

THE BIRTH OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

SERMON 1

Wisdom has built her house [Prov 9:1]. Today, all the faithful celebrate the feast of the birth of the blessed Virgin, a birth that in the text quoted is announced under the metaphor of building a house for wisdom. Something is perfectly and adequately described when specified by its causes, as the wise man¹ of the world says: ‘we think we know something when we know its causes’; and since in the text quoted the birth of the glorious Virgin Mary is specified by its causes, it is perfectly and adequately described.

It is described firstly by its efficient cause, namely, divine Wisdom, the maker of all things, that is, Christ the Son of God, Word of the Father, through whom *all things came into being* [Jn 1:3]: *Wisdom*. Secondly, it is described with reference to its leading or moving purpose; for eternal Wisdom formed the Virgin Mary so as to rest in her, to dwell in her; hence Sirach 24:12 can be applied to the Virgin: *My Creator chose the place for my tent*. Thirdly, it is described with reference to its completing or finishing form, since Wisdom formed her and built for itself a temple and home: *chose the place for my tent*.

It is described firstly with reference to the efficient principle: *Wisdom*. Secondly, with reference to the purpose: *chose for itself*. Thirdly, with reference to the formal finished work or effect: *a place; this one and that one were born in it, for the Most High himself will establish it* [Ps 87:5]. Because the efficient cause or principle does not pertain to the present solemnity nor the purpose intended that deals with the Annunciation, we will say something of the effect, namely, the Virgin Mary born today in the world as implied by the word place or home.

Seven things are needed to finish the building of a home: firstly, it is cleaned, secondly, foundations are laid, thirdly, a pavement is put down, fourthly, it is laid out, fifthly, it is lifted and raised, sixthly, it is finished, seventhly, it is decorated. Holiness cleansed this spiritual house, humility was its foundation, mildness, meekness

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and kindness were its pavement, generosity broadened it, poverty raised it up, love finished it, while integrity of character adorned and decorated it.

1. Firstly, Wisdom cleansed or cleaned this home with holiness. Eternal Wisdom was to be born from her, take flesh from her, live in her who is *a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God*, in whom *nothing defiled gains entrance* [Wis 7:25-26], for eternal Wisdom would not deign to live in a home which was not clean and pure. Because wisdom lived in Mary in her mind and flesh, wisdom purified her flesh and mind. It is to be noted that there is a double cleansing of a material home, and a double sanctification of the Virgin: she was cleansed when the home was to be built, that is, when a place is cleansed in preparation for the building of a home; she was cleansed when the home was to be lived in. So the blessed Virgin Mary was doubly sanctified: firstly, in the womb before her birth, secondly in the Annunciation and conception of the Son of God when the Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Most High overshadowed her [Lk 1:35].

In the first sanctification she was cleansed and purified from original sin; although she was conceived with original sin, she was sanctified before she was born.² By this sanctification she was so cleansed of concupiscence and passion that never did she commit a sinful action be it mortal or venial, nor did she experience any feeling of concupiscence. Augustine in *On Nature and Grace*,³ listed all the holy people of the Old and New Testaments and there was not one of whom it could be said he or she was without sin. Of the blessed Virgin he says: 'Of her alone, when there is question of sin, I want there to be no question raised, for to her was given to conquer all sin, she who merited to conceive and bear the Son of God'.

In the second sanctification not only was passion laid to rest and weakened, indeed it was completely taken away, so that not only did she not sin, she was not able to sin; not only did she not feel concupiscence, she was not able to feel it, and perhaps she was not able to desire it. It is stated⁴ that after she conceived the Son of God, such brightness shone from her face, that any feelings of

concupiscence were extinguished in all who saw her. As Anselm says in *The Virgin Conception*⁵: ‘It was fitting that the Virgin who was to be the Mother of God should shine with a purity than which nothing greater could be thought of under God’.

Ps 93:5 says of the sanctification of this house: *holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore*. Rightly is it said *forevermore*, because she was to be holy not for one day only, not for one month only, not for one year only, but always because she is the source and mother of holiness and from her sanctification we have all received [Jn 1:16].

2. Secondly, Wisdom founded the house on humility. Eternal Wisdom, the Son of God, who is the power of the Father, would not deign to live in a ruined and tottering house, but in a secure house set on a solid foundation. We have a double power: to know and to feel; and a double humility: humility of the mind by which one depends on and assents by faith to the first truth for its own sake, and humility of the affections by which one clings to and depends by hope on the first truth.

The first foundation is humility of faith by which one is made firm in truth; everything not based on truth is vain. Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, chapter 7⁶: ‘Faith is the only foundation for believers, for those who base themselves on truth’; and so whatever exists without faith is completely vain. Augustine, *To Peter on Faith*⁷:

Faith is the foundation of all that is good; faith is the beginning of human salvation. Without faith no one can be numbered among the children of God, because without it the grace of sanctification cannot be gained in this world, nor life eternal possessed in the future. Should one not walk in faith he or she will not come to what it represents. Without faith every human effort is empty.

The second foundation is humility of hope by which one is made firm in virtue. By this virtue one does not presume on one’s own strength but distrusts oneself in everything, recognizes that of one’s self nothing is possible and relies on unfailing strength so that

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whatever one does is credited entirely to God: *with God we shall do valiantly* [Ps 60:12; 108:13]. Otherwise, everything is nothing as Gregory says⁸: ‘Whoever gathers virtues without humility, carries dust on high’. This humility of hope is a strong and safe anchor, as the Apostle says in Hebrews 6:19.

Because this double virtue lived most strongly in Mary she was a firm, secure and solid dwelling. To this double virtue the conception of the Son of God is attributed, for she says: *he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant* [Lk 1:48]; and holy Elizabeth: *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord* [Lk 1:45].

Of this foundation Matthew 7:24-25 says:

Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on firm rock.

Everyone who hears these words of mine diligently, faithfully and is obedient, is like a wise person, namely, Christ, the power and Wisdom of God [1 Cor 1:24], *who built his house*, the Virgin Mary, *on rock*, that is, upon himself because *the rock was Christ* [1 Cor 10:4]; or *on rock*, that is, on the firmness of eternal truth and virtue. To all who build their house in this way shall come floods of earthly prosperity and delights, and winds of earthly troubles and setbacks, which will in no way be able to overthrow or destroy them, for they are *founded on firm rock*.

3. Thirdly, divine wisdom paved this house with mildness, meekness, and endowed it with kindness because with eternal Wisdom *companionship has no bitterness*, and *in friendship with her is pure delight* [Wis 8:6.18]. Therefore, Christ who is truly peaceful,⁹ does not deign to dwell other than in a place which is kind and peaceful, since her *abode has been established in Salem*¹⁰ [Ps 76:2]. And because the blessed Virgin was most kind, sweet, meek, in whom there was no bitterness, no restlessness, she was completely developed and suitable, she was a dwelling fit for eternal Wisdom

and for the Son of God to rest in her. Unfortunately, many are so rough, crafty, bitter and restless, that they can live neither with others nor with themselves: they annoy others with words, grind their teeth at them, strike them with their hand so that they seem to have forgotten what humans are: ‘a human being is an animal gentle by nature’;¹¹ they seem to be beasts not human beings. They are always restless and tossed about by passions as the sea is tossed about: now they burn with envy, now moved with anger, now descend into lust, now agitated with impatience, as stated in Isaiah 57:20: *The wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still.*

But this house is so suitable, so developed and so endowed with sweetness and kindness that in 2 Chronicles 3:6 it is said that Solomon *adorned the house with settings of precious stones.*¹² [Christ], the peaceful Solomon, loved and rested in peace and adorned the house with a pavement, that is, adorned Mary with precious marble. Marble is a stone able to be highly polished and laid down so that it is extremely smooth. There is nothing in Mary indicating anything other than mildness, kindness and meekness; and she is called most precious marble, because to God and humans nothing is more acceptable than her.

4. Fourthly, eternal Wisdom enriched and extended this home with generosity. For divine Wisdom, which is immense, did not deign to dwell in a narrow and confined home, but demanded an ample and broad place. Greed and love of self constrict the heart greatly; an abundance of generosity, love and sharing broaden and enrich: one who craves nothing, spreads oneself to all others. This is the nature of good because, according to Dionysius,¹³ good always goes out of itself. A good person is one who offers a hand to whom he or she can and acts kindly; when this is not possible, an affection of compassion is shown; no one is rejected, no one excluded, all are accepted. The Father of mercy is imitated, who *makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous* [Mt 5:45]. If someone says he or she has a broad heart from loving God but not from loving a neighbour, he or she is mistaken: for *those who do not love a brother or sister whom they*

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have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen [1 Jn 4:20]. And if one cannot hold mercy in the heart for a finite and limited creature, how could one hold immense majesty? Certainly, in no way!

This love and affection for oneself is the cause of all evil, of every war, of all dissension, of all litigation, according to James:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures [Jas 4:1-3].

And because *all of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ* [Phil 2:21], all incline towards their own convenience, seek their own advantage, and so arise arguments, discord and dissension. Since *love does not insist on its own way* [1 Cor 13:5] it is ignorant of the way in which divine Wisdom dwells in the heart and is at home in the heart [Prov 13:33]; hence a constricted heart, centred on itself by self love and affection for self, drives eternal Wisdom away from itself. But because Mary's affection was most broad, generous and her heart open wide, she was a fit dwelling for eternal Wisdom, and she received and conceived the Son of God in her mind but also in her body.

Of her breadth is written: *The house that I am about to build will be great, for our God is greater than other gods* [2 Chron 2:5]. Indeed great and broad had to be the house for such a guest: great is the Lord, great is his house. 'O holy and immaculate virginity, I know not what praise to offer you because you carried in your womb the person whom the heavens cannot contain.'¹⁴ Should anyone be in some necessity, be placed in some need, go to that house so full, so abundant yet so generous that it is closed to no one. All receive from its fullness,¹⁵ *and nothing is hid from its heat* [Ps 19:6]; for she offered for us generously and freely together with the Father the Son of God, Jesus Christ, source of grace who was conceived 'from most pure blood'.¹⁶

5. Fifthly, eternal wisdom exalted this house with poverty. Eternal wisdom *reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other* [Wis 8:1], is most distinguished and wanted to have a notable home; it would in no way deign to live in a broken down and inferior house. Only a poor person can build for God a distinguished and high dwelling, a person who puts little value on earthly goods and desires only what is heavenly and eternal. The greedy, avaricious, lovers of what is earthly and worldly, build worldly houses in which Wisdom does not live, for Wisdom's dwelling is in heaven according to the words: *the Lord's throne is in heaven* [Ps 11:4]. The blessed Virgin was most poor, seeking nothing in the world, with her whole affection for heaven – from tender years she was nourished in the temple,¹⁷ and lived her life in a generous and dedicated way. After she became the Mother of God, giving birth to the Son of God, she had nowhere to put the child other than in a stable for animals; she wrapped him in poor cloth; as it is written:

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn [Lk 2:6-7].

Afterwards, in accord with the Law [Lev 12:8], she went to offer in the temple not a lamb as the Law stated as this was an offering of the rich, but she got for the redemption of her first born *a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons* [Lk 2:22-24]. Finally she supported her child by the work of her hands and so was a fit home and worthy dwelling for God.

On the height of this home is written: *Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me and what is my resting place? And later: the one to whom I will look is the humble and contrite* etc [Isa 66:1-2]. As if to say: I am shut out of heaven, I came to the earth, I want a high and distinguished home. Who can build such a home other than a poor person for the higher the desire the higher can he or she build a temple for the Lord.

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6. Sixthly, eternal Wisdom finished the house with love. Eternal Wisdom in which there is no defect, rather *all its ways are just* [Deut 32:4], does not want to live in an imperfect and unfinished home. A home is completed and perfected in love, the end *to all perfection* [Ps 119:96], it *binds everything together* [Col 3:14], it is *the aim of instruction* [1 Tim 1:5], and *the fulfilling of the law* [Rom 13:10]. For this reason Noah was ordered to finish the roof of the ark to a cubit above [Gen 6:16],¹⁸ that is, to the unity of a unifying, transforming love that reaches up to God, to the One loved. Love is the form and perfection of every virtue,¹⁹ completing all, moving, directing and leading all towards their end; without love all are shapeless and unfruitful, according to the Apostle: *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, and the other things he mentions, but do not have love, I gain nothing* [1 Cor 13:1-3]. Mary was complete in a most ardent charity, in a most perfect and simple love, totally united to God, made the Mother of God, wholly transformed into God, joined to her Son more than any other creature and wholly directed towards God. This love is moving, fervent and sharp,²⁰ penetrating even to the depths of the divinity; 'it is life joining the lover with the one loved' according to Augustine,²¹ it is 'a uniting force' according to Dionysius;²² and according to Hugo, *De arrha sponsae*²³ 'it transforms the lover into the one loved'. Although it is not written, one can like Paul [2 Cor 12:2-4], indeed more than Paul, forsake oneself in this ecstatic love, move towards God, be taken up into God, and contemplate and enjoy God²⁴ *face to face* [1 Cor 13: 12].

It is written of the completion of this home in 2 Chronicles 7:11 that Solomon finished the house of the Lord; the truly peaceful Jesus Christ finished the home, that is, his mother or dwelling because he perfected her with love in her appearance, walking, dress and gesture.

7. Seventhly, eternal Wisdom adorned, decorated, and beautified this house with integrity of character. Eternal Wisdom, the Word of God, the Son of God, the first form, the first beauty, did not deign to live in a home other than in a beautiful, fitting and adorned home. Just as the homes of the powerful are decorated, painted and hung

with painted tapestries, so the elegance, beauty and adornment of this house are integrity of character and adornment of virtues. The blessed Virgin Mary was most good and modest; good, by being developed and mature in appearance, in gesture, in walking, so that in everything she was serious, good and mature; she was not unsettled, careless nor impudent. But unfortunately, this teacher of integrity has few disciples, few imitators; she has rather clerics who ought to be an example for others but are themselves unsettled, intemperate, undisciplined, dissolute and negligent in appearance, in walking, in dress and in gesture. Against such, Ambrose says in *De Virginibus*²⁵:

Nothing piercing in the eyes, no shameful action, no impudent words, no wild gesture, no feeble steps, no careless word, so that the appearance of her body might be an expression of the mind and a sign of probity.

In these words holy Ambrose seems to be describing the blessed Virgin.

Of the beauty of this house it is said: *O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides* [Ps 26:8]. Every Christian, every person devoted to the Virgin Mary should say: Lord, holy Father, *I love the beauty of your house*, that is, the integrity of the Virgin Mary, and *the house in which you dwell*, because your Son, your glory, lived in her.

Let us ask the Virgin to intercede for us with her Son, so that she would make us imitators of him, and that through her merits we may merit to reach eternal glory which Jesus Christ her Son gives to us, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

SERMON 2

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work [Prov 8:22]. Because the glorious Virgin Mary, whose birth holy mother Church celebrates today, was the mother of wisdom, since she conceived and gave birth as a dwelling of wisdom in which wisdom rests: *Wisdom has built her house* [Prov 9:1]. Wisdom rested and lived not only in her mind but also in her flesh and womb: *My Creator chose the place for my tent* [Sir 24:8]. What is said of wisdom can be applied to her just as for emphasis we use the abstract for the concrete. For example, to broaden the sense we refer to an extremely bright body as light, we refer to a person whose justice is broad and great as justice itself, and a very truthful person as truth itself. It is not out of order to understand the text in which God is said to have made and arranged everything: *In wisdom you have made everything* [Ps 104:24] as applying in a mystical sense to the glorious Virgin who, as has been said, was the mother of wisdom, its special temple and home.

The Virgin commends and describes herself, not glorying in herself but in the Lord, referring all to the Lord especially in two things: firstly, for the fulness of grace by which she was made the particular temple and home of God, when she said: *The Lord created me* [Prov 8:22]. We say a house is owned when someone lives in it with a certain right. Therefore, the glorious Virgin says: *The Lord created me*, that is, dwelt in me by grace, and so in a special way laid claim to my whole person, for which reason the angel greeted her saying: *Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you* [Lk 1:28].

Secondly, for the greatness of the excellence by which she is an example and model for all, when she says: *at the beginning of his work* [Prov 8:22], that is, worthier and more excellent than all others. Rightly does every creature admire and strive to imitate her. Therefore, she says: *The Lord created me at the beginning of his work*. So I ask what and of what kind was this creation since the most prudent Virgin glorifies herself for being created?

1. This creation was free and pleasing by the grace of adoption. *The Lord chose her as his own possession* [Ps 135:4], chose her beforehand only because she pleased him. So that she might please him, he adorned her with grace, adopted her and claimed her as his own. He adorned her with grace and claimed her that she might please him in a double life, namely, in her active and contemplative life, in both of which the Virgin Mary was the main handmaid of Christ. She was the handmaid who carried him in her body, fed him, fled with him to Egypt as he cried and returned with him.¹ No less was she the principal one to contemplate Christ, always *meditating on the law of the Lord day and night* [Ps 1:2], immersed in the divine oracles, always attentive to the Word she was to conceive, always thinking of him after conceiving and giving birth to him. This double life is represented by the two sisters, Martha and Mary, one of whom zealously and carefully served him while the other sat at his feet to listen most attentively to his word, as is read of these two sisters in the Gospel. Even though Mary had been a sinner, on the feast of the Assumption this Gospel is read in their honour. The following text can be applied to God's choice of Mary: *The Lord has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession* [Ps 135:4]. Jacob means 'one who struggles',² and stands for the active life; Israel means 'one who sees God',³ and represents the contemplative life. The same person was first known as Jacob, but was later named Israel by God. And since in no created person other than in the glorious Virgin was this double life perfectly harmonious, this can quite fittingly be understood of Mary.

Therefore, Christian, you should honour and imitate the Mother of Christ, busy yourself in this double life, namely, in work and actions, in the rest and quiet of contemplation, but in such a way as to avoid undue worry in actions, in rest not seeking idleness or sloth, as Augustine states and teaches in *The City of God*.⁴

2. Secondly, this creation is pure, beautiful and fitting from sanctifying grace. God who chose, adopted and made her full of grace, sanctified, purified, adorned and wonderfully endowed her, that she might be a pure, holy and splendid possession of God. Note

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how farmers cultivate their possessions, pulling up dangerous weeds, pruning unfruitful branches, killing harmful and useless grass and planting healthy plants. In the same way the heavenly farmer cleansed his possession, took out the passion of concupiscence, the beginning and root of almost all sins, sowed and placed the seeds of virtues, and adorned her with multiple gifts and charisms.

The following text can be applied to her sanctification: *It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb* [Ps 139:13]. No one doubts that concupiscence is active in the loins and is the cause of lust in our loins, and so it can truly be said of the glorious Virgin: *It was you who formed my inward parts*. You, Lord, sanctified me, stilled and took away the passion of concupiscence and *knit me together in my mother's womb* because this sanctification preceded my birth from the womb. 'The Mother of the Lord was sanctified before she was born.'⁵ Hence the Lord can apply to himself what was said in Jeremiah 1:5: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you*. It is not out of place to understand the text of Numbers 35:4 in the same way: *You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites*.

Any Christian desirous of imitating the Virgin so that God may dwell in his or her mind, must cleanse the conscience, wash away sins with tears, mortify the flesh *with its passions and desires* [Gal 5:24], not look to pleasures of the flesh, be anxious to be busy in acts and works of virtue, so as to be a temple of God and a pure and beautiful dwelling fit for God.

3. Thirdly, this creation is fruitful from the grace of fertility. God who chose, consecrated and sanctified her, made her fruitful without human embrace or cooperation, so that she might conceive from her own most pure blood⁶ by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God. From the sanctified womb of the Virgin the Word of God by the Holy Spirit took human nature so that God and man might be one person; and the Son of the Father who existed from all eternity without a mother, became in time the Son of a Mother without a father, 'without harm to what is proper to each nature'⁷. This was a

prophecy of the Prophet: *Look, the young woman (virgin) is with child and shall bear a son* [Isa 7:14]. It is the new thing of Jeremiah 31:22: *a woman encompasses a man*. Who has ever heard or seen a thing like this: conceived without passion, a birth without stain, virginity with fertility and fertility with virginity? This is the blessed earth which produces the fruit of our salvation; *Lord, you were favourable to your land* [Ps 85:1], and later: *our land will yield its increase* [Ps 85:12], which is explained in Isaiah 45:8 as: *let the earth open, that salvation may spring up*. The Lord can say: *I have gained a prize possession* [Sir 51:21]; certainly this possession is good and fruitful, not infertile, for it brought forth such fruit: *he who acquires a wife gets his best possession* [Sir 36:29].

Christian soul, devoted to God, you are to greet this Virgin not forgetting her fruit and you are to bless her frequently saying and reflecting on the words: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb”; and try to imitate her. And while you cannot conceive the Son of God in your flesh, at least conceive him by good intentions and right thinking; form him in you by good affection and bring him forth by perfect actions, lest it be said of you what was said of the wicked by the prophet: *children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth* [Isa 37:3].

4. Fourthly, this is a quiet, peaceful and tranquil creation from the grace of protection and confirmation. The glorious Virgin was a secure and tranquil creation of the Lord, so that no demon spirit, no movement of temptation, might reach her or in any way be able to touch her. Luke 11:21 states: *When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe*. Who is stronger than God, who is more powerful than the angelic powers who uphold and defend the Virgin, since it is their duty to confine and restrain contrary powers? However, *where there is no fence of divine or angelic defence the property will be plundered* [Sir 36:30]. Discipline over her senses was a fence for the blessed Virgin so that no enemy might gain entry and she might be a garden locked, a fountain sealed: *A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain*

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sealed [Song 4:12]. From a confirming grace there was no rebellious movement in her contrary to reason, no feeling of any disturbance or passion, no disordered appetite, for every exercise of her strength was perfectly subject to a higher power; in her there was no disobedience, no struggle, no opposition for everything was at peace just as the animals in Noah's ark were at peace.⁸ This is the place of peace referred to in the text: *His abode has been established in Salem*⁹ [Ps 76:2].

Devout soul, if you want God to dwell in your heart, fence in your senses with the fence and protection of discipline, close all the doors through which your heart can be approached lest disturbance be stirred up within you, lest *Death comes up in the windows* [Jer 9:21]; check every storm of images, put down every turmoil of passion so that the Lord may deign to rest in you as on a sabbath and to dwell in your heart as in his own tent.

5. Fifthly, this is a creation full with no diminution. The Lord claimed her completely for himself, not wanting or allowing any other to share her. The glorious Virgin saw no other as lord even over a small part of herself, she tolerated no other owner in thought, desire or action, but the whole force of her love was directed to God, perfectly fulfilling the divine command: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might* [Deut 6:5]. She neither loved nor desired anything in the world unless she wanted it for the sake of God, lest even in a detail her love be slackened or impeded from being centred on God, as Augustine says¹⁰: 'One loves you less, Lord, who loves something else with you unless it be loved for your sake'.

On the fulness of such possession we read: *The earth is full of your creatures* [Ps 104:24]; and in Numbers 24:18 according to another translation: *The whole earth will be your possession*, where we have: *Edom will become a possession*. The earth is the blessed Virgin Mary, who is wholly, totally and perfectly the possession of the Lord, there being nothing in her he does not own.

Devout soul, you wish to imitate the Virgin. If then you want to be a perfect possession of God, be careful above all not to hold

within you the love of any good thing in the world, any wealth, joy, friendship or wisdom of this world; all that must be left behind is of the world and of the flesh, but direct the whole force of love to God.

6. Sixthly, she is possessed continuously without interruption. Never did she admit of another lord or allow another to own her, but from the beginning the Lord possessed her continuously for she offended God neither venially nor mortally; she never drew away from him nor he from her for he always remained in her by grace.

Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago [Ps 74:2]. Each human person is a kind of congregation, assembly, kingdom in which are different powers, namely, the ability to feel exteriorly such as with certain particular senses; the ability to feel interiorly such as the basic senses of imagination, thinking logically and memory;¹¹ there are intellectual powers such as memory, understanding and will in which is the image of God,¹² over all of which the will reigns as lady and queen. The will, however, should follow judgment and the advice of reason as from a judge. This kingdom is well ruled when the lower senses are subject to and obey the middle, when the middle senses are subject to the highest, when the highest senses are subject to the ordered will of God alone, so that from his will and orders it never draws back. Such was the order in the Virgin Mary so that she always persevered in this order. From the beginning God continuously possessed her so that she could say: *Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago* [Ps 74:2].

Christian, whoever you are, perhaps at some time you drew back from this owner, that is, you sinned, and by doing so, especially if the sin was mortal, you submitted yourself to another owner. As often as one sins so often does one hand oneself over to demons: *Other lords besides you have ruled over us* [Isa 26:13]. Should this be true, be sorry and pay your debt so that you may return to so kind and good an owner, who cultivates you, plants gardens of virtues in you and deigns to dwell in you by grace as in his own possession.

7. Seventhly, she is a perpetual possession without end or terminus. The blessed Virgin Mary was not only a perpetual

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possession, but by her final perseverance carried to the end, she was brought to completion by glory or in glory. Only perseverance leads to glory: *The one who perseveres to the end will be saved* [Mt 10:22].

On the continuing and unending quality of this possession it is said: *O Israel, how great is the house of God, how vast the territory that he possesses. It is great and has no end; it is high and immeasurable* [Bar 3:24-25]. The Virgin Mary was the *house of God* because God lived in her, she is a *territory* because God rested in her; she is called a *great house* because of the breadth of her love, a *high house* because of the depth of her wisdom, *great and without end* because of her perseverance and the length of her enduring, *high and immeasurable* because of the height and grandeur of her intention.

Christian, you are to imitate this Virgin so that by neither trouble nor adversity will you be separated from divine love; you are to persevere patiently as God's lasting possession so that you will be possessed by God and you will possess God in eternity, see God immediately, love God with delight and praise God without end, because as Augustine says¹³: 'We will see and love, we will love and praise and this will be without end'. Amen.

SERMON 3

A star shall come out of Jacob [Num 24:17]. In this text the birth of the glorious Virgin is foretold and described in two ways, namely, in her natural origin and in her supernatural origin. Her natural origin is stated because she is to be born from Jacob: *she shall come out of Jacob*; her supernatural origin because the text says *star*.

The birth is also described in the singular dignity of the one being born, and in the carnal nobility of her ancestry; the dignity of the one being born: *star*; the nobility of her ancestry: *She shall come out of Jacob*, out of a line of kings and patriarchs.

1. She is called a star and rightly is the Virgin Mary compared to a star. Stars by nature are heavenly and Mary is a star because of her unstained and immaculate purity: *God made the stars and set them in the dome of the sky* [Gen 1:16-17]. God made the stars of a heavenly nature, and the Philosopher¹ says that stars are of the nature of the heavenly body.

Mary by her calling is sublime: *Is not God high in the heavens? See the highest stars, how lofty they are* [Job 22:12]. It is said of Abraham: *The Lord assured him that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth and exalt his offspring like the stars* [Num 44:21]; so Mary was a star.

Mary by her nature was enduring because of her strengthened constancy:

When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established [Ps 8:3]; *Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, like the stars forever and ever* [Dan 12:3].

Mary was ordered in her movement and so Mary is a star because of her ordered life during which she moved by nothing other than a direction from the eternal law.

Birth of B.V.Mary

The stars shone in their watches, and were glad; he called them, and they said, 'Here we are!' [Bar 3:34]. *The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera* [Judg 5:20].

In her appearance Mary was small and modest and so Mary is a star because of her deep humility. *Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them* [Gen 15:5]. This text refers not only to the number of the stars because they are innumerable, but to their apparent smallness because they cannot be distinguished.

Mary was graceful in her beauty. The stars are the beauty of the sky and so Mary was a star because of the goodness of her way of life: *The glory of the stars is the beauty of heaven, a glittering array in the heights of the Lord* [Sir 43:10]. Just as the stars adorn the sky, so Mary adorns the Church.

Mary was like light in her brightness and so Mary is a star because of the truth of her saving knowledge. She was a teacher of the faith: *I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star* [Rev 22:16].

2. Something has been said of the properties of a star applicable to the dignity of the one to be born. Something can now be said of the effects applicable to the value of the birth. There are in the world six effects or values in the rising of this star.

Firstly, there is honour to the humble. The humble are honoured in the birth of the Virgin: *The sun rose and the humble were exalted* [Add Esth 11:11]; *Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you* [Isa 60:1].

Secondly, there is comfort, strength and protection for the weak. In the birth of the Virgin the weak were strengthened and the enemies laid low: *As soon as it was dawn they hung the head of Holofernes on the wall* [Jdt 14:11]. She is the one who struck the head of the serpent [Gen 3:15].

Thirdly, there is a curing of the sick, for in the birth of the Virgin the sick are freed:

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. Then your light shall come forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly [Isa 58:7-8].

Fourthly, there is a reconciliation of those who quarrel and are divided for in the birth of the Virgin those quarreling are brought to peace: *In her days may righteousness flourish and peace abound [Ps 72:7]; When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens [Ps 104:22].*

Fifthly, there is a correction or setting straight of all who are in error for in the birth of the Virgin all who turned aside are corrected and the ignorant enlightened:

Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined [Isa 9:2]; So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts [2 Pet 1:19].

Sixthly, there is consolation and gladness for all who mourn and are sad for in the birth of the Virgin the sorrowful are consoled:

Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright of heart [Ps 97:11]; For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honour, in every province and in every city [Esth 8:16-17].

SERMON 4

A stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground [Gen 2:6]. In this text the birth of the Virgin is described with reference to three things: the dignity of one being born, the quality of her birth, and the value of the subsequent fruit. Firstly, *a stream*; secondly, *would rise*, and so I say the quality of her birth since other children of Adam are conceived and born with original sin; their birth is not a rising but a fall for we are all born *by nature children of wrath* [Eph 2:3]. But Mary, although she was conceived in original sin, was sanctified before she was born, for as Bernard says¹: ‘It is not lawful to believe that what was granted to a few mortals was denied to the Mother of God’. Thirdly, *water the whole face of the ground* and fill the whole Church.

1. The text says *a stream*. The Virgin Mary is a small stream, a living stream, an open stream and a distinguished stream.²

i. Mary is a small stream because of her deep humility: *There was the little spring that became a river, and there was light and sun and abundant water – the river is Esther, whom the king married and made queen* [Add Esth 10:6]. A *little spring* through humility, and by this humility she rightly *became a river* for she conceived the Son of God. That river *whose streams make glad the city of God* [Ps 46:4], flowing and coming from the main spring, namely, God the Father, wanted to flow from a small stream, namely, the Virgin rightly called the mother of humility: *The Lord has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant, and has done great things for me* because he is *the Mighty One* [Lk 1:48-49]. *There was light and sun* and her name became famous throughout the whole Church when she became the Mother of God and Queen of heaven. There was *abundant water* when from her merits and intercession charisms of graces were poured out on the whole Church, so that it can be said of her: *From her fulness we have all received* [Jn 1:16]. *The king married*, that is, made her the bride and chose her to be the Mother of his only begotten Son.

ii. A *living stream* from the height of her love: *A garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon* [Song 4:15]. The Virgin Mary is a fountain in the fountain of the Church in which there are as many plantings as there are faithful, as many plants as Christian souls watered from this fountain. A well receives water and in it rest the waters flowing from the great sea, the main source of water, so that the text can be applied to her: *The spirit of wisdom shall rest on her* [Isa 11:2]. The Virgin Mary had a fulness of grace according to the text: *Greetings, favoured one* etc [Lk 1:28]. These waters are not dead like water held in a stagnant pool but living by the vital force of love and coming from Lebanon, that is, from the purity of eternity. Just as the waters flow from the eternal fountain with much force, so they force the waters to return to the fountain because they can rise only so far as they come down: *Those who drink of the water that I will give them, it will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life* [Jn 4:13-14]. For a soul that God has filled and that has drunk from the water of love and charity, from the very weight of the waters, that is of love, leaps towards eternal life, indeed it goes up as high as it can leap, as it leaps in thought, affections, groaning, desires and sighs.

iii. Mary is an open stream because of her broad generosity. The Virgin Mary is sweet and pious, abundant and courteous, mean to no one, coveting nothing, giving of herself to all, ready for all: *On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity* [Zech 13:1]. The opened fountain is nothing other than the Virgin offering herself to all. Because the fountain is pure and clean, it provides everyone with clean waters; because she was above all humble and chaste, so it is said *to cleanse them from sin and impurity*, that is, in the cleansing of pride and lust.

iv. Mary is a fountain sealed by chastity, indeed by undefiled virginity: *A garden locked is my sister* [Song 4:12], locked due to her disciplined way of life, *a fountain sealed*, that is, sealed by her unstained integrity. Well does the text refer to closing before speaking of sealing because it is impossible to preserve the seal of chastity unless the door of virtue is guarded and closed. Every soul is

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a kind of garden to which the doors are the five senses; through these doors enters death that kills the beautiful plants of virtues: *Death has come up into our windows* [Jer 9:21]. When these doors are locked the whole seal of chastity is safeguarded; but if they are left open through carelessness the seal will necessarily be torn open and violated; so Augustine says³: ‘A shameless eye is the messenger of a shameless heart’. No one is to say he or she has a chaste heart if he or she has a shameless eye.

2. The text goes on: *would rise from the earth*. As has already been said,⁴ the birth of others happens in accord with the law of concupiscence, but the birth of the most sacred Virgin was a rising up, I would call it a second birth. The birth of others is infected with the stain of concupiscence, clouded over by stain, enervated by the helplessness of weakness, depraved by the wickedness of malice. According to Bede,⁵ four wounds are inflicted by sin, namely, ignorance, weakness, malice and from these together comes concupiscence. But the birth of the Virgin was purified by sanctifying grace, made clear by illuminating grace, strengthened by confirming grace, it was, as already said, full of grace making her fruitful.

i. The birth of the Virgin was purified from the stain of concupiscence by sanctifying grace and so she is compared to the growth of a plant: *a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots* [Isa 11:1]. Jeremiah⁶: When we are born, we fall into concupiscence like something foul. But she flowered in holiness and grace; as has been said, she was holy before she was born,⁷ born from a formerly childless mother⁸ and announced by an angel.

ii. Her birth was clear from illuminating grace, purified from the darkness of ignorance, and so is compared to the rising of dawn; in Genesis 32:26 when Jacob was struggling with the angel, he said: *Let me go, for the day is breaking*. In the days of the Old Testament there was fighting and war between humans and angels, but when the dawn, that is, the Virgin Mary rose up, struggling ceased and there was peace. Dawn is the midpoint between night and day, the end of

night, the beginning of day, with something in it of darkness, but it moves towards the light. This is a figure of the Virgin Mary: she is as it were the turning point, the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, having something of darkness since she was conceived in original sin, but moving towards the light when born without sin, or when the Son of God was born from her, he who is light by nature, *enlightening everyone coming into the world* [Jn 1:9].

iii. Her birth was strengthened against the difficulty of weakness by a confirming grace and so she is compared to the rising of a shoot: *Who is this coming up from the wilderness, like a column of smoke?* [Song 3:6]. A Virgin in all things upright, unchanging, not able to turn to sin: *Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity* [Ps 45:7]. She was so upright that never could she be turned aside; Bernard⁹: ‘I hold that a more copious gift of grace came down on Mary to sanctify not only her birth but to keep her then free from all sin’.

iv. Mary was perfect and filled with a fruitful grace against any evil of malice, and so she is compared to the rising of a little cloud: *A little cloud no bigger than a person's hand is rising out of the sea* [1 Kings 18:44]. This *little cloud* is the most humble Mary; heavy with rain, for Mary is all gracious, pouring on us heavenly dew. And indeed she was *a person's hand* especially when the woman encompassed the perfect man [Jer 31:22]¹⁰ in wisdom, grace, virtue and was Christlike. She is a cloud heavy and swelling with dew, shot through with a ray of the eternal sun, making the heavenly arc, that is the rainbow, because she carried Christ in his two natures and three substances just as the rainbow has three clear colours: *A woman clothed with the sun, with a rainbow over her head* [Rev 12:1; 10:1].

3. The text continues: *to water the whole face of the earth* [Gen 2:6] in which is seen the value of Mary's birth. The Church is irrigated by the waters flowing from this fountain, because by these waters what is burning is cooled, what is parched becomes green, what is dirty is cleansed, what is barren becomes fertile.

i. These waters irrigate the Church because what is burning is cooled from the heat of temptation and trouble. *A fountain shall*

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come forth from the house of the Lord and water the Wadi Shittim [Joel 3:18]; the Wadi Shittim refers to the stings of troubles.¹¹ A torrent of thorns, that is, an abundance and multitude of troubles are irrigated from the fountain flowing out of the house of the Lord, that is, mitigated and cooled by the influence of the Virgin Mary who is the consoler of the afflicted.

ii. What is parched becomes green from the moisture of devotion: *A river flows out of Eden to water the garden* [Gen 2:10]. *A river*, that is, the influence of grace, *flows out*, spreads and runs down *out of Eden*, that is, from the Virgin Mary who is full of comfort and spiritual joy, *to water the garden*, that is, to give the sweetness of devotion to souls living within the Church. *How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! Like palm-groves that stretch far away, like gardens beside a river* [Num 24:5-6].

iii. What is dirty is cleansed from the stain of sin: *I planted, Apollos watered* by giving the sacraments by which sins are cleansed, *but God gave the growth* by increasing and encouraging.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you [Ezek 36:25-26].

iv. What is barren becomes fertile from an increase in good works: From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the work of your hands [Ps 104:13].

ENDNOTES

- 1 Aristoteles, *Physica*, book 1, n. 1, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930, 184^a.
- 2 Bernard, *Epistola 174*, Ad canonicos Lugdunenses, n. 5 (PL 182, 334): 'Without a doubt the Mother of the Lord was holy before she was born'.
- 3 Ch. 36, n. 42, FOTC, vol. 86, 1992, 52-53.
- 4 The same thing is found in *Summa Halensis*, III, n. 80 (IV-2, Quaracchi 1948, 122): '...the infidels say that while Mary was most beautiful, no one

- could desire her, and this was because the strength of her chastity and holiness put out any carnal feeling in all who looked at her'; Bonaventure, *In III Sententiarum*, d. 3, p. 1, a. 2, q. 3 (*Opera omnia*, III, Quaracchi 1887, 77b); Ioannes de Rupella, *Sermo in nativitate B. M. Virginis* (ed. K. F. Lynch, St Bonaventure, N.Y. 1961, 66), with the notes of the editors.
- 5 Ch. 18, New York: Magi Books, Inc., 1969, 194.
 - 6 N. 4 (PG 3, 871).
 - 7 Rather Fulgentius, ch. 1, n. 1, FOTC, vol. 95, 1997, 60.
 - 8 *In Evangelia*, homilia 7, n. 4 (PL 76, 1103).
 - 9 Isa 9:6: He is called *Prince of Peace*.
 - 10 Salem means peace.
 - 11 Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, ch. 11, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, Oxford: University Press, 1928, 20b; Plato, *Laws*, book 6, *Plato*, vol. 10, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, 409.
 - 12 In the Latin Bible the word marble is used, not stones.
 - 13 *De coelseti hierarchia*, c. 4, n.1 (PG 3, 178); *De divinis nominibus*, c. 4, n.1 (PG 3, 694).
 - 14 The common of the blessed Virgin Mary, Responsory, *The Divine Office*, vol. 1, Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1974, 234*.
 - 15 Bernard, *Sermon for the Sunday within the Octave of the Assumption*, in, *St Bernard's Sermons for Seasons and Principal festivals of the Year*, vol. 3, Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1921, 260: 'From her fulness all receive'; see John 1:16.
 - 16 P. Lombard, *Liber III Sententiarum*, d. 3, c. 1, n. 1 (ed. Grottaferrata 1981, 33); from J. Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, l. 3, c. 2 (PG 94, 986).
 - 17 See É. Amann, *Le Protévangile de Jacques et ses remaniements latins*, Paris 1910, 205ss.; Ps.-Jerome, *Epistola 50*, n. 5 (PL 30, 300). See below, page 16, note 13.
 - 18 *Glossa ordinaria*: 'So the church gathered together in unity rises up and is perfected' (PL 113, 105).
 - 19 P. Lombard, *Glossa* in Rom 1:17: Love is 'the form of all the virtues' (PL 191, 1324).
 - 20 See Ps.-Dionysius, *De coelseti hierarchia*, c. 7, n. 1 (PG 3, 206); versio Scoti Eriug.: 'It is always in motion around what is divine, sharp and most fervent'; in *Dionysiaca*, II, 838. Matthew treats of this in *Quaestio de cognitione*, q. 9 (BFS I, ed. 2, Quaracchi 1957, 381); *Quaestio de anima beata*, q. 6, (ed. A Emmen in BFS XVIII, Quaracchi 1959, 308s.).
 - 21 *The Trinity*, book 8, ch. 10, n. 14, FOTC, vol. 45, 1963, 266.
 - 22 *De divinis nominibus*, c. 4, n. 15 (PG 3, 714); apud *Dionysiaca*, I, 225s.

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- 23 Prologus (PL 176, 954).
- 24 On this opinion in the Scholastics see A. Martinelli, *La B. V. Maria vide in terra la divina essenza?*: Roma 1957; Idem, *La visione di Dio 'per speciem' durante la presente vita*, Roma 1958.
- 25 L. 2, c. 2, n. 7 (PL 16, 220).

SERMON 2

Pages 10-16

- 1 See Ps.-Augustine, *De assumptione B. M. Virginis*, c. 7 (PL 40, 1146), whose words occur later on page 132.
- 2 Jerome, *De nominibus hebraicis* (PL 23, 825).
- 3 Ibid. (PL 23, 832).
- 4 Book 19, ch. 19, FOTC, vol. 24, 1954, 230: 'In rest not idleness pausing should delight...'
- 5 Bernard, *Epistola 174*, Ad canonicos Lugdunenses, n. 5 (PL 182, 334). See above, page 2, note 2.
- 6 See above, page 6, note 16.
- 7 Council of Chalcedon, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London: Sheed and Ward, vol. 1, 1990, 86; see Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 1-10*, Tractate 2, n. 15, FOTC, vol. 78, 1988, 72-73.
- 8 Alanus de Insulis, *Sententiae*, n. 23 (PL 210, 241): 'In the ark of Noah all the beasts were peaceful, because all sensual feelings were made peaceful in the human nature of Christ, that is subject to reason', or something similar attributed to Augustine by Alexander of Hales, *Glossa in III Sententiarum*, d. 17, n. 4 (BFS XIV, Quaracchi 1954, 175); *Summa Halensis*, III, n. 126 (IV-1, 177a); Bonaventure, *In III Sententiarum*, d. 17, a. 1, q. 3 (III, 369a) etc.
- 9 Salem means peace.
- 10 *Confessions*, book 10, ch. 29, FOTC, vol. 21, 1953, 299.
- 11 Cf. E. Gilson, *Les sources gréco-arabes de l'augustinisme avicennisant*, in *Archives d'hist. doct. et litt. du Moyen Age*, IV, Paris 1929-1930, 62, 77.
- 12 P. Lombard, *Liber I Sententiarum*, d. 3, c. 2 (ed. Grottaferrata), 1971, 72.
- 13 *The City of God*, book 22, FOTC, vol. 24, 1954, 230.

SERMON 3

Pages 17-19

- 1 *De caelo*, book 2, n. 7, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol 2, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930, 289^a: '... so we say that stars are from the nature of the fifth body, because they are placed and fixed in that body'; and Averroes, *De*

caelo, l. 2, *Aristotelis opera cum Averrois commentariis*, Frankfurt: Minerva, 1962, 124.: ‘Since he stated that stars have to be of the nature of the sky ...’, *Aristotelis opera cum Averrois commentariis*, Frankfurt, Minerva, 1962, 124.

SERMON 4

Pages 20-24

- 1 *Epistola 174*, Ad canonicos Lugdunenses, n. 5 (PL 182, 334).
- 2 The same distinction is found in Bonaventure, *Sermo IV*, De assumptione B. V. Mariae (IX, 696).
- 3 *Regula ad servos Dei*, n. 6 (PL 32, 1381); also *Letter 211*, FOTC, vol. 32, 1956, 45.
- 4 Above, page 20.
- 5 This quote has not been found even though it is commonly attributed to Bede by the Scholastics.
- 6 In the codex the abbreviation for Jeremiah is J'e, an abbreviation by which the scribe constantly refers to Jeremiah. Perhaps Jerome was intended but the opinion quoted is not found in Jerome's writings.
- 7 Above, page 20, note 1.
- 8 J. Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, l. 4, c. 14 (PG 94, 1158); É. Amman, *Le Protévangile de Jacques*, 185ss.
- 9 *Epistola 174*, Ad canonicos Lugdunenses, n. 5 (PL 182, 334).
- 10 See P. Lombard, *Liber III Sententiarum*, d. 13, n. 3 (ed. Grottaferrata) 1981, 84-85.
- 11 In the Latin Bible *Wadi Shittim* is *the torrent of thorns*.