SAINT BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

In Praise of the Virgin Mother

De laudibus Virginis Matris

SABBATISMUS

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)
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Preface

Devotion bids me write something, and business forbids it. Yet since bodily weakness prevents me for the present from following the common life of the brethren, I will not let lie idle the little leisure I am allowed to snatch at night, cheating myself of sleep. I am minded, then, to attempt above all what has often knocked at my heart: to say something in praise of the Virgin Mother, on that reading from the Gospel in which Luke tells the story of the Lord's Annunciation. And although no need of the brethren (whose progress I am bound to serve) presses me to this work, nor any profit of theirs moves me to it, yet, so long as it does not hinder me or leave me less ready for any of their needs, I do not think they ought to take it ill if I satisfy my own devotion.

Homily I

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee whose name is Nazareth, to a Virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the name of the Virgin was Mary (Lk 1:26–27).

1

What did the Evangelist mean by setting down so many proper names in this passage, and so pointedly? I believe it was because he did not want us to listen carelessly to what he took such care to relate. He names the messenger who is sent, the Lord by whom he is sent, the Virgin to whom he is sent, and the Virgin's spouse as well; and he marks out by their proper names the lineage of both, the city and the region. Why so? Do you suppose that any of this was set down to no purpose? By no means. For if not a leaf falls from the tree without cause, nor one of the sparrows falls to the ground without the heavenly Father (Mt 10:29), am I to think that a superfluous word flowed from the mouth of the holy Evangelist, above all in the sacred history of the Word? I do not think so. For all things here are full of heavenly mysteries, and each overflows with the sweetness of heaven — provided they have a dili-

gent reader, one who knows how to suck honey from the rock, and oil from the hardest stone (Deut 32:13). Truly, on that day the mountains dripped sweetness, and the hills flowed with milk and honey (Joel 4:18), when, the heavens dropping dew from above and the clouds raining down the Just One, the earth opened in gladness and budded forth the Saviour (Isa 45:8); when, the Lord giving his goodness and our earth yielding her fruit (Ps 85:13), upon that mountain of mountains, the curdled and fertile mountain (Ps 68:16), mercy and truth met together, justice and peace kissed (Ps 85:11). At that time, too, this one among the other mountains, and no small one — this blessed Evangelist, I mean — as he commended to us in his honey-sweet speech the longed-for beginning of our salvation, let certain spiritual spices flow out from him, as though the south wind were blowing and the Sun of justice shining close at hand. Would that God might now too send forth his word and melt them for us; may his spirit blow (Ps 147:18), and may the words of the Gospel become understandable to us; may they become in our hearts more desirable than gold and many precious stones, may they become sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb (Ps 19:11)!

2

He says, then: The angel Gabriel was sent from God. I do not think this angel was one of the lesser ones, who for one reason or another are often sent on embassies to earth. This is plainly

to be understood from his name, which is interpreted "strength of God", and from the fact that he is said to be sent not by some other spirit, perhaps more excellent than himself (as is the custom), but by God himself. For this reason, then, the words from God were set down; or else from God was said so that no one should think God had revealed his counsel to any even of the blessed spirits before the Virgin — save only the archangel Gabriel, who could be found of such excellence among his fellows as to be held worthy both of such a name and of such a message. Nor does the name disagree with the message. For whom was it more fitting to announce Christ, the power of God, than him whom a like name honours? For what is strength but power? Nor should it seem unseemly or unfitting that the lord and the messenger are reckoned under a common name, since, though the name is alike in both, the reason for it is not alike in each. For Christ is called the strength or power of God in one way, the angel in another. The angel is so called by name only; but Christ, substantially too, both is called and is Christ the power of God (1 Cor 1:24) — the power which, coming upon the strong man armed who was wont to guard his court in peace, and stronger than he (Lk 11:21–22), overthrew him with its own arm, and so mightily wrested from him the spoils he held captive. The angel, for his part, was called the strength of God either because he was found worthy of the privileged office of announcing the coming of that same Power, or because he was to strengthen a

virgin — by nature timid, simple and modest — lest she be terrified at the newness of the miracle; and so he did, saying: Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found grace with God (Lk 1:30). And it is believed, not unreasonably perhaps, that the same angel also strengthened her spouse, a man no less humble and God-fearing, although the Evangelist does not name him at that point. Joseph, son of David, he says, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife (Mt 1:20). Fittingly, then, Gabriel is chosen for this work; or rather, because such a task is laid upon him, he is rightly marked by such a name.

3

The angel Gabriel, then, was sent from God. Where? To a city of Galilee whose name is Nazareth. Let us see whether, as Nathanael says, anything good can come from Nazareth (Jn 1:46). Nazareth is interpreted "flower". Now it seems to me that the words and promises spoken from heaven to the fathers — to Abraham, that is, to Isaac and to Jacob — were a kind of seed of the knowledge of God, cast as it were from heaven upon the earth; of which seed it is written: Unless the Lord of hosts had left us seed, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like Gomorrah (Isa 1:9). This seed flowered in the wonders shown when Israel went out of Egypt, in the figures and riddles along the whole journey through the desert as far as the land of promise, and thereafter in the visions and oracles of the prophets, and in the ordering of the kingdom

and the priesthood, down to Christ. And Christ is rightly understood to be the fruit of this seed and of these flowers, as David says: The Lord will give goodness, and our earth will yield her fruit (Ps 85:13); and again: Of the fruit of your womb I will set upon your throne (Ps 132:11). So it is in Nazareth that the coming birth of Christ is announced, because in the flower the fruit that is to come forth is hoped for. But when the fruit comes forth, the flower falls; for when the truth appeared in the flesh, the figure passed away. That is why Nazareth is called a city of Galilee, that is, of "passing over": because at the birth of Christ all those things passed away which I listed above, which, as the Apostle says, happened to them in figure (1 Cor 10:11). These flowers, then, we who already hold the fruit see to have passed away; and even while they still seemed to be in bloom, it was foreseen that they would pass. Hence David: In the morning it shall pass like the grass; in the morning it shall flower and pass away; in the evening it shall fall, grow hard and wither (Ps 90:6). For in the evening — that is, when the fullness of time came, in which God sent his Only-begotten, made of a woman, made under the law (Gal 4:4), he himself saying: Behold, I make all things new (Rev 21:5) — the old things passed away and vanished, as the flowers fall and wither when the new fruit grows. Hence it is written again: The grass has withered and the flower has fallen; but the word of the Lord endures for ever (Isa 40:8). You do not doubt, I

believe, that the word is the fruit; and the Word is Christ.

4

Christ, then, is the good fruit, which endures for ever. But where is the grass that withered? Where is the flower that fell? Let the Prophet answer. All flesh is grass, and all its glory like the flower of the grass (Isa 40:6). If all flesh is grass, then that carnal people of the Jews withered like grass. Did not the grass wither when that same people, empty of all the sap of the spirit, clung to the dry letter? And did not the flower fall too, when the glory they took in the law did not remain? If the flower has not fallen, where then is the kingdom, where the priesthood, where the prophets, where the temple, where, in short, those mighty works in which they used to glory, saying: How great are the things we have heard and known, which our fathers have told us (Ps 78:3), and again: How great are the things he commanded our fathers to make known to their children (Ps 78:5)? This has been said on the words: To Nazareth, a city of Galilee.

5

To that city, then, the angel Gabriel was sent from God. To whom? To a Virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph. Who is this Virgin, so worthy of reverence that she is greeted by an angel, so humble that she is betrothed to a carpenter? A lovely blending of virginity and hu-

mility! And no small delight to God is that soul in which humility commends virginity and virginity adorns humility. But of how great veneration, do you think, is she worthy, in whom fruitfulness exalts humility and childbearing consecrates virginity? You hear "virgin", you hear "humble": if you cannot imitate the virginity of the humble one, imitate the humility of the virgin. Virginity is a praiseworthy virtue, but humility is more necessary. The one is counselled, the other commanded. To the one you are invited, to the other you are compelled. Of the one it is said: Let him who can take it, take it (Mt 19:12); of the other it is said: Unless a man becomes like this little child, he shall not enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:3). The one, then, is rewarded; the other is required. In short, you can be saved without virginity; without humility you cannot. Humility, I say, can please even when it mourns a virginity that is lost; but without humility (I dare to say it) not even Mary's virginity would have pleased. Upon whom, he says, shall my spirit rest, if not upon the humble and the quiet? (Isa 66:2) Upon the humble, he said, not "upon the virgin". If, then, Mary had not been humble, the Holy Spirit would not have rested upon her; and if he had not rested upon her, he would not have made her conceive. For how could she conceive of him without him? It is plain, then, that for her to conceive of the Holy Spirit, God, as she herself testifies, regarded the humility of his handmaid (Lk 1:48) rather than her virginity. And though she pleased by her virginity, it was by her humil-

ity that she conceived. From which it is clear that it was humility, beyond all doubt, that made even her virginity pleasing.

6

What do you say, proud virgin? Mary, forgetting that she is a virgin, glories in her humility; and do you, neglecting humility, flatter yourself on your virginity? He has regarded, she says, the humility of his handmaid. And who is she? A virgin, surely: a holy virgin, a sober virgin, a devout virgin. Are you more chaste than she? More devout? Or is your purity perhaps more pleasing than Mary's chastity, so that you, without humility, can please by yours, when she could not by hers? In short, the more honourable you are by the singular gift of chastity, the greater the wrong you do yourself by staining its beauty in you with an admixture of pride. Better for you, indeed, not to be a virgin than to grow insolent over your virginity. Virginity is not for everyone; but far fewer still have humility together with virginity. If, then, you can only marvel at virginity in Mary, strive to imitate her humility, and that is enough for you. But if you are both a virgin and humble, whoever you are, you are great.

7

Yet there is something greater to wonder at in Mary: fruitfulness together with virginity. For since the world began it has never been heard that any woman was at once a mother and a

virgin. Oh, if you consider whose mother she is as well! Where will your wonder at her marvellous loftiness lead you? Will it not lead you to see that you cannot even wonder at it enough? Will not she who had God for her son be exalted, in your judgement — nay, in the judgement of Truth — above all the choirs of angels? Does not Mary boldly call the God and Lord of the angels her own son, when she says: Son, why have you done this to us? (Lk 2:48) Which of the angels would dare this? It is enough for them, and they count it a great thing, that, being spirits by their creation, they have by grace been made and called angels, as David testifies: Who makes, he says, his angels spirits (Ps 104:4). But Mary, knowing herself a mother, with confidence calls her son that Majesty whom they serve with reverence. Nor does God disdain to be called what he has deigned to be. For a little later the Evangelist adds: And he was, he says, subject to them (Lk 2:51). Who, and to whom? God to human beings! God, I say, to whom the angels are subject, whom principalities and powers obey, was subject to Mary — and not to Mary only, but to Joseph too, for Mary's sake. Wonder, then, at either one, and choose which you will wonder at the more: the Son's most gracious condescension, or the Mother's most excellent dignity. On either side, amazement; on either side, a miracle. That God should obey a woman is humility without example; that a woman should command God is a height without peer. In the praises of virgins it is sung as something singular that they follow

the Lamb wherever he goes (Rev 14:4). Of what praises, then, do you judge her worthy who even goes before him?

8

Learn, O man, to obey; learn, O earth, to be subject; learn, O dust, to submit. Speaking of your Maker, the Evangelist says: And he was subject to them — to Mary and Joseph, no doubt. Blush, proud ashes! God humbles himself, and do you exalt yourself? God makes himself subject to men, and do you, eager to lord it over men, set yourself above your Maker? Would that God might deign, whenever I think anything of the kind, to answer me as he answered his apostle in rebuke: Get behind me, he said, Satan, for you do not savour the things that are of God (Mt 16:23). For as often as I desire to be set over men, so often do I strive to go before my God; and then indeed I do not savour the things that are of God. For it was said of him: And he was subject to them. If you disdain, O man, to imitate the example of a man, surely it will not be beneath you to follow your Maker. If perhaps you cannot follow him wherever he goes, deign at least to follow him where he comes down to you. That is: if you cannot walk the lofty path of virginity, follow God at least along the safest way, the way of humility; and if any, even among the virgins, stray from its straightness, then — to tell the truth — not even they follow the Lamb wherever he goes. The humble man who has been defiled does follow the Lamb, and so does the proud

virgin; but neither follows him wherever he goes: for the one cannot rise to the purity of the Lamb, who is without spot, and the other does not deign to come down to his meekness — the Lamb who was dumb not before his shearer, but before his slayer. Yet the sinner in his humility has chosen a more wholesome way of following than the proud man in his virginity: for the humble satisfaction of the one purges his uncleanness, while the pride of the other defiles his chastity.

9

But happy Mary, who lacked neither humility nor virginity! A singular virginity indeed, which fruitfulness did not violate but honoured; a humility no less special, which fruitful virginity did not take away but lifted up; and a fruitfulness wholly beyond compare, which virginity and humility accompany together. Which of these is not wonderful? Which not incomparable? Which not singular? It would be strange indeed if, weighing them, you did not hesitate over which you judge the more worthy of your wonder: whether fruitfulness in a virgin is more astonishing, or integrity in a mother; the loftiness of her offspring, or humility joined to such loftiness — except that, beyond doubt, all of them together are to be preferred to each one singly, and it is incomparably more excellent and more blessed to have received them all than some. And what wonder if God, who is read and seen to be wonderful in his saints (Ps 68:36), showed himself more wonderful still in his Mother? Venerate, then, you who

are married, the integrity of the flesh in corruptible flesh; marvel, too, you consecrated virgins, at fruitfulness in a virgin; imitate, all mankind, the humility of the Mother of God. Honour, holy angels, the Mother of your King, you who adore the Child of our Virgin — him who is our King and yours alike, the restorer of our race and the rebuilder of your city. To him, so lofty among you and so lowly among us, let both you and we alike give the reverence due to his dignity, and to his condescension honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

HOMILY II.

On Luke 1:26–27

1

No one doubts that the new song which it will be given to virgins alone to sing in the kingdom of God will be sung by the Queen of virgins herself with the others — nay, first among them. But I think that, besides that song which is permitted to virgins alone, and which, as I said, she will share with all the virgins, she will gladden the city of God with a song still sweeter and more exquisite. Its sweet-sounding melodies none even of the virgins will be found worthy to bring forth or to utter; for it will rightly be kept for her alone to sing, who alone glories in childbirth, and in a divine childbirth. She glories, I would say, in her childbearing — not in herself, but in him whom she bore. For God — and it is God whom she

bore — meaning to endow his Mother with a singular glory in heaven, took care to forestall her on earth with a singular grace as well, by which she might, ineffably, both conceive untouched and give birth uncorrupted. Such a birth befitted God, that he should be born of none but a Virgin; and such a childbirth befitted the Virgin, that she should bear none but God. Therefore the Maker of men, in order to become man, being about to be born of a human being, had to choose out of all — nay, to fashion — such a mother for himself as he knew to be fitting for himself and knew would please him. So he willed her to be a virgin, that from a spotless mother the Spotless One might come forth, he who was to cleanse the stains of all; and he willed her to be humble, that from her he might come forth meek and humble of heart (Mt 11:29), to show in himself the example of these virtues, necessary to all and most wholesome. He gave the Virgin her childbearing, then, who had already inspired in her the vow of virginity and had bestowed on her beforehand the merit of humility. Otherwise how could the angel, in what follows, declare her full of grace, if she had any good, however little, that was not from grace?

2

So that she who was to conceive and bear the Holy of holies might be holy in body, she received the gift of virginity; that she might be holy in mind as well, she received the gift of humility too. Adorned with these jewels of the virtues,

and shining with the twofold beauty of mind and body, the royal Virgin, known in heaven for her comeliness and her beauty, drew upon herself the gaze of the citizens of heaven, so that she inclined the heart of the King to desire her and drew the heavenly messenger down to her from on high. And this is what the Evangelist commends to us here, when he tells that the angel was sent from God to the Virgin. From God, he says, to a virgin: that is, from the High One to the lowly, from the Lord to the handmaid, from the Creator to the creature. How great the condescension of God! How great the excellence of the Virgin! Run, mothers; run, daughters; run, all you women who after Eve and from Eve are brought forth in sorrow and in sorrow bring forth. Approach the virginal bridal chamber; enter, if you can, the chaste room of your sister. For see, God sends to the Virgin; see, the angel addresses Mary. Put your ear to the wall, listen to what he announces to her, in case you may hear something to console you.

3

Rejoice, father Adam; but you still more, O mother Eve, exult: you who, as you were the parents of all, so were the slayers of all — and, what is more unhappy, slayers before you were parents. Be comforted, both of you, I say, over your daughter, and such a daughter; but she the more, from whom the evil first arose, whose reproach has passed on to all women. For the time is at hand when the reproach is to be taken away,

and the man will have nothing to allege against the woman — the man who, while he tried foolishly to excuse himself, did not hesitate to accuse her cruelly, saying: The woman you gave me gave me of the tree, and I ate (Gen 3:12). Run, therefore, Eve, to Mary; run, mother, to your daughter. Let the daughter answer for the mother; let her take away her mother's reproach; let her make satisfaction to the father for the mother: for see, if man fell through a woman, he is now raised up only through a woman. What were you saying, O Adam? The woman you gave me gave me of the tree, and I ate. These are words of malice, by which you increase your guilt rather than blot it out. Yet Wisdom has overcome malice; for the occasion of pardon which God tried to draw from you by questioning you, but could not, he found in the treasury of his unfailing mercy. For a woman is given back for a woman, a wise one for a foolish, a humble one for a proud: one who, in place of the tree of death, may hold out to you the taste of life, and, in place of that poisonous food of bitterness, may bring forth the sweetness of the eternal fruit. Change, then, the word of your wicked excuse into a voice of thanksgiving, and say: "Lord, the woman you gave me gave me of the tree of life, and I ate; and it has become sweeter than honey to my mouth (Ps 119:103), for by it you have given me life (Ps 119:93)." For it is for this that the angel was sent to the Virgin. O Virgin to be wondered at and most worthy of all honour! O woman singularly to be revered,

admirable above all women, restorer of her parents, life-giver to those who come after!

4

The angel, he says, was sent to a Virgin. A virgin in flesh, a virgin in mind, a virgin by profession; a virgin, in short, such as the Apostle describes, holy in mind and body (1 Cor 7:34); not found lately or by chance, but chosen from the beginning of the world, foreknown by the Most High and prepared for himself, guarded by angels, prefigured by the fathers, promised by the prophets. Search the Scriptures, and prove what I say. Would you have me set down here some of their testimonies myself? To speak of a few out of many: what other woman does God seem to you to have foretold when he said to the serpent: I will put enmity between you and the woman (Gen 3:15)? And if you still doubt that he spoke of Mary, hear what follows: She shall crush your head. For whom was this victory kept, if not for Mary? She beyond all doubt crushed that poisonous head, for she brought to nothing every suggestion of the evil one, whether of the allurement of the flesh or of the pride of the mind.

5

And what other woman was Solomon seeking when he said: Who shall find a valiant woman? (Prov 31:10) For that wise man knew the weakness of this sex: the frail body, the unsteady mind. Yet because he had read that God had

promised it, and saw how fitting it was that he who had conquered through a woman should be conquered through one, he said in great wonder: Who shall find a valiant woman? As if to say: if the salvation of us all, the restoring of innocence and the victory over the enemy hang thus upon the hand of a woman, then a strong woman indeed must be provided, one fit for so great a work. But who shall find a valiant woman? Yet lest he be thought to have asked this in despair, he adds, prophesying: Far off, and from the uttermost ends, is her price (Prov 31:10) — that is, not cheap, not small, not middling, not, in short, from the earth, but from heaven; and not from the heaven nearest the earth comes the price of this valiant woman, but his going forth is from the highest heaven (Ps 19:7). What, then, did that bush of Moses long ago foreshadow, sending forth flames yet not burning (Ex 3:2), if not Mary giving birth and feeling no pain? What, I ask, did Aaron's rod foreshadow, flowering though it had not been watered (Num 17:23), if not her conceiving, though she knew not man? The greater mystery of this great miracle Isaiah unfolds, saying: There shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root (Isa 11:1) — understanding by the rod the Virgin, and by the flower the Virgin's offspring.

6

But if it seems to you that saying now that Christ is to be understood in the flower conflicts with what was said earlier, where he was said to

be signified not by the flower of the rod but by the fruit of the flower, know that in that same rod of Aaron (which not only flowered but also put forth leaves and bore fruit) he is signified not only by the flower or the fruit but by the very leaves as well. Know too that in Moses he is shown neither by the fruit of the rod nor by the flower, but by the rod itself: that rod, namely, at whose stroke the water is either divided for those who are to pass over (Ex 14:16) or struck from the rock for those who are to drink (Ex 17:6). Nor is there anything unfitting in Christ's being figured by different things for different reasons: so that in the rod his power is to be understood, in the flower his fragrance, in the fruit the sweetness of his savour, and in the leaves his watchful protection, by which he never ceases to shelter under the shadow of his wings the little ones who flee to him, whether from the heat of carnal desires or from the face of the wicked who have afflicted them (Ps 17:8–9). Good and desirable is the shade under the wings of Jesus, where there is a safe refuge for those who flee and a welcome refreshment for the weary. Have mercy on me, Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, for my soul trusts in you, and in the shadow of your wings I will hope, until iniquity passes away (Ps 57:2). In this testimony of Isaiah, however, understand the flower as the Son and the rod as the Mother: for the rod flowered without seed, and the virgin conceived not of man. The putting forth of the flower did not harm the greenness of the rod, nor did the

bringing forth of the sacred offspring harm the virgin's modesty.

7

Let us bring forward from the Scriptures other testimonies too, befitting the Virgin Mother and God her Son. What does that fleece of Gideon signify — shorn from the flesh, indeed, but without wound to the flesh, and laid on the threshing floor, now the wool and now the floor being drenched with dew (Judg 6:37–40) — if not the flesh taken from the flesh of the Virgin, and without loss to her virginity? Into it, as the heavens distilled their dew, the whole fullness of the Godhead poured itself, so that of this fullness we have all received (Jn 1:16) — we who without it are truly nothing but dry ground. With this deed of Gideon a prophetic saying seems to agree very beautifully, where we read: He shall come down like rain upon the fleece (Ps 72:6). For by what follows, and as showers falling gently upon the earth, the same is given to be understood as by the threshing floor that was found wet with dew. For that willing rain which God set apart for his inheritance (Ps 68:10) first let itself down into the virginal womb gently, without the noise of any human working, in its own most quiet descent; but afterwards it was spread abroad over all the earth through the mouths of the preachers — no longer like rain upon the fleece, but like showers falling upon the earth — with a certain noise of words and sound of miracles. For those clouds that carried the rain remembered the command

given them when they were sent: What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach upon the housetops (Mt 10:27). And so they did: for their sound has gone forth into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world (Ps 19:5).

8

Let us hear Jeremiah too, foretelling new things to the men of old, and, since he could not show him present, longing ardently for the one who was to come and confidently promising him: The Lord, he says, has created a new thing upon the earth: a woman shall encompass a man (Jer 31:22). Who is this woman? And who is this man? Or, if he is a man, how is he encompassed by a woman? Or, if he can be encompassed by a woman, how is he a man? And to speak more plainly: how can he be at once a grown man and in his mother's womb? For that is what it means for a man to be encompassed by a woman. Men, as we know them, are those who have passed through infancy, childhood, adolescence and youth and reached the stage of life next to old age. How, then, can one who is already so grown be encompassed by a woman? Had he said, "A woman shall encompass an infant", or, "A woman shall encompass a little child", it would seem neither new nor wonderful. But since he set down nothing of the kind, but said "a man", we ask what this new thing is that God has made on the earth, that a woman should encompass a man, and a man confine himself within the mem-

bers of one small woman's body. What miracle is this? Can a man, as Nicodemus says, enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born again? (Jn 3:4)

9

But I turn to the virginal conception and birth, in case, among the many new and wonderful things which anyone who searches carefully surely beholds there, I may find this new thing too which I have brought forward from the Prophet. There one recognises length made short, breadth made narrow, height brought low, depth made level. There one recognises the light that does not shine, the speechless Word, water that thirsts, bread that hungers. You may see, if you look closely, Might being ruled, Wisdom being taught, Power being upheld; God, in short, at the breast, yet feeding the angels; wailing, yet consoling the wretched. You may see, if you look closely, Joy made sad, Confidence afraid, Salvation suffering, Life dying, Strength made weak. But — what is no less to be wondered at — there the sadness itself is seen to gladden, the fear to strengthen, the suffering to save, the death to give life, the weakness to make strong. Who would not now come upon what I was looking for as well? Is it not easy for you, amid all this, to recognise the woman encompassing a man, when you see Mary enfolding in her womb Jesus, a man approved by God (Acts 2:22)? And I would say that Jesus was a man not only when he was already called a man, a prophet, mighty in deed

and word (Lk 24:19), but also when the Mother of God was still cherishing the tender limbs of the infant in her gentle lap, or carrying them in her womb. Jesus, then, was a man even before he was born — but in wisdom, not in age; in vigour of soul, not in strength of body; in maturity of understanding, not in size of limb. For Jesus had no less wisdom — or rather, was no less Wisdom — when conceived than when born, when small than when grown. Whether, then, hidden in the womb, or crying in the manger, or, a little older, questioning the doctors in the temple, or, of full age, teaching among the people, he was in truth equally full of the Holy Spirit. Nor was there an hour, at any age of his life, when anything was taken from that fullness which he received in the womb at his conception, or anything added to it; but from the beginning he was perfect — from the beginning, I say, he was full of the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety, the spirit of the fear of the Lord (Isa 11:2–3).

10

Nor let it trouble you that you read of him in another place: And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace with God and men (Lk 2:52). For what is said here of wisdom and grace is to be understood not according to what he was, but according to what appeared: not that anything new was added to him which he did not have before, but that it seemed to be added, when he himself willed it to be seen. You, O man, when

you advance, do not advance when you will or as much as you will; your progress is governed and your life ordered without your knowing it. But the child Jesus, who orders your life, ordered his own as well: when he willed and to whom he willed he appeared wise, when and to whom he willed wiser, when and to whom he willed wisest of all — though in himself he was never anything but wisest. So too, though he was always full of every grace he was to have, whether with God or with men, he showed it at his own discretion, now more, now less, as he knew it to suit the merits of those who saw him or to further their salvation. It is clear, then, that Jesus always had the mind of a grown man, even if in his body he did not always appear a man. Why, in short, should I doubt that he was a man in the womb, when I have no doubt that he was God there? For it is less to be a man than to be God.

11

But see whether Isaiah does not also lay open most clearly this new thing of Jeremiah's — he who above expounded the new flowers of Aaron as well. Behold, he says, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son (Isa 7:14). There you have the woman: the Virgin. Would you hear also who the man is? And his name, he says, shall be called Emmanuel, that is, God with us. The woman encompassing a man, then, is the Virgin conceiving God. You see how beautifully and harmoniously the wonderful deeds and the mystical sayings of the saints accord with one another. You see how

astounding is this one miracle, wrought of the Virgin and in the Virgin, which so many miracles went before and so many oracles promised. For the spirit of the prophets was one; and though in different ways, signs and times, different men foresaw and foretold the same thing, they did so by no different spirit. What was shown to Moses in the bush and the fire, to Aaron in the rod and the flower, to Gideon in the fleece and the dew, Solomon foretold openly in the valiant woman and her price; Jeremiah sang of it beforehand more openly in the woman and the man; Isaiah declared it most openly in the Virgin and God; and Gabriel at last showed it forth, greeting the Virgin herself. For she it is of whom the Evangelist now says: The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a Virgin betrothed to Joseph.

12

To a Virgin, he says, betrothed. Why betrothed? Since she was, I say, a chosen virgin and, as has been shown, a virgin who was to conceive and a virgin who was to give birth, it is strange that she should have been betrothed when she was not to marry. Will anyone say that this too happened by chance? What a reasonable cause commends did not happen by chance — a cause most useful and necessary, and altogether worthy of the devising of the divine counsel. I will say what seemed good to me — or rather, what seemed good to the Fathers before me. The reason for Mary's betrothal was the same as the reason for Thomas's doubting. It was the

custom of the Jews that from the day of their betrothal until the time of the wedding, brides were handed over to their bridegrooms to be guarded, so that the men might guard the women's chastity all the more carefully, as being the more faithful guardians on their own account. As, then, Thomas, by doubting and by touching, became the most steadfast witness to the Lord's resurrection, so Joseph, by taking Mary as his betrothed and observing her way of life the more closely during the time she was in his keeping, became the most faithful witness of her chastity. A beautiful correspondence between the two: the doubt of Thomas and the betrothal of Mary. They might indeed have cast about us the snare of a like error, bringing into suspicion the truth of the faith in him and of chastity in her; but, most wisely and lovingly, the contrary came about: that whence suspicion was feared, from there comes firm certainty. For about the Son's resurrection I, who am weak, would more readily believe Thomas, who doubted and touched, than Cephas, who heard and believed; and about the Mother's continence, I would more easily believe her spouse, who guarded her and knew it by experience, than the Virgin herself defending herself on the strength of her own conscience alone. Tell me, pray, who, seeing her with child and not betrothed, would not rather call her a harlot than a virgin? But it was not fitting that this should be said of the Mother of the Lord. It was more tolerable, and more seemly, that Christ should for a time be

thought to have been born of wedlock than of fornication.

13

But could not God, you say, have shown some open sign, so that neither his birth should be defamed nor his mother accused? He could indeed; but what men knew could not have been hidden from the demons. And it was necessary that the mystery of the divine counsel be hidden for a time from the prince of this world: not that God feared he could be hindered by him if he chose to do his work openly, but because he, who has done whatever he willed not only mightily but also wisely, and who in all his works is wont to keep certain fitting correspondences of things and times for the beauty of order, willed in this so magnificent work of his too — the work of our restoration — to show not only his power but also his wisdom. And although he could have accomplished it otherwise, in whatever way he wished, it pleased him rather to reconcile man to himself in the same manner and order in which he knew man had fallen: so that, as the devil first deceived the woman and afterwards overcame the man through the woman, so he should first be deceived by a woman, a virgin, and afterwards be openly overthrown by a man, Christ; that, while the art of mercy outwitted the fraud of malice and the power of Christ crushed the strength of the evil one, God might appear both wiser and stronger than the devil. For so it befitted incarnate Wisdom to overcome spiritual malice,

that he should not only reach from end to end mightily but also order all things sweetly (Wis 8:1). He reaches from end to end, that is, from heaven to hell. If I ascend into heaven, he says, you are there; if I descend into hell, you are present (Ps 139:8). And mightily in both places: when he cast the proud one out of the heights, and despoiled the greedy one in the underworld. It was fitting, then, that he should also order all things sweetly, things in heaven and things on earth: so that, casting the restless one down from there, he might establish the rest in peace; and, being about to overthrow the envious one here, he might first leave us the most necessary example of his humility and meekness; and so by a wonderful governance of wisdom he would appear both sweet to his own and strong to his enemies. For what would it profit that the devil be overcome by God, if we remained proud? Of necessity, therefore, Mary was betrothed to Joseph, since by this what is holy is hidden from the dogs (Mt 7:6), her virginity is proven by her spouse, and the Virgin's modesty is spared as well as her good name protected. What could be wiser, what more worthy of divine providence? By one such counsel a witness is admitted to the secrets of heaven, the enemy is shut out, and the good name of the Virgin Mother is kept unharmed. Otherwise, when would a just man have spared an adulteress? Yet it is written: But Joseph her husband, being a just man and unwilling to expose her, was minded to put her away privately (Mt 1:19). Well said: being a just man, he was unwilling to expose her; for

as he would by no means have been just had he condoned a guilt he knew of, so neither would he have been just had he condemned one whom he had proved innocent. Being, then, a just man and unwilling to expose her, he was minded to put her away privately.

14

Why was he minded to put her away? Here too, take not my opinion but that of the Fathers. Joseph was minded to put her away for the same reason for which Peter too pushed the Lord away from him, saying: Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man (Lk 5:8); and for which the centurion kept him from his house, when he said: Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof (Mt 8:8). So Joseph too, deeming himself unworthy and a sinner, said within himself that the familiar company of one so holy and so great ought no longer to be granted him, for he stood in awe of her wonderful dignity, so far above his own. He saw, and trembled to see, that she bore the surest sign of the divine presence; and because he could not penetrate the mystery, he was minded to put her away. Peter was afraid before the greatness of his power; the centurion was afraid before the majesty of his presence. Joseph too, being a man, shrank in awe before the newness of so great a wonder and the depth of the mystery; and therefore he was minded to put her away privately. Do you wonder that Joseph judged himself unworthy of the company of the Virgin with child, when you hear that holy Eliza-

beth too could not bear her presence except with trembling and reverence? For she says: Whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Lk 1:43) That is why Joseph was minded to put her away. But why privately, and not openly? So that he should not be questioned about the cause of the separation or required to give a reason for it. For what answer could a just man give to a stiff-necked people, a people that does not believe and contradicts (Rom 10:21)? Had he said what he thought, what he had proved of her purity, would not the unbelieving and cruel Jews at once have mocked him and stoned her? For when would they have believed the Truth silent in the womb, whom they afterwards despised when he cried aloud in the temple? What would they have done to him before he appeared, who afterwards laid impious hands on him even when he shone with miracles? Rightly, then, the just man, lest he be forced either to lie or to defame an innocent woman, was minded to put her away privately.

15

But if anyone thinks otherwise, and maintains that Joseph, being a man, doubted; that because he was just he was unwilling to live with her on account of his suspicion, yet (because he was kind) unwilling to expose her once suspected, and that he was therefore minded to put her away privately — I answer briefly that even so, that doubt of Joseph's was necessary, since it was found worthy of being resolved by a divine oracle.

For thus it is written: But while he thought on these things — namely, of putting her away privately — an angel appeared to him in his sleep, saying: Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife (Mt 1:20). For that which is born in her is of the Holy Spirit. For these reasons, then, Mary was betrothed to Joseph — or rather, as the Evangelist puts it, to a man whose name was Joseph. He calls him a man, not because he was her husband, but because he was a man of virtue. Or rather, because according to the other Evangelist he is called not simply "a man" but "her husband" (Mt 1:19), he is rightly called what he was of necessity thought to be. He had to be called her husband, then, because it was necessary that he should also be thought so; just as he was found worthy, not indeed to be, but to be called the father of the Saviour, so that he was thought to be so, as this same Evangelist says: And Jesus himself was beginning to be about thirty years of age, being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph (Lk 3:23). So he was neither the husband of the mother nor the father of the son, although by a sure (as has been said) and necessary dispensation he was for a time both called and thought to be both.

16

Yet gather from this title — by which, though it was given by dispensation, he was found worthy to be so honoured by God as to be both called and believed the father of God — gather too from his own name (which you do not doubt means

"increase") who and what manner of man this Joseph was. Remember too that great patriarch of old who was sold into Egypt, and know that this Joseph inherited not only his name but also his chastity, and attained his innocence and his grace. For that Joseph, sold out of his brothers' envy and led into Egypt (Gen 37:27–28), prefigured the selling of Christ; this Joseph, fleeing the envy of Herod, carried Christ into Egypt (Mt 2:14). That one, keeping faith with his master, would not lie with his mistress (Gen 39:12); this one, recognising his lady, the mother of his Lord, as a virgin, and himself continent, guarded her faithfully. To that one was given understanding in the mysteries of dreams (Gen 40–41); to this one it was given to be made the confidant and sharer of heavenly mysteries (Mt 1:20). That one stored up grain, not for himself but for the whole people (Gen 41:48–49); this one received the living bread from heaven (Jn 6:51) into his keeping, both for himself and for the whole world. There is no doubt that this Joseph, to whom the Mother of the Saviour was betrothed, was a good and faithful man. A faithful and prudent servant, I say, whom the Lord set (Mt 24:45) to be the comfort of his mother, the foster-father of his flesh, and, in short, the one most faithful helper of his great counsel on earth. To this is added that he is said to have been of the house of David. Truly of the house of David, truly of royal stock was this man Joseph descended: noble by birth, nobler in mind. Plainly a son of David, not unworthy of his father David. Wholly a son of David, I say, not in the

flesh alone, but in faith, in holiness, in devotion: one whom the Lord, as another David, found according to his own heart (Acts 13:22), to whom he might safely entrust the most secret and most sacred mystery of his heart; to whom, as to another David, he made known the uncertain and hidden things of his wisdom (Ps 51:8), and granted him not to be ignorant of the mystery which none of the princes of this world knew (1 Cor 2:8); to whom, in short, it was given — what many kings and prophets desired to see, and did not see; to hear, and did not hear (Lk 10:24) — not only to see and to hear, but also to carry, to lead by the hand, to embrace, to kiss, to nourish and to guard. And not Joseph only, but Mary too must be believed to have descended from the house of David. Otherwise she would not have been betrothed to a man of the house of David, had she not herself been of the house of David. Both, then, were of the house of David; but in the one was fulfilled the truth which the Lord swore to David (Ps 132:11), while the other was the confidant and witness of the promise fulfilled.

17

At the end of the verse he says: And the name of the Virgin was Mary. Let us say a few words about this name too, which is interpreted "star of the sea", and which most fittingly suits the Virgin Mother. For she is most aptly compared to a star: as a star sends forth its ray without corruption of itself, so the Virgin brings forth her Son without hurt to herself. The ray does not lessen the star's

brightness, nor the Son the Virgin's integrity. She, then, is that noble star risen out of Jacob (Num 24:17), whose ray illumines the whole world, whose splendour shines out in the heights and pierces the depths; travelling over the earth too, and warming minds rather than bodies, it fosters virtues and burns out vices. She, I say, is that bright and peerless star, raised of necessity above this great and wide sea, glittering with merits, shining with examples. O you, whoever you are, who know yourself to be tossed in the tide of this world amid squalls and storms rather than walking on the land: do not turn your eyes from the brightness of this star, if you do not want to be overwhelmed by the storms. If the winds of temptation rise, if you run upon the rocks of tribulation, look to the star, call upon Mary. If you are tossed on the waves of pride, of ambition, of detraction, of envy, look to the star, call upon Mary. If anger or avarice or the allurement of the flesh has shaken the little ship of your mind, look to Mary. If, troubled by the enormity of your sins, confounded by the foulness of your conscience, terrified by the horror of the judgement, you begin to be swallowed up in the gulf of sadness, in the abyss of despair, think of Mary. In dangers, in distress, in doubt, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let her not leave your lips, let her not leave your heart; and, that you may obtain the help of her prayer, do not forsake the example of her life. Following her, you do not stray; praying to her, you do not despair; thinking of her, you do not go wrong. If she holds you, you do not fall; if she

protects you, you do not fear; if she leads you, you do not tire; if she is gracious to you, you reach the goal: and so you learn by experience in yourself how rightly it was said: And the name of the Virgin was Mary. But now we must pause a little, so that we too may not gaze only in passing upon the brightness of so great a light. For, to use the words of the apostle, it is good for us to be here (Mt 17:4); and it is sweet to contemplate in silence what laborious speech cannot suffice to unfold. Meanwhile, from the devout contemplation of the sparkling star, our discourse will be renewed with greater fervour in what follows.

HOMILY III.

On Luke 1:28–32

1

I gladly borrow the words of the saints wherever I see that they suit me, so that whatever I may set before the reader in them may be the more pleasing, at least for the beauty of the vessels. And to begin now with the words of a prophet: Woe is me — not, as with the prophet, because I have held my peace, but because I have spoken — for I am a man of unclean lips! (Isa 6:5) Alas! How many vain things, how many false, how many shameful, I remember having vomited forth through this same most filthy mouth of mine, with which I now presume to turn over heavenly words! I am sorely afraid that I may at any moment hear said to me: Why do you

declare my justices, and take my covenant in your mouth? (Ps 50:16) Would that there might be brought to me too from the altar on high not a single coal (Isa 6:6), but a huge ball of fire, enough to burn away completely the thick and long-standing rust of my itching mouth, so that I may be held worthy to retell, in such words as I have, the gracious and chaste converse of the angel with the Virgin and of the Virgin with him! The Evangelist says, then: And the angel came in to her — to Mary, no doubt — and said: Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you (Lk 1:28). Where did he come in to her? Into the secret place of her chaste chamber, I think, where perhaps, having shut the door upon herself, she was praying to her Father in secret (Mt 6:6). Angels are wont to stand by those who pray and to delight in those whom they see lifting up pure hands in prayer (1 Tim 2:8); they rejoice to offer to God the holocaust of holy devotion as an odour of sweetness. And how greatly Mary's prayers pleased the Most High the angel showed, who came in to her and greeted her so reverently. Nor was it hard for the angel to pass through the closed door into the Virgin's retreat; for by the subtlety of his substance he has this in his nature, that not even iron bolts can bar his entrance wherever his impulse carries him. For walls do not resist the angelic spirits; all visible things yield to them, and all bodies alike, however solid or dense, are penetrable and open to them. We are not to suppose, then, that the angel found the Virgin's little door open; for it was surely her resolve to flee the crowds of men

and to avoid their conversation, lest the silence of her prayer be disturbed or the chastity of her continence be tempted. So the most prudent Virgin had closed her dwelling upon herself at that hour too — but to men, not to angels. Hence, though the angel could come in to her, to no man was access easy.

2

The angel, then, came in to her and said: Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that Stephen was full of grace (Acts 6:8) and that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4); but in a way far unlike Mary. For in him the fullness of the Godhead did not dwell bodily (Col 2:9), as it did in Mary; nor did they conceive of the Holy Spirit, as Mary did. Hail, he says, full of grace, the Lord is with you. What wonder if she was full of grace, with whom the Lord was? This is rather to be wondered at: how he who had sent the angel to the Virgin was found by the angel to be with the Virgin. Was God, then, so much swifter than the angel that, swifter still, he outstripped his hastening messenger to the earth? No wonder. For while the King was at his repose, the Virgin's nard gave forth its fragrance (Song 1:12), and the smoke of her spices rose up before his glory and found grace in the eyes of the Lord, while those who stood around cried out: Who is she that comes up through the desert like a column of smoke, from spices of myrrh and frankincense? (Song 3:6) And at once the King, coming forth

from his holy place, rejoiced like a giant to run his course; and though his going forth is from the highest heaven (Ps 19:6–7), flying with exceeding desire he outstripped his messenger to the Virgin whom he had loved, whom he had chosen for himself, whose beauty he had desired. Seeing him coming from afar, the Church says, rejoicing and exulting: Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills (Song 2:8).

3

Rightly did the King desire the Virgin's beauty. For she had done all that she had been counselled long before by her father David, who said to her: Hear, O daughter, and see, and incline your ear; and forget your people and your father's house (Ps 45:11). And if you do this, the King will desire your beauty (Ps 45:12). For she heard and saw — not like some who hearing do not hear, and seeing do not understand (Mt 13:13) — but she heard and believed, she saw and understood. And she inclined her ear to obedience and her heart to discipline, and forgot her people and her father's house: for she cared neither to increase her people by a line of offspring nor to leave an heir to her father's house; but whatever honour she might have had among her people, whatever earthly goods from her father's house, she counted all as dung, that she might gain Christ (Phil 3:8). Nor did her intention deceive her, since she both claimed Christ as her son and did not violate her resolve of chastity. Well, then, is she called full of

grace, who both kept the grace of virginity and won besides the glory of fruitfulness.

4

Hail, he says, full of grace, the Lord is with you. He did not say, "the Lord is in you", but, "the Lord is with you". For God, who by his simple substance is everywhere equally and wholly present, is nevertheless present by his working in one way in rational creatures and in another in the rest; and among rational creatures, in one way in the good and in another in the wicked. In irrational creatures he is present in such a way that he is not grasped by them. By all rational creatures he can be grasped through knowledge; but only by the good is he grasped through love as well. In the good alone, then, is he present in such a way as to be also with them, through the harmony of the will. For since they so subject their wills to justice that it does not misbecome God to will what they will, by not dissenting from his will they join God to themselves in a special way. But while he is thus with all the saints, he is with Mary in a special way: for with her he was so wholly of one accord that he joined to himself not only her will but her flesh too, and out of his own substance and the Virgin's made one Christ — or rather, became one Christ: who, though neither wholly from God nor wholly from the Virgin, was yet wholly God's and wholly the Virgin's; not two sons, but the one Son of both. So he says: Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. And not only the Lord the Son is with you, whom you clothe

with your flesh, but also the Lord the Holy Spirit, of whom you conceive, and the Lord the Father, who begot him whom you conceive. The Father, I say, is with you, who makes his Son your Son too. The Son is with you, who, to establish in you a wonderful mystery, in a wonderful way both opens for himself the secret of birth and keeps for you the seal of virginity. The Holy Spirit is with you, who with the Father and the Son sanctifies your womb. The Lord, then, is with you.

5

Blessed are you among women. I am pleased to add what Elizabeth, whose words these are, went on to say: And blessed is the fruit of your womb (Lk 1:42). Not because you are blessed is the fruit of your womb blessed; but because he went before you with blessings of sweetness (Ps 21:4), therefore you are blessed. Truly blessed is the fruit of your womb, in whom all nations are blessed, of whose fullness you too have received with the rest, though differently from the rest. And so you are blessed indeed, but among women; whereas he is blessed not among men, not among angels, but is, as the Apostle says, God over all, blessed for ever (Rom 9:5). A man is called blessed, bread is called blessed, a woman blessed, the earth blessed, or whatever else among creatures is said to be blessed; but the fruit of your womb is blessed in a singular way, since he is God over all, blessed for ever.

6

Blessed, then, is the fruit of your womb. Blessed in fragrance, blessed in savour, blessed in beauty. The fragrance of this sweet-smelling fruit was perceived by him who said: Behold, the smell of my son is as the smell of a plentiful field which the Lord has blessed (Gen 27:27). Is he not truly blessed, whom the Lord has blessed? Of the savour of this fruit one who had tasted it broke forth thus, saying: Taste and see that the Lord is sweet (Ps 34:9); and elsewhere: How great is the multitude of your sweetness, O Lord, which you have hidden for those who fear you! (Ps 31:20) And another: If indeed, he says, you have tasted that the Lord is sweet (1 Pet 2:3). And the Fruit himself, speaking of himself and inviting us to himself: He who eats me, he says, shall hunger still; and he who drinks me shall thirst still (Sir 24:21). He said this, surely, because of the sweetness of his savour: once tasted, it stirs the appetite the more. A good fruit, who is both food and drink for souls that hunger and thirst for justice (Mt 5:6). You have heard of the fragrance, you have heard of the savour: hear now of the beauty. For if that fruit of death was not only sweet to eat but also, as Scripture testifies, delightful to behold (Gen 3:6), how much more ought we to seek the life-giving beauty of this fruit of life, on which, as another Scripture testifies, even the angels desire to look (1 Pet 1:12)? Its beauty he saw in spirit, and longed to see in the body, who said: Out of Zion the loveliness of his beauty (Ps 50:2). And lest he seem to you to have praised a middling beauty, recall what you

read in another psalm: You are fairer in form than the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you for ever (Ps 45:3).

7

Blessed, then, is the fruit of your womb, whom God has blessed for ever; and by his blessing you too are blessed among women, for a bad tree cannot bear good fruit (Mt 7:18). Blessed are you among women, I say, who have escaped that general curse by which it was said: In sorrow you shall bring forth children (Gen 3:16); and no less that other which followed: "Cursed is the barren woman in Israel" (Ex 23:26; Deut 7:14); and who have obtained a singular blessing, neither to remain barren nor to bring forth in pain. A hard necessity, and a heavy yoke upon all the daughters of Eve! If they give birth, they are tormented; if they do not, they are cursed. Pain forbids them to give birth, and the curse forbids them not to. What will you do, O Virgin, who hear these things and read these things? If you give birth, you will be in anguish; if you remain barren, you will be cursed. What will you choose, O prudent Virgin? I am hemmed in on every side (Dan 13:22), she says; yet it is better for me to incur the curse and remain chaste than first to conceive through concupiscence what I should then rightly bring forth in pain. For on this side, though I see a curse, I see no sin; on that side, sin and torment together. And after all, what is this curse but the reproach of men? For the barren woman is called cursed for no other reason than

that she is to be held in reproach and contempt as useless and unfruitful — and that only in Israel. But to me it is a very small thing (1 Cor 4:3) that I displease men, so long as I can present myself to Christ as a chaste virgin (2 Cor 11:2). O prudent Virgin, O devout Virgin, who taught you that virginity is pleasing to God? What law, what ordinance, what page of the Old Testament commands, or counsels, or exhorts us to live in the flesh not according to the flesh, and to lead the life of angels on earth? Where had you read, blessed Virgin: The wisdom of the flesh is death (Rom 8:6), and: Make no provision for the flesh in its desires (Rom 13:14)? Where had you read of virgins that they sing a new song which no one else can sing, and follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Rev 14:3–4)? Where had you read that those were praised who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19:12)? Where had you read: For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh (2 Cor 10:3); and: He who gives his virgin in marriage does well, and he who does not give her does better (1 Cor 7:38)? Where had you heard: I would that you all were as I am myself (1 Cor 7:7); and: It is good for a man to remain so, according to my counsel (1 Cor 7:26, 40)? Concerning virgins, he says, I have no commandment, but I give counsel (1 Cor 7:25). But you had — I will not say no commandment — not even a counsel or an example; except that the anointing taught you about all things (1 Jn 2:27), and the Word of God, living and effective (Heb 4:12), who became your teacher before he

became your son, instructed your mind before he put on your flesh. So you vow to present yourself to Christ as a virgin, and you do not know that you must present yourself to him as a mother too. You choose to be contemptible in Israel and, to please him to whom you have proved yourself, to incur the curse of barrenness; and behold, the curse is changed into a blessing, and barrenness is repaid with fruitfulness.

8

Open your bosom, O Virgin, spread wide your lap, make ready your womb: for behold, he who is mighty is about to do great things for you, so much so that, instead of the curse of Israel, all generations shall call you blessed (Lk 1:48–49). Do not distrust fruitfulness, prudent Virgin, for it will not take away your integrity. You shall conceive, but without sin; you shall be heavy with child, but not weighed down; you shall give birth, but not in sorrow; you shall not know man, and you shall bear a son. What kind of son? You shall be the mother of him whose Father is God. The Son of the Father's brightness will be the crown of your chastity. The Wisdom of the Father's heart will be the fruit of a virgin's womb. In short, you will bear God, and you will conceive of God. Take heart, then, fruitful Virgin, chaste Mother, untouched Mother: for you will no longer be cursed in Israel, nor counted among the barren. And if you are still cursed by Israel according to the flesh, it is not because they see you barren, but because they envy you fruitful. Remember

that Christ too bore the curse of the cross, he who blessed you, his mother, in heaven; and on earth too you are blessed by the angel and rightly proclaimed blessed by all the generations of the earth. Blessed, then, are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

9

And when she had heard, she was troubled at his saying, and thought what manner of greeting this might be (Lk 1:29). Virgins who are true virgins are wont to be always fearful and never secure; and, to beware of what is to be feared, they fear even what is safe, knowing that they carry a precious treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor 4:7), and that it is exceedingly hard to live like an angel among men, to dwell on earth after the manner of those in heaven, and to lead a celibate life in the flesh. And so whatever new or sudden thing arises, they suspect a snare and think it all contrived against them. That is why Mary too was troubled at the angel's saying. She was troubled, but not distraught. I was troubled, he says, and I did not speak; but: I thought upon the days of old, and I had the eternal years in mind (Ps 77:5–6). So Mary too was troubled and did not speak, but thought what manner of greeting this might be. That she was troubled came of virginal modesty; that she was not distraught, of fortitude; that she kept silent and pondered, of prudence. And she thought what manner of greeting this might be. The prudent virgin knew that an angel of Satan often transforms himself into an angel of light

(2 Cor 11:14); and because she was humble and simple, she expected nothing of the kind from a holy angel; and so she thought what manner of greeting this might be.

10

Then the angel, looking upon the Virgin and easily perceiving that she was turning various thoughts over within herself, comforts her in her fear, strengthens her in her doubt, and, calling her familiarly by name, kindly persuades her not to be afraid. Do not be afraid, Mary, he says, you have found grace with God (Lk 1:30). There is no guile here, no deceit. Suspect no trickery here, no snares. I am not a man but a spirit, and an angel of God, not of Satan. Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found grace with God. Oh, if you knew how much your humility pleases the Most High, what exaltation awaits you with him! You would not judge yourself unworthy of an angel's speech or an angel's service. For why should you call the favour of angels undeserved by you, who have found grace with God? You have found what you sought, you have found what no one before you could find, you have found grace with God. What grace? Peace between God and men, the destruction of death, the restoration of life. This, then, is the grace that you have found with God. And this shall be a sign to you: Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus (Lk 1:31). Understand, prudent Virgin, from the name of the Son promised you, how great and how special a grace you have found with God.

And you shall call, he says, his name Jesus. The reason for this name another Evangelist gives, the angel interpreting it thus: For he shall save his people from their sins (Mt 1:21).

11

I read of two named Jesus who went before as figures of this one whom we now have in hand, and both ruled over peoples: one of them led his people out of Babylon (Hag 1:1; Ezra 2:2), the other brought his into the land of promise (Josh 1:11). And they did defend those over whom they ruled from their enemies; but did they save them from their sins? But this Jesus of ours both saves his people from their sins and has brought them into the land of the living. For he shall save his people from their sins. Who is this who even forgives sins? (Lk 7:49) Would that the Lord Jesus might deign to number me, a sinner, among his people, that he may save me from my sins! For truly blessed is the people whose God is the Lord (Ps 144:15) — this Jesus — for he shall save his people from their sins. But I fear that many profess themselves to be of his people whom he does not count as his people; I fear that to many who seem, as it were, the more religious among his people, he may one day say: This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me (Mt 15:8). For the Lord Jesus knows who are his (2 Tim 2:19); he knows too whom he has chosen from the beginning. Why do you call me, he says, Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say? (Lk 6:46) Do you want to know whether you belong to his peo-

ple — or rather, do you want to be of his people? Do what Jesus says, and he will count you among his people. Do what the Lord Jesus commands in the Gospel, what he commands in the law and the prophets, what he commands through his ministers who are in the Church; obey his vicars, your superiors, not only the good and gentle, but also the froward (1 Pet 2:18); and learn from Jesus himself, for he is meek and humble of heart (Mt 11:29); and you will be of his blessed people, which he has chosen for his inheritance (Ps 33:12); you will be of his praiseworthy people, which the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying: You are the work of my hands, Israel my inheritance (Isa 19:25). And, lest perhaps you should envy the carnal Israel, he bears witness to this people too, saying: A people which I knew not has served me; at the hearing of the ear it has obeyed me (Ps 18:44–45).

12

But let us hear what the same angel thinks of him to whom, not yet conceived, he gave such a name. For he says: He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High (Lk 1:32). Rightly great, he who will be found worthy to be called Son of the Most High. Is he not great, of whose greatness there is no end (Ps 145:3)? And who is great, he says, like our God? (Ps 77:14) Plainly great, he who is as great as the Most High, because he too is the Most High. For the Son of the Most High will not think it robbery to be equal to the Most High (Phil 2:6). He it is who must rightly

be judged to have intended robbery who, though made out of nothing in angelic form, compared himself to his Maker and usurped for himself what belongs to the Son of the Most High — who, being in the form of God, was not made by God but begotten. For God the Father Most High, almighty though he is, could neither create a creature equal to himself nor beget a Son unequal to himself. So he made the angel great, but not as great as himself, and therefore not most high. But the Only-begotten alone — whom he did not make but begot, the Almighty the almighty, the Most High the most high, the Eternal the coeternal — he holds it neither robbery nor wrong that he should be compared to himself in all things. Rightly, then, he shall be great, who shall be called the Son of the Most High.

13

But why shall be, and not rather is great, he who, always equally great, has nowhere to grow, and will not be greater after his conception than he is or was before? Or did he perhaps say shall be because he who was great as God was to be great as man? Well said, then: He shall be great. A great man, a great teacher, a great prophet. For so it is said of him in the Gospel: A great prophet has risen among us (Lk 7:16). And by a certain lesser prophet a great prophet is likewise promised as one to come: "Behold," he says, "a great prophet shall come, and he shall renew Jerusalem." And you, O Virgin, will bear a little one, nourish a little one, suckle a little one; but when you see the

little one, think of the great one. For he shall be great, because God will magnify him in the sight of kings, so that all kings shall adore him, all nations shall serve him (Ps 72:11). Let your soul, then, also magnify the Lord (Lk 1:46), for he shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High. He shall be great, and he who is mighty shall do great things for you, and holy is his name (Lk 1:49). For what name is holier than that he shall be called the Son of the Most High? Let the great Lord be magnified by us little ones too, for whom, to make us great, he became a little one. A little child, he says, is born to us, and a son is given to us (Isa 9:5). To us, I say, not to himself: for he, born far more nobly of the Father before all time, had no need to be born in time of a mother. Nor to the angels, who, since they had him great, did not seek him little. To us, then, he is born; to us he is given, because to us he is necessary.

14

Now let us do with him who is born and given to us that for which he was born and given. Let us use what is ours for our profit; let us work out our salvation from the Saviour. Behold, a little child is set in the midst. O little one, longed for by little ones! O truly a little one — but in malice, not in wisdom! Let us strive to become like this little child; let us learn from him, for he is meek and humble of heart, lest the great God should have become a little man without cause, lest he should have died for nothing, lest he should have been crucified in vain. Let us learn his humility,

imitate his meekness, embrace his love, share in his sufferings, be washed in his blood. Let us offer him as the propitiation for our sins (1 Jn 2:2), for it is for this that he was born and given to us. Let us offer him to the eyes of the Father, and offer him to his own eyes too; for the Father did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us (Rom 8:32), and the Son himself emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Phil 2:7). He delivered his soul unto death, and was reckoned with the wicked; and he bore the sins of many, and prayed for the transgressors (Isa 53:12) that they might not perish. They cannot perish for whom the Son prays that they may not perish, for whom the Father delivered up the Son to death that they may live. Pardon, then, is to be hoped for equally from both, in whom mercy is equal in loving-kindness, power is matched in will, and substance is one in the Godhead, in which, one with them, the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

HOMILY IV.

On Luke 1:32–38

1

There is no doubt that whatever we utter in praise of the Mother belongs to the Son; and again, when we honour the Son, we do not depart from the glory of the Mother. For if, as Solomon says, a wise son is the glory of his father (Prov 10:1), how much more glorious is it to become

the mother of Wisdom itself? But what am I attempting in praise of her whom the prophets proclaim, the angel attests and the Evangelist relates to be worthy of praise? So I do not praise her, for I do not dare; I only repeat devoutly what the Holy Spirit has already unfolded through the mouth of the Evangelist. For he goes on to say: And the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father (Lk 1:32). These are the words of the angel to the Virgin about the promised Son, promising that he is to possess the kingdom of David. That the Lord Jesus drew his origin from the stock of David no one doubts. But I ask how God gave him the throne of David his father, since he did not reign in Jerusalem — indeed, when the crowds wanted to make him king, he would not consent (Jn 6:15), and before Pilate's face he even declared: My kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:36). And then, what great thing is it to promise him who sits upon the cherubim (Ps 80:2), whom the prophet saw sitting upon a throne high and lifted up (Isa 6:1), that he shall sit on the throne of David his father? But we know of another Jerusalem, signified by the one that now is, in which David reigned — far nobler than this, far richer. This, then, is the one I think is meant here, by that manner of speaking, often found in the Scriptures, in which the sign is put for the thing signified. God gave him the throne of David his father when he was appointed king by him upon Zion, his holy mountain (Ps 2:6). And here the prophet seems to have shown more expressly of which kingdom he spoke, in that

he did not put "in Zion" but "upon Zion". For perhaps "upon" was said because David reigned in Zion, whereas upon Zion is the kingdom of him of whom it was said to David: Of the fruit of your womb I will set upon your throne (Ps 132:11); of whom it was also said through another prophet: Upon the seat of David, and upon his kingdom, he shall sit (Isa 9:6). Do you see that everywhere you find "upon"? Upon Zion, upon the throne, upon the seat, upon the kingdom. So the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father — not a figurative throne but a true one, not temporal but eternal, not earthly but heavenly. And it is said to have been David's, as has already been said, because the throne on which he sat in time bore the image of that eternal one.

2

And he shall reign in the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end (Lk 1:33). Here too, if we take the house of Jacob as temporal, how is he to reign for ever in a house that is not eternal? We must look, then, for an eternal house of Jacob, in which he may reign for ever, he of whose kingdom there shall be no end. And did not that rebellious house of Jacob impiously deny him and foolishly reject him before Pilate, when, as he asked, Shall I crucify your king?, it cried out with one voice in answer: We have no king but Caesar (Jn 19:15)? Ask the Apostle, then, and he will distinguish for you the one who is a Jew inwardly from the one who is so outwardly, and the circumcision which is in the

spirit from that which is made in the flesh (Rom 2:28–29): the spiritual Israel from the carnal, and the children of Abraham's faith from the children of the flesh. For not all, he says, who are of Israel are Israelites; nor are all who are the seed of Abraham his children (Rom 9:6–7). Follow on, then, and say: likewise, not all who are of Jacob are to be counted in the house of Jacob. For Jacob is the same as Israel. Count, then, in the house of Jacob only those who are to be found perfect in the faith of Jacob — or rather, know that they themselves will be the spiritual and eternal house of Jacob, in which the Lord Jesus will reign for ever. Who is there among us who, according to the meaning of the name Jacob, supplants the devil from his heart and wrestles with his vices and desires, so that sin may not reign in his mortal body (Rom 6:12), but Jesus may reign in him, now by grace and for ever by glory? Blessed are those in whom Jesus will reign for ever, for they too will reign with him, and of this kingdom there will be no end. Oh, how glorious is that kingdom in which the kings are gathered together, they have assembled as one (Ps 48:5), to praise and glorify him who is above all, the King of kings and Lord of lords, in the most radiant contemplation of whom the just shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Mt 13:43)! Oh, if Jesus would remember me too, a sinner, in the favour of his people (Ps 106:4), when he comes into his kingdom (Lk 23:42)! Oh, if on that day, when he is to deliver up the kingdom to God the Father (1 Cor 15:24), he would deign to visit me with his salva-

tion, that I may see the good things of his chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of his nation, that he may be praised by me too with his inheritance (Ps 106:4–5)! Come meanwhile, Lord Jesus, take away the scandals from your kingdom, which is my soul, that you (as you ought) may reign in it. For avarice comes and claims a throne in me for itself; boastfulness longs to lord it over me; pride wants to be my king. Lust says: "I will reign"; ambition, detraction, envy and anger contend within me over me, as to whose I should chiefly seem to be. But I resist as far as I am able; I struggle against them as far as I am helped. I cry out to my Lord Jesus; for him I defend myself, because I know that I am his by right. Him I hold as my God, him as my Lord, and I say: I have no king but the Lord Jesus. Come, then, Lord, scatter them by your power (Ps 59:12), and you will reign in me; for you yourself are my King and my God, who command the saving of Jacob (Ps 44:5).

3

And Mary said to the angel: How shall this be, since I know not man? (Lk 1:34) At first she prudently kept silent, while, still in doubt, she thought what manner of greeting this might be, preferring humbly not to answer rather than rashly to speak of what she did not know. But now, strengthened and having pondered well — the angel speaking outwardly, but God persuading her inwardly (for the Lord was with her, as the angel said: The Lord is with you) — thus made firm, faith driving out fear and gladness shyness,

she said to the angel: How shall this be, since I know not man? She does not doubt the fact, but asks the manner and the order. For she does not ask whether this shall be, but how. As if she said: "Since my Lord, the witness of my conscience, knows that it is his handmaid's vow not to know man, by what law, in what order will it please him that this be done? If I must break my vow to bear such a son, I rejoice over the son and grieve over my resolve; yet let his will be done. But if I am to conceive as a virgin and give birth as a virgin — which, if it please him, will surely not be impossible — then I know truly that he has regarded the humility of his handmaid." How, then, shall this be, since I know not man? And the angel answered and said to her: The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you (Lk 1:35). Above she was said to be full of grace; how, then, is it now said: The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you? Could she be filled with grace and not yet have the Holy Spirit, since he is the giver of graces? And if the Holy Spirit was already in her, how is he still promised as one about to come upon her anew? Did he perhaps not say simply "will come into you", but added "upon", because he was indeed in her before through much grace, but is now announced as coming upon her because of the fullness of a more abundant grace which he is to pour out upon her? But since she is already full, how will she be able to hold that more? And if she can hold something more, how is she to be

understood to have been full before? Or had the former grace filled only her mind, while the grace that follows is to pervade her womb as well — so that the fullness of the Godhead, which before dwelt in her spiritually, as in many of the saints, might begin to dwell in her bodily too, as in none of the saints?

4

So he says: The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you. What does it mean: and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you? Let him who can take it, take it. For who — save perhaps her who alone was found worthy, most happily, to experience this in herself — could grasp with the understanding or discern by reason how that inaccessible splendour poured itself into a virgin's womb; and how, that she might be able to bear the approach of the Inaccessible, he made of the small portion of that same body to which, once it was ensouled, he joined himself, a shade for the rest of her frame? And perhaps it was chiefly for this reason that shall overshadow you was said: because the thing was a mystery, and what the Trinity alone, by itself, willed to work in the Virgin alone and with her alone, it was given to her alone to know, to whom alone it was given to experience it. Let it be said, then: The Holy Spirit shall come upon you — he who by his power will make you fruitful. And the power of the Most High shall overshadow you: that is, the manner in which you will conceive of the Holy

Spirit, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), will so cover and hide by overshadowing it in his most secret counsel that it will be known to him alone and to you. As if the angel answered the Virgin: "Why do you ask of me what you will soon experience in yourself? You will know, you will know, and happily you will know — but with him for your teacher who is also its author. I was sent to announce the virginal conception, not to create it. It cannot be taught except by the giver, nor learned except by the receiver." And therefore the Holy that shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God (Lk 1:35). Which is to say: since you will conceive not of man but of the Holy Spirit — and you will conceive the power of the Most High, that is, the Son of God — therefore the Holy that shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God: that is, not only he who, coming from the Father's bosom into your womb, will overshadow you, but also what he will unite to himself from your substance will from then on be called the Son of God; just as he who was begotten of the Father before all ages will henceforth be reckoned your son as well. Thus what is born of the Father himself will be yours, and what will be born of you will be his; and yet they will not be two sons, but one. And though one thing is from you and another from him, he will no longer be each one's own son, but the one Son of both.

5

And therefore the Holy that shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God. Notice, I pray, how reverently he said: the Holy that shall be born of you. Why so simply the Holy, with nothing added? I believe it was because he had no word by which to name properly or worthily that surpassing, that magnificent, that venerable thing which, from the most pure flesh of the Virgin, together with its soul, was to be united to the Only-begotten of the Father. Had he said "holy flesh", or "holy man", or "holy infant", whatever he had put of that kind would have seemed to him too little. So he put it indefinitely, the Holy: for whatever that may be which the Virgin brought forth, it was beyond doubt holy, and singularly holy, both by the sanctification of the Spirit and by its assumption by the Word.

6

And the angel added: And behold, Elizabeth your kinswoman has herself conceived a son in her old age (Lk 1:36). What need was there to announce to the Virgin the conception of this barren woman too? Did he perhaps wish to confirm by a recent miracle one who was still doubtful and unbelieving of the oracle? Far from it! We read that Zechariah's unbelief was punished by this same angel (Lk 1:20); but we do not read that Mary was reproved in anything — rather, we know that her faith was praised by Elizabeth herself, speaking in prophecy. Blessed are you, she says, who have believed, for the things that were spoken to you by the Lord shall be accom-

plished in you (Lk 1:45). Rather, the conception of her barren kinswoman is announced to the Virgin so that, as miracle is added to miracle, joy may be heaped upon joy. For she who was soon to conceive the Son of the Father's love with the joy of the Holy Spirit had to be set aflame beforehand with no small fire of gladness and love. For such an overflowing of sweetness and eagerness could be contained only in a heart most devout and most joyful. Or else Elizabeth's conception is announced to Mary because it was surely fitting that news soon to be spread everywhere should be known to the Virgin through the angel before she heard it from a man — lest the Mother of God should seem to be kept out of her Son's counsels, had she remained ignorant of things being done on earth so near to her. Or rather, Elizabeth's conception was announced to Mary so that, being taught now of the Saviour's coming and now of the forerunner's, and keeping the time and order of events, she might afterwards the better disclose the truth to the writers and preachers of the Gospel, having been fully instructed from heaven in all the mysteries from the beginning. Or else Elizabeth's conception is announced to Mary so that, hearing that her kinswoman is old and with child, the young girl may think of serving her; and so, as she hastens to visit her, place and occasion may be given to the little prophet to offer the first-fruits of his office to his Lord, who is younger still; and, as the devotion of the mothers and of the infants, kindled each by the

other, meets together, miracle may spring more wonderfully from miracle.

7

But see that you do not expect these so magnificent things, which you hear foretold by the angel, to be accomplished by him. If you ask by whom, then, hear the angel himself. For no word, he says, shall be impossible with God (Lk 1:37); as if he said: "These things which I so faithfully promise I venture to promise not on my own power, but on the power of him who sent me." For no word shall be impossible with God. For what word could be impossible to him who made all things in the Word? This too in the angel's words strikes me: that he pointedly did not say "no deed shall be impossible with God", but "no word". Did he put "word" because, as easily as men can speak what they will, even what they can in no way do, so easily — nay, incomparably more easily — can God fulfil in deed whatever they can express in word? Let me put it more plainly. If it were as easy for men to do as to say what they will, then for them too no word would be impossible. But since it is a common and ancient saying that there is a great difference between speaking and doing — among men, that is, not with God — and since for God alone to do is the same as to speak, and to speak the same as to will, rightly no word shall be impossible with God. For example: the prophets could foresee and foretell that a virgin, or a barren woman, would conceive and give birth; but could they make her

conceive and give birth? But God, who gave them the power to foresee, as easily as he could then foretell through them what he willed, so easily could he now, when he willed, fulfil by himself what he had promised. For with God the word does not differ from the intention, because he is truth; nor the deed from the word, because he is power; nor the manner from the deed, because he is wisdom: and therefore no word shall be impossible with God.

8

You have heard the fact, O Virgin; you have heard the manner as well: both are wonderful, both are delightful. Rejoice, O daughter of Zion, and exult greatly, O daughter of Jerusalem (Zech 9:9). And since to your hearing has been given joy and gladness, let us too hear from you the answer of gladness that we long for, that now the bones that were humbled may exult (Ps 51:10). You have heard the fact, I say, and believed it; believe also what you have heard of the manner. You have heard that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will be not through a man but through the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits your answer; for it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too await, O Lady, a word of mercy — we who are wretchedly weighed down by the sentence of condemnation. And see, the price of our salvation is offered to you; we shall be set free at once if you consent. In the eternal Word of God we were all made, and see, we are dying; by your brief answer we are to be remade, that we

may be called back to life. This, O loving Virgin, tearful Adam begs of you, an exile from paradise with his wretched offspring; this Abraham begs, this David. This the other holy Fathers implore — your own fathers — who themselves too dwell in the region of the shadow of death (Isa 9:1). This the whole world awaits, prostrate at your knees. And not without reason, since on your lips hangs the consolation of the wretched, the redemption of captives, the deliverance of the condemned — in short, the salvation of all the children of Adam, of your whole race. Give your answer quickly, O Virgin. O Lady, answer the word which earth, which the underworld, which heaven itself awaits. The King and Lord of all himself, as much as he has desired your beauty, so much does he long for the assent of your answer, in which he has purposed to save the world. And him whom you pleased by your silence you will please still more by your word, when he himself cries to you from heaven: O fair one among women, let me hear your voice (Song 1:8; 8:13). If, then, you let him hear your voice, he will let you see our salvation. Is not this what you were seeking, what you were groaning for, what you were sighing for in prayer day and night? What then? Are you she to whom this was promised, or do we look for another? Nay, you yourself, and no other. You, I say, are the one promised, the one awaited, the one desired, from whom your holy father Jacob, as death drew near, hoped for eternal life, when he said: I will wait for your salvation, O Lord (Gen 49:18). In whom, in short, and through

whom God himself, our king, determined before the ages to work salvation in the midst of the earth (Ps 74:12). Why do you hope from another for what is offered to you? Why do you await through another what will soon be shown forth through you, if only you give your assent and answer a word? Answer the angel quickly, then — or rather, through the angel, answer the Lord. Answer a word, and receive the Word; utter your own, and conceive the divine; let go the word that passes, and embrace the everlasting. Why do you delay? Why do you tremble? Believe, confess, and receive. Let humility take courage, and modesty confidence. It is by no means fitting now that virginal simplicity should forget prudence. In this one thing alone, prudent Virgin, do not fear presumption: for though modesty is pleasing in silence, devotion is now more needful in speech. Open, blessed Virgin, your heart to faith, your lips to confession, your womb to the Creator. Behold, the Desired of all nations (Hag 2:7) is knocking outside at the door. Oh, if while you delay he should pass by, and you should begin again in sorrow to seek him whom your soul loves (Song 3:1)! Arise, run, open! Arise by faith, run by devotion, open by confession.

9

Behold, she says, the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word (Lk 1:38). Humility is ever wont to be the familiar companion of divine grace. For God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Jas 4:6).

So she answers humbly, that a seat may be made ready for grace. Behold, she says, the handmaid of the Lord. What is this humility, so sublime, that knows not how to yield to honours, and cannot grow insolent in glory? She is chosen to be the Mother of God, and she calls herself a handmaid. It is truly no small mark of humility not to forget humility when such glory is offered. It is no great thing to be humble in lowliness; but humility honoured is a great and rare virtue indeed. If the Church, deceived by my pretences, has raised me, a wretched little man, to some honour, even a modest one — God permitting it, no doubt, for my sins or for those of my subjects — do I not at once forget what I was, and think myself such as I am thought to be by men (who do not see the heart)? I believe my reputation and pay no heed to my conscience; and, ascribing not honour to virtue but virtue to honour, I think myself the holier the higher I stand. You may see many in the Church who, from low-born made noble and from poor made rich, suddenly swell with pride and forget their former lowliness; they even blush for their family and disdain their humble parents. You may see moneyed men too flying up to every ecclesiastical honour, and presently applauding their own holiness — a change of clothes only, not of minds — and judging themselves worthy of the dignity they reached by canvassing, and ascribing (if I dare say it) to their merits what they obtained with coins. But I say nothing of those whom ambition blinds, and for whom honour itself is matter for pride.

10

But I see — and this grieves me more — some who, after spurning the pomp of the world, learn pride rather in the school of humility, grow more grievously insolent under the wings of the meek and humble Master, and become more impatient in the cloister than they had been in the world. And what is more perverse, many cannot bear to be held in contempt in the house of God who in their own house could be nothing but contemptible: so that, since they did not deserve a place where honours are sought by many, they may at least seem honourable where honours are despised by all. I see others too (a thing that ought not to be seen without grief) who, after taking up the warfare of Christ, entangle themselves again in worldly business (2 Tim 2:4) and plunge again into earthly desires; with great care they build up walls and let morals go; under pretext of the common good they sell words to the rich and greetings to great ladies; and, against the edict of their Emperor, they covet what belongs to others and claim back their own by lawsuits — not hearing the Apostle sounding the trumpet at the King's command: This itself, he says, is a fault in you, that you have lawsuits. Why do you not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? (1 Cor 6:7) Is this how they have crucified the world to themselves, and themselves to the world (Gal 6:14) — that those who before were scarcely known in their own village or town now go round the provinces, haunt the courts, and have won

the acquaintance of kings and the familiarity of princes? What shall I say of the habit itself, in which it is no longer warmth that is sought but colour, and more care is spent on the adornment of clothes than of virtues? I am ashamed to say it! Silly women are outdone at their own pursuit when monks seek costliness in their clothes, not necessity; not even keeping the outward form of religion, the soldiers of Christ want their habit to adorn them, not to arm them; and whereas they ought to be preparing themselves for battle and holding up against the powers of the air the badge of poverty (which the adversaries greatly dread), they display instead, in the softness of their clothing, a token of peace, and of their own accord surrender themselves unarmed to the enemy without bloodshed. And all these evils come from nowhere else but this: that, forsaking the humility by which we forsook the world, and being thus driven to follow again the foolish pursuits of worldly men, we become dogs returning to their vomit (2 Pet 2:22).

11

Let us hear, then, as many of us as are such, what she answered who was being chosen to be the Mother of God, yet did not forget humility. Behold, she says, the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word. Be it done is a sign of desire, not a mark of doubt. And when she says, be it done to me according to your word, she is to be understood as expressing the affection of one who desires rather than seeking

the effect, as one who doubts. Though nothing prevents our understanding be it done as the word of one who prays. For no one prays except for what he believes and hopes for. And God wills to be asked even for what he promises. And that is perhaps why he first promises many things that he has resolved to give, so that devotion may be stirred by the promise, and devout prayer may earn what he was going to give freely. Thus the loving Lord, who wills all men to be saved (1 Tim 2:4), wrings merits from us for our own sake; and, by forestalling us with gifts that he may reward, he acts freely so as not to give for nothing. This the prudent Virgin surely understood when to the gift of the free promise that came before her she joined the merit of her prayer, saying: Be it done to me according to your word. Let it be done to me concerning the Word according to your word. The Word that was in the beginning with God (Jn 1:1–2), let him be made flesh of my flesh according to your word. Let the word be done to me, I pray, not spoken so as to pass away, but conceived so as to remain — clothed, that is, with flesh, not with air. Let it be done to me not only audible to the ears, but visible to the eyes, palpable to the hands, to be carried on the shoulders. Nor let the word be done to me written and dumb, but incarnate and living: that is, not traced in dumb characters on dead skins, but imprinted in human form, living, in my chaste womb; and this not by the drawing of a dead pen, but by the working of the Holy Spirit. Let it be done to me, that is, in a way in which it was done to no one

before me and is to be done to no one after me. In many and various ways God spoke of old to the fathers in the prophets (Heb 1:1); and to some the word of the Lord is recorded as having come in the ear, to others in the mouth, to others even in the hand; but for me I pray that it may be done in the womb, according to your word. I do not want it done to me as something proclaimed in declamation, or signified in figures, or dreamed in images; but silently breathed in, personally incarnate, bodily enwombed. May the Word, then, who in himself could not be made and had no need to be, deign to be made in me, deign to be made for me, according to your word. Let it be done for the whole world in general, but for me in particular let it be done according to your word.

SAINT BERNARD'S APOLOGY FOR HAVING TAKEN UP THIS PASSAGE OF THE GOSPEL AFTER OTHER COMMENTATORS

I have expounded the Gospel reading as best I could; nor am I unaware that it will not please everyone. Indeed, I know that on this account I shall be exposed to the indignation of many, and shall be judged either superfluous or presumptuous for having dared, as a new expositor, to set my hand again to this very passage after the Fathers, who expounded it most fully. But if anything has been said after the Fathers that is not against the Fathers, I do not think it should displease the Fathers or anyone else. And where I have said what I received from the Fathers, so long as the swelling of presumption is absent and

the fruit of devotion is not lacking, I shall listen patiently to those who complain of superfluity. Yet let those who taunt me as if for an idle and needless explanation know that I intended not so much to expound the Gospel as to take from the Gospel an occasion of speaking of what it delighted me to speak of. And if I have sinned in stirring up my own devotion by this rather than seeking the common good, the loving Virgin will be able to excuse this sin of mine before her merciful Son — she to whom I have most devoutly dedicated this little work of mine, such as it is.