grace is not something “extra” added onto nature, but grace inheres in and perfects nature. Nature is good, created by God, and the place in which God dwells. There is so much more to nature and God’s relationship to nature that we can know or understand. Divine grace is not something “added” to the creation, but is indeed in the act of creation itself. The sacramental and panentheistic language that God is present “in”, “with”, and “under” creation pervades much of the theology in the Western Christian tradition. Incarnation begins in creation and transforms creation.

A new understanding of who both Jesus and Mary were is found within this incarnation narrative as creation is drawn to God. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, in her book, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment*, erases the divide between body and spirit [6]. There we catch a glimpse of what it means to be made whole through the embodiment revealed in the incarnation narrative and within the virgin birth myth. We believe this wholeness, however, is diminished when emphasis on the divinity of Jesus in turn heightens Mary to a divine status and ultimately causes us to neglect our own flesh. Without a central focus on Christ being like us in humanity, our bodies are sent into exile ([7], p. 9) and we become disembodied ([7], p. 15). We choose to focus on God incarnate in Jesus as fully embodied in flesh because we believe it affirms our humanity as the intention of our divine vocation. The more human we become, the closer we become to God. In a world that is so smitten with the “divine Christ” we cannot forget the orthodox statements about the incarnation: that Christ is like us in his humanity.

5. Birth: Reproduction and God’s Grace

The virgin birth reveals likeness of humanity and God’s grace co-inhering in creation. God’s incarnation does not come apart from it, but deeply within it—in Mary’s womb, even if it is in ways, which we do not understand. Modern science can help us interpret much of the natural world, revealing how complex and mysterious God’s creation really is. The process of birth, of parthenogenesis, of

reproduction is amazing in and of itself. Theologians and scientists can tirelessly debate whether or not the conception is parthenogenetic but there is always “the more,” the mystery that transcends or deepens our awareness of God’s creation. It is this mystery, God’s grace co-inhering, that leads us to focus on the why, rather than the how, of God incarnate dwelling within the body of Mary. Our awareness of God’s creation is deepened as we understand the miraculous ability of God to relate to human beings in a tangible, and fleshly, way through the power of embodiment. God takes the world so seriously that God enters into divine partnership with Mary, a poor teenage engaged Jewish woman, to become incarnate. God takes the world so seriously that God becomes incarnate in flesh like ours, through the human Jesus. Mary, a very real human being, delivers (both physically and theologically) God incarnate through labor and birth pains. This is not to deny the spiritual experience Mary had as she gave her consent to carry God incarnate. She was, after all, visited by an angel in the Gospel of Luke. However, what is often overlooked, is that Mary had a very human, natural, response to the angelic visit. We are told that she was perplexed, questioned what she heard, was comforted by the angel, and sought female companionship in Elisabeth. We can rightly assume the decision was a bit scary, to say yes to God, but Mary gave consent to have God incarnate dwell within her belly. God’s radical grace created space for Mary to say yes to a humanly unheard of divine mystery. Mary said yes and the incarnation narrative came to be. We prefer to move the myth or story about the virginal conception and birth of Jesus away from Mary’s “purity” or “sexual abstinence” as these notions of “purity” can be dangerous in a world that already discounts women, the poor, and other marginalized populations. What God does is much more than that. And what Mary does is certainly more than being a passive, pure “vessel”.

Mary, or Miriam of Nazareth, is notably the most celebrated woman in Christian tradition. Many love, honor, and even reject her based on their own interpretation of the significance of her role in the story of incarnation. When asking, who is Mary and what is her role in our lives today many have trouble grappling with her identity other than being simply “the mother of Jesus” or the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer. Within the four Gospels her character is displayed differently according to the theological perspectives of the evangelists [8]. Catholics tend to identify with Luke’s positive and personal view of Mary as “full of grace”, being this divine gift from God, involved in the divine action of bring Jesus into being; Protestants cling more favorably to Mark’s negative views of Mary; while the Orthodox draw from John’s ideas of Mary being best displayed more as a symbol [8]. Whatever Gospel individuals resonate with, there has to be some common ground Mary stands on for all, and more importantly, a ground she stands on with the rest of humanity. However, heightened attention on supernatural miracles tends to illumine divine characteristics which in turn diminishes attention on her humanity. Mary was fully human and yet has been captured by the curse of a single story, a single story that confines her in a narrow cage with labels reading divine and mother. An even bigger problem arises when we begin to believe that these labels give honor to her life and role in the incarnation of Jesus. For when we do we are instantly cheating her out of her own story as a vulnerable, young, poor and struggling woman who in addition was called forth by God to fulfill His purposes in our redemptive history [9].

If we are not careful, Mary gets promoted to higher status, *i.e.*, titled “intercessor, mediatrix, helper, advocate, defender, consoler, and counselor” ([10], p. 129), and her humanness is overshadowed by divine language. For many, as noted by Elizabeth Johnson, “this village woman, mother of Jesus,

honored Mother of God, functions as an icon of the maternal God, revealing divine love as merciful, close, interested in the poor and the weak, ready to hear human needs, related to the earth, trustworthy, and profoundly attractive” ([10], p. 103). When Mary is “addressed as the mother *par excellence*, Mother of God, Mother of Mercy, Mother of Divine Consolation, our Mother” ([10], p. 102) we could forget that she was fully human. To us, whether Mary was a virgin seems drastically less important than the fact that Mary was fully human and in her creaturely freedom chose to accept God’s invitation to bear God’s Son. She was fully human so that Jesus was born of our own flesh. All of creation is drawn closer to God because “Jesus is flesh of her flesh and heart of her heart” ([11], p. 151). “Life flows from God’s heart, to Mary’s heart, in Jesus’ heart, to all humanity” ([11], p. 151). The Council at Chalcedon boldly shaped an understanding of the two natures of Christ. We see yet another valiant outcome from the gathering in so much that “the gift of the Chalcedon is its clarity regarding Mary as Jesus’ mother and its understanding that Jesus had a human body and soul” ([11], p. 120). Here Mary is clarified “*theotokos* (bearer of God), rather than *theodochos* (receiver of God)” ([11], p. 121). Bearing a child is a physical, bodily, act while receiving could be interpreted in many ways. Viewing Mary through the lens of humanity, and recognizing her choice to physically bear a child, is essential to our understanding of the humanity of Jesus and our own embodiment. When Mary is held in divine light, the divinity of Jesus is in turn highlighted. When Mary’s humanity is remembered we also remember the humanity of Jesus. While we respect that Mary plays a unique role in the spiritual lives of many we speculate that such veneration has contributed to the growing dualism in the church between body and spirit and overshadows the miracle within the incarnation.

6. Continuity between Creation and Incarnation in Jesus Christ

What is really important, then, about a theological interpretation of the virginal conception? The continuity of our humanity with Jesus and the rest of creation require a “natural” response to the mystery of the virginal conception and not a supernatural interpretation. Our claim is that God works in the world, in nature, and not apart from the world, with a disdain toward the natural world. We suggest that the incarnation, and continuity of humanity, is the greatest miracle of the virginal conception. The incarnation acts as an affirmation of a redemptive loving God working through the Holy Spirit, laboring into the human flesh through Mary, and offering continuity/deliverance through Jesus the Christ. Such narrative, of God incarnate through the flesh of Christ, offers redemption for all creation, delivers the disembodied, and draws creation in.

As we see it, the great “mystery” of the birth of Christ is that God not only chose a vehicle through which we would all seemingly relate, flesh like our own, but also worked deeply within a population of the lowly, disgraced, and unexpected. God worked within the vulnerable, crucified, and forgotten. This miraculous ability to transcend demographics, and relate to all of humankind through flesh and bone, seems to make the incarnation of God through the birth of Jesus the Christ the “miracle of all miracles.” God’s own embodiment navigated through the lowly Mary and enfleshed [12] in Jesus, a seemingly social outcast, allows all bodies regardless of any classifications that divide to be “loved, fully experienced, and redeemed by God ([12], p. 5). God loves us into loving God ([11], p. xi) by being enfleshed ([12], p. 5) and working within the depths of humanity. The “mystery” or “miracle” of Jesus’s conception, or Mary’s virgin birth, is not that it is “contrary” to our humanity, or that it is

radically different, but that it is of humanity. It is that God inhaled deeply within the belly of Mary, a vulnerable woman, and provided protective strength. It is that God chose this way to come into our world, into our flesh, and stay awhile. God incarnate in Jesus Christ dwelled among, and within, humanity, got his feet dirty, cried at the loss of a friend, and loved the unlovable.

The virginal conception of Mary is not some supernatural, external magic trick by an intervening God but is instead a redemptive narrative and manifestation of the gracious, creative God who so loves all of the world that God chose to become deeply embodied within it. Because God dwells within all of us, in our bodyselves, fully and naturally, we are nature, and becoming nature. Nature is made whole and resurrection is found in our forgotten, crucified bodies, because God “was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human [2]”. God provides fullness of life by entering into the messy details of our lives, through the messy details of Mary’s life. Mary was a vulnerable, young, poor and struggling girl bearing a weight so heavy it could have ruined her name and her fidelity. Mary bearing Jesus could have led to a life lived alone, but instead her actions invited all of us into God’s mystery and grace. Thus, the incarnation “tells us that human flourishing is tied to an embodied fullness of life (John 10:10)” ([12], p. 26). Life is made full within the pain and anguish of the birth of Jesus. Isaiah 42:14 says, “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.” There is no doubt that Mary gasped and panted while delivering Jesus, God incarnate. How could she not? Mary was only human, and part of the human experience in childbirth is great physical pain. Pain that is scattered throughout Hebrew Scripture, illumining the realities of mothering and highlighting the acts of conceiving, bearing, laboring, and delivering. Pain that becomes “metaphors pointing to God’s ways of relating to the world” ([10], p. 100). Within this pain, “Mary is a symbol of what it means to intimately bear the power of liberation, which is the hope for the future” ([11], p. 3). Hope for a future that, through the birth of grace, liberates and opens receptivity to God for all creation. Fullness of life can be found for all of nature because of the miracle of the incarnation in the virgin birth myth. Together we must all labor with God for the birth of new life.

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Author Contributions

Ann Pederson developed the main outline. All the authors contributed to the research and writing of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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