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FIRST SERMON ON THE GLORIES OF THE
VIRGIN MOTHER

" The Angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee Nazareth, " To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David: and the virgin's name was Mary "-Luke i. 26-27.

Why, it may be asked, does the Evangelist in this passage mention by their proper names so many persons and places, and that with such evident deliberation ? It is, I believe, because he wishes to remind us of the attention with which we should peruse what he ' is chronicling so carefully. He names the messenger who is sent, the Lord Who sends him, the Virgin to whom designates by their proper names the family of both he is sent, and even the spouse of the Virgin. He also spouses, their city, and their country. Wherefore this ? Shall we suppose that the inspired author has set down anything without special signification? Surely not For if a leaf falls not from the tree without cause, if a sparrow does not " fall on the ground without (the per mission of) the Father " in heaven, how is it credible that a superfluous word could flow from the lips of the holy Evangelist, especially whilst he is narrating the sacred history of the Incarnate Word ? No, I cannot believe it. On the contrary, I affirm that everything here is full of heavenly mystery, every smallest detail abounding in divine sweetness, yet only for him who examines it with diligence, and who knows how to " suck honey out of the rock and oil out of the hardest stone." For, as the Prophet Joel predicted," on that day the mountains dropped down sweetness and the hills overflowed with honey and milk, " when the heavens " distilled dew from above and the clouds rained down the just," when the exulting " earth opened and budded forth a Saviour," when " the Lord gave benignity and our earth yielded her fruit," when on that Mountain of mountains, on that " curdled and fat Mountain," mercy and truth met each other, justice and peace embraced." At that time not the least among the other, mountains, viz., the disciples of Christ, was this blessed Evangelist who, in mellifluous language, tells the entrancing story of the origin of our salvation,-a veritable aromatic hill, which of old under the warm breath of the south wind and from the vicinity of the radiant Sun of justice, exhaled and diffused abroad the sweet odour of its spicy treasures. Oh, that now also God would vouchsafe to "send out His word and melt " for us these spiritual spices 1 That " His wind would blow," in order to liquefy and make intelligible to us the odori ferous words of this Gospel narrative 1 That He would place them in our hearts as a rich inheritance, 44 more to be desired than gold and many precious stones, and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.

The Evangelist therefore says, The Angel Gabriel was sent from God." I do not suppose that this Angel belonged to the inferior choirs of blessed spirits who are frequently sent to the earth on embassies of ordinary importance. An evident reason for thinking so is furnished in his very name, because " Gabriel " signifies' Strength of God." Another reason is the fact that he is not said to have been sent by any higher angel, as is usually the case when the heavenly messenger happens to be of inferior dignity.,¹ but directly by God Himself. It is therefore with the design to insinuate this that the Evangelist is not content to say, " He was sent," but adds, " from God." Or perhaps the addition is made lest we should think that God revealed His counsel to any even of the celestial court before it was made known to the Virgin,² excepting of course the Archangel Gabriel, who was found so highly exalted amongst his fellow spirits as to be accounted worthy of so glorious a name and of so honourable a mission. And his name accords well with his mission. For how could anyone more fittingly announce Christ, " Who is the Power of God," than he who has been honoured with the similar name of " Strength of God " ? What difference is there between the Power of God and the - Strength- of God ? Nor ought it to seem improper or unbecoming that the messenger should be called by the same name as his Master, since that name is not applied to both with the same signification. For Christ is called the Power " or the " Strength of God " in a sense in which such a title cannot be understood of the Angel

The name " Strength of God " as applied to the Angel is purely titular, whereas in Christ it is not a name simply, but a name that expresses His Nature. He is what He is called, the " Power of God," Who coming with superior strength upon " the strong man armed that was wont to keep his court and his possessions in peace, " overcame him " by the might of His arm, and forcibly took

¹ That is to say, the lower angels ordinarily learn the divine, decrees which concern themselves, not immediately from God, but by illumination from the higher spirits : just as on earth the divine will is made known to us through human superior,,,. Cf. St. Thomas, Sum. *Theol.*, I. q. cvi. a. i-2; cf. also Suarez.

t. ii. 1. vi. C. xi!.-xv -(Translator),

² But how could the angels have been ignorant of what was known to the patriarchs and prophets ? The Saint solves this difficulty (de Bapt. v.) by distinguishing between the substance of the mystery and its circumstances. That the Word was to become incarnate the angels knew from the beginning, but as to the circumstances of place, time, mode, and persons, they, like the prophets, had no clear knowledge. Somewhat similar is our own knowledge of Christ's second coming, as St. Bernard himself points out. In this position the holy Preacher is supported by St. Thomas, I. q. Lxiv. a. i ;, and by Suarez, t. v. c. 6, n. 33 (Translator).

away from him his captives and his spoil. But the Angel is named the " Strength of God," not because he possesses in himself the reality signified by this name, but either because he merited to obtain the high prerogative of being chosen to announce the coming of Him Who is the true " Strength of God " ; or else because it was his duty to comfort the Virgin, 11 naturally timid, simple, and retiring, lest the announcement of so unheard of a prodigy should overwhelm her with fear: hence we find him reassuring her with the words, " Fear not Mary, for thou hast found grace with God." We may suppose, and not without reason, that it was the same Angel who comforted her humble and modest spouse also, saying to him, "Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife," although in recording this incident the Evangelist does not mention the Angel's name. Gabriel, therefore, was most fittingly chosen to herald the Saviour's coming; or rather he is most fittingly designated by this name because chosen for so high an office.

" The Angel Gabriel," then, " was sent from God." But whither ? " Into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth." Let us see whether, as Nathanael says, " any thing of good can come from Nazareth." The word Nazareth " means " a flower." Now, it seems to me that the celestial communications and promises made to the fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, were, in a sense, the seed of the divine counsel, cast from heaven on the earth. Of this seed Isaiah says, "Except the Lord of Hosts had left us seed, we had been as Sodom, and we should have been like to Gomorrha." It attained to florescence in the wonders which were wrought " when Israel went out of Egypt," in the figures and signs exhibited throughout the whole long journey across the desert to the promised land, afterwards in the visions and predictions of the prophets, and finally in the institution and government of the kingdom and the priesthood, down to the Christian era. Christ Himself may be properly understood to be the Fruit of this seed and of these flowers. Hence the Royal Prophet sang, " The Lord will give goodness, and our earth shall yield her Fruit." And again, declaring God's promise to himself, " Of the Fruit of thy womb I will set upon thy throne." Christ therefore is announced to be born in Nazareth, because we naturally expect to see the fruit coming forth from the flower. But when the fruit has made its appearance, the flower falls off; so too, all types and figures vanished away as soon as Truth appeared in the flesh. Hence also Nazareth is said to be a 41 city of Galilee," that is, of "transmigration" (such being the meaning of the name Galilee), because at the birth of Christ all those things which I have just enumerated and which, as the Apostle declares, " happened to them (the Israelites) in figure," passed for ever away. Indeed we can see for ourselves we, who are now enjoying the Fruit, that the flowers are all withered and gone. And even whilst they were still in bloom it had been foreseen that they should perish. This may be inferred from the words of the Psalmist, "In the morning it shall grow up like grass, in the morning, it shall flourish and pass away; in the evening it shall fall, grow dry and wither " ³ For " in the evening" that is to say, in the evening of the world, when the fullness of time was come (and) God sent His Son, made of a woman, made under the law," : in that evening. I say all the types and shadows of the old dispensation passed away and disappeared, just as the blossom falls and withers when the new fruit comes forth. Therefore it is also written, "The grass is withered, and the flower is fallen: but the Word of the Lord endureth for ever." it will be granted, I suppose, that the Word here stands for the fruit. Now the Word of the Lord is Christ. Christ is, consequently the excellent Fruit That endureth forever "But where is the grass which has withered ? Where is the flower ,which has fallen? endureth for ever ? Let the Prophet Isaiah answer

All flesh is grass. and the glory thereof as the flower of the field."

But if "all flesh is grass" and if the grass is withered," it follows that the nation of the Jews, must be withered as the grass. since they are carnal, Can we doubt that this people are withered, whilst we behold them, strangers to the sweet unction of grace, obstinately adhering to the dry and sapless letter ? And is not their flower also fallen, since the glory which they derived from the law has been lost to them for ever ? But if that flower still remains where, then is the kingdom where is the priesthood ? where the prophets, and the temple ? where those mighty wonders which they used to boast, saying, " How great things have we heard and known, and our fathers have told us," and also, " How great things He commanded our fathers that they should make the same known to their children " ? This is all I have to say in connection with the words, " Into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth."

Therefore the Angel Gabriel was sent from God into this city of Nazareth. But to whom was he sent ? The Evangelist informs us, " To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph." And who is this Virgin, so venerable that she is saluted by an. angel, yet so humble that she is espoused to an artisan ? We have here a beautiful alliance of virginity with humility. And surely

³ * This is only an accommodation. for it is clear from" the context that the prophets is speaking of man
-(Translator)

that soul must be highly pleasing to God in which humility commends virginity and virginity adorns humility. But what degree of reverence shall we not judge, her to be worthy of whose humility fruitfulness glorifies, and whose virginity is consecrated by motherhood ? You have learned that she was a virgin and you have learned that she was humble. If you cannot imitate the virginity of the humble 'Mary, at least imitate the humility of the virgin Mary. Very desirable is the virtue of virginity, yet humility is more necessary. We are counselled to embrace the former, but the latter is a matter of precept. To the one we are invited, to the other we are constrained. Concerning virginity the Saviour only says, " He that can take it, let him take it " ; whereas He speaks thus of humility - " Unless you be converted and become as little children you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." The first, there fore, is commanded with the promise of a special reward, whilst the second is exacted as a debt. One can be saved without virginity, but without humility salvation is utterly impossible. The soul that is humble, I say, even if she has to lament the loss of her virginity, may nevertheless be pleasing to God; but-I dare to affirm it-the virginity even of Mary would have no value in His eyes apart from her humility. Hence He has said by His Prophet Isaiah, " Upon whom shall My Spirit rest but upon him that is humble and quiet ? " ⁴Notice that it is not on virginity He has promised that His Spirit shall rest, but on humility. Consequently, had Mary not been humble the Spirit of the Lord would not have rested upon her. But if He had not rested upon her, He would not certainly have made her fruitful. For how could she have conceived by Him without His co-operation ? It is evident then that, as she herself declares, God " hath regarded the humility of His hand-maid " rather than her virginity, in order that she might conceive by the Holy Ghost. But although she was pleasing on account of her virginity, still it was her humility that made her a mother. And hence it may be said that her humility was the true reason why the Lord took complacency in her virginity.

What sayest thou to this, O proud virgin ? Mary, forgetful of her virginity, glories only in her humility,

and dost thou, on the contrary, applaud thyself for being a virgin whilst taking no pains to become an humble virgin ? " He hath regarded," she says, " the humility of His hand-maid.." MO is she that speaks thus ? She is a virgin, and a virgin conspicuous for sanctity, for prudence, and for piety. Dost thou pretend to be more Pure than she ? or to be more pious ? Perchance thou believest thy chastity to be more pleasing than was Mary's. and that thy virginity will be sufficient of itself, and without the help of *humility*, to win the favour of God, whereas hers was not ? Oh consider that the more honourable thou hast been made by the singular grace of chastity, the greater is the injury thou dost inflict on thyself by thus befouling thy beauty with the filth of pride ! In truth, it were more expedient for thee to have lost thy virginity than to make its preservation a reason for pride.⁵ Virginity is a virtue that is found with few, but far fewer are they who combine it with humility. If therefore thou be one who can only admire the virginity of Mary, apply thyself with zeal to copy her humility, and that will be enough for thee. But if thou art both a virgin and an humble virgin, thou hast attained to true greatness, whosoever thou mayest be.

Nevertheless, there is something further *for* thee to admire in Mary, something even more wonderful than this union Of humility with virginity. I refer to that prerogative by which she unites integrity with fruitfulness. For " from the beginning of the world it hath not been heard that any" woman was at one and the same time a mother and a virgin. And oh 1 if thou rememberest Whose Mother she was, what bounds shalt thou set to thy admiration of her incomparable grandeur ? Shalt thou not be brought to understand that thou canst never admire her as much as she deserves ? Shall not she who has God for her Son be exalted in thy judgement, as in the judgement of Truth, above all creatures, even above all the choirs of angels ? Is not the God of the universe and the Lord of the angels called Son by Mary, who, as the Evangelist St. Luke, tells us, once said to Him, " Son, why hast Thou done so to us ? " Which of the celestial princes would dare to use such language ? It is enough for them, yea, it is a great thing in their estimation, that having been created pure spirits, they received from grace the dignity and the name of angels of God. Hence the Psalmist says, speaking to the Lord, " Who makest Thy angels spirits." But Mary, remembering that she is His Mother, gives with confidence the name of Son to that awful Majesty Whom they are happy to serve with lowly reverence. Neither does the Lord disdain to be called what He has not disdained to become. For a little further on the same Evangelist from whom I have last quoted tells us that "He (Jesus) was subject to them," viz., to Mary and Joseph. God became subject to man 1 God, before Whom the angels prostrate, Whose commands are carried out by the powers and the principalities, that God, I say, was subject to Mary, and not to Mary alone, but to Joseph also, for Mary's sake! Admire therefore these, two marvels, and choose, which of

⁴ This reading- of Is. lxvi. 2, differs considerably from the Vulgate, which is thus rendered by the Douay Translators But to whom shall I have respect but to him that is poor and little ? " The Septuagint differs from both (To whom shall I have respect but to him that is Humble and quiet.(Translator)

⁵ Similarly St. Augustine: " Superbis continentibus expedit cadere, ut in eo ipso . In quo se extollunt, humilientur " (De Verbis Domini) Translator

them thou wilt admire the more, whether the gracious condescension of the Son, or the glorious exaltation of the Mother. Each of them oppresses our mind, each of them passes our comprehension. That God should obey a woman is a condescension without parallel; that a woman should command God is a glory beyond compare. Where the Evangelist is speaking in praise of virgins, he mentions it as a special prerogative that "they shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." Of what praise, then, shalt thou deem her worthy, who follows not but precedes the Lamb?

Learn, O man, to obey; learn, O earth, to bear the yoke; learn, O dust, to be submissive. It is of thy Creator the Evangelist is speaking where he says, "And He was subject to them." namely, to Mary and Joseph. Oh, be ashamed, proud ashes! God humbles Himself, and dost thou exalt thyself? God subjects Himself to men, and dost thou, by striving to subject men to thee, prefer thyself to thy Maker? Would to God that, whenever such ambitious thoughts possess my soul, I might hear -addressed to me the words in which the Saviour once replied to the Apostle who had rebuked Him, "Go behind Me, Satan, thou art a scandal unto Me, because thou savourest not the things that are of God, but the things that are of men"! For as often as I entertain the desire to rule over men, so often do I endeavour to run before God. Then truly I do not "savour the thing, that are of God," of Whom it is written that "He was subject to thee, O man, if thou disdainest to follow the example of man, surely thou wilt not deem it a dishonour to imitate thy Creator. And if thou art not able to follow Him whithersoever He goeth," at least refuse not to follow Him whither He condescends for thy sake. I mean to say, if thou canst not follow Him in the sublime way of virginity, follow Him, follow thy God in the safe path of humility, from the straightness of which should any one wander, even though he belong to the number of the virgins, such a one, to confess the truth, does not "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." The proud virgin does indeed follow the Lamb, and so too does the humble penitent, but neither follows Him whithersoever He goeth, because whilst the latter cannot ascend to the purity of the Lamb Who is without spot, the former is equally unable to descend to His lowly meekness, Who was dumb not only before His shearers, but even before His slayers. Nevertheless, the penitent soul that follows Him in the path of humility has taken a safer course than the proud soul that imitates His virginity. For whereas humble satisfaction shall wipe away the stains of the one, the purity of the other shall be tarnished by her pride.

But how happy is Mary, to whom neither humility is wanting nor virginity! Hers, moreover, is a singular virginity, which her fruitfulness has not injured but enhanced; just as hers is an unparalleled humility, which her fruitful virginity impaired not but glorified; yea, and her fruitfulness also is incomparable, attended and adorned as it is by humility and virginity. In which of these qualities is not Mary wonderful? in which is she not pre-eminent? in which not unique I shall be very much surprised if, in balancing them, one against the other, thou art not puzzled to determine which is the most worthy of thy admiration. whether thou shouldst feel greater wonder at the fruitfulness of the virgin than at the integrity of the mother; at her exaltation in her Son, or at her humility in the midst of such glory. But undoubtedly all these, taken together, are more marvellous than any one of them; and it is an incomparably better and happier lot to have received the whole of them than some without the others.

And what matter for surprise is it that God, Who is said and Who is seen to be "wonderful still His saints," has shown Himself still more wonderful in His Mother? O all ye who are engaged in the married state, look with admiration on this incorruption of the flesh in corruptible flesh! Ye consecrated virgins, wonder at this alliance of virginity and Motherhood! O Children of Adam all, imitate the humility of God's Mother! And do You, O holy angels, honour the Mother Of Your King whilst You adore the Child of our Virgin, Him Whom both you and we acknowledge as our Sovereign Lord, Who is the Redeemer of our race and the Restorer of your city. To the Same therefore, so sublime with you in heaven, so humble with us on earth, let us all unite in showing the reverence which His Majesty requires, and the honour, and glory in which is due to His condescension both now and for evermore. Amen.