

DEVOTION *to* OUR
LORD *in the* WOMB

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The Divine Nine Months



FR. HENRY JAMES COLERIDGE, SJ

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Devotion to Our Lord in the Womb: The Divine Nine Months ©
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*Virginum custos et pater
Sancte Joseph
Cujus fidei custodiae
Ipsa innocentia Christus Jesus
Et ipsa Virgo Virginum Maria
Commissa fuit
Te per hoc utrumque carissimum pignus
Jesum et Mariam
Obsecro et obtestor
Ut me ad omni immunditia præservatum
Mente incontaminata
Puro corde et casto corpore
Jesu et Mariæ
Semper facias
Castissime famulari*



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EDITOR'S NOTE

This edition by TAN Books is an abridged version of the original work by Fr. Henry James Coleridge, SJ. While every effort has been made to preserve the spirit and core teachings of the author, certain sections have been condensed or omitted for clarity, accessibility, and length. First published in 1885 by Burns and Oates, the British edition numbered 362 pages without the front matter and appendix. Because the author covered much more ground than the central thesis or subject of his manuscript, the editors decided to greatly shorten the volume so that readers would benefit from the most important and central reflections and meditations of the author on the life of Jesus during Our Lady's nine months of pregnancy. It was also believed that a high-quality abbreviated version would appeal to more readers than the full-length original edition.

The process of shortening this edition involved the substantial reduction in length of existing chapters and the elimination of chapter 12. The chapters have been renumbered. The original British spelling was Americanized. The editorial process included the elimination of some footnotes and thus required the reformatting of the text with renumbered notes. Errors that existed in the original edition were corrected, while excessive wordiness of the author was removed where it was thought to impede the reader's appreciation of

his main points. However, Father Coleridge's writing style remains substantially unchanged. He was assigned to Immaculate Conception, better known as Farm Street Church, the flagship parish of the Jesuits of nineteenth-century London, located in the Diocese of Westminster.



PREFACE

The present volume embraces a distinct and separate stage in the history of the Incarnation. Our Lord's life in the womb of His Blessed Mother is a part of His infinite condescension which calls for a corresponding and particular devotion on our part. As the present volume reaches from the Annunciation itself to the eve of the Nativity, it covers the whole of this unborn life of Our Lord. It is enough for devout Christians that there exists this separate portion of Our Lord's human existence, the period of His greatest humiliation and self-abasement. It is only natural that this should at once attract our adoring homage and that those who give themselves to the special devotion which it suggests should find themselves consoled and assisted in a wonderful degree by the practices and contemplations which belong to that devotion.

There are many reasons for this devotion. In the first place, it sets before us the complete interior picture of the Sacred Humanity itself, the immense treasures which constitute that fullness of grace of which we all receive, and the intense activity of the heart and mind of our Lord when no other activity was possible to Him. It was a life almost entirely addressed to God and the object of His delight. Moreover, it was the true foundation of all that followed. On this account, we find those Christians who entirely ignore it

generally wanting in an intelligence of the simplest truths of faith concerning the Incarnate Son of God. The Babe of Bethlehem is like any other child to them, as He was to the people of Bethlehem itself. The misconception leads to an inadequate idea of the whole life, office, and work of Our Lord: Who He is and what He came to do.

Again, Our Lord's Life, at this time, reveals the work and office which He at once gave Himself to discharge toward His Father. The created existence which began at the moment of the Incarnation was the greatest work of God. It may be considered as the crown and completion of the creation of the universe. Holy Scripture speaks of Our Lord as the head and consummation of the whole creation. He was sent indeed on earth for the redemption of mankind, and for their instruction in the manner of serving God perfectly, but as it is implied, His presence as Man added the crowning dignity to the creation as it was originally left. Only through Him could there be that perfect and worthy service to the Creator, which no one could give to Him but a Divine Person. God's greatness, beauty, and majesty, as displayed in the creation, required the most perfect appreciation, gratitude, and praise, and these had never been rendered to Him adequately, nor could they ever be so rendered, until the moment of the Incarnation. The life which then began paid this homage to the immense glory of God from the very beginning, in a thousand acts of adoration and self-abasement, oblation, and thanksgiving. The soul of Jesus Christ was a living mirror which gave back to God the perfect representation of His glories and wonders in an adoration of reverence, delight, and gratitude which was of

infinite merit and worth, because it was the homage of a Divine Person.

Now at length God could be understood, thanked, and honored in an ineffably adequate manner, by a created intelligence and will united to a Divine Person, and that thus at last He could have from His creation a worship worthy of Himself. Our faith teaches us that it was this that was brought about by the Incarnation and that this work was complete from the very first instant of the Divine Union. This was the occupation and life of Our Lord during these nine months, when He did not begin as yet to redeem, or to atone, or to teach, in the ordinary way, as He did afterward, but when He began from the very first moment to devote Himself to honoring and glorifying His Father by the most intense acts of love and adoration. The eye of faith can see, in the circumstances of this stage of His Life, many holy and tender lessons of humility, obedience, silence, recollection, dependence, and other virtues. We may gather also that at the first moment of this adorable life was made the great oblation of Himself, to undergo all that had been decreed for Him to suffer in order to repair the sins of all the world before the justice of God. But the occupation of the Sacred Heart during these long months, an occupation never to cease for all eternity, was the employment of all His faculties of intelligence and affection upon the greatness and loveliness and majesty of God.

These nine months are the time in Our Lord's life which seems most entirely given up to this employment. God was all in all. Out of this life in the womb, which had no external manifestation at all, there sprang all the beauties and

charities of the after stages of Our Lord's life. It is this life which continues now in heaven where He sits at the right hand of God, and in order that earth may not be without this continual and most perfect worship, He remains among us on the altar, not only to be the food and consolation of the devout souls who receive Him and live by Him, but also that from Him may rise up, day after day and night after night, as long as the world lasts, His own most loving adoration, most powerful intercession, and most intelligent praise. In the Blessed Sacrament, He lives indeed for us, but His life there is a return to His former existence in this stage of His infancy, only that He has added to it, in His infinite tenderness and most ingenious and long-suffering love, the marvelous communication of Himself which embodies all the choicest fruits of His life and passion.

We may understand in this sense also the words of Our Lord in His last prayer to His Father before the Passion, "I have glorified Thee upon earth, I have accomplished the work which Thou gavest Me to do, and now glorify Me, O Father, with Thyself with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was"¹—that is, give to My Humanity the glory which belongs to Me as Thy Only-Begotten Son.

For the perfect glorification of the Father, of which Our Lord speaks, must certainly include the utter self-abasement with which He began, humbling Himself even to the condition of a babe in the womb of a woman, the nearest approach to utter annihilation of self that can be conceived, as well all

¹ St. John xvii.

the other service and homage and obedience and praise and worship of which His life was made up as it advanced.

Another momentous fruit of an intelligent devotion to this part of the sacred infancy is the light which it throws on the position of the Blessed Mother of Our Lord in the kingdom of her divine Son, His dependence on her and union with her, the immensity of her graces and the supreme perfection of her virtues. His dependence on her as her child was different from that which is ordinary, on account of His full consciousness and perfect possession and use of all His faculties of intelligence and will. It is during this period of the nine months that He was hers and hers alone, and that she fulfilled the duties of the whole human race in regard of the honor and service due to Him. It is now that the pre-eminent greatness of the Mother of God seems to dwarf the magnificent perfections even of the highest of other saints, on account of her unapproachable nearness to Our Lord, her incomparable dignity as His Mother, and her unexampled faithfulness to the graces which she received, while all the time she is almost as hidden and silent as Our Lord Himself. Again, the devotion which is fed on the contemplations which belong to this stage of the history involves a constant exercise of the highest faith, and the devotion is rewarded by a great increase and deepening of that most precious virtue.

I trust that no one will blame me for having given so large a part of the present volume to an attempt to unfold the meaning of the two first Evangelical Canticles, especially the Cantic of our Blessed Lady. This may be considered as, in one sense, the first utterance of Our Lord Himself, as well as a revelation of the thoughts and affections of His

Blessed Mother which has no parallel at all in the rest of Sacred Scripture. The other chief subject contained in the present volume is the Preparation of St. Joseph for his high and peculiar office in the accomplishment of the decree of the Incarnation and all that followed on it.

H. J. C.

31, Farm Street, Berkeley Square:

Feast of St. Michael, Archangel, 1885



Chapter I

THE SALUTATION OF THE ANGEL

St. Luke i. 26–28; Vita Vitæ Nostræ, § 4.

THE sacred narrative tells us nothing as to the time or place at which the Annunciation occurred, except that it was at Nazareth. The words of St. Luke, about the angel entering in, seem to imply that it was in the house that the message was delivered. The apparitions of St. Gabriel in the Sacred Scriptures are more than once connected with the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice in the Temple, a time which may have been, to all the devout Jews, whether at Jerusalem or elsewhere, a time of adoration and prayer. It was at this time that St. Gabriel appeared to Daniel, and it was at this time that he had appeared in the Temple itself to the holy Zachary. Thus the devotion of the Church, which keeps the *Magnificat* of our Blessed Lady for the Vesper service, would have a kind of foundation in the history of the Annunciation.

All the details of the scene are veiled from us in the simple brevity of the Gospel words. But we are not forbidden to

fill them up for ourselves out of the contemplations of the saints. We may well suppose that Mary was praying earnestly for the fulfillment of the promises made to the holy nation. They occupied her thoughts day and night: "I saw," she said to St. Bridget, "a star, but not such as shines from heaven, I saw a light, but not such as shines in this world. I perceived a sweet odor, wonderfully sweet and such as cannot be described. It filled everything, and I was exulting with joy on its account. And then immediately I heard a voice, but not from human mouth. On hearing it I was much afraid, thinking in myself, whether perchance it was an illusion. And immediately there appeared to me an Angel of God as a most beautiful man, but not clothed in human flesh."¹

But it is time for us to give the simple words of the Evangelist, in which the history of the Annunciation is related, probably, from our Blessed Lady herself. St. Luke has just told us that St. Elizabeth hid herself for five months after the conception of her son. The narrative of the Annunciation is a continuation of the same record.

And in the sixth month the Angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee called Nazareth, to a Virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the Virgin's name was Mary. And the Angel, being come in, said unto her, Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women. Who having heard, was troubled at his saying, and thought within herself what manner of salutation this should be. And the Angel said to her,

¹ St. Bridget, *Rev.* i. 10.

Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shall bring forth a Son, and thou shalt call His Name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the most High, and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of David His Father, and He shall reign in the house of Jacob for ever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end. And Mary said to the Angel, How shall this be done, because I know not man? And the Angel answering said to her, the Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the most High shall overshadow thee, and therefore also the Holy One which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And behold, thy cousin Elizabeth, she also hath conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month with her that is called barren, because no word shall be impossible with God. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word. And the Angel departed from her.

We must first consider the opening address of St. Gabriel to our Blessed Lady. "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women." The word *Hail* is the common salutation, wishing joy and happiness, implying respect and good will. The word which our version most rightly renders "full of grace" is applied somewhat in the same way as when we speak of persons being "graced" or "gifted." The words might have been rendered "Hail, graced one, or fully graced one," and the meaning would then have been conveyed that the person to whom the words were applied was

endowed with grace in its fullness, that the process, so to say, of her endowment with grace was as complete as it could be. The words *gratia plena*, and our English words *full of grace* express the same meaning, while they convey most perfectly the theological truth also that grace is a quality or substance which is in the soul itself, not merely the favor with which the soul may be regarded, without any actual possession of the quality signified by the word.

The words of the angel imply, by their own force and weight, that the soul of Mary was at this moment already filled with grace. We have had to interpret the great words of St. John in the opening of his Gospel, in which he tells us that the Incarnate Word of God dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and that of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.² The plenitude of grace, in the case of the blessed Mother of Our Lord, must be considered as the fullest and highest possible participation of the fullness of the grace of the Incarnate Word, although, the Incarnation had not yet taken place. But all the graces of Mary were for the sake of her Son, all given to her with the view of fitting her for the supreme honor of becoming His Mother. We may therefore speak of the graces of the sacred humanity of Our Lord, although they did not at this precise moment as yet exist. Those who have written on this great subject tell us that there are three kinds of plenitude of grace. The first is in God, in Whom alone are all good things, all gifts, all graces, essentially and infinitely perfect. God can receive no grace, for He is the one full and inexhaustible fountain of

² St. John i. 16.

grace, a fountain which may give out countless treasures of the highest graces to His creatures, and which yet remains infinite and undiminished in its own fullness.

The next kind of fullness or plenitude is that which belongs to Christ as Man, the sacred humanity of Our Lord. It is this of which St. John speaks in the words just now quoted. It is of this fullness that we have all received. The fountain and source of all the graces of the sacred humanity is the union with the Divine Person of the Word of God, and it is from the One Godhead, which He possesses in common with the Father and the Holy Ghost, that Our Lord as Man receives infinitely and without measure, as the same Evangelist says, every kind of grace. As His grace is without measure, His works were all of infinite merit, all proceeding from infinite and most perfect charity, and by them He merited indeed, though not for Himself, but for us. Thus, indeed, He is full of grace; He has as Man by grace what He has as God by nature, and no grace in Him was ever wasted or idle. This is the fullness of grace which belongs to our Lord as Man.

These two great plenitudes of grace might be said to have been in Mary in a certain way, because she had within her, after the Incarnation, God Himself to Whom the first plenitude belongs, and Our Lord also as to His humanity, to Whom belongs the second. But speaking strictly, Mary cannot have either the fullness which is infinite and which sheds itself on all creatures without exhausting itself, nor can she have the imparted grace of the fullness which was in Our Lord as Man, in Him alone without measure. In the same way, she could not have been so full of grace as not to be able to receive more, or to increase in grace, nor, with regard to

the fullness of truth of which St. John speaks, could she in her mortal life have had that in such a manner as to know all things, nor did she behold God as He is in the way in which the saints in glory behold Him. Her plenitude of grace was the plenitude of a pure creature, and therefore immeasurably distant from that which is in God and in Our Lord. When the angel addresses her as full of grace, he must be understood as implying that she was as full of grace as she could be full. And the saints and Fathers tell us that she was thus so full of grace as that she could have had no greater fullness unless she had been herself united to the Godhead, as was the humanity of her Son. The reason for this is the simple principle that she had been raised, or was to be raised, to a dignity than which no higher, under God, can possibly be conceived, the dignity of the Mother of God.

This kind of fullness of grace, flowing over, so to say, on all that is said or done by the person who possesses it, is thought to have been in the holy apostles and in others. But it must have been in our Blessed Lady in a higher degree than in any of the saints. Our Blessed Lady was far closer and more united to her divine Son than any of the saints could be, and therefore she must have received from Him the treasure of which we are speaking far more perfectly and largely than any other.

We must add a further thought. The graces of our Blessed Lady, wonderful as they were even at the very outset of her life, when the privilege of the Immaculate Conception was bestowed on her, were nevertheless always such as admitted of growth and increase. We believe that she did continually advance and increase in grace, from moment to moment,

with a swiftness and ease and invariable continuity of growth of which there is no other instance in the whole creation, as her dignity as Mother of God has no parallel therein. It cannot be doubted that the continual growth of Mary in every grace was a special subject of delight to God, distinct from her simple possession of so many graces, and from her practice of the highest virtues, interior and exterior, from the moment when she became capable of such exercise of her gifts. But this peculiar beauty of the unfolding, before the eyes of God, of this most beautiful flower of paradise, is something which it is beyond our power to draw out in our present exile from heaven.

As the Holy Ghost is the Divine Person to Whom in a special manner is attributed the carrying out of the Incarnation, it is reasonable to suppose that His gifts were most fully and lavishly bestowed upon Mary from the very moment at which her soul became capable of receiving them, and that He ever afterward took a special delight in increasing them, in their beauty and efficacy. Indeed, short as the records are which remain to us, they seem not to be too short to show us the continual exercise of these gifts. It is indeed most important for us, in our considerations of the mysteries of the Incarnation, not to have any limited or jejune estimate of the amount of graces possessed from the very first by her, who was so chief an agent in them all. The gifts of the Holy Ghost are usually divided into two classes, according to the faculties of the soul which they affect and elevate and, as it were, transfigure, with new powers. Four of the gifts affect the intelligence. These are the gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge. The remaining three, the gifts

of fortitude, piety, and fear, perfect the will and make its action noble and lofty. In the possession of each of these classes of gifts our Blessed Lady was unique among pure creatures. As to the first, Mary was immensely nearer to God than anyone else could be; her charity, which was the uniting principle between Him and her, was such as to bind her closer to Him than any but she could be.

The just in this life are said to hunger and to thirst after God, and the blessed in heaven to be satiated with the possession of Him. This hunger and thirst on the one hand and this satisfaction on the other hand represent the two stages of the workings of this gift of wisdom in their souls. In our Blessed Lady, the result of this gift was something which raised her above the state of hunger and thirst, because she had the perfect cognizance of God in the sacred humanity of Our Lord, and yet she could not have as yet the full satiety with which her soul was to be flooded in heaven.

St. Antonine here quotes the Blessed Albert the Great concerning the gift of understanding as possessed by our Blessed Lady. He tells us that she had certain privileges of her own. She had by grace, even in this life, a very perfect knowledge of the Divine Trinity and, in the same way, of the mystery of the Incarnation, though in this case her own long familiarity with it and with Our Lord was, in part, the ground of her privilege.

The gift of counsel, according to St. Thomas, is that by which the Holy Ghost directs us in all things which are ordained to the end of our eternal life, whether they are commandments necessary to salvation or not. "But Mary was a most perfect observer, both of the commandments

and of the counsels of God. She had beyond all, therefore, the knowledge of His counsels by this gift of counsel. She was also most dear to and familiar with God above all others, and so instructed even in the greatest secrets. Among the other counsels of God are poverty, virginity, and obedience, and she observed these in their highest perfection. She was most poor," as we see in her offering in the Temple. "She was the first to make the vow of virginity, which she always observed without the slightest contrary movement, and she was most obedient," as we see in the mystery of her purification, to which she was not bound, in her journey to Bethlehem, in her visit to Jerusalem, for the feasts and the like.

We pass over for the present what the saint tells us about the gifts of fortitude and knowledge. He makes the gift of piety consist in three acts: in disposition for works of mercy, in perfect obedience to the Sacred Scriptures, and in due honor to holy persons and things. He has little difficulty in showing the perfection of these acts in our Blessed Lady. She was moved to works of mercy by considering all men, not only as the images of God, but also as representing Him in a new way in consequence of the Incarnation. The simple words of the angel were enough for her to ground on them her stupendous act of faith, when she said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word." She was in her lifetime the pattern of veneration for all holy things and places, feasts and the like, and we probably owe to her the first example of the veneration which has always been shown in the Church to the special objects of Christian devotion, such as the Holy Cross, the

Holy Sepulchre, the Way of the Cross, relics, and the Blessed Sacrament.

Lastly, the saint comes to the holy gift of fear. There are, he says, three kinds of fear. There is the fear of servants, which consists in the apprehension of punishment for disobedience; there is the chaste fear, of which the Psalmist speaks,³ and this has two acts, the fear of separation from God, like the fear of a pure spouse lest she should lose her beloved; and the fear of reverence, which consists in a very humble veneration, mixed with love of the thing or the person venerated. It was this last which was so excellent in Mary. She could not fear chastisement, being without sin, nor could she seriously fear to be separated from God, being confirmed in grace. But she was overwhelmed with the thought of the magnificence and greatness and mightiness and majesty of Him Who had lavished His choicest blessings on her and raised her to a height unparalleled among His creatures.

Lastly, he treats at considerable length what he calls her special privileges. These are in truth so many natural and reasonable deductions from her one fundamental grace of the divine maternity. It may be well summarily to mention them now.

The first privileges in this series are her perfect freedom from all sin, whether original or actual, mortal or venial, and even beyond this, the kind of impossibility of sinning in her which has been explained above. The saints in glory cannot sin, because they are absolutely united to God, in Whom there can be no sin. In this sense, Mary was not incapable

³ Psalm xviii.

of sin, because she was not as yet united to God in the state of glory. But she was united to Him by the plenitude of her grace, yet there was in her condition nothing at all that could bring about a separation from God, and in this sense, her plenitude of grace was incompatible with sin.

The next privilege was that she was the expression of the highest purity. The purity of which the saint speaks is not simply freedom from what is impure, but the closest possible approximation to the supreme purity which is in God, and to this privilege Our Lady attained by four stages, deriving greater and higher grace from the bounty of God. These four stages were, as St. Antonine tells us, her Immaculate Conception and the graces received therewith, her practice of virtue as her years went on, the coming on her of the Holy Ghost for the accomplishment of the Incarnation in her, and her Virginal Conception of the Son of God.

The next of the privileges of Mary was that she was at once Virgin and Mother. Both maternity and virginity have a kind of natural glory of their own. But in Mary, both were meritorious and deliberate, meritorious because so deliberate. Her virginity was the most perfect purity of mind and body, springing from her consummate charity and love of God, and her maternity was accepted and willed.

And her fruitful virginity and most pure maternity made her the Mother of God. Under this privilege is included the whole of her wonderful relations with Our Lord, from the moment when He became her Son in her most chaste womb, her interaction with Him during the nine months, the thirty years after His birth, and throughout all the ages which have since passed, throughout all eternity. This privilege has lasted

on in ever increasing glory and magnificence, and will last on forever.

But if the maternity of Mary was thus a privilege which cannot be measured in its fruits and results, a privilege which is as fresh and fruitful in heaven at this moment as it was at the first instant of the Incarnation, so also is the virginity of Mary a privilege which lasts on and is continually most fruitful. For she is called in the litanies sung in her honor "Sancta Virgo Virginum," and she deserves this title on two accounts. In the first place, she was the first to discern the inappreciable treasure of holy virginity and to raise its honor in the world to the immense glory of God and benefit of mankind. And, in consequence, she is the mother of all holy virgins, a countless throng of both sexes, who have served God faithfully in this holy state. And in the second place, Mary is the virgin of virgins because she is the one most perfect and incomparable instance of virginity. For her virginity was not, as in others, a crown which had to be defended against the assaults of internal concupiscence, for in her the root of evil concupiscence was destroyed, and it was in itself of a purity which has no peer. It has also the unattainable glory of fertility, fertility of that unapproachable dignity which belongs to the fruitfulness which generates the Son of God in human nature.

It is thought by some theologians that the Incarnation might have been, even if Adam had not fallen, and that thus there might have been a divine maternity which would not have been that which made Mary the mother of the Savior of the world. Even in this case, it cannot be doubted that Our Lord would have been the head of the whole universe

by virtue of His incarnation, and that all the elevation of which creatures might have been made partakers would have come from and through Him. If so, Mary would still have had that relationship to all those who are members of Our Lord and who are united with Him in the nature which He has assumed through and from her. It is essential that this thought should be included in the idea of her maternity, and our grasp of this truth is confirmed by the position which she occupies in the sacred scroll of prophecy, as the second Eve, by the truth that she was not an involuntary or unconscious instrument of the Incarnation.

St. Antonine tells us that she is the mother of all those who have a share in the new creation which has been the work of her Son. She bares Him for us, Who created us and regenerated us all by His passion, which confers the power of grace on the Sacraments, and she merited congruously by her virtues that she should bring forth Him as her Son. It was from her most pure flesh and blood that the Holy Ghost, by her own consent, took the flesh which He transformed into the Body by which our redemption and new creation were effected. Moreover, Our Lady, by her wonderfully godlike conversation, was to us the pattern and example of our turning away from darkness to light, and our perfect conversion unto the vision of the primeval light. And lastly, he says that the whole work of our redemption and new creation was ordered by God to her glory and honor. Thus the vision of the Apocalypse represents the elders in heaven casting their crowns down before the feet of the Lamb,⁴ as if

⁴ Apoc. v. 8.

to acknowledge that they owe all to the humiliation of Our Lord and the sacred humanity which He took of Mary. And he says that this truth of the maternity of Mary over all who are redeemed by her Son is touched on in her own words in her Canticle, where she says that from henceforth all generations shall call her blessed. For the regeneration and recreation of all things by means of the Incarnation make her in this sense the mother of all.

It is a part of the same truth that Mary is called the Gate of Heaven. It is the function of a gate that through it everything must pass which enters or comes forth from the city of which it is the gate. This name has sometimes been applied to the saints, as it is used in the Apocalypse of the Apostles, and it is sometimes applied to the holy cross. Its application to Mary represents the truth that we have through her the whole of the blessings which come to us by means of the Incarnation, because we have, through her, her Divine Son. It means also that as we all enter heaven through her Son, we enter heaven through her, whose Son He was. It is well known how some of the fathers and saints have insisted on the doctrine that all graces pass through the hands of Mary to us, by the special disposition of God, and it would not be easy to see how the denial of this truth can be altogether consistent with the true appreciation of the Incarnation.

The third privilege of this class in our Blessed Lady is that she is the queen and mother of mercy. Although so many of the great attributes of God are manifested in the Incarnation, still it is true to say that His mercy is therein manifested more than all others, and that it is, in itself, the greatest of all the manifestations of His mercy. St. Antonine

tells us that there is glory in heaven alone, that there is grace on earth alone, but that in heaven, and even in hell, as well as on earth, there is always mercy. For the blessed in heaven are rewarded beyond their strict deserts, and the enemies of God in the place of torment are punished less than they deserve. The Incarnation was beyond everything else a work of mercy, and its effects reach throughout all the kingdom of God. Thus Our Lord is the embodiment of the divine mercy, and it is but right that Mary should have a great position in this kingdom of mercy, as she has so large a part in the administration of all that her Son has wrought. She is herself the greatest instance of His mercy, because she has received more than all others, she has a larger share in the benefits of His redemption than others, and from this it is only congruous to reason that she must have an immense share and power in turning His mercy on others by means of her intercession.

We must constantly remind ourselves, in considering these privileges of our Blessed Lady, that she was not an unconscious or involuntary instrument in the Incarnation, nor was she an unwilling victim of all the agony she had to undergo when she stood by the foot of the cross. She freely was made the mother of the Redeemer, and she freely gave Him up for us all on the cross. She had thus much to do with the carrying out of the divine mercy on the human race, and it is not a farfetched thought that she stands, and always stood, before God, as the representative of His counsel of mercy. Thus she is the queen of mercy, with a nobler right to the title than her famous prototype Esther, who obtained by pure favor, and the influence of the affection which she

had inspired in the king, the pardon and deliverance of the whole nation to which she belonged. Mardochai told Esther that she might have been raised to the kingdom for that very purpose in the providence of God, that she might use her influence in the great need and danger of her nation.⁵ In something of the same way, Mary may have been raised so high and granted so much power, with the especial design that she should always plead for mercy, even when the justice of God might well have its course, if it were not for her office of asking again and again for pardon for sinners.

There remain, according to St. Antonine, two more of these privileges of Mary to be considered in our present short view of this great subject. The first of these two is that to her was communicated the passion of Our Lord. He founds this statement on the common interpretation of the prophecy of holy Simeon, on the occasion of her purification, and he quotes St. John Damascene, who says that the pangs of childbirth, which she did not undergo at the Nativity, were reserved for her in the crucifixion of her Son. St. Antonine explains his meaning in this way. The privilege of the communication of the Passion implies two things, her faith in the Crucified as God and Man and the suffering which was occasioned by her sympathy for His sufferings. Our Lady was the only one who had both these in full measure, whose faith was entirely unshaken and unclouded, and whose compassion was intense to the fullest measure of intensity. Her Son, he says, desirous of giving her the reward involved in such a privilege, chose to communicate to her the merit of

⁵ Esther iv. 14.

His passion, that He might make her a sharer in the benefit of redemption, inasmuch as that as she had helped in the work of redemption by her compassion, she might also become the mother of all in the new creation resulting therefrom, and, as the whole world is under an immense debt to God for His passion, so also it might be the debtor of Our Lady for her compassion.

St. Antonine adds that it is said of Our Lord that He had in His passion the height of sorrow and the height of joy, sorrow in the sensitive part of His humanity, and joy in the intelligent part of the same humanity. So it is also true to say of Our Lady that she then had the extreme of compassion from His sorrow and the extreme of sympathy in His joy. Her soul regarded the death of her Son as the extreme of pain to its nature, and in this way, she felt the extreme of sorrow, and at the same time, she knew that that death was the remedy by which mankind was redeemed, and so she felt the highest joy. Again, her love for Our Lord is the measure of her sorrow at His sufferings, and as her love was in every way most intense, so also her sorrow for His sufferings was in every way most intense. This was the cause, then, of the immeasurable height of her sorrow, and at the same time, as she loved God and her neighbor in the highest degree, and as from the Passion was to come the immense glory of God and the immense advantage of her neighbor, the Passion was on this account the cause of the most intense joy to her.

The last of these twelve privileges of Our Lady is her exaltation above all creatures. Because Mary is above all creatures, she is therefore above the angels. The devout doctor, St. Antonine, applies to Our Lady the rule of Our Lord,

that whosoever humbleth himself shall be exalted, and the more anyone humbles himself, the more he shall be exalted by God in the realms of bliss. As Mary was the humblest of all except her Son, so in heaven is she the highest of all after her Son. And so he concludes his chapter on the fullness of grace in Mary by saying that she was full of grace in four ways. First, she had all the graces, general and special, of all creatures in the highest degree. Secondly, she had those graces which other creatures had not. Thirdly, she had grace in so great a degree that a simple creature was not capable of more. Lastly, she had in herself the uncreated grace Himself, that is God.

They are all founded on the supreme grace which none but Mary can receive, the grace of the elevation to the Divine Maternity. Let us take the four first in the catalogue of St. Antonine, and we shall see that they are simple corollaries from the fact of the Divine Maternity in itself.

It stands to reason that the Mother of God could never be allowed to be stained by sin. They also included so large a dowry of graces and spiritual aids to the will and the intelligence that it was easy for them to conclude that our Blessed Lady was incapable of sin, not by the destruction of her liberty, but by the overwhelming abundance of her grace. And in the same way, the fourth privilege, that she is the highest expression and loftiest instance of all purity in the true sense of the word. It claims for her simply the highest grace that can be conferred. The absolute freedom from sin of every kind—original, actual, venial, and even every possible imperfection—is the beginning of this chain of graces,

which is completed by the consummate purity of this final grace made as high and as fruitful as possible.

If these first privileges in the list given by St. Antonine are simply corollaries from the fundamental truth that our Blessed Lady is the Mother of God, the three which follow hang together as being connected with that great privilege of the manner of her maternity, according to which she was to be at once the most fruitful of mothers and the most pure and unsullied of virgins. It seems to the Christian intelligence impossible to conceive that Mary could have been a mother otherwise than by remaining perfectly a virgin, that anyone but God and herself should have any part in the generation of the Incarnate God. If this fundamental privilege be once understood, the other privileges follow almost as a matter of course—namely, that she was most truly and perfectly mother, and the mother of the divine Person Who took flesh in her, and, again, that she is preeminent among virgins, the virgin of virgins, as the Church calls her, having thus the perfection and unattainable grace of having as a mother God Himself for her Son, and as a virgin, the singular dignity of uniting this inconceivable fruitfulness with her virginity, of being the Mother of God.

The object of the Incarnation was the Redemption of the world. If Mary the Mother of God was raised so high in the favor of God in order that she might be fit to be the conscious and willing instrument of this great work of the Incarnation, it stands to reason that her influence and power with God, which of necessity correspond to her graciousness in His sight, must be exercised in favor of those for whom He became her Son, and that she must have the office of being

the patroness and advocate of all those for whom He was to die. As Our Lord made Himself our Brother by taking flesh in her most pure womb, our relation to her as His brethren must be that of children, and thus the holiest and tenderest of ties that can exist between creatures, that of motherhood and sonship, binds us to her and her to us by a bond that nothing can sever. When she ceases to be the mother of Jesus Christ, she will cease to be our mother through Him.

From the same consideration of the object of the Incarnation which was carried out in her womb, we arrive at the reasonableness of the other two privileges mentioned by St. Antonine, that she is the Gate of Heaven and the Queen of Mercy. Heaven is opened to us by Our Lord, and Our Lord is what He is to us through her, and thus she is the Gate of Heaven by the decree of God which gave Him to us through His mother. Unless we are to make a stop in the divine mercies and draw a line where we see no line drawn by God, it is natural to think that she has an office connected with the distribution of all the graces which flow to us from her Son. We have said that the Incarnation itself is supremely and above everything the exhibition of the fullness of the infinite mercy of God. No doubt it displays His power, His wisdom, and a number of His other attributes, in a marvelous manner, but still it is preeminently the realm of the mercy of God. The Redemption that was wrought on the cross was exacted, so to say, by the justice of God, but the Incarnation, which is the field of the action of Mary, is pure mercy.

And thus we may understand the contemplations of those saints who speak of our Blessed Lady as having the special office of pleading, with all the intensity of her maternal

intercession, the interests of mercy and of mercy alone, as representing, if we may so speak, the mercy of God and nothing else before His throne in heaven, not urging His justice or rousing His indignation against sinners. It is as if that original act of mercifulness, which made God conceive the design of the salvation of the world by the Son of Mary, were now enshrined in her, the purest and the most holy and the most powerful of creatures, using her influence in that royal way which becomes a queen, who has a right to the heart of the King, and has nothing to do with His vengeance but only with His compassionateness and clemency. In this sense, we rightly speak of her as the Queen of Mercy.

Thus it is impossible to suppose that Mary had not the fullest participation of the Passion of Our Lord which it was possible for her to have. It takes but a moment to write these few words, but it will take all the years of eternity for the illuminated minds and inflamed hearts of the blessed in heaven to comprehend their full meaning. And again, after this consideration of the reasonableness, or rather the necessity, of this privilege of the communication of the Passion to Mary.

She was full of grace, and the fullness of her grace was that she might receive fitly, if it could be so, the dignity of the divine maternity. And now, having made her fit to receive that ineffable dignity, God is with her for the accomplishment of His purpose in the Incarnation, and whatever belongs to that accomplishment, on His part, is an element of the special assistance to and presence with her which the great words, "the Lord is with thee," are intended to convey.