

Gaze of Grace: Revisiting the Immaculate Conception in Light of DW Winnicott's Concept of Maternal-infant Mirroring

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INTRODUCTION

Studying under Ann Ulanov in the Department of Psychiatry and Religion at Union Theological Seminary was an opportunity to bring depth psychology and theology together in a way that fed my soul for eight years. Dr. Ulanov's interdisciplinary methods as a teacher left room for the world of religion and the world of psychoanalysis to be explored and appreciated separately, and each for their own strengths. Yet there was always a powerful discovery to be made when psychological insight met theological wisdom. Her vast and still growing body of written work testifies to the many ways Dr. Ulanov has brought the two fields together. As a teacher, Ann has seemed to revel in the unique ways her students find and explore connections between the two disciplines. In my particular case, studies with Ann have nurtured a passion for conversation between psychoanalytic theory, Catholic faith, and the Hebrew Bible.

This article attempts to demonstrate the sort of psychologically infused theology that my studies with Ann Ulanov helped to develop. I will look at three concepts that stand separate from each other, each belonging to a different field: one aspect of object-relations theory, one piece of Catholic doctrine, and one theological intuition from the Hebrew Bible. Allowing each to inform the other will, I hope, bring forward new insights for future consideration.

The aspect of object-relations theory to be discussed here comes from DW Winnicott, a 20th century British pediatrician and psychoanalyst whose particular focus included early human development and the role of the mother. It is no coincidence that Winnicott is my choice here. Winnicott, along with Melanie Klein, was the subject of the first seminar I took with Ann; and this was shortly after Ann's book, *Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Psychic Reality*, was published. Introduced to both of them at the same time, in my mind Ulanov and Winnicott became a sort of duo: two theorists who get to the heart of the matter, and whose writing seems to move with life and truth.

'MIRRORING' IN DW WINNICOTT'S PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

In a symposium paper originally published in 1967, titled "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development," DW Winnicott suggests that the first mirror a child has is his or her mother's face.

In individual emotional development *the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face*. ...What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there* (1971, 111–112; emphasis in original).

By holding the infant in her arms, and taking the baby in with her gaze, the mothering one¹ offers the newborn its first opportunities for self-reflection. Neurological research shows that the infant's focus is predisposed to find the mother's face while nursing; indeed, locking the gaze to the mother's is a brainstem reflex, strongest in the earliest days of life (Cozolino 2006, 100–101; cf. Farroni et al., 2002; Melzoff & Moore 1992; Field et al 1982; Baker & Berthoz, 1977). Just as the human infant emerges from the womb with the instinct to latch onto the breast with his or her mouth, so there is the innate impulse to latch on to the mother's face with his or her eyes.

From the object-relations perspective, this predisposition serves an important function in human development: in the mutual gaze, not only will a bond be forged between mother and baby, but the newborn will discover awareness of his or her own being. As important as mother's milk (or its equivalent) is in sustaining the newborn's body, so this holding and gaze is to the development of the newborn's psyche.

This holding environment, says Winnicott, is where a developing human first comes to know that he or she exists, and who he or she is (1971, 111–112). The baby's being is accepted and recognized by the one who holds him or her, and the gaze of the embracing mother 1) conveys that she has received the gift of the baby's being, and 2) simultaneously offers it back for the child's own enjoyment, that he or she may recognize his or her own being. This combination of being securely held and lovingly mirrored initiates healthy psychological development and the earliest beginnings of the self.

This mirroring function is achieved by the mother in the typical course of events. It is an essential aspect of what Winnicott termed "good-enough mother-

1 Winnicott articulated his theory relative to the relationship between biological mother and child. This aspect of mirroring can be performed by an adult of any gender, willing to offer a primary relationship of loving, consistent presence to an infant from birth onwards. Further, as will be discussed below, Winnicott was explicit in noting that the mirroring function is one that appears initially in the mother-child relationship, but all members of the family eventually play an important role in mirroring the growing child.

ing” (1965, 18). Yet although this is the ordinary state of affairs, it is not always the case, and there are consequences:

Many babies, however, do have to have a long experience of not getting back what they are giving. They look and they do not see themselves. There are consequences. First, their own creative capacity begins to atrophy, and in some way or other they look around for other ways of getting something of themselves back from the environment....Second, the baby gets settled in to the idea that when he or she looks, what is seen is the mother’s face. The mother’s face is not then a mirror. So perception takes the place of apperception, perception takes the place of that which might have been the beginning of significant exchange with the world, a two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of meaning in the world of seen things....If the mother’s face is unresponsive, then a mirror is a thing to be looked at but not to be looked into (112–113).

Without mirroring, the developing human loses access not only to the means of self-consciousness, but to the circumstances which enable the development of his or her creativity and capacity to understand the world.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854. Still upheld today by the Roman Catholic Church as holy doctrine, the notion is rejected by Protestant churches. The history of the doctrine is complex (O’Connor 1958; Beattie 2011) and beyond the scope of the current article. One particular aspect of the Catholic understanding of Immaculate Conception is of interest here. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994, para. 490–493) explicates the doctrine by twice referencing the messenger Gabriel’s salutation of Mary in Luke’s annunciation narrative:

...The angel Gabriel at the moment of the annunciation salutes her as “full of grace” (Lk 1:28). In fact, in order for Mary to be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God’s grace.

Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, “full of grace” through God (Lk 1:28), was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses... (ibid. 490–491).

The religious document goes on to assert that this immaculate conception means Mary was preserved from ‘all stain of original sin’ from birth to death (491, 493). Grappling with the theological implications of Original Sin has been at the root of many theological arguments and controversies surrounding the doctrine, and will not be tackled here. Instead, it is hoped that fruitful discussion may arise

from a closer look at the theological intuition, as articulated both in this Catholic doctrine and in Luke's gospel, that Mary was 'full of grace.'

'FULL OF GRACE' OR 'FAVOR' IN LUKE'S ANNUNCIATION NARRATIVE AND IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." NRS Luke 1:28

The phrase translated as 'favored one' (NRS, ESV, NAB), 'highly favored' (ASV, KJV, NIV) or 'full of grace' (DRA, MRD) is the Greek word *κεχαριτωμένη* (a participle form of the verb *χαριτώω*). The narrative goes on to indicate Mary's puzzlement at the greeting, and Gabriel's clarification:

²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Luke 1:29–30

Here the word translated as 'favor' is *χάρις* the noun related to the verb in verse 28.

This reader's understanding of the title bestowed on Mary by Gabriel is informed by the fact that Luke's narrative about Mary has literary and religious roots in the 'Old Testament.'² Luke begins his narrative by introducing characters with established links to Jewish religion and tradition (Lk 1:5–6); the messenger Gabriel is a character from the Hebrew Bible (Daniel 8:16); scholars have noted that the Annunciation follows a literary form present in Hebrew scriptures, known as the 'call narrative' (Wyler); and that Mary's song in Luke 1:46–55 (commonly referred to as the Magnificat) is replete with allusions to various parts of the Hebrew Bible (Luccio 2011; Grohmann 2005; Hieke 2007; Lohfink 1990, ch.1; Koch 2010).

The notion of favored one and of grace (Greek: *κεχαριτωμένη χάρις*) has a parallel in the Semitic notion of grace/favor. In the Septuagint (an early Greek translation of Hebrew scriptures used in Jesus' day and in the time the author of Luke was writing his story), *χάρις* was the word used to translate the Hebrew word *חַן*. A closer look at *חַן* in the Bible gives a backdrop for its Greek equivalent in Gabriel's message to Mary.

In the Hebrew Bible this notion of receiving grace, or being favored, is to be had in a very specific relational manner: grace is to be found in the eyes of another. Thus: in Genesis 6:8, "Noah found favor [*חַן*] in the eyes [*בְּעֵינַי*] of the Lord." In Genesis 39, when Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt, he finds *חַן* in the eyes of his

2 'Old Testament' is the contemporary Christian term for the Hebrew Bible. Of course there was no 'New Testament' when the Gospel of Luke was being written. The Hebrew Bible is referred to simply as 'scripture' elsewhere in Luke (Luke 4:21. Gk).

master (39:4). In the book of Ruth, Ruth finds חַן in the eyes of Boaz while working in his fields (2:10). Translations of the phrase vary widely and do not always mention the gaze indicated in the Hebrew,³ but in each of the forty-five instances in which חַן appears in narrative contexts in the Hebrew Bible, it always appears in the phrase מָצָא [to find] + חַן [grace/favor] + בְּעֵינַי [in the eyes of].

In each case, חַן is bestowed 1) through the gaze of another and 2) by one who has power over the other. The person who seeks favor in the eyes of someone else acknowledges dependence upon the one who bestows that grace.

BRINGING TOGETHER THE BIBLICAL NOTION OF חַן AND WINNICOTT'S NOTION OF MIRRORING

The Hebrew notion of חַן and Winnicott's notion of mirroring have more than a little in common: in both, *something essentially good is to be found (or not) in the gaze of another, when one is in a state of vulnerable dependence upon that other.*

The Hebrew phrase lends itself to nuance; thus the multiple translations. What does it mean to find favor in the sight of another? To find grace in the eyes of another? Regarding the first interpretation (finding favor in another's sight), the emphasis is on the one looking. Someone with power over you looks well upon you, and through their position of authority can grant you something that will improve your position in some way (see Gen. 50:4 for an example of such a scenario). What matters here is *what the one with power sees*, and what the one with power will do as a result. In the second instance (finding grace in another's eyes), the emphasis is on the one being seen; there is something to be received through the eyes of another; someone looks at you and sees *you*, and you receive this knowing through the mutual gaze. What matters here is *what is received by the dependent one* through the eyes of the one with power.

It is left then to the one interpreting each instance of this Hebrew phrase to determine if it indicates a simple cultural exchange of power, in which what matters most is that the one with power favors the vulnerable one; or if there is something more complex and interpersonal going on between the characters. I suggest that the language and context of the many instances in which מָצָא + חַן + בְּעֵינַי occur must be analyzed by the reader to determine if a simple favor is being granted, or if something more mutual and psychologically enriching is also occurring.

When looked at closely, several of these stories in the Hebrew Bible do depict interpersonal exchanges that hint at the dependence, mutuality, and psychological complexity alluded to by Winnicott in his description of mirroring. In each, language about the human face accompanies this phrase about finding grace

3 "Grace in the eyes of," "favor in the sight of," "grace in thy sight," "mercy in thine eyes," are some variations. Sometimes the reference to the eyes is left out of the translation all together. Thus Ruth 2:10 in TNK has "Why are you so kind?" as a translation of the phrase; the NIB translates the phrase in Exod 33:13 as "if you are pleased with me"; and in Genesis 47:29 the NRSV has no mention of the gaze, saying only "if I have found favor with you..."

in the eyes of another. I leave it for another time to more fully explore the human dynamic of mirroring in light of some of these deceptively brief vignettes in the Hebrew Bible.⁴ Here one example serves as a sort of bridge between the biblical notion of יָדָע and the psychological concept of mother-infant mirroring.

In a discussion between Moses and God (Exod 33:12–23) in which they discuss the nature of their relationship, the phrase in question appears five times. Moses mentions it three times as he opens the dialogue:

Exodus 33:12–17¹² Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Further, you have said, ‘I know you by name, and *you have found grace in my eyes.*’¹³ Now, if I truly have *found grace in your eyes*, pray let me know your ways, that I may know you and continue to *find grace in your eyes*. Consider, too, that this nation is your people. 14 And [God] said, “I myself will go with you and give you rest.” [Emphasis added]

Moses (v. 12) alludes to the words his divine lord has spoken to him previously: “I [God] know you [Moses] by name, and you have found grace in my eyes.” The word translated as ‘name’ [שֵׁם] is more encompassing than what modern-day readers understand as knowing someone by name: in the ancient mindset, a person’s or nation’s שֵׁם was their identity, it was who they were in the world (see Gen 12:2; 2 Sam 7:9). The essential aspects of a person, family, or tribe that may live on in the memory of others were denoted by the word שֵׁם (see 1 Sam 24:20; Deut 25:7). To know God’s שֵׁם was to seek, love, and trust God (Ps. 9:10; 91:17). “I know you by name” is therefore an assertion of deep and intimate knowing, not simply that God and Moses are on a first-name basis.

The statement that you, Moses, have found grace in my eyes builds upon God’s assertion that he knows Moses in this intimate way. Interpreted in light of the depth psychological perspective taken here, this statement echoes the silent communication from mother to infant as she holds her child and successfully mirrors him or her. Held in such a way, the baby may read on the mother’s face: “I know you! I see you! In my eyes find a reflection of your true and beloved identity. This grace to be found in my eyes *is* you.”

In Exodus 33, the relationship between gazer and gazed-upon grows.⁵ Moses remembers what his God has said in the past (v. 12), and now he wants more (v. 13). The initial mirroring (“if I truly have found grace in yours eyes...”) has instigated a capacity for and desire for mutual knowing (“...let *me* know *your* ways,

4 I am particularly gripped by the following three passages: the exchange between Jacob and his brother Esau when they reunite after several years (Genesis 33); the exchange between Hannah and the priest Eli (1 Samuel 1); and the exchange between Ruth and Boaz. In each the faces of the characters are described in a way that suggests transformation, recognition and/or divine grace.

5 The reader will note that while Moses speaks to God about their relationship, he also speaks to God about the people of Israel as well. In this section, I focus only on the Moses-YHWH relationship. I will revisit this passage, and the community of Israel, below.

that I may know you and continue to find grace in your eyes...”). Having found an experience of being known in the gaze of the other, Moses now wants to know the knower, wants further evidence that this relationship can be trusted.

Moses’ response to God’s knowing gaze resonates with the truths of human development: when we are sufficiently mirrored, says Winnicott, our powers of ap-*per*ception are unleashed. Not only can we look *out* at the world, we can look *into* another and seek to know them. Mirroring begins a relationship that Winnicott describes as “a significant exchange,” first with the one who mirrors us, and eventually with the larger world. Moses’s desire to know God and God’s ways as part of the relationship between them may indeed point to a desire for a “two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of meaning in the world of seen things” (Winnicott 1971, 113).

God’s initial response to Moses’s desire is a brief statement, four Hebrew words:

פָּנַי יֵלְכוּ וְהִנַּחְתִּי לְךָ: Exodus 33:14

The first word (פָּנַי) may be translated as ‘my face.’ Interestingly, the Hebrew word for face is a plural word, perhaps indicating that the visage, with its capacity to reflect different emotions and experiences moment to moment, is really more than one single surface. This word also indicates ‘presence’: in the Hebrew imagination, the face of another was symbolic of their very presence. The second word (יֵלְכוּ) is the verb ‘to go, to move.’ The third word (וְהִנַּחְתִּי) is a compound word meaning ‘I will give rest’ and the last word (לְךָ) is ‘to you.’ In response to Moses imploring God for evidence that their relationship can be trusted, God says, “My face will move and I will give you rest.” Most biblical translations offer a variation of “my presence shall go with thee, and I will give you rest.”⁶

As any baby searches for his or her mother’s face in response to being mirrored, with a desire to feel continued security, and to deepen the relationship—to know the other as he or she feels known—perhaps these four Hebrew words echo the wished-for response to be found in the maternal gaze, and in the feeling of being held by the ‘good-enough mother.’ “In our mutual gaze, you will continue to find my face responsive to you and to the moment, and this is how you will get to know me, as I get to know you. In this holding relationship, you may find rest. I am with you. I’ve got you. Don’t worry.”

I find YHWH’s statement, “I will give you rest” particularly poignant in light of Winnicott’s theories. If a baby can pick up the unspoken communication “I give you rest” in the arms of his or her mother, the mother has achieved one of the most important tasks in her role as facilitating environment for her child’s emotional and psychological development. Resting from the hard work of learning how to do all that humans do, and taking a pause from integrating the experience

6 In the King James Version. See also ASV, ESV, JPS, NIV, NRS and others for similar. NLT and TNK have more liberal translations: the New Living Translation offers, “I will personally go with you, Moses. I will give you rest—everything will be fine for you.” The JPS Tanakh gives, “I will go in the lead and will lighten your burden.”

accumulated from one moment to the next are crucial for human development. Winnicott referred to this necessary resting state as ‘unintegration’ (1958, 98–99; 1986, 29). Just *being* in a state of utter dependence *when that dependence is safely met*, says Winnicott, is the foundation for all healthy emotional and psychological development (1971b, 70–71).

When a mother functions as holding environment and mirror for her infant, it allows the child’s being, self-knowing, creativity, and meaningful exchange with the world all to emerge. If a growing child finds this with the one upon whom his or her life depends, more than favor has been found. It is a grace.

MARY AS ‘FULL OF GRACE’ IN LIGHT OF THE HEBREW NOTION OF חַן, AND WINNICOTT’S MIRRORING

Having looked at the Hebrew notion of חַן we now return to Luke’s annunciation narrative and ask, “What if Gabriel’s salutation to Mary—his assertion that she has found favor with God and is thus called κεχαριτωμένη—includes the theological intuition that to find favor with God is to find grace *in God’s eyes*?” Or, stated in the language of depth psychology, “What if Gabriel’s announcement to Mary includes recognition of the mirroring relationship between God and Mary?”

To interpret *Mary’s status* (‘full of grace’) as indicative of her being fully mirrored by God leads to a number of depth-psychological-theological considerations. A first consideration: Gabriel’s two-part salutation⁷ is pregnant with meaning. “Hail! Favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). Here finding grace (‘favored one’) is linked directly with God *being with* Mary (‘the Lord is with you’). As with the Moses passage, a continuing divine presence is promised along with mention or implication of the gaze of grace. Significantly, this pair—found in both passages—parallels the essential aspects of the earliest mother-infant relationship: mirroring offered through the mother’s face, and secure holding environment offered through the mother’s consistent holding and handling of her infant. In the psychological development of the young human, mirroring and secure holding are crucial because *utter dependence* is the natural state the infant is born into. Only when this utter dependence is met by such responsive and trustworthy presence on the part of the maternal other can the newborn human slowly grow into a healthy adult, to live out his or her innate potential (Winnicott 1971b, 71).

The theological notion of ‘grace’ emerges out of our recognition that the divine-human relationship is also one of utter dependence. According to this theology, humans are utterly dependent on God as creator, sustainer, and source of blessing (Ulanov 2001, 50). While this inescapable dependence speaks of human

7 Some ancient biblical texts have Gabriel’s salutation as a *three*-part greeting, while some modern translations leave out this third part. This third part (“blessed are you among women”) will be discussed further in the penultimate section.

vulnerability, in the eyes of one with faith this human weakness is also the very source of potential grace: allowing for our dependence on God opens us up to receive continuing experiences of grace.

A second consideration: such a depth-psychologically infused understanding of dependence, holding, and mirroring gives a new perspective on Mary's response to Gabriel, after he has given her his message:

"Here I am. The servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

While such a response may be taken as the sort of subservient attitude that raises the hackles of one's feminist and postcolonialist sensibilities, in light of the psychological realities of human dependence we may see it differently. Human dependence is a reality for us all. Mary has just been assured that in her particular relationship with God, this human dependence is being fully met. In calling her "full of grace" (Lk 1:28) and "one who has found favor (in the eyes of) God" (1:30), Gabriel is affirming something that Mary could only confirm through *her own ongoing experience with* God: that she has been mirrored fully by the divine other upon whom she is innately dependent. That she has been *successfully* mirrored is indicated not only by Gabriel's name for her, but by her own statement, "Here I am."

In saying, "Here I am," Mary asserts self-knowledge, self-actualization, presence.⁸ In the realm of human development, "Here I am" is a reality initiated through the mirroring gaze of the other upon whom we are initially dependent. Thus, as interpreted here, Mary's willingness to be 'servant' of the Lord is as much about recognizing that *her* needs have been met *by* God, as it is about her agreement to follow along with God's plan. Her dependence met fully by her divine other has enabled her to continue growing fully into who she actually is. Now that it is time to act in the world out of this maturing identity, she is ready for the task at hand. God's statement to Moses that God's face or presence will move along with him comes to mind. In a mirroring relationship, the one who is dependent upon the other may rest in that dependence, precisely because the one with the power is so exquisitely responsive to who the dependent one really is and what they need.

A third consideration: there are implications for the connection between this mirroring relationship, and Mary's role as mother of the Messiah. In considering Mary's "full of grace" status as indicative of the mirroring relationship between her and God, one may wonder why this particular aspect of Mary, and of her relationship with the divine, is being emphasized by the messenger. Why is this mirroring being 'announced' along with the news that she will give birth to one who will

8 The Hebrew equivalent is *hineni*. It is spoken by characters of the Hebrew Bible when they are called by God, just before God asks them to do something extraordinary.

reign over the house of Israel and be called the Son of God? A depth-psychologically infused theology offers a two-part answer:

- 1) Regardless of the child's innate identity as the Messiah, without a good enough holding environment in which to grow up (e.g. without proper mirroring), the child could not grow up to fulfill such a destiny.
- 2) In order to fully mirror the divine nature of her own child, Mary herself would have to have been fully mirrored by her divine Other.

Psychoanalysis recognizes that growth does not arise in a vacuum. Further, just as a growing human needs a nurturing environment—provided by other humans, beginning with one maternal other—so we learn how to be a nurturing environment for others from how we ourselves have been nurtured. The capacity to mirror, for instance, is one that is passed from generation to generation. To the extent that we are truly seen and securely held, our sense of authentic being is initiated and affirmed. This allows us to not only establish our own sense of being, it allows us to look into the world and find meaning in the life around us. *Our gaze can thus enrich another.* As we have been mirrored, so has our own capacity for truly seeing and understanding another been launched.

Winnicott recognized that this element of being is passed on from one generation to the next, through the way we function as environment for each other's dependence. In one paper he named this 'being element' the 'female element':

The simplest of all experiences [is] the experience of *being*. Here one finds a true continuity of generations, being which is passed on from one generation to another, via the female element of men and women and of male and female infants. I think this has been said before, but always in terms of women and girls, which confuses the issue. It is a matter of the female elements in both males and females (Winnicott 1971b, 80).

Theological intuition in the Bible seems to echo such an understanding of intergenerational transmission of this essential 'female element'⁹ in a particular way: God assures that chosen leaders will successfully nurture God's people, *by adequately nurturing those leaders first, and continuing to do so along the way.* To return to the exchange between Moses and God: Moses initiates this exchange because he is concerned that God has told him to "bring up this people" and Moses needs help doing so (Exod 33:12). God responds to Moses' concern by

9 Along with the 'female element' Winnicott also posited a 'male element,' both of which are present in all humans regardless of gender. The female element—connected to 'just being,' to identity, and to being held and mirrored in a state of quiet rest—is established first and becomes the basis for the male element—connected to 'doing,' and to our instinct-backed relationship with others. The female element is particularly relevant to this discussion, but both elements are best understood in relationship to the other. For further reading see DW Winnicott, DW, "Creativity and its Origins" pages 65–85 in *Playing and Reality*; Ann Ulanov, chapter 3, pages 67–91 in *Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Psychic Reality*.

talking about how he is taking care of Moses (“You have found grace in my eyes... my presence will be with you....I will give you rest...”). God’s response indicates that Moses’ ability to take care of the Israelites will arise out of God’s continuing care of Moses. For the leader of the Israelites to succeed in bringing them up (one might say: in order for Moses to be a ‘good enough mother’ for the Israelites), he needs to have a ‘good enough mother’ in God. Thus is the female element passed on from divine lord to human leader to burgeoning community.

As with God, Moses and the Israelites in Exodus, so too, with God, Mary and Jesus in Luke’s gospel. For Mary to succeed in bringing up Jesus, she needs God as divine other to hold and mirror her. In turn, her son will naturally draw upon his own experience being nurtured, mirrored, and held in his dependence by his mother, when he lives into his leadership role, having others dependent upon him.

This perspective on Mary’s status as “full of grace” brings us back to the notion of the Immaculate Conception.

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

These depth-psychologically infused theological considerations allow us to revisit the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and view it from a different perspective.

‘Conception’ in this perspective means more than just biological conception; it also includes the conception that happens in the psyche. Like biological conception, which happens in the womb (or in vitro), psychological conception is central to our being. To become a ‘self’ is the basic (yet oh so complicated!) task of human psychological development. Our self-conception—the way we originally come to know ourselves—begins, says Winnicott, in the mirroring gaze of our mother. We cannot live into our true selves unless we experience that truth received and reflected back to us. In order to live into who we truly are, this reality must be mirrored back to us, first in our mother’s gaze, and then—as our utter dependence on maternal provision slowly evolves into dependence upon our family, and ultimately into inter-dependence within larger and larger circles of our societal and cultural realms—in the gaze of our family and trusted others. No matter our innate potential or inborn personality traits, our way into the fulfillment of this true self begins in the recognition of who we are. This conception of the self is first found in the mirroring gaze of our maternal other. In that moment we have our first conception of ourselves, our first glimmer of “Aha! I *am!* I am *me!* I am in the world.” To the extent that our primal other does not see us, our inborn potential is hampered, and the road towards realization is compromised.

This discussion brings the psychological paradigm to the doctrine of ‘Immaculate Conception.’ There is psychological truth to be found in the catechetical statement that Mary needed to be “wholly borne by God’s grace” in order to conceive (of) the Son of God. Indeed, Mary’s human dependence needed to be *fully held by God*, and her unique being needed to be *fully mirrored by God* to initi-

ate *her own self-conception as a person with a unique religious vocation*. In turn, her self-conception could then allow her to freely and creatively live into that vocation, to fully mirror her son, thus initiating *his* own ability to live into his self, and into the self-discovery of his unique identity and vocation.

In order to do this for Jesus, Mary herself needed to be ‘full of grace.’ She needed to have been caught in the divine gaze herself, and to have felt her own unique being authentically recognized by divine Being. To say that Mary “was redeemed from the moment of her conception” does not necessarily mean that this happened when sperm met egg in her mother’s womb. According to this interpretation, her ‘conception’ can mean that her own self-knowing was actualized through the gaze of divine other; it was Mary’s self-knowing—that conception born in the gaze of grace—that empowered her to mirror her child’s divine nature.

If all this speaks to the psychological understanding of ‘conception,’ what about the notion of ‘immaculate?’ The purity associated with the word seems at odds with the human fallibility that Winnicott’s phrase “good enough mother” embraces. Winnicott assured us that we do not need to be perfect. His theories acknowledge that in the course of human events we can never fully mirror another; our attention to our newborns can never be so full and so wise and so perceptive that our own faces offer an immaculate mirror of the unique and special little humans caught in our gaze. Winnicott’s term reminds us that the mirror does *not* need to be immaculate for a baby to initiate conception of his or her own self, for a baby’s creativity to be set in motion, or for a baby to discover meaning in the world.

So does ‘immaculate conception’ mean that Mary *was* able to achieve this superhuman feat when raising her son? Perhaps not. Here I suggest a particular meaning of ‘immaculate’ to modify the form of psychological conception described above. ‘Immaculate’ modifies ‘conception’ in this particular case of maternal-infant mirroring because this doctrine explicates a mother-child bond in which the child was born and raised to be not only 100% human, but 100% divine as well. Thus while the gaze of the good-enough mother initiates self-conception in the psyche of the human infant, in this case *divinity* needed to be part of self-conception as well. Hence the conception as immaculate. It is not so much that Jesus needed a maternal other to mirror him *perfectly*, but rather that Jesus needed a maternal other who could *conceive of him as divine* and reflect this awareness in her gaze upon him.

The traditional Catholic doctrinal link between Jesus’ divine conception and Mary’s immaculate conception is echoed in this psychologically infused notion of the doctrine: in order to conceive of her son as divine and reflect this awareness in her gaze upon him, Mary needed to have had her own self-conception originate in more than good-enough human handling. She also needed to be held in the gaze of grace found in relationship with a divine other. Such divine nurture of her spiritual being was a precursor to the “Here I am” uttered by the one willing and able to be mother of God.

THE MIRRORING ROLE OF THE INTIMATE COMMUNITY

Yet one more parallel is to be considered between Winnicott's theory on mirroring and the Annunciation narrative. According to Winnicott, the importance of mirroring continues as the human develops: first it is the mother's role to "give back to the baby the baby's own self"; and this eventually becomes the role of the role of the whole family, whose attitude towards the growing child functions as a mirror (1971a, 118).

The child cannot use the parents and the family as a mirror unless there is this principle of permissiveness to be whatever he or she is, to be himself or herself, accepted completely without evaluation or pressure to change (1989, 497–8).

What the mother starts, the family continues. Mother initiates and establishes our road to being, but this female element in all of us can be redeemed through mirroring that happens in a variety of intimate relationships throughout our lives.¹⁰ Similarly, in the annunciation narrative, what God starts, the human community continues. Above it was mentioned that in Gabriel's salutation to Mary he mentions both her graced status ("full of grace") and that the "Lord is with you". Many translations of the scene leave it at that. But in several of the earliest manuscripts¹¹ there is a third appellation given to Mary: "Blessed are you among women!"

If 'full of grace' has been interpreted here as indicative of the *mirroring* aspect of Mary's relationship with the divine, and 'the Lord is with you' has been interpreted as indicative of the *holding* aspect of Mary's relationship with the divine, how then is "Blessed are you among women!" to be interpreted? In closing, I suggest that with these words, Gabriel directs Mary to the *intimate community* that may continue to bestow the blessings of mirroring and holding that have been initiated by God—the blessings of being, identity and a sense of self characterized by Winnicott as the female element.

Indeed, Gabriel speaks of a particular intimate community where blessings are to be found: he mentions a family-member of Mary's: her cousin Elizabeth (Lk 1:36). The narrative informs that Mary goes to stay with Elizabeth for three months. Mary chooses Elizabeth and Zechariah's home as the human holding environment for her early pregnancy, and offers her own human presence to Elizabeth as a holding environment for Elizabeth's late pregnancy. Indeed, Mary finds

10 For Winnicott one of the most significant adult relationships where mirroring can and should occur is that between psychotherapist and patient. He saw the function of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy as "a long-term giving the patient back what the patient brings. It is a complex derivative of the face that reflects what is there to be seen" (1971a, 117). As the psychotherapeutic relationship can be thought of as a 'derivative' of mother-infant mirroring, so we might begin to think of pastoral relationships and worship communities as potentially derivative of divine-human mirroring.

11 Greek manuscripts that include the phrase include Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Ephraemi, Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis, the Koine text, and others. The Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, Washington (Freer) Manuscript, and the "Lake Group" of minuscules leave it out. (Throckmorton 1992, 5, n. G)

an essential mirror in Elizabeth's joyful full-bodied response to her arrival (see Lk 1:39–45)—a response that does not judge the young, unmarried, pregnant girl but rather, to use Winnicott's words "accepts her completely," mirroring the humanity *and* the divinity that Elizabeth experiences in Mary's presence. Her sacred state of being having been acknowledged and reflected back to her by her loving cousin, Mary is then able to proclaim her immaculate conception in so many words:

"My soul magnifies the Lord" (Lk 1:46).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This article has considered the psychological conception of the self that originates in the mirroring gaze of one's maternal other. It has considered the ancient Hebrew notion that grace can only be found in another's eyes, when one is dependent upon that other. And it has revisited Mary's state of being "full of grace" in light of these considerations. A new theological perspective on Jesus' divine conception and Mary's immaculate conception has arisen as a result. When the questioning eyes of Mary's infant child asked her, "Who do you say that I am?" the answer in her gaze begat his self-conception. This scenario describes a psychological conception that is universally human, for better or for worse. The *particularities* of that mirroring relationship are what may be described as "immaculate" conception: Prior to this relationship, Mary's own vocational self-conception had originated in the mirroring relationship with her divine other, and was reinforced by additional mirroring in intimate human community. This in turn allowed her to conceive of her child's true divine nature. Only when she could conceive of her child's divine nature could she then authentically reflect this conception of him back to him through her gaze. In turn, this gaze of grace initiated Jesus' authentic self-conception as fully human and fully divine.

As a closing reflection upon Ann Ulanov and her work at Union, I return to the distinction between gaining favor in the sight of another and finding grace in another's gaze. This distinction was a lesson to be learned in my days as a student of Professor Ulanov's. To seek to gain her favor, to crave evidence that in her sight I was a 'good student' was a trap easily set by the circumstances. But if that trap could be avoided, a gift was there to be received: the grace of letting my own work and selfhood unfold authentically in the holding environment provided by Dr. Ulanov as teacher, advisor, mentor, and role model. Thank you, Ann Ulanov. I am among many women and men blessed to have been taught by you. Your vision of the world and your willingness to carefully watch over us and our work while at Union have functioned as the gaze of grace.