

# The Crown of the Virgin



THE  
CROWN  
OF THE  
VIRGIN

An Ancient Meditation  
on Mary's Beauty,  
Virtue, and Sanctity

attributed to  
St. Ildephonsus of Toledo

translated by  
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*Ad Majorem Gloriam Virginis Mariae*

*Lily of love, pure and inviolate!  
Tower of ivory! red rose of fire!  
Thou hast come down our darkness to illumine:  
For we, close-caught in the wide nets of Fate,  
Wearied with waiting for the World's Desire,  
Aimlessly wandered in the house of gloom,  
Aimlessly sought some slumberous anodyne  
For wasted lives, for lingering wretchedness,  
Till we beheld thy re-arisen shrine,  
And the white glory of thy loveliness.*

Oscar Wilde, 1879



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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The text presented in the following pages is a translation from a Latin work entitled *Libellus de Corona Virginis*, or “The Little Book on the Crown of the Virgin.” In it the author imaginatively fashions a crown, decorated with twelve jewels, six stars, and six flowers. Each of these is interpreted as representing particular aspects of the beauty, beneficence, virtue, or sanctity of the Blessed Virgin. The use of the image, suggested by Scripture,<sup>1</sup> of a bejewelled crown as the formal and conceptual basis of devotional writing to our Lady is by no means unique to the present work—innumerable other examples are to be found dating from the end of the Middle Ages through to the early modern era.<sup>2</sup> Yet the present work, apart from consid-

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<sup>1</sup> Rv 12:1; Ps 21:3; Prv 4:9; Sg 7:5; Sir 45:14.

<sup>2</sup> See Maurice de Villepreux, *Nova Corona Mariae* (Paris: Johannes Argentoracensis, 1512), Pelbartus de Temesvár, *Stellarium Coronae Gloriossimaе Virginis* (Venice: Jo. Ant. Bertanus, 1586), Isidorus de S. Aegidio, *Corona Stellarum Duodecim* (Antwerp: Henricus van Dunwalt, 1685).

erations of its perhaps considerably greater antiquity, remains distinguished amongst this literary *corpus* of Marian crowns.

According to its earliest editor, “It glories in heartfelt piety, in cordial affection and in mellifluous sweetness to an extent that I have encountered in no other writings of the saints or doctors of the Church; (nor indeed have I found anything which) seizes the soul of the reader more sweetly, or inflames it to devotion to the Virgin more ardently.”<sup>3</sup>

Another compiler opines that “we scarcely believe that (this small book) could be read without it inspiring an intimate sense of piety and devotion towards the Mother of God.”<sup>4</sup>

The work is found in a single manuscript source only, from which the various published editions (of which mention will be made shortly) all derive, either directly or indirectly. This manuscript is held in the venerable library of the Cathedral of Toledo and is of unknown

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<sup>3</sup> Pedro de Alba y Astorga, *Bibliotheca Virginalis, sive Mariae Mare Magnum, Tomus II* (Madrid: Typogr. Regia, 1648), 360-61.

<sup>4</sup> L. Vives (ed.), *Liber precum in quo variae et multae egregiae preces ad usum cleri tum regularis tum secularis, Tomus II* (Paris: Bibliopolam, 1857), 387.

date, but apparently “most ancient.”<sup>5</sup> While no author is identified in the manuscript, the text is located in a codex containing various writings of St. Ildephonsus, to whom it has therefore appeared reasonable to attribute the authorship.

Ildephonsus (c.607–c.670) was a monk at the monastery of Agali, in the vicinity of the imperial centre of Toledo, where he later served as abbot. He became archbishop of that illustrious city in 659, succeeding his uncle, Eugenius II. According to St. Julian, who succeeded him in his archepiscopal office, Ildephonsus was “rich with the fear of God, devout in religion, profuse in compunction, grave in carriage, praiseworthy in honesty, singular in patience, silent in guarding secrets, and of the highest wisdom. He was brilliant in his ingenuity of speech, and fluent in his eloquence.”<sup>6</sup>

A well-known tradition relates that the Virgin Mary herself appeared to Ildephonsus and presented him with a chasuble. This anecdote is related thus by one writer:

When once (Ildephonsus) was attending a nightly prayer vigil (in honor of the Immaculate

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<sup>5</sup> de Alba, *Bibliotheca Virginalis*, 361.

<sup>6</sup> Julian of Toledo, *Beati Hildephonsi Elogium*, PL 96:43-44.

Conception of the Blessed Virgin), the church seemed suddenly to blaze with radiant light, beyond what any mortal eyes could bear. Everyone else present fell to the ground, struck with terror. But Ildephonsus alone dauntlessly proceeded to the altar, and fell to his knees and prayed fervently. He perceived the Blessed Virgin herself, seated in his own episcopal throne, in aspect more glorious than any mortal being. She spoke to him in these words, "The reward you will receive for defending the honor of my perpetual virginity will be a special gift from the treasury of Heaven!" She then placed upon him a chasuble, saying, "My son, henceforth celebrate all the annual feasts held in my honor vested in this garment."<sup>7</sup>

He was a vigorous champion of the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, which is the theme of his best-known work, *On the Perpetual Virginity of Most Blessed Mary*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Carl Stengel, *Imagines Sanctorum Ordinis S. Benedicti* (Augsburg: Benediktinerkloster St. Ulrich und Afra, 1652), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ildephonsus of Toledo, *De Virginitate perpetua SS. Mariae*, PL 96:53-110.

The attribution of the present work to Ildephonsus is not, it must be noted, unproblematic. There are certain indisputable anachronisms in the text, notably borrowings of phrases from hymns, prayers, or writings, that are of later origin.<sup>9</sup> There are also notable discrepancies in vocabulary between the works of Ildephonsus of which the authorship is more certain.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand certain literary traits which characterize the *Corona*, such as the rhythmic accumulation of long and intentionally repetitive series of titles, invocations, descriptions, and petitions, are prominent characteristics of Ildephonsus's style elsewhere. Given that the work is attributed to no particular author in the manuscript, it seems not impossible that the copyist of the single extant manuscript may have introduced textual variants, additions, or "improvements" in transcribing

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<sup>9</sup> An obvious example of this is the appearance of the phrase, "*illos tuos misericordes oculos ad me converte*", clearly borrowed from the *Salve Regina*, in chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in *De Virginitate perpetua SS. Mariae*, Ildephonsus employs the terms "*Dominatrix*" and "*Genitrix*." (PL 96:58) Yet the *Corona*, despite the otherwise exhaustive multitude of titles it uses for the Blessed Virgin, does not include either word. On the other hand, the *Corona* uses the title "*Domina nostra*" ("Our Lady"), (cf. prologue and chapter 17) which does not feature in any of the other writings of Ildephonsus.

an earlier work. But it could also simply be a later work which emulates some of the literary features and devotional themes of Ildephonsus's writing, with which the scribe who created the manuscript was clearly familiar.

To date, the *Corona* has been presented to the reading public in five editions. The most significant are those of Pedro de Alba y Astorga, OFM, dating from 1648,<sup>11</sup> and of Francisco de Lorenzana, Archbishop of Toledo, dating from 1782.<sup>12</sup> Both of these editions derive from (apparently) the same manuscript in the Toledo Cathedral library. Nevertheless, there are a few textual discrepancies (albeit of a minor nature) between the 1648 and the 1782 editions. These, in the main, emerge simply from the correction of the typographical errors and misreadings of the manuscript, which abound in de Alba's earlier edition. The text of the 1782 edition, certainly the more reliable of the two, was reproduced in three nineteenth-century compilations: a *Liber Precum*

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<sup>11</sup> Ildephonsus of Toledo (attrib.), "Libellus de Corona Virginis," in Pedro de Alba y Astorga, *Bibliotheca Virginalis, II* (Madrid: Typographia Regia, 1648), 362-83.

<sup>12</sup> Ildephonsus of Toledo (attrib.), "Libellus de Corona Virginis," in Francisco de Lorenzana, *SS. PP. Toletanorum quotquot extant Opera, Tomus I* (Toledo: Ioachimium Ibarra, 1782), 394-434.

edited by Louis Vives,<sup>13</sup> the *Summa aurea de laudibus Beatissimae Virginis Mariae* edited by J. P. Migne,<sup>14</sup> and the ubiquitous *Patrologia Latina* of the same editor.<sup>15</sup>

As in any translation, the rendering given here is necessarily a compromise between fidelity to the original and the demands of idiomatic English. Latin is, of course, rich in words which are more-or-less but not-quite synonymous (e.g., *pulchra*, *speciosa*, *decora*, *formosa*, etc. for “beautiful”), for which precise or acceptable English equivalents do not always spring readily to hand, especially when several (or, indeed, many) such words are used in immediate succession. The translator has been guided in such instances not only by the primary question of replicating the meaning intended by the author but also by considerations of idiom, sonority, rhythm, and readability.

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<sup>13</sup> Ildephonsus of Toledo (attrib.), “Libellus de Corona Virginis,” in L. Vives (ed.), *Liber precum*, II, 387-458.

<sup>14</sup> Ildephonsus of Toledo (attrib.), “Libellus de Corona Virginis,” in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Summa aurea de laudibus Beatissimae Virginis Mariae, Tomus XIII* (Paris: Migne, 1862), 1247-75.

<sup>15</sup> Ildephonsus of Toledo (attrib.), “Libellus de Corona Virginis,” in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina, Tomus XCVI* (Paris: Migne, 1862), 283-318.

In translating the names of gemstones and stars, English terms which are in current general usage have been favored as far as possible. For example, *carbunculus* has been translated as “ruby” rather than the punctiliously literal option of “carbuncle” (a now somewhat dated term) or the more mineralogically accurate “almandine garnet.” For similar reasons, *chrysoprasus* has been given as “jade” rather than the more literal “chrysoprase.”

In those passages presented in verse, a higher degree of translational, or indeed paraphrastic, liberty has been freely exercised, wherever it seems more faithfully or more felicitously to convey the spirit and qualities of the original text.

It is the sincere hope and prayer of the present translator—just as it was of the original author—that this work may serve to promote love of and devotion to the glorious and Blessed Virgin Mary, who remains, now as always, our life, our sweetness, and our hope.

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## PROLOGUE

by the Author

*“There shall be a crown of gold upon her head,  
as a visible sign of her sanctity.”*

Ecclesiasticus 45:14

Sacred Scripture teaches us, all creation urges us, mystical symbols warn us, and every page of holy theology instructs us that we should never cease to bless, to praise, and to proclaim the imperial majesty of the most glorious Virgin Mary. For she is decorated with the glory of every imaginable virtue, adorned with finest pearls of all heavenly gifts, and rendered splendid by the radiance of divine wisdom and knowledge. We are warmly called to her praise by wonderful miracles, by oracles descending from heaven itself, through hidden mysteries, through the teaching of the prophets, through mystical signs, through the words of the Holy

Gospel, and through the clarion call of the Lord's holy apostles.

The most exalted heavens praise her, together with the sun and the moon, the stars of the firmament, the whole orb of the earth, the choirs and legions of holy angels, and all the host of celestial spirits. For this reason, holy people and saints of every nation under heaven, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have always endeavored to extol her with wondrous praise, with golden eloquence, and with mellifluous and noble speech. I myself, who have by no means been so copiously or egregiously endowed with any such talents, will, nevertheless, elucidate and show forth her praise as far as my own small abilities permit. I, who am indeed a mere stammering rustic, do this only by virtue of the grace mercifully given me. Indeed, were I not to do so, I could rightly be judged to have failed in my duty of gratitude for the fruitful blessings Mother Mary has shown me.

In order that—in accordance with the verse of Scripture quoted above<sup>16</sup>—our Lady's most revered head may shine forth with fitting splendor, I shall fashion for her a golden crown, adorned with twelve precious gems, made radiant with six stars of celestial light, and

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<sup>16</sup> Sirach 45:14.

perfumed with six of the most beautiful flowers so that it may indeed be filled with all imaginable sweetness!

In the following chapters, these shall be described in the order of their placement in this crown. And I shall position them thus:

- in the first place, a precious topaz;
- in the second place, the morning-star, Sirius;
- in the third place, a carnelian stone;
- in the fourth place, a lily;
- in the fifth place, a chalcedony;
- in the sixth place, the star Arcturus;
- in the seventh place, a sapphire;
- in the eighth place, a crocus flower;
- in the ninth place, an agate stone;
- in the tenth place, the Star of the Sea;
- in the eleventh place, a jasper;
- in the twelfth place, a rose;
- in the thirteenth place, a ruby;
- in the fourteenth place, the Sun;
- in the fifteenth place, an emerald;
- in the sixteenth place, a violet;
- in the seventeenth place, an amethyst;
- in the eighteenth place, the Moon;

- in the nineteenth place, a peridot gemstone;
- in the twentieth place, a sunflower;
- in the twenty-first place, a stone of precious gold-green jade;
- in the twenty-second place, the star Orion;
- in the twenty-third place, a beryl; and, finally,
- in the twenty-fourth place, a daisy flower.

May such an array of precious jewels, of glowing stars, of beautiful flowers, render the crown which I shall fashion more noble, more beautiful, and more pleasing to our gracious Lady!

Therefore, I beg you, O Virgin most pure and merciful, most noble and radiant Queen, to accept benignly this humble token of my service. By your grace, may you receive me into your protection and guard me from all the perils which surround me. Let my voice be joined—I earnestly entreat you—with the glorious choirs of heavenly angels who sing your praises!

And may you generously show, O great Virgin Queen, your peaceful and serene countenance to all your sons and daughters of grace who glorify you and who beg for your unfailing help. By your intercession, may we merit mercy for our sins. And by your guidance

and example, may we come at last to the glory of paradise! Amen.





## CHAPTER I

# ON WHY A CROWN IS FITTING FOR OUR LADY

**I**n the longing of my soul, in the joy of the Holy Spirit, in the most genuine love, and in the Word of Truth, I wish to extol you, to praise you, and to bless you, O Virgin Mary! For you are more radiant than the Sun; in appearance, you are more beautiful; in faith and grace, you are richer. Indeed, you are the most beautiful of all created beings; and serene, radiant, and pleasing, as lovable as the fragrant rose, wholly entrancing and utterly attractive. Such is your dignity and excellence, that were I in possession of the tongues of humans and of angels, and understood all hidden mysteries, and had all the knowledge of Scripture, these resources should fail me long before I had succeeded in expressing even the beginnings of the praise due to you. For you indeed are incomparably above all women in

beauty, in gracefulness, and in elegance. You surpass all mortals in virtue, grace, and wisdom. You are more glorious than the angels themselves in eminence of dignity, in excellence of holiness, and in command of glory and honor. Exalted above the choirs of angels, above the thrones of the apostles and the prophets, and above all heavenly beings, you sit—crowned as Queen, at the right hand of your most beloved Son!

There your merits are proclaimed, your honor gloriously extolled, and your praises and privileges sung forth by all, with the deepest veneration and most fervent devotion.

What, therefore, am I, a miserable sinner, able to add to such ineffable splendor, to such transcendent glory? But may my humble pen strive for this goal alone—that it may contribute the merest drop, however small, to the limitless ocean of your immortal praise . . .

The crown which I would fashion for you, O Mistress, fittingly ought to be fashioned of purest gold. For just as gold excels all other metals in value and rarity so you have primacy above all others, both in heaven and on earth. To you every knee shall bend, in heaven and on earth and in the underworld; and every tongue shall proclaim you to be the unique and honored Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the glory of God the Father.



Within the celestial reality of eternity, you are clothed with the sun as in a robe and crowned with the interwoven radiance of twelve dazzling stars, and adorned with all conceivable glory and splendor. Just as gold is outstanding for its brilliance and beauty, so you, O beloved Queen, are most bright in your sanctity, most refulgent in your virtues and miracles, most radiant in your outstanding merits, and most indescribably lovely and attractive in both your mind and body.

#### PRAYER

O Virgin Queen, clothed with the Sun, crowned with twelve stars, and raised up to the highest heavens, you are most merciful! You are more radiant than the Star of the Sea!

Behold the hostile spears by which I am pierced. See the bitter sorrows by which I am tormented. Look upon the grave temptations by which I am tested. Lest the enemy should continue to attack me, lest he should overturn and overcome me, may your right hand cast him down into hell from whence he came. And lest the light of faith should ever grow dark to me, may the ray of your splendor shine always upon me.

For as long as grim death may threaten our bodies, and past ills may trouble our minds, and our

consciences stand burdened by sin and trembling with guilt, may your gracious presence continue to assist us kindly.

Defend us by your gentle protection, that we be not disturbed or overcome by our foes. And may we pass—secure in the hope of the holy resurrection—to the glory of eternal light. Amen.



## CHAPTER 2

# THE PRECIOUS TOPAZ,

in the First Place in the  
Crown of the Virgin

O Virgin, full of every grace, wholly radiant and serene! You are the sacred and blessed resting place for the Son of God, resplendent in gold and dazzling in loveliness and glory! In the first place in your magnificent crown I shall place a topaz, excelling the sparkle of all other stones. This I do hoping to reflect the praise and glory of your singular excellence. This topaz is well suited to be an ornament of your crown, O most sweet Mistress; for just as you excel all women in the beauty of your flesh, so also you surpass all saints and angels in the excellence of your holiness. For your whole life stands as an example of sanctity and perfection, and a model of the most impeccable purity of morals.

If one considers faith, who was ever richer  
in it than you?

If one considers hope,  
who was ever more patient or more  
unwavering?

If love, who was more fervent?

Who was ever more studious in sacred  
reading?

Or more devout in prayer?

Or more subtle in contemplation?

Or more sincere in piety?

Or more clement in mercy?

Or purer in chastity?

Or more spotless in virginity and  
temperance?

Or more generously endowed with divine  
knowledge?

Or more eloquent in justice?

Or stronger in the face of adversity?

What angel or saint ever penetrated more deeply  
into the heavenly mysteries?

Who ever drew divine grace more fully into them-  
selves than you?

Or who ever perceived with more clarity and illumination the ineffable majesty of the Most High God?

Therefore, O Mistress, you shall deservedly have as an ornament of your head this topaz—a jewel more stunning than all other stones! For you surpass all other saints and angels in beauty of virtue, in splendor of holy charisms, and in the merits by which you are crowned. Because of the loveliness of all the good qualities you possess and the generous fruitfulness of all your mercies, you draw sinners to reconciliation. You encourage all those who struggle to fight on to the crown of their victorious reward, and you lead the just to the prize of eternal glory.

O Empress of the earth, and Queen of Heaven, when you bore your glorious Son—who was also the Son of God and our Savior—you abolished our servitude and restored our liberty! You conquered death and granted us new life. You refresh us in our anxiety; you comfort us in our adversity; you strengthen us in our weakness; you liberate us from the domain of death; you rescue us from demons; you save us from eternal damnation; you open the gates of paradise to us; you unite us with our precious Redeemer!

O Mother of mercy, you untie that which is bound up; you lighten our afflictions; you heal the wounded;

you obtain mercy for sinners; you revive those who are failing; you restore those who have fallen away; you give hope to those who despair. You renew honor; you rejuvenate faith; you pour forth grace and new strength. You alleviate anger; you restore our lost inheritance; you separate us from the devil; you purify us from sin—O most gracious Mother, you reconcile us to God himself!

#### PRAYER

O Virgin of aureate radiance, most holy Mother of God, joy of the angels, exaltation of the patriarchs, happiness of the prophets, felicity of the apostles, sweetness of the martyrs, nectar of those who profess the Truth, harmony of the holy virgins!

Turn, in kindness, your benign ear towards  
me,

let your eyes of mercy gaze upon me.

I am blind; grant me light!

I am weak; give me strength!

I am dead; make me live!

By the honeyed vision of your beauty, the sorrowful are made joyful. By your gentle touch, the infirm are made whole. By your rose-like odour, the dead are raised to

life. All the good things which come from heaven are given through your merits, or obtained through your kindly intercession.

O Mistress, look, therefore, upon me—a wretched sinner, darkened by iniquity, surrounded by a multitude of miseries! Through you, most holy Virgin, let my chains be broken, let my sins be forgiven, let what is broken within me be repaired, let what has grown weary be renewed, let what is lost be found, let what is incomplete be rendered whole. Through your grace, let my will be cleansed, let my mind be clarified, my soul inflamed, my heart melt, my taste be filled with sweetness, my appearance be made as beautiful as God intended.

Come to my aid—O you who are the light by which I am illuminated, the sweetness by which I am refreshed, the strength by which I become strong, and the fortitude by which I am sustained. Cast far away from me the false and wicked word, the malevolent thought, and the evil deed. May your grace direct my life; may your presence enlighten my mind; and may your mercy lead me unto life eternal.

For you are, indeed, the true and surest path to that glory!

O Mother! Through you the way is illuminated which leads to the heights of heaven, where, through your intercession, the assembly of the humble will be graciously received.

O Thou honey of ineffable sweetness, O Thou glowing brilliance of the spring's flowers!

O Mistress of the Cosmos, O blessed bond of charity,  
O unique union of love!

You wash away our guilt, you cleanse us of our sin.

You are the supreme maidenly Dignity, decorated with lilies.

You are the unique, fruitful Virginity, enthroned on high.

Queen of the angels, life-giving medicine, mysterious flower of the valley!

Teacher of virtue and light of every heart!

Celestial Queen, protectress of the faithful, ivory throne of Christ, lead us, thy children, to the glory of the saints when this, our earthly exile, is complete.  
Amen.