CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTION LITURGIES: IN PRAISE OF THE ROSE

The history of the Conception must begin by charting how the feast came about and how and where it was celebrated. I will then focus on establishing how the history of the feast began in the Peninsula and examine the type of liturgies used for its celebration from its earliest appearances to the end of the fifteenth century.

The story begins between the third and fifth centuries, when apocryphal histories about Mary began to circulate. Analogy with the Gospel events surrounding the birth of John, Christ’s Precursor, fuelled the development of Apocryphal Gospels, which sought to satisfy the wishes of early believers to know more about the Mother of Jesus. Writing of Apocryphal Gospels also sprang from the desire to ensure parity for Mary with other saints. The details of the stories about Mary’s birth and girlhood, as well as their connection with the Conception doctrine, are to be examined later in this study (see below, Chapter 10). Stefano de Fiore sees these stories as a first intuitive consciousness of the perfect sanctity of Mary (1988: 614). The stories, such as the one about how Salomé, the midwife, wishes to have physical evidence that Mary remained a Virgin after the birth and how her hand was withered for her temerity, were influenced by docetic tradition. Despite influences from traditions, like docetism, which the Church was to declare heretical, the stories were soon accepted.

Once stories about Mary’s birth were in circulation, the second stage of development was the introduction of a feast-day. John the Baptist was already different from all the other saints because of the celebration of his birth on earth, rather than his birth into heaven. Now, Mary was to stand out from other saints in the same way. The link established between John and Mary lead to pressure to parallel the Nativity feast of John with one for Mary. Analogy with the existing feast day meant that no new doctrine was required in order for the Conception feast to be introduced. The new feast marked out Mary’s specialness, opening the way for further development of how that could have occurred.

There was, however, a further precedent for establishing a non-Gospel feast for the Nativity of Mary in the way in which the Dormi-
tion, or Transitus, and later the Assumption, had developed. The Dormition developed into the Assumption because early Christians were unwilling to accept that Mary's perfect body could have undergone decay in the earth (Shoemaker 2002). The feast was first celebrated in the East and then became known in the West. Mary’s Nativity feast took the same route. It was established during the sixth or seventh century, and spread to the West, where it was introduced on 8 September (Barré 1955; Stacpoole 1982: 218; Boss 1999: 124).

Following the introduction of the Nativity feast in a small number of dioceses, attention began to turn to establishing the mechanics of Mary’s preparation for a holy birth. The Gospel of Luke describes John the Baptist’s leap of recognition at the visit of his Saviour and it was his sanctification in the womb that his feast-day recognized. Once the Nativity was established, the question of whether Mary had been sanctified in the womb to prepare her for her birth had to be resolved.

The Conception feast developed in several stages. By the early eighth century, a feast-day dedicated to the mother of Mary, St Anne, was being celebrated in the East on 9 December, a feast set just nine months before the Nativity (Warner 1976: 239; Ricossa 1994: 21). In Constantinople, it had been called the feast of St Anne. When it appeared in Naples in 840–850 AD, the feast was known as the Conception of the Virgin (Levi d’Ancona 1957: 11–12; Ricossa 1994: 24). It had spread from the East with monks fleeing the iconoclast persecutions and was taken up first in the Greek monasteries (Stacpoole 1982: 219). The feast celebrated two events: St Anne and the physical act of conceiving Mary, and the moment of the passive conception, when the Virgin took form in the womb of her mother. 1 Eventually, Mary’s name took precedence and the feast of St Anne was moved to 26 July.

For a time, it was believed that the Conception feast originated in Ireland but Lamy argues that its presence at 3 May in the Leinster martyrology was a misreading for another saint’s name (2000: 32). The feast became established in England shortly after the time of the Norman Conquest. 2 It was being celebrated in various dioceses by the

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1 There were strong precedents in the calendar for this dual conception. In the same way, the feast of the Annunciation on 25 March celebrated the moment when the Virgin conceived and gave her assent, as well as honouring the moment when Christ began his life in her womb.

2 This theory was developed by Edmund Bishop (1904) and most historians follow his lead (Van Dijk 1954: 253–262; Woolf 1968: 116; Stacpoole 1982: 219). Bishop