

**December 8<sup>th</sup>**

**Feast of the Immaculate Conception**

**Thursday of the Second Week of Advent**

**The Liturgical Year**

**Dom Prosper Gueranger**

At length, on the distant horizon, rises, with a soft and radiant light, the aurora of the Sun which has been so long desired. The happy Mother of the Messiah was to be born before the Messiah Himself; and this is the day of the Conception of Mary. The earth already possesses a first pledge of the divine mercy; the Son of Man is near at hand. Two true Israelites, Joachim and Anne, noble branches of the family of David, find their union, after a long barrenness, made fruitful by the divine omnipotence. Glory be to God, who has been mindful of His promises, and who deigns to announce, from the high heavens, the end of the deluge of iniquity, by sending upon the earth the sweet white dove that bears the tidings of peace!

The feast of the blessed Virgin's Immaculate Conception is the most solemn of all those which the Church celebrates during the holy time of Advent; and if the first part of the cycle had to offer us the commemoration of some one of the mysteries of Mary, there was none whose object could better harmonize with the spirit of the Church in this mystic season of expectation. Let us, then, celebrate this solemnity with joy; for the Conception of Mary tells us that the Birth of Jesus is not far off.

The intention of the Church, in this feast, is not only to celebrate the anniversary of the happy moment in which began, in the womb of the pious Anne, the life of the ever-glorious Virgin Mary; but also to honour the sublime privilege, by which Mary was preserved from the original stain, which, by a sovereign and universal decree, is contracted by all the children of Adam the very moment they are conceived in their mother's womb. The faith of the Catholic Church on the subject of the Conception of Mary is this: that at the very instant when God united the soul of Mary, which He had created, to the body which it was to animate, this ever-blessed soul did not only not contract the stain, which at that same instant defiles every human soul, but was filled with an immeasurable grace which rendered her, from that moment, the mirror of the sanctity of God Himself, as far as this is possible to a creature. The Church with her infallible authority, declared, by the lips of Pope Pius IX, that this article of her faith had been revealed by God Himself. The Definition was received with enthusiasm by the whole of Christendom, and the eighth of December of the year 1854: was thus made one of the most memorable days of the Church's history.

It was due to His own infinite sanctity that God should suspend, in this instance, the law which His divine justice had passed upon all the children of Adam. The relations which Mary was to bear to the Divinity, could not be reconciled with her undergoing the humiliation of this punishment. She was not only daughter of the eternal Father; she was destined also to become the very Mother of the Son, and the veritable bride of the Holy Ghost. Nothing defiled could be permitted to enter, even for an instant of time, into the creature that was thus predestined to contract such close relations with the adorable Trinity; not a speck could be permitted to tarnish in Mary that perfect purity which the infinitely holy God requires even in those who are one day to be admitted to enjoy the sight of His divine majesty in heaven; in a word, as the great Doctor St. Anselm says, 'it was just that this holy Virgin should be adorned *with the greatest purity which can be conceived after that of God Himself*, since God

the Father was to give to her, as her Child, that only-begotten Son, whom He loved as Himself, as being begotten to Him from His own bosom; and this in such a manner, that the selfsame Son of God was, by nature, the Son of both God the Father and this blessed Virgin. This same Son chose her to be substantially His Mother; and the Holy Ghost willed that in her womb He would operate the conception and birth of Him from whom He Himself proceeded.'

Moreover, the close ties which were to unite the Son of God with Mary, and which would elicit from Him the tenderest love and the most filial reverence for her, had been present to the divine thought from all eternity: and the conclusion forces itself upon us that therefore the divine Word had for this His future Mother a love infinitely greater than that which He bore to all His other creatures. Mary's honour was infinitely dear to Him, because she was to be His Mother, chosen to be so by His eternal and merciful decrees. The Son's love protected the Mother. She, indeed, in her sublime humility, willingly submitted to whatever the rest of God's creatures had brought on themselves, and obeyed every tittle of those laws which were never meant for her: but that humiliating barrier, which confronts every child of Adam at the first moment of his existence, and keeps him from light and grace until he shall have been regenerated by a new birth — Oh! This could not be permitted to stand in Mary's way, her Son forbade it.

The eternal Father would not do less for the second Eve than He had done for the first, who was created, as was also the first Adam, in the state of original justice, which she afterwards forfeited by sin. The Son of God would not permit that the woman, from whom He was to take the nature of Man, should be deprived of that gift which He had given even to her who was the mother of sin. The Holy Ghost, who was to overshadow Mary and produce Jesus within her by His divine operation, would not permit that foul stain, in which we are all conceived, to rest, even for an instant, on this His Bride. All men were to contract the sin of Adam; the sentence was universal; but God's own Mother is not included. God who is the author of that law, God who was free to make it as He willed, had power to exclude from it her whom He had predestined to be His own in so many ways; He could exempt her, and it was just that He should exempt her; therefore, He did it.

Was it not this grand exemption which God Himself foretold, when the guilty pair, whose children we all are, appeared before Him in the garden of Eden? In the anathema which fell upon the serpent, there was included a promise of mercy to us. 'I will put enmities,' said the Lord, 'between thee and the Woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head.' Thus was salvation promised the human race under the form of a victory over Satan; and this victory is to be gained by the Woman, and she will gain it for us also. Even granting, as some read this text, that it is the Son of the Woman that is alone to gain this victory, the enmity between the Woman and the serpent is clearly expressed, and she, the Woman, with her own foot, is to crush the head of the hated serpent. The second Eve is to be worthy of the second Adam, conquering and not to be conquered. The human race is one day to be avenged not only by God made Man, but also by the Woman miraculously exempted from every stain of sin, in whom the primeval creation, which was in justice and holiness, will thus reappear, just as though the original sin had never been committed.

Raise up your heads, then, ye children of Adam, and shake off your chains! This day the humiliation which weighed you down is annihilated. Behold I Mary, who is of the same flesh and blood as yourselves, has seen the torrent of sin, which swept along all the generations of mankind, flow back at her presence and not touch her: the infernal dragon has turned away his head, not daring to breathe his venom upon her; the dignity of your origin is given to her in all its primitive grandeur. This happy day, then, on which the original purity of your race is renewed, must be a feast to you. The second Eve is created; and from her own blood (which, with the exception

of the element of sin, is the same as that which makes you to be the children of Adam), she is shortly to give you the God-Man, who proceeds from her according to the flesh, as He proceeds from the Father according to the eternal generation.

And how can we do less than admire and love the incomparable purity of Mary in her Immaculate Conception, when we hear even God, who thus prepared her to become His Mother, saying to her, in the divine Canticle, these words of complacent love: 'Thou art all fair, Oh my love, and there is not a spot in thee! It is the God of all holiness that here speaks; that eye, which sees all things, finds not a vestige, not a shadow of sin; therefore does He delight in her, and admire in her that gift of His own condescending munificence. We cannot be surprised after this, that Gabriel, when he came down from heaven to announce the Incarnation to her, should be full of admiration at the sight of that purity, whose beginning was so glorious and whose progress was immeasurable; and that this blessed spirit should bow down profoundly before this young Maid of Nazareth, and salute her with, 'Hail, full of grace!' And who is this Gabriel? An Archangel, that lives amidst the grandest magnificences of God's creation, amidst all the gorgeous riches of heaven; who is brother to the Cherubim and Seraphim, to the Thrones and Dominations; whose eye is accustomed to gaze on those nine angelic choirs with their dazzling brightness of countless degrees of light and grace; he has found on earth, in a creature of a nature below that of angels, the fullness of grace, of that grace which had been given to the angels measuredly. This fullness of grace was in Mary from the very first instant of her existence. She is the future Mother of God, and she was ever holy, ever pure, ever Immaculate.

This truth of Mary's Immaculate Conception — which was revealed to the apostles by the divine Son of Mary, inherited by the Church, taught by the holy fathers, believed by each generation of the Christian people with an ever increasing explicitness — was implied in the very notion of a Mother of God. To believe that Mary was Mother of God, was implicitly to believe that she, on whom this sublime dignity was conferred, had never been defiled with the slightest stain of sin, and that God had bestowed upon her an absolute exemption from sin. But now the Immaculate Conception of Mary rests on an explicit definition dictated by the Holy Ghost. Peter has spoken by the mouth of Pius; and when Peter has spoken, every Christian should believe; for the Son of God has said: 'I have prayed for thee, Peter, that thy faith fail not.' And again: 'The Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I shall have said to you.'

The Symbol of our faith has therefore received not a new truth, but a new light on a truth which was previously the object of the universal belief. On that great day of the definition, the infernal serpent was again crushed beneath the victorious foot of the Virgin Mother, and the Lord graciously gave us the strongest pledge of His mercy. He still loves this guilty earth, since He has deigned to enlighten it with one of the brightest rays of His Mother's glory. How this earth of ours exulted! The present generation will never forget the enthusiasm with which the entire universe received the tidings of the definition. It was an event of mysterious importance which thus marked this second half of our century; and we shall look forward to the future with renewed confidence; for if the Holy Ghost bids us tremble for the days when truths are diminished among the children of men, He would, consequently, have us look on those times as blessed by God in which we receive an increase of truth; an increase both in light and authority.

The Church, even before the solemn proclamation of the grand dogma, kept the feast of this eighth day of December; which was, in reality, a profession of her faith. It is true that the feast was not called the Immaculate Conception, but simply the Conception of Mary. But the fact of such a feast being instituted and kept, was an

unmistakable expression of the faith of Christendom in that truth. St. Bernard and the angelical doctor, St. Thomas, both teach that the Church cannot celebrate the feast of what is not holy; the Conception of Mary, therefore, was holy and immaculate, since the Church has, for ages past, honoured it with a special feast. The Nativity of the same holy Virgin is kept as a solemnity in the Church, because Mary was born full of grace; therefore, had the first moment of Mary's existence been one of sin, as is that of all the other children of Adam, it never could have been made the subject of the reverence of the Church. Now, there are few feasts so generally and so firmly established in the Church as this which we are keeping to-day.

The Greek Church, which, more easily than the Latin, could learn what were the pious traditions of the east, kept this feast even in the sixth century, as is evident from the ceremonial or, as it is called, the *Type*, of St. Sabas. In the west, we find it established in the Gothic Church of Spain as far back as the eighth century. A celebrated calendar which was engraved on marble, in the ninth century, for the use of the Church of Naples, attests that it had already been introduced there. Paul the deacon, secretary to the emperor Charlemagne, and afterwards monk at Monte Cassino, composed a celebrated hymn on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception; we will insert this piece later on, as it is given in the manuscript copies of Monte Cassino and Benevento.

In 1066, the feast was first established in England, in consequence of the pious Abbot Helysyn's being miraculously preserved from shipwreck; and shortly after that, was made general through the whole island by the zeal of the great St. Anselm, monk of the Order of St. Benedict, and archbishop of Canterbury. From England it passed into Normandy, and took root in France. We find it sanctioned in Germany, in a council held in 1049, at which St. Leo IX was present; in Navarre, 1090, at the abbey of Irach; in Belgium, at Liege, in 1142. Thus did the Churches of the west testify their faith in this mystery, by accepting its feast, which is the expression of faith.

Lastly, it was adopted by Rome herself, and her doing so rendered the united testimony of her children, the other Churches, more imposing than ever. It was Pope Sixtus IV who, in the year 1476, published the decree of the feast of our Lady's Conception for the city of St. Peter. In the next century, 1568, St. Pius V published the universal edition of the Roman breviary, and in its calendar was inserted this feast as one of those Christian solemnities which the faithful are every year bound to observe, It was not from Rome that the devotion of the Catholic world to this mystery received its first impulse; she sanctioned it by her liturgical authority, just as she has confirmed it by her doctrinal authority in these our own days.

The three great Catholic nations of Europe, Germany, France, and Spain, vied with each other in their devotion to this mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception. France, by her king Louis XIV, obtained from Clement IX that this feast should be kept with an octave throughout the kingdom; which favour was afterwards extended to the universal Church by Innocent XII. For centuries previous to this, the theological faculty of Paris had always exacted from its professors the oath that they would defend this privilege of Mary; a pious practice which continued as long as the university itself.

As regards Germany, the emperor Ferdinand III, in 1647, ordered a splendid monument to be erected in the great square of Vienna. It is covered with emblems and figures symbolical of Mary's victory over sin, and on the top is the statue of the Immaculate Queen, with this solemn and truly Catholic inscription:

To God, Infinite In Goodness And Power,  
King Of Heaven And Earth,  
By Whom Kings Reign;  
To The Virgin Mother Of God

Conceived Without Sin,  
By Whom Princes Command,  
Whom Austria, Devoutly Loving, Holds As Her  
Queen And Patron;  
Ferdinand III, Emperor,  
Confides, Gives, Consecrates Himself,  
Children, People, Armies, Provinces,  
And All That Is His,  
And Erects In Accomplishment Of A Vow  
This Statue,  
As A Perpetual Memorial.

But the zeal of Spain for the privilege of the holy Mother of God surpassed that of all other nations. In the year 1398, John I, king of Arragon, issued a chart in which he solemnly places his person and kingdom under the protection of Mary Immaculate. Later on, kings Philip III and Philip IV sent ambassadors to Rome, soliciting, in their names, the solemn definition, which heaven reserved, in its mercy, for our days. King Charles III, in the eighteenth century, obtained permission from Clement XIII, that the Immaculate Conception should be the patronal feast of Spain. The people of Spain, which is so justly called the Catholic kingdom, put over the door, or on the front of their houses, a tablet with the words of Mary's privilege written on it; and when they meet, they greet each other with an expression in honour of the same dear mystery. It was a Spanish nun, Mary of Jesus, abbess of the convent of the Immaculate Conception of Agreda, who wrote God's Mystic City, which inspired Murillo with his Immaculate Conception, the masterpiece of the Spanish school.

But, whilst thus mentioning the different nations which have been foremost in their zeal for this article of our holy faith, the Immaculate Conception, it were unjust to pass over the immense share which the seraphic Order, the Order of St. Francis of Assisi, has had in the earthly triumph of our blessed Mother, the Queen of heaven and earth. As often as this feast comes round, is it not just that we should think with reverence and gratitude on him, who was the first theologian that showed how closely connected with the divine mystery of the Incarnation is this dogma of the Immaculate Conception? First, then, all honour to the name of the pious and learned John Duns Scotus! And when at length the great day of the definition of the Immaculate Conception came, how justly merited was that grand audience, which the Vicar of Christ granted to the Franciscan Order, and with which closed the pageant of the glorious solemnity! Pius IX received from the hands of the children of St. Francis a tribute of homage and thankfulness, which the Scotist school, after having fought four hundred years in defence of Mary's Immaculate Conception, now presented to the Pontiff.

In the presence of the fifty-four Cardinals, forty-two archbishops, and ninety-two bishops; before an immense concourse of people that filled St. Peter's, and had united in prayer, begging the assistance of the Spirit of truth; the Vicar of Christ had just pronounced the decision which so many ages had hoped to hear. The Pontiff had offered the holy Sacrifice on the Confession of St. Peter. He had crowned the statue of the Immaculate Queen with a splendid diadem. Carried on his lofty throne, and wearing his triple crown, he had reached the portico of the basilica; there he is met by the two representatives of St. Francis: they prostrate before the throne: the triumphal procession halts: and first, the General of the Friars Minor Observantines advances, and presents to the holy Father a branch of silver lilies: he is followed by the General of the Conventual Friars, holding in his hand a branch of silver roses. The Pope graciously accepted both. The lilies and the roses were symbolical of Mary's purity and love; the whiteness of the silver was the emblem of the lovely brightness of that orb, on which is

reflected the light of the Sun; for, as the Canticle says of Mary, 'she is beautiful as the moon.' The Pontiff was overcome with emotion at these gifts of the family of the seraphic patriarch, to which we might justly apply what was said of the banner of the Maid of Orleans: 'It had stood the brunt of the battle; it deserved to share in the glory of the victory.' And thus ended the glories of that grand morning of the eighth of December, eighteen hundred and fifty four.

It is thus, Oh thou the humblest of creatures, that thy Immaculate Conception has been glorified on earth! And how could it be other than a great joy to men, that thou art honoured by them, thou the aurora of the Sun of justice? Dost thou not bring them the tidings of their salvation? Art not thou, Oh Mary, that bright ray of hope, which suddenly bursts forth in the deep abyss of the world's misery? What should we have been without Jesus? And thou art His dearest Mother, the holiest of God's creatures, the purest of virgins, and our own most loving Mother!

How thy gentle light gladdens our wearied eyes sweet Mother! Generation had followed generation on this earth of ours. Men looked up to heaven through their tears, hoping to see appear on the horizon the star which they had been told should disperse the gloomy horrors of the world's darkness; but death came, and they sank into the tomb, without seeing even the dawn of the light, for which alone they cared to live.

It is for us that God had reserved the blessing of seeing thy lovely rising, Oh thou fair morning star! Which sheds thy blessed rays on the sea, and brings calm after the long stormy night! Oh! Prepare our eyes that they may behold the divine Sun which will soon follow in thy path, and give to the world His reign of light and day. Prepare our hearts, for it is to our hearts that this Jesus of thine wishes to show Himself. To see Him, our hearts must be pure: purify them, Oh thou Immaculate Mother! The divine wisdom has willed that of the feasts which the Church dedicates to thee, this of thy Immaculate Conception should be celebrated during Advent; that thus the children of the Church, reflecting on the jealous care wherewith God preserved thee from every stain of sin because thou was to be the Mother of His divine Son, might prepare to receive this same Jesus by the most perfect renunciation of every sin and of every attachment to sin.

This great change must be made; and thy prayers, Oh Mary, will help us to make it. Pray — we ask it of thee by the grace God gave thee in thy Immaculate Conception — that our covetousness may be destroyed, our concupiscence extinguished, and our pride turned into humility. Despise not our prayers, dear Mother of that Jesus who chose thee for His dwelling-place, that He might afterwards find one in each of us.

Oh Mary! Ark of the covenant, built of an incorruptible wood, and covered over with the purest gold, help us to correspond with those wonderful designs of our God, who, after having found His glory in thine incomparable purity, wills now to seek His glory in our unworthiness, by making us, from being slaves of the devil, His temples and His abode, where He may find His delight. Help us to this, Oh thou that by the mercy of thy Son hast never known sin, and receive this day our devoutest praise. Thou art the ark of salvation; the one creature unwrecked in the universal deluge; the white fleece filled with the dew of heaven, whilst the earth around is parched; the flame which the many waters could not quench; the lily blooming amidst thorns; the garden shut against the infernal serpent; the fountain sealed, whose limpid water was never ruffled; the house of the Lord, whereon His eyes were ever fixed, and into which nothing defiled could ever enter; the mystic city, of which such glorious things are said. We delight in telling all thy glorious titles, Oh Mary, for thou art our Mother, and we love thee, and the Mother's glory is the glory of her children. Cease not to bless and protect all those that honour thy immense privilege, Oh thou who was conceived on this day! May this feast fit us for that mystery, for which thy Conception, thy Birth, and thy Annunciation, are all preparations — the Birth of thy Jesus in Bethlehem: yea, dear Mother, we desire thy Jesus, give Him to us and satisfy the longings of our love.

## **Mass**

The Introit is a song of thanksgiving, taken from Isaiah and the Psalms. Mary extols the wonderful gifts of God to her, and the victory which He has granted her over Satan and sin.

### **Introit**

*I will rejoice with exceeding joy in the Lord, and my soul shall exult in my God: for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; and with the robe of justice He has covered me, as a bride adorned with her jewels.*

*Ps. I will extol thee, Oh Lord, for thou has upheld me: and has not made my enemies to rejoice over me.*

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, Amen.*

*I will rejoice with exceeding joy in the Lord, and my soul shall exult in my God: for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; and with the robe of justice He has covered me, as a bride adorned with her jewels.*

The Collect gives us the moral explanation of the mystery. Mary was preserved from original sin because she was to be the dwelling place of the Most Holy: let this teach us to beg of this same God, that He would purify our souls.

### **Collect**

*Oh God, who by the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin did prepare a worthy dwelling place for thy divine Son; grant, we beseech thee, that, as by the foreseen merits of the death of this thy Son, Thou did preserve her from every stain of sin, we also may, through her intercession, be cleansed from our sins and united with thee. Through the same, Christ our Lord. Amen.*

### **Epistle - Lesson from the Book of Wisdom. (Proverbs 8:22-35)**

*The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made anything from the beginning. I was set up from eternity, and of old before the earth was made. The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived: neither had the fountains of waters as yet sprung out; the mountains with their huge bulk had not as yet been established: before the hills I was brought forth: he had not yet made the earth, nor the rivers, nor the poles of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was present: when with a certain law and compass he enclosed the depths: when he established the sky above, and poised the fountains of waters: when he compassed the sea with its bounds, and set a law to the waters, that they should not pass their limits: when he balanced the foundations of the earth: I was with him forming all things: and was delighted every day, playing before him at all times, playing in the world: and my delights were to be with the children of men. Now, therefore, ye children, hear me. Blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that hears me, and that watches daily at my gates, and waits at the posts of my doors. He that shall find me, shall find life, and shall have salvation from the Lord.*

The apostle teaches us that Jesus, our Emmanuel, is the first-born of every creature. These mysterious words signify not only that He is, as God, eternally begotten of the Father; but also that the divine Word is, as Man, anterior to all created beings. Yet, how is this? The world had been created, and the human race had dwelt on this earth full four thousand years, before the Son of God took to Himself the nature of man.

It is not in the order of time, but in the eternal intention of God, that the Man-God preceded *every creature*.

The eternal Father decreed first to give to His eternal Son a created nature, namely, the nature of man; and, in consequence of this decree, to create all beings, whether spiritual or material, as a kingdom for this Man-God.

This explains to us how it is, that the divine Wisdom, the Son of God, in the passage of the sacred Scripture which forms the Epistle of this feast, proclaims His having existed before all the creatures of the universe. As God, He was begotten from all eternity in the bosom of the Father; as Man, He was, in the mind of God, the type of all creatures, before those creatures were made. But the Son of God could not be of our race, as the divine will decreed He should be, unless He were born in time, and born of a Mother as other men; and therefore she that was to be His Mother was eternally present to the thought of God, as the means whereby the Word would assume the human nature.

The Son and the Mother are therefore united in the plan of the Incarnation: Mary, therefore, existed, as did Jesus, in the divine decree, before creation began. This is the reason of the Church's having, from the earliest ages of Christianity, interpreted this sublime passage of the sacred volume of Jesus and of Mary unitedly, and ordering it and analogous passages of the Scriptures to be read in the assembly of the faithful on the solemnities or feasts of the Mother of God. But if Mary be thus prominent in the divine and eternal plan; if, in the sense in which these mysterious texts are understood by the Church, she was, with Jesus, *before every creature*; could God permit her to be subjected to the original sin, which was to fall on all the children of Adam? She is, it is true, to be a child of Adam like her divine Son Himself, and to be born at the time fixed; but that torrent, which sweeps all mankind along, shall be turned away from her by God's grace; it shall not come near to her; and she shall transmit to her Son, who is also the Son of God, the human nature in its original perfection, created, as the apostle says, in holiness and justice.

The Gradual is the application to the Immaculate Mother of God of those praises with which the ancients of Bethulia greeted Judith, after she had slain the enemy of God's people. Judith is one of the types of Mary, who crushed the head of the serpent.

The Alleluia verse applies to our blessed Lady those words of the divine Canticle, which proclaim the bride of God to be all fair and spotless.

### **Gradual**

*Blessed art thou. Oh Virgin Mary, by the Lord the most high God, above all women upon the earth.*

*V. Thou art the glory of Jerusalem, thou art the joy of Israel, thou art the honour of our people*

*Alleluia, alleluia.*

*V. Thou art all fair, Oh Mary, and the stain of original sin is not in thee.*

*Alleluia.*

### **Gospel - Sequel of the holy Gospel according to Luke. (Luke 1:26-28)**

*At that time the angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a Virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David: and the Virgin's name was Mary. And the angel being come in, said Hail, full of grace; the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women.*

This is the salutation with which the Archangel greets Mary. It shows us what was his admiration and his profound veneration for the Virgin of Nazareth. The holy Gospel tells us that Mary was troubled at these words, and thought within herself what such a salutation as this could imply. The sacred Scriptures record many angelical salutations:

but, as St. Ambrose, St. Andrew of Crete, and, before them, Origen had remarked, there is not one which contains such praises as this does. The prudent Virgin was, therefore, naturally surprised at the extraordinary words of the angel, and, as the early fathers observe, they would remind her of that other interview between Eve and the serpent. She therefore remained silent, and it was only after the Archangel had spoken to her a second time, that she made him a reply.

And yet, Gabriel had spoken not only with all the eloquence, but with all the profound wisdom of a celestial spirit initiated into the divine mysteries; and, in his own superhuman language, he announced that the moment had come when Eve was to be transformed into Mary. There was present before him a woman destined for the sublimest dignity, the woman that was to be the Mother of God; yet, up to this solemn moment, Mary was but a daughter of the human race. Think, then, taking Gabriel's words as your guide, what must have been the holiness of Mary in this her first estate: is it not evident that the prophecy, made in the earthly paradise, had already been accomplished in her?

The Archangel proclaims her full of grace. What means this, but that the second woman possesses in herself that element of which sin had deprived the first? And observe, he does not say merely that divine grace works in her, but that she is full of it. 'She is not merely in grace as others are,' as Saint Peter Chrysologus told us on his feast, 'but she is filled with it.' Everything in her is resplendent with heavenly purity, and sin has never cast its shadow on her beauty. To appreciate the full import of Gabriel's expression, we must consider what is the force of the words in the language which the sacred historian used. Grammarians tell us that the single word which he employs is much more comprehensive than our expression 'full of grace.' It implies not only the present time, but the past as well, an incorporation of grace from the very commencement, the full and complete affirmation of grace, the total permanence of grace. Our translation has unavoidably weakened the term.

The better to feel the full force of our translation, let us compare this with an analogous text from the Gospel of St. John. This evangelist, speaking of the Humanity of the Incarnate Word, expresses all by saying that Jesus is full of grace and truth. Now, would this fullness have been real, had sin ever been there, instead of grace, even for a single instant? Could we call Him full of grace, who had once stood in need of being cleansed? Undoubtedly, we must ever respectfully bear in mind the distance between the Humanity of the Incarnate Word and the person of Mary, from whose womb the Son of God assumed that Humanity; but the sacred text obliges us to confess, that the fullness of grace was, proportionately, in both Jesus and Mary.

Gabriel goes on still enumerating the supernatural riches of Mary. He says to her: 'The Lord is with thee.' What" means this? It means, that even before Mary had conceived our Lord in her chaste womb, she already possessed Him in her soul. But, would the words be true, if that union with God had once not been, and had begun only when her disunion with Him by sin had been removed? The solemn occasion, on which the angel uses this language, forbids us to think that he conveyed by it any other idea, than that she had always had the Lord with her. We feel the allusion to a contrast between the first and the second Eve; the first lost the God who had once been with her; the second had, like the first, received our Lord into her from the first moment of her existence, and never lost Him, but continued from first to last and for ever to have Him with her.

Let us listen once more to the salutation, and we shall find from its last words that Gabriel is announcing the fulfilment of the divine oracle, and is addressing Mary as the woman foretold to be the instrument of the victory over Satan. 'Blessed art thou among women.' For four thousand years, every woman has been under the curse of God, and has brought forth her children in suffering and sorrow: but here is the one among women, that has been

ever blessed of God, that has ever been the enemy of the serpent, and that shall bring forth the fruit of her womb without travail.

The Immaculate Conception of Mary is therefore declared in the Archangel's salutation; and we can now understand why the Church selected this portion of the Gospel to be read to-day in the assembly of the faithful.

After the glorious chant of the Symbol of our faith, the choir intones the Offertory: it is composed of the words of the angelical salutation. Let us say to Mary with Gabriel: Verily, Oh Mary, thou art full of grace.

### **Offertory**

*Hail Mary, full of grace: the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women, alleluia.*

### **Secret**

*Receive, Oh Lord, this host of salvation, which we offer unto thee on this solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the blessed Virgin Mary; and grant, that, as we confess her to have been preserved, by thy preventing grace, from every stain of sin, we may, by her intercession, be freed from all our sins. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, Who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, forever and ever. Amen.*

### **The Preface**

The Church is too full of joy on this great feast to be satisfied with her usual form of thanksgiving; she employs one which makes mention of the holy Mother of God, whose Conception revives her hopes, and announces the rising of Him who is the eternal light.

*It is truly meet and just, right and available to salvation, that we should always, and in all places, give thanks to thee, Oh holy Lord, Father almighty, eternal God. And that we should praise, bless, and glorify thee on the Immaculate Conception of the blessed Mary, ever a Virgin, 'who by the overshadowing of the Holy Ghost conceived thine only-begotten Son, and, the glory of her virginity still remaining, brought forth the eternal light to the world, Jesus Christ our Lord. By whom the Angels praise thy Majesty, the Dominations adore it, the Powers tremble before it, the Heavens, the heavenly Virtues, and blessed Seraphim, with common jubilee glorify it. Together with whom we beseech thee that we may be admitted to join our humble voices, saying: Holy! Holy! Holy!...*

During the Communion, the Church shares in the holy enthusiasm, wherewith David proclaims the glories and the privileges of the mystic city of God.

### **Communion**

*Glorious things are said of thee, Oh Mary! for he that is mighty has done great things in thee.*

### **Postcommunion**

*May the mysteries we have received, Oh Lord our God, repair in us the wounds of that sin, from which thou with exceptional providence, preserved the Immaculate Conception of the ever blessed Mary. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, Who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, forever and ever. Amen.*