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Dominicans Towards the Liturgical Celebration of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (13th –16th Centuries)

Odnos dominikancev do liturgičnega praznovanja brezmadežnega spočetja Device Marije (13.–16. stoletje)

Abstract: The study entitled “Dominicans Towards the Liturgical Celebration of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (13th –16th Centuries)” presents the position of the Order of Preachers towards the celebration of the Immaculate Conception. It reveals the reasons that influenced the negative attitude of Dominicans towards this truth of faith. Apart from the negative opinion of St. Thomas Aquinas on this topic, it also presents other, no less important motives that contributed to taking an irreconcilable position on the liturgical celebration of *Conceptio Mariae*, which have so far remained unknown. The analysis carried out allowed to discover that the unfavorable position of the Order towards the feast of the Immaculate Conception was not only the result of Dominicans identifying with the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, but his motives lay much deeper and touched key aspects of the broadly understood theology and liturgy of that time.

Keywords: Dominicans, Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, liturgy, celebration

Povzetek: Prispevek „Odnos dominikancev do liturgičnega praznovanja brezmadežnega spočetja Device Marije (13.–16. stoletje)“ predstavlja stališče reda pridigarjev do praznika brezmadežnega spočetja Device Marije. Razkriva razloge, ki so vplivali na negativen odnos dominikancev do te verske resnice. Poleg negativnega mnenja svetega Tomaža Akvinskega o tej tematiki izpostavlja tudi druge – nič manj pomembne – motive, ki so prispevali k zavzetju nepremostljivega stališča do liturgičnega praznovanja *Conceptio Mariae*, a so bili doslej neznani. Opravljena analiza je dognala, da neugodno stališče reda do praznika brezmadežnega spočetja ni bilo le posledica opredeljevanja dominikancev do nauka svetega Tomaža Akvinskega, temveč so motivi globlji in se dotikajo ključnih vidikov takratne široko razumljene teologije in liturgije

Ključne besede: dominikanci, brezmadežno spočetje Device Marije, liturgija, praznovanje

1. Introduction

While the question of the development of the liturgical celebration of the Immaculate Conception has been the subject of studies, the position of Dominicans towards the feast spreading in the Church has not been analyzed so far.¹ Therefore, it seems justified to study this issue in order to better understand the attitude of the Order of Preachers (*Ordo Praedicatorum*) to the question of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the 13th–16th centuries. It is worth learning more about the motives that led the Dominicans to adopt a conservative (if not hostile) stance towards the feast that was gaining increasing popularity in the Church, especially when it was officially introduced into the liturgical calendar of the Roman Church. The answer to this question is important for a better understanding of the position taken by the Dominicans in the debate on the Immaculate Conception, which left a strong mark on theological reflection of the Middle Ages.

2. The Origins of the Feast of the Conception of Mary in the Western Church

The feast of the Conception of Mary, of Eastern provenance, appears in Western Europe in the 9th century, celebrated in lands under Byzantine rule (De Aldama 1961, 429). In the 11th century it was known in England (Capelle 1954, 150). Calendars of liturgical books from Winchester, Worcester, Canterbury record the feast of *Conceptio sanctae Mariae* or *Conceptio sanctae Dei Genitricis Mariae* on December 8 (De Aldama 1961, 429). In the next century, the celebration reached the territory of France. The feast is included in the 12th century liturgical calendar of the Church of Lyon. Gradually, it is celebrated in other churches: Mont-Saint-Michel, St. Evreux, Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire, Saint-Corneille de Compiègne, Anchin, Bayeux, Lisieux, Caen, Ruen, Evreux (449). In Saint-Pierre-de-la-Reole, in 1154, Bishop Atton ordered the celebration of this feast *quae iam fere per totam Galliam devotissime ab omni christiano percelebratur populo* (449). The growing popularity of the new feast was met with the reaction from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who strongly opposed this celebration in a letter to the canons of Lyon.

3. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux's Position Towards the Feast of *Conceptio Sanctae Mariae*

The Cistercian abbot, in letter 174 addressed to the canons in Lyon, included a reasoned critique of the celebrated feast. Since some of the arguments were later adopted by St. Thomas Aquinas, it seems reasonable to present the most important ones.

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Bernard opposed the claim of feast supporters that since we honour Virgin Mary's birth, we should honour Her conception. Following this line of thinking, it would be appropriate to honour not only Mary's parents, but also Her grandparents and great-grandparents with a similar liturgical celebration (Bernardus, *Epistola CLXXIV ad Canonicos Lugdunenses De Conceptione*, 334). The holiness that was manifested at birth does not necessarily indicate Her holy conception (335).

He also criticized the claim that before Mary's conception, grace was granted to Her, guaranteeing the sanctity of the conception. He notes that She could not have been sanctified before the union of body and soul, as She simply did not exist then (Bernardus, *Epistola CLXXIV ad Canonicos Lugdunenses De Conceptione* 335). He also points out that since the conception of a child is the result of the parents' intercourse, the accompanying sinful lust precludes any holiness. It follows that since Mary was not sanctified before Her conception (because She did not yet exist), or at the moment of Her conception (due to sinful lust), Her sanctification took place after conception, when She was still in Her mother's womb (335–336).

Concluding his criticism, Bernard asked the canons: if the conception of the Virgin Mary took place in sin, what were the motives for introducing a new liturgical feast in Lyon (Bernardus, *Epistola CLXXIV ad Canonicos Lugdunenses De Conceptione* 336)? Since, in his opinion, the above-mentioned celebration originated from popular piety, hence, in order to be officially included in the liturgical calendar of the diocese, it should first receive the approval of the Holy See (336).

4. The First Dominicans' Stance Towards the Feast of *Conceptio Sanctae Mariae*

The negative attitude of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux had a great influence on the first Dominicans. According to Stephen Bourbon, who joined the Dominicans in 1225, the said feast was not accepted by the universal Church because the Blessed Virgin Mary was conceived in original sin as a result of Her parents' union. "Mary was not holy at the moment of Her bodily conception, as St. Bernard demonstrated in his letter, opposing the custom of the Church of Lyon which celebrates this feast." (Capelle 1954, 152) The Dominican, citing the authority of the Cistercian theologian, noted that the subject of the liturgical celebration should be the spiritual conception (the union of body and soul), which took place about forty days after the physical conception (Capelle 1954, 153). Liturgical books kept in the General Archives of the Dominican Fathers in Rome confirm this. The oldest ones do not contain the office forms of the feast of interest (APDSSR, ms. XIV L 1; APDSSR, ms. XIV L 2; APDSSR, ms. XIV L 3; APDSSR, ms. XIV L 5; APDSSR ms. XIV L 6). It first appears in the Dominican breviary, dating from the 13th /14th centuries as *Conceptio sanctae Mariae, totum duplex* (APDSSR, ms. XIV L 4).

5. Saint Thomas Aquinas' Attitude Towards the Feast of *Conceptio Sanctae Mariae*

Saint Thomas Aquinas, considering the circumstances of Mary's conception, could not ignore the feast, which was introduced into the liturgical celebration in some dioceses. Referring to the position of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, he stated that although some churches celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Church in Rome believed that the Blessed Virgin Mary was conceived in original sin, and therefore, it did not celebrate this feast, although it tolerated it (*Summa Theologiae* III, q. 27 a. 2 arg. 2; Kochaniewicz 2003, 126). Bearing in mind that the liturgy celebrates God's action in the history of salvation, the Angelic Doctor noted that the liturgy honoured not only the conception of Mary, but Her sanctification performed by God on the day of Her conception (*Quaestiones quodlibetales* VI, q. 5 a. 1). Therefore, the Church should celebrate Mary's sanctification in Her mother's womb rather than Her conception (*Summa Theologiae* III, q. 27 a. 2 ad 3).

6. The Stance of the Dominican General Chapters Towards St. Thomas Aquinas' Doctrine

The negative opinion of Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Immaculate Conception of Mary influenced the attitude of the entire Order. The condemnation of some opinions of Thomas Aquinas by Stephen Tempier and Robert Kilwardby in 1277 (Weisheipl 1985, 413–418) met with the reaction of the Order. The Dominicans deliberating at the General Chapter of Paris (1279) emphasized that the Order would not tolerate criticism of Thomas's writings, while recommending that their superiors punish those who did not comply with these recommendations (AC 1898, 204). Acts of the General Chapter of 1286 recommend that every Dominican preach the teaching of Thomas, treating it as defensible. Those opposing this order would be subject to the penalty of suspension, regardless of their position in the Order (235).

The position adopted by the Dominican general chapters in the 13th century shows that Thomas' doctrine was valued and respected by the Order. In the 14th century, a new stance of the Dominicans towards the doctrine of Thomas could be observed. The General Chapter of Sargossa (1309) ordered lectors to teach and decide issues in accordance with the teachings and works of the venerable Doctor Thomas Aquinas (AC 1899, 39). However, the Chapter of Metz (1313), noted, "Since the teaching of Brother Thomas Aquinas is considered a more sound and universal doctrine than all others, and since the Dominican Order is particularly obliged to follow it, let no one dare to teach, decide questions or respond to objections otherwise than in accordance with what is commonly interpreted as his doctrine" (AC 1899, 64–65). During the Chapter of Bologna (1315), it was decided that "whoever would teach contrary to the universally recognized teaching of Thomas /.../ in matters relating to the articles of faith, morals or sacraments of

the Church, bringing charges against them, /.../ should be deprived of all teaching positions" (AC 1899, 81).

As can be seen, the resolutions adopted reveal that the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, and therefore also his position on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, became obligatory for all Dominicans. The recommendations and resolutions made culminated in the canonization of Aquinas, which took place in 1323, officially confirming the sanctity of his life and the orthodoxy of his teachings (Torrell 2021, 454).

7. The Attitude of the Dominican General Chapters Towards the Feast of *Conceptio Mariae*

The acts of the general chapters also provide us with information about the feast of *Conceptio Mariae*. The Dominicans deliberating at the General Chapter of Rodez (1388), adopting Aquinas' opinion, distinguished between the moment of conception of the embryo and the chronologically separate moment of *infusio animae*. They thus confirmed Mary's conception in the state of original sin and Her subsequent sanctification. The chapter participants obliged all Dominicans not to honour Mary's conception (*conceptio*) but her sanctification (*sanctificatio*). The celebration of *De sanctificatione Mariae* was ordered as a *totum duplex*. For the new liturgical celebration, the Holy Mass formula, *De Nativitate Beatae Mariae*, had to be used, replacing the term '*nativitas*' with the new one – '*sanctificatio*' (AC 1900, 31).

The General Chapter of Rome (1481) decided that December 8 would be celebrated as the feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Conceptio Mariae*) (AC 1900, 3555). The next General Chapter (1484) confirmed the liturgical celebration of the feast, referred to as *Sanctificatio Virginis Gloriosae* (AC 1900, 377). It follows that the names *Conceptio Mariae* and *Sanctificatio Mariae* were used by the Dominicans interchangeably. This opinion is confirmed by the Acts of the Chapter of Salamanca (1551), which remind that when celebrating the feast of *Conceptio seu Sanctificatio Beatae Mariae Virginis*, the office for the Nativity of Mary should be used (AC 1901, 319). The position of the Dominicans in the period from the 13th to the 15th century remained unchanged on this issue.

The resolutions of Dominican general chapters are reflected in liturgical books from the 15th and 16th centuries. The preserved breviary of Hieronymus Savonarola OP contains his handwritten notes made on the margin of the book in the years 1490–1492 (Verde 1999, LII). Pages 178v–180r of this book include the office entitled "Concezione di Maria Vergine" (Verde 1999, LII). However, the "Missale Praedicatorum" of 1504 contains a similarly titled Holy Mass form. The collect emphasized that the Blessed Virgin Mary was sanctified in her mother's womb after the union of body and soul (Bouman 1958, 144). The secreta and postcommunio, in accordance with the provisions of the general chapters, were taken from the form of the feast of *De*

Nativitate Beatae Mariae Virginis celebrated on September 8 (Bouman 1958, 145). An example of the implementation of resolutions of general chapters is also the form “In Conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis” included in the Gradual of Brother Victorinus of 1536, kept in the Archive of Dominican Fathers in Cracow (ADK L3, 81–83).

8. Dominicans on the Liturgical Celebration of *Conceptio Mariae*

The liturgical argument, already raised by St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Thomas Aquinas, appears in later Dominican treatises. John Dominici pointed out that Mary’s conception from human semen could not be an object of worship, as it took place in sin. However, since She was sanctified after Her conception, the Church celebrates Her birth. To reinforce his opinion, the Dominican cardinal refers to the authorities of Raymond of Penafort, Lanfranc and William of Auxerre, who emphasized conception in sin, which was an obstacle to the liturgical celebration (Dominici 1965, 62).

The general of the Order, Vincentius de Bandelis, considering the approval of Pope Sixtus IV for the new Mass Office of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, emphasized that a liturgical celebration of the feast was possible (De Bandelis 1481, 81). He distinguished two categories of conception: corporeal, resulting from conjugal life, and spiritual, when God’s grace was granted very soon after the union of the soul with the embryo. Therefore, if the conception of Mary can be celebrated liturgically, it is only in this latter sense.

The opinion of Cardinal Jan de Torquemada is also worth quoting. In the treatise *De veritate Conceptionis Beatissimae Virginis* he expressed his opinion on the celebrated feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Torquemada states the presence of the annual celebration of the pure conception of the Virgin Mary in the Roman curia, while noting that not everything that happens in the Roman curia, or among cardinals and bishops, or even among the people of God, should be identified with the position of the Roman Church (De Turrecremata 1966, 503). The Holy See tolerates this feast, which does not mean that it has officially approved of it (504). Moreover, cardinals and bishops celebrate the feast not because of the conception itself, but because of Mary’s sanctification. The Dominican notes that the feast of *Conceptio Mariae* has been celebrated for several centuries, but in the Dominican and Carthusian Orders it is celebrated as *Sanctificatio Mariae*, understood as a sanctified spiritual conception, thanks to the granting of divine grace (504).

Torquemada, relying on Thomas’s embryology, recalled that a conceived embryo - the result of parents’ marriage - without a connection with the human soul cannot be the subject of God’s grace (505). Only rational nature is able to accept. Therefore, the feast of Mary’s sanctification should be celebrated instead of Her conception. The Dominican recalled that only 162 years had passed since the de-

ath of Aquinas. His opinion that the Roman Church, while tolerating the customs of particular churches, nevertheless indicated that this feast should not be understood that Mary became holy at the moment of Her conception. Since it is not known when She was sanctified, on the day of Her conception we celebrate Her sanctification, not Her conception (505).

9. The Feast of *Conceptio Mariae* Celebrated in Rome

The position of the Holy See regarding the celebration of the feast gradually changed. Although at the end of the 13th century it was occasionally celebrated in the papal chapel (De Aldama 1961, 454), none of St. Peter's successors did officially approve of the feast of the Conception of Mary (Sericoli 1945, 13–14). This happened only in 1477, when Sixtus IV promulgated the constitution "*Cum praeexcelsa*", thus approving of the form of the Holy Mass "*De Immaculata Conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis*" (Sixtus IV 1996, 610–612) composed by Leonardo Nogarolo (Bouman 1958, 151). The papal approval meant the official inclusion of the feast in the Roman liturgy (Capelle 1954, 157), and thus the end of one of the Dominicans' crowning arguments justifying their negative position.

The Oratio, included in the Nogarolo Mass form, draws attention to the purpose of the Immaculate Conception - the preparation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to welcome the Son of God (Bouman 1958, 151–152). Thanks to extraordinary grace, She was prepared to become the future Mother of the Saviour. The bond between the paschal mystery of Christ and the Immaculate Conception was emphasized. Mary, because of the foreseen passion of Christ on the Cross, was preserved from all taint of original sin. The Immaculate Conception is therefore the anticipation of Mary in the salvific work of Jesus Christ. The term *Immaculata Conceptio* appeared for the first time in liturgical texts. The remaining prayers included in the mass form are biblical in nature; they refer to texts from the book of Song of Songs.

10. "Missale Romanum" of St. Pius V (1570)

The official approval of the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary by the Roman Church only ends a certain stage in the history of the development of liturgical celebration. The next century was marked by the emergence of Protestantism and the convocation of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which was the Church's reaction to the situation. The implementation of the council's recommendations fell to the Dominican, who on January 7, 1566, ascended to the See of Peter, taking the name of Pius V.

The expression of the conciliar reforms was the revision of the liturgical books, which resulted in a new edition of the "Missale Romanum" approved by Pius V in 1570. Among the changes introduced to the new liturgical book, it is worth highlighting the removal of the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed

Virgin Mary and its replacement with the feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Bouman 1958, 153). The form of the mass “In Conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis” attached to the “Missale Romanum” was nothing else than the form of the mass of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in which the word *nativitas* was replaced by the term *conceptio* (153–154).

The decision to return to the celebration of the feast of the Conception of Mary could certainly have pleased the Dominicans, seeming to tip the scales of victory in their favour, but it appears that the situation which occurred in the 16th century could have influenced the decision to return to classical forms of piety based on sound doctrine. Given the Protestant controversy, the concept of conservative redemption proposed by the Franciscans and the weakness of the Nogarol’s mass form may have been factors in favour of introducing “De Conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis” form into the “Missale Romanum” (BKDK, syg. 6951 III, 413–414; BKDK syg. 4078 XVIII, 349–350):

Oratio

“Famulis tuis quaesumus Domine, coelestis gratiae munus impertire: ut quibus beatae Virginis partus extitit salutis exordium, Conceptionis ejus votive solemnitas, pacis tribuat incrementum. Per Dominum nostrum.”

Secreta

“Unigeniti tui, Domine, nobis succurrat humanitas: ut qui natus de Virgine, matris integritatem non minuit, sed sacrauit; in Conceptionis ejus solemnitis, nostris nos piaculis exuens, oblationem nostram tibi faciat acceptam Jesus Christus Dominus noster. Qui tecum.”

Post communionem

“Sumpsimus, Domine, celebratis annuae votive sacramenta: praesta quaesumus; ut et temporalis vitae nobis remedia praebeant et aeternae. Per Dominum nostrum.”

The quoted prayer texts do not specify the circumstances of the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that is, whether She was preserved from original sin or purified from it. *Oratio* recalls Her conception and addresses a request to God for an increase in peace in the hearts of the faithful. However, *secreta* emphasizes the Incarnation of the Son of God and His saving coming into the world, which allowed the Mother’s bodily integrity to be preserved.

The form of mass approved by Pius V did not deepen the theological significance of the liturgical celebration, which maintained this form even several years after the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was proclaimed (1854). Only the “Quod iam pridem” decree of September 25, 1863, promulgated the form of the Holy Mass “De Immaculata Conceptione BMV”, definitively removing the liturgical celebration of *Conceptio Mariae* (Klawek 1954, 189).

11. Assessment of the Position of the Dominicans Towards the Celebration of the Immaculate Conception of Mary

The attitude of the Dominicans towards the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was expressed in the liturgy. The Order, implementing recommendations of the general chapters, celebrated the feast of *Conceptio Mariae*, using the form from the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. If such a solution was understandable in the 13th and 14th centuries, it was difficult to accept it in the 15th and 16th centuries, when the Immaculate Conception was solemnly celebrated throughout the Church. The approval of the form of the Mass of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary by Pope Sixtus IV resulted in the Dominicans losing one of the key arguments repeated since the time of St. Thomas Aquinas. In this context, a question must be asked: what caused the Order to take an irreconcilable stance against the feast of the Immaculate Conception?

It seems that one of the reasons may have been the uncritical acceptance of Aquinas' position and, consequently, the lack of willingness to learn about the claims given by the supporters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This assumption seems to be confirmed by the words contained in the constitution "Grave namis" of Pope Sixtus IV,

"Just when the Holy Roman Church celebrates the feast of the conception of the Immaculate and Ever-Virgin Mary and has established a special 'Office' for this purpose, we learn that some preachers from various orders in their sermons preached to the people in various cities and neighbourhoods, were not ashamed to say that all those who maintained or affirmed that the glorious and immaculate Mother of God was conceived without the taint of original sin, sinned mortally or were heretics. They also said that the faithful who recited the 'office' about Her Immaculate Conception, listened to teachings that She was conceived without this stain, sinned gravely or were heretics. We condemn and reject such claims by virtue of our apostolic authority as false, erroneous and even contrary to the truth, as well as books containing such views." (Sixtus IV 1996, 616)

Analysis of the liturgical development of the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary allowed to discover another reason that determined the conservative position of the Dominicans; it was their understanding of Tradition. For Thomas Aquinas, Tradition was always associated with the Apostolic Tradition (Congar 1984, 159). However, the concept of Tradition as the transmission of the deposit of faith throughout the history of the Church through the Church Fathers or magisterial statements was completely unknown (160–161). *Auctoritates* provided them with arguments to support the hypotheses they presented. This impoverished understanding of Tradition also contributed to the conservative attitude of the Order of Preachers towards the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

The resolutions of the general chapters also had a great impact on the position of the Order. The resolutions recommending the defense and promotion of the doctrine

of Thomas coincided with the command to celebrate the feast of the Conception of Mary. Moreover, it seems that the rigorous position of the general chapters, narrowing the theological perspective of the search to that charted by St. Thomas, undermined the freedom of theological reflection, thus preventing the introduction of new, original solutions. While Aquinas, in his search for truth, fearlessly used the achievements of Aristotle and Averroes, the restriction of the Dominican theological reflection to Thomas' doctrine led Dominican theology to regression in the following centuries.

12. Conclusion

The research conducted for the first time allowed to answer the question of why Dominicans took a negative stance towards the liturgical celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The presented analysis also revealed the hitherto unnoticed and unrecognized role of the Dominican general chapters, which, striving to maintain the unity of the Order, ordering everyone to accept the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas and disseminate it, at the same time punished all those who deviated from this rule. The resolutions of the general chapters resulted in the ossification of Dominican theology and liturgy. The lack of a dynamic understanding of Tradition and the lack of sensitivity to the *sensus fidelium* of the People of God resulted in a narrowing of theological reflection to the perspective set by Aquinas.

The unfavourable attitude of the Dominicans towards the feast of the Immaculate Conception was not merely the result of the Order's identification with the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas. The analysis of the Dominican position towards the liturgical celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception showed that the reasons for such a conviction lay much deeper and touched key aspects of the broadly understood theology of that time.

Abbreviations

AC – *Acta Capitulorum Generalium Ordinis Praedicatorum*.

APDSSR – Archivio dei Padri Domenicani.

ADK – Archiwum oo. Dominikanów w Krakowie.

BKDK – Biblioteka Kolegium oo. Dominikanów w Krakowie.

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