

DECEMBER XXV.

THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST, OR CHRISTMAS DAY.

THE world had subsisted about four thousand years, and all things were accomplished which, according to the ancient prophets, were to precede the coming of the Messias, when Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, having taken human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and being made man, was born of her for the redemption of mankind. The all-wise and all-merciful providence of God had, from the fall of our first parents, gradually disposed all things for the fulfilling of his promises, and the accomplishing the greatest of all his mysteries, the incarnation of his divine Son. Had man been restored to grace as soon as he had forfeited it, he would not have been sufficiently sensible of the depth of his horrible wounds, nor have had a just feeling of the spiritual blindness, weakness, and wretchedness in which he lay buried under the weight of his guilt. Neither would the infinite mercy, power, and goodness of God, in saving him, have appeared in such great lustre. Therefore man was left grovelling in his miseries for the space of so many thousand years, only enjoying a glimpse of his future redemption in the promise and expectation of it; which still was sufficient to raise those to it who did not shut their eyes to this light. God always raised several faithful servants; and even when most nations, from following the bent of their passions, fell into the most deplorable spiritual blindness, and abandoned his knowledge and true worship to transfer his honour to the basest of creatures and the most criminal objects, he reserved to himself a peculiar people, among which he was known and served, and many were saved through faith and hope in this promised Redeemer, then to come. All this time the saints never ceased with sighs and tears to beg that this *Desired of all Nations*(1) might speedily make his appearance; and by these inflamed desires they both disposed themselves to receive the fruit of his redemption, and moved God to hasten and most abundantly to pour forth his mercy.

(1) Aggeus ii. 7.

God, who with infinite wisdom brings things to maturity and perfection in their proper season, disclosed this to men partially and by degrees. He gave to Adam a promise and some knowledge of it.(1) He renewed the same to Abraham, limiting it to his seed.(2) He confirmed it to Isaac and Jacob.(3) In the prophecy of this latter it was fixed in the tribe of Judah.(4) It was afterwards clearly determined to belong to the posterity of David and Solomon : which was repeated in all the succeeding prophets. In these all the particular circumstances of Christ's birth, life, death, and spiritual kingdom in his church are expressed ; the whole written law which was delivered to Moses, consisted of types expressive of the same, or alluding to him. The nearer the time approached the fuller was the revelation of him. The prophecy of turning *swords into ploughshares, and lances into pruning hooks*,(5) &c. expressed that a profound peace in which the world should be, was to be an emblem of the appearance of the *Prince of Peace*. According to the prophecy of Jacob, (6) the sceptre was to be removed from the tribe of Judah, to show the establishment of the new spiritual kingdom of the Messiah, which is to endure to the end of the world. According to Aggæus,(7) and Malachi,(8) the Messiah was to appear whilst the second temple stood, which was that of Solomon, restored after the captivity. Daniel foretold the four great empires which succeeded one another, the first of which were to be destroyed by the latter, viz. of the Medes, Persians, Macedonians, and Romans, each marked by very distinguishing characters.(9) The seventy weeks of years predicted by Daniel, (10) determine the time of the coming of the Messias, and of his death. For from the order of King Artaxerxes Longimanus for the rebuilding of Jerusalem seven weeks were to pass in the execution of that work in difficult times ; and sixty-two more, that is, with these seven, sixty-nine to the manifestation of Christ, who was to be slain in the middle of the seventieth week ; and his death was to be followed by the destruction of the city and temple ; it was to expiate iniquity,

(1) Gen. iii. 15. (2) Ib. xxii. 18. (3) Ib. xxvi. and xxviii

(4) Ib. xlix. 8. (5) Isa. ii. 4 ; Mich. iv. 2. (6) Gen. xlix. 8, 10.

(7) Aggæus ii. 3. (8) Malachi iii. 1.

(9) Dan. ii. 32 ; v. 20 ; viii. 3. See Rollin, or Mezengui, or Calmet.

(10) Dan. ix. 21, &c. See Nouveau Comment. t. 9, p. 500.

to establish the reign of eternal justice, and to accomplish the visions and prophecies. The Gentiles had also received some glimmerings of this great event; as from the prediction of Balaam foretelling a star to arise from Jacob.(1) All over the East, at the time of our Saviour's birth, a great deliverer of mankind was firmly expected, as the pagan historians expressly affirm. Suetonius(2) writes as follows: "There had prevailed all over the East an ancient and constant notion, that the fates had decreed that, about that time there should come out of Judea those who should obtain the empire of the world." And Tacitus says:(3) "A firm persuasion had prevailed among a great many, that it was contained in the ancient sacerdotal books, that about this time it should come to pass, that the East should prevail, and that those who should come out of Judea should obtain the empire of the world." Josephus, the Jewish historian, took occasion from hence to flatter Vespasian, as if he had been the Messias foretold by the prophets,(4) and the great number of impostors who pretended to this character among the Jews in that and the following century, is a clear proof of this belief amongst them about the time.(5) Hence several among them met with incredible success for some time, particularly Coziba, called Barcokebas, from *Barhokeba*, "Son of the Star," who drew on the Jews their utter destruction under Adrian.(6)

When Jesus Christ was born, the seventy weeks of Daniel were near being accomplished, and the sceptre was departed from the house of Judah, whether we restrain this to that particular tribe, or understand it of the whole Jewish nation, so as to give a main share only to that tribe. For Herod, though a Jew by religion, was by birth an Idumean, as Josephus, whose testimony is unexceptionable, informs us, relating how his father Antipas, who chose rather to be called by the Greek name Antipater, was made, by King Alexander Jannæus, governor of his own country, Idumea. Herod was raised to the throne

(1) Numb. xxiv. 17.

(2) In Vespas.

(3) Tacit. in Annal.

(4) See the life of Josephus.

(5) Acts v. 36, xxi. 38. Joseph. Ant. l. 20, c. 2, et 6, l. 18, c. 1.—Idem. *de Bello Jud.* l. 7, c. 31, &c. Read Dissert. sur les Faux Messies, in the new Fr. Comment. t. 11, p. 21.

(6) Spartan in Adriano, c. 14. See Basnage, *Contin. de l'Hist. des Juifs*, t. 2, p. 123. Also Annot. Josephi de Voisin, in two parts, c. 2 Pugini's *Fidei Hæret. Demonst. Evang.* &c.

by the Romans, excluding the princes of the Asmonean or Jewish royal family, whom Herod entirely cut off; as he did also the principal members of the Sanhedrim or great council by which that nation governed itself by its own laws under its kings. This tyrant, moreover, stripped that people of all their other civil rights. Soon after they were made a Roman province; nor was it long before their temple was destroyed, and their whole nation dispersed; so that the Jews themselves are obliged to confess that the time foretold by the prophets for the coming of the Messiah has long since elapsed. Christ was born at the time when the Roman or fourth empire, marked by Daniel, was exalted to its zenith by Augustus, who reigned fifty-seven years from his first command of the army at nineteen years of age; and forty-four from the defeat of Antony, his partner in the empire, in the battle of Actium. God had pre-ordained the greatness of the Roman empire, for the more easy propagation of the gospel over so many nations which formed one monarchy. Augustus had then settled it in peace. It was the custom at Rome to shut the gates of the temple of Janus only in time of a general peace; which had happened but twice before the reign of Augustus, and it happened three times under it. First, this temple was shut in the reign of Numa: a second time, after the first Punic war: but during very short intervals. Under Augustus it was shut after his victory over Antony and Cleopatra: again upon his return from his war with the Cantabrians in Spain; and thirdly, in the very year in which Christ was born, when it remained shut during twelve years, the whole empire enjoying all that time a profound peace. Christ was born when Augustus was in the fortieth year of his reign, the twenty-ninth from the battle of Actium, about four thousand years or a little more from the creation of the world, about two thousand five hundred from the flood, almost two thousand from the vocation of Abraham, and a little above one thousand from the foundation of the temple by Solomon. A decree was issued by Augustus, and published all over the Roman empire, ordaining, that all persons with their estates and conditions, should be registered at certain places, according to their respective provinces, cities, and families. It was the custom at Rome to make a census or registration of all the citizens every five years, which term was called a *lustrum*.

This general register of all the subjects of the empire, with the value of their estates, was probably ordered, that the strength and riches of each province might be known. It was made in Syria and Palestine by Cyrinus. Quintilius Varus was at that time præconsul of Syria, on whom the procurator or governor of Judea in some measure depended, after it was made a Roman province. Cyrinus succeeded Varus in the government of Syria about ten years after Herod's death, when his son Archelaus was banished, and Judea made a province of the empire. Cyrinus then made a second register; but he made the first in the time of Varus, in which he might act as extraordinary deputy, at least for Palestine, then governed by Herod; or this enregistration is all attributed to him because it was finished by him afterwards. This decree was given by the emperor for political views of state; but proceeded from an overruling order of providence that, by this most authentic public act, it might be manifest to the whole world that Christ was descended of the house of David, and tribe of Juda. For those of this family were ordered to be registered at Bethlehem, a small town in the tribe of Juda, seven miles from Jerusalem to the south-west. This was called David's-town; and was appointed the place where those that belonged to his family were to be enrolled.(1) Joseph and Mary were perhaps natives of this place, though they then lived at Nazareth, ninety miles almost north from Jerusalem. Micheas had foretold(2) that Bethlehem (called by the Jebusites, who first built it, Ephrata) should be ennobled by the birth of Christ. Mary therefore, though with child, by the special direction of providence, undertook this tedious journey with her husband in obedience to the emperor's order for their enrolment in that city; and it is believed that with St. Joseph also Mary and her infant Jesus were enrolled; of which Origen,(3) St. Justin,(4) Tertullian,(5) and St. Chrysostom (6) make no doubt. All other characters or marks of the Messiah,* mentioned by the prophets, agree to Jesus Christ.(7)

(1) Luke ii. 1, 2, 3.

(2) Mich. ii. 2.

(3) Orig. hom. ii. in Luc.

(4) St. Justin, Apol. i ol 2

(5) Tert. l. 4, cont. Marcion.

(6) St. Chrys. in Matt. hic.

(7) See Calmet's Diss. sur les Caractères du Messie, suivant les Juifs, at the head of his comm. on St. Matthew.

* The word *Messiah* is derived from the Hebrew *Mashach*, which sig-

To show the divine Jesus's descent from David and Juda, the evangelists, St. Matthew and St. Luke, give his Pedigree; but designedly different, that this noted character of the Messiah might be demonstrated by his double genealogy. The reason of this difference was at that time public and known to every one, and so was not mentioned. It seems most probable that St. Luke gives the natural, and St. Matthew the legal line of Joseph, who had been adopted into the latter by the frequent case specified in the law of Moses. St. Chrysostom puts us in mind to take notice of the astonishing mercy and humility of our divine Redeemer in this circumstance that he did not disdain, in order to save sinners, to choose a pedigree in which several notorious sinners are named; so much did he humble himself to satisfy for, and to cure our vanity and pride. The same father, upon reading the exordium of St. Matthew's gospel and of this pedigree, breaks out into this vehement pathos: (1) "What dost thou say, O evangelist? Thou hast promised to speak of the only begotten Son of God, and dost thou name David? Imagine not that what you hear is low or trifling; but raise your mind, be filled with awe and astonishment, hearing that God is come upon the earth. This was so stupendous, so unexpected a prodigy, that the angels assembled in choir sung praise and glory for the whole world, and the prophets stood astonished at the wonderful mystery. Admire that the natural Son of God who is without a beginning, would suffer himself to be called the son of David, that he might make you the Son of God." The circumstances of the great mystery, and the wonderful manner in which it was performed, ought to attract our whole attention, and be the object of our pious meditations and devotions, particularly on this holy festival.

The Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, after a painful journey of at least four days in a mountainous country, arrived at Bethle-

(1) St. Chrys. hom. 2, in Matt. t. 7, p. 21, ed. Ben.

nifies, to anoint. In the Greek tongue *Christ*, or *the Anointed*, is the interpretation of this name. The word is sometimes applied to kings and high priests, who were anointed among the Hebrews; as 1 Kings (or Sam.) xii. 5, &c. Ps. civ. Heb. v. 15, but by way of eminency it belonged to the sovereign spiritual deliverer and Saviour of mankind, so often and so solemnly promised by God to his people.

hem. There they found the public inns or caravanseras (such as is customary in towns in the East) already full; nor were they able to procure any lodgings in the town, every one despising and rejecting their poverty. Do we spiritually invite Jesus into our hearts, and prepare a lodging for his reception in our affections? This is the entertainment he is infinitely desirous of, and which he came from heaven to seek. By spiritual nakedness, coldness, sloth, or sin, a Christian soul refuses him admittance. Of such treatment he will justly complain much more than of the people of Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary, in this distress, retired into a cave made on the side of a rock, which is called a stable; because it served for that purpose, perhaps for the use of those who lodged at the caravanseras.* It is a common tradition that an ox and an ass

* St. Jerom says, this cave lay on the south side of the city: St. Justin, martyr, (Dial.) and Eusebius (Demonst. Ev. l. 7, c. 2.) tell us, it was without the city, in the fields. Casaubon (Exercit. 2, in Baron. p. 143,) and Krausen, (Diss. cui titulus: Christi locus natalitius in Thesauro Diss. in Nov. Testam. edit. 1732, t. 2,) also among the Catholics Maldonatus (in Luc. c. 2,) and Drexelius, (t. 2, de Christo Nascente, p. 391,) will have it that this cave was situate within the town of Bethlehem. But the contrary assertion of Baronius is confirmed by Natalis Alexander, Tillemont, Calmet, Serry, (Exerc. 30, n. 2,) Card. Gotti, (de Verit. Relig. Christian. t. 4, c. 7, sec. 3,) Honore of St. Mary, (Crit. t. 2, l. 3, diss. 2, art. 2,) and Quaresmius, (Elucid. Terræ Sanctæ, t. 2, l. 5, c. 4.) The cave on the side of a rock is about forty feet deep, and twelve wide, growing narrow towards the roof. To this day there are three convents of Latins, Greeks, and Armenians, all contiguous, each having their several doors opening into the chapel of the Holy Manger. There are also shown at Bethlehem the chapel of St. Joseph, that of the Holy Innocents, and those of St. Jerom, St. Paula, and St. Eustochium. The manger in which Christ was born, the object of the devotion of St. Paula and St. Jerom, (ep. 108, ad Eustoch. § 10,) is of wood, and is kept in the church of St. Mary Major at Rome, whither it was brought with some stones cut out of the rock in the cave at Bethlehem, not in the year 352, as some say, but in the seventh century, as Benedict XIV. proves, (l. 4, de Canoniz. part 2.) On the description of Bethlehem, see Adrichomius, and principally Quaresmius. Also, Fr. Blanchini, diss. 1, de Præsepe et Cunis Dni. J. C. in basilicam Liberianam translatis. Tillemont, (note 5,) Baillet, and some others think the opinion that an ox and an ass were in the stable, arose from Isaiah i. 3, and Habacuc iii. 2, (which latter passage is, according to the seventy, *In the midst of the beasts thou shalt be made known*,) both which prophecies the fathers expound metaphorically. But the truth of this tradition is maintained by Baronius, (ad an. 1, n. 3.) Graveson, (de Myster. Chr. p. 156.) Honore of St. Mary, (Crit. t. 2, l. 3, diss. 2, art. 3.) Ayala, (Pictor Christianus, l. 3, c. 1, n. 7.) Sandinus, (Historia familiæ sacræ, c. 1, p. 12.) Quaresmius, (Elucid. Terræ Sanctæ, l. 6, c. 5.) Benedict XIV. (l. 1, de Myster. c. 17, n. 37,) &c. See St. Jerom, ep. 108, ad Eustoch. &c.

were in it at that time. This circumstance is not mentioned in holy scripture, but is supported by the authority of St. Jerom, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and Prudentius produced by Baronius; and if the blessed travellers came not on foot, they must have had their own ass-with them. In this place, the holy mother when her time was come, brought forth her divine Son without the pain of other mothers; remaining both in and after his conception and birth a pure virgin. With what joy and holy respect did she behold and adore the newborn infant; the creator of all things made man for us! She wrapped him in swaddling-clothes such as her poverty had allowed her to prepare, and with holy awe laid him in the manger. "With what solicitude did she watch him!" says St. Bonaventure.(1) "With what reverence did she touch him whom she knew to be her Lord! With what affection, tenderness, and veneration did she embrace and kiss him! With what awe did she look on his face and tender hands! With what gravity did she compose and cover his little limbs! With what pleasure did she present to him her breast to suck!" In like manner are we to admire with St. Bernard, "How the holy man Joseph would often take him upon his knees, smiling at him." We ought also to contemplate how the choirs of angels descending from above in raptures of astonishment, adore their God in this new wonderful state to which mercy and love have reduced him, and salute him with hymns of praise. We are invited to join them in the persons of the holy shepherds. God was pleased that his Son, though born on earth with so much secrecy, and in a state of the most astonishing humiliation, should be acknowledged by men, and receive the first fruits of their homages and devotion upon his first appearance among them. Who are they that are favoured with the honour of this heavenly call? The great ones of the world, the renowned sages among the Jews and Gentiles, the princes who, by their riches, power, pomp, and state, seemed

(1) St. Bonav. Vit. Christi, c. 10.

Several ancient paintings in glass and sculptures on sepulchres of the fourth century, and some probably older, represent the ox and the ass present at the birth of Christ. See Bottarius (t. 1, explicit. sacrar. pictur. et sculptur. Romæ subterraneæ, tab. 22, pp. 88, 89,) and Gorius, (Observ. de præsepi Dni, N. J. C. n. 13, p. 82.)

raised above the level of their fellow-creatures, are passed over on this occasion. They are chosen whose character, by their very station, is simplicity and humility, and whose obscurity, poverty, and solitude removed them from the principal dangers of worldly pride, and were most agreeable to that love and spirit of retiredness, penance, and humility which Christ came to recommend. Nor can we doubt but they adorned their state with the true spirit of this simplicity and devotion. These happy persons were certain shepherds, who, being strangers to the sensuality and pride of the world, were at that time keeping the watches of the night over their flock. Whilst the sensual and the proud were asleep in soft beds, or employed in pursuits of voluptuousness, vanity, or ambition, an angel appeared to these humble poor men, and they saw themselves encompassed with a great brightness. They were suddenly seized with exceeding great fear, but the heavenly messenger said to them : *Fear not : for behold I bring you good tidings of exceeding great joy, that shall be to all the people. For this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign to you : you shall find the child wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger.* Suddenly then appeared with the angel a multitude of heavenly spirits praising God, and saying : *Glory be to God in the highest ; and on earth peace to men of good will.* After the departure of the angels the wondering shepherds said to one another : *Let us go over to Bethlehem, and let us see this word that is come to pass, which the Lord hath showed to us.* They immediately hastened thither, and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. Here they did homage to the Messiah as to the spiritual king of men ; and then returned to their flocks glorifying and praising God.(1) Mary was very reserved amidst these occurrences, and continued silent in her deportment, but observed all these things, with secrecy pondering them in her heart. The message delivered by the angel to these shepherds is addressed also to us. In them we are invited to pay our homages and devotion to our new-born Saviour. Devotion gave them wings in hastening to the manger. In like manner with ardour and diligence

we must obey this summons, and acquit ourselves in spirit of this great duty. In contemplating this mystery we must honour our God and Redeemer, exulting with holy joy, and paying to him the just homages of adoration, praise, and love.

The angel calls this wonderful mystery a subject of great joy to all the people. Indeed our hearts must be insensible to all spiritual things if they do not overflow with holy joy at the consideration of so glorious a mercy, in which is displayed such an excess of the divine goodness, and by which such inestimable benefits and so high an honour accrue to us. The very thought and foreknowledge of this mystery comforted Adam in his banishment from Paradise. The promise of it sweetened the laborious pilgrimage of Abraham. The same encouraged Jacob to dread no adversity, and Moses to brave all dangers and conquer all difficulties in delivering the Israelites from the Egyptian slavery. All the prophets saw it in spirit with Abraham, and they rejoiced. If the expectation of it gave the patriarchs such joy, how much ought the accomplishment to create in us! Joy is defined the delight of a rational creature arising from the possession of a desired object. It must then be proportioned to the nature of the possession; consequently it ought to be as much greater in us as the fruition of a good surpasses the promise, possession the hope, or fruit the blossom. This St. Peter Chrysologus illustrates with regard to this difference of the Old and New Law as follows: "The letter of a friend," says he, "is comfortable; but his presence is much more welcome: a bond is useful; but the payment more so: blossoms are pleasing, but only till the fruit appears. The ancient fathers received God's letters: we enjoy his presence: they had the promise, we the accomplishment: they the bond, we the payment." How would those ancient saints have exulted to have beheld with Simeon the completion of this great mercy! for which they never ceased ardently to sigh, weep, and pray. This reflection made St. Bernard say: (1) "Very often do I revolve in mind the ardour of the desire with which the fathers sighed for the coming of Christ in the flesh: and I am filled within myself with confusion, and penetrated with compunction; and even now scarce am I able to contain my tears:

(1) St. Bern. Serm. in Cant. c. 2.

so much am I ashamed of the sloth and lukewarmness of these wretched times. For who amongst us now conceives so much joy from the presence of this grace, as the promise of it inflamed desire in the ancient saints? Behold many indeed will rejoice in this festival; but I wish it were on account of the festival, not of vanity.* Christians who rejoice with a worldly, vain, or carnal mirth, are strangers to the spirit of God, and his holy joy. This arises from a feeling sense of the blessings which we receive, and the love which God bears to us in this mystery; to which souls which are immersed in the flesh and vanity, are strangers. Did they truly weep under their spiritual miseries, and value these advantages, some degree of this spiritual joy would enter their hearts. Some exterior marks of this joy are allowed, provided they be not sought for themselves, but such as suit a penitential state and Christian gravity, both by their nature and extreme moderation that is held in them; and, lastly, provided motives of virtue sanctify them, and they express and spring from an interior spiritual joy, which is altogether holy. If sensuality have any share in our festivals, they are rather heathenish Bacchanals than Christian solemnities, and on them we feed and strengthen those passions which Christ was born only to teach us to subdue. To sanctify this feast, we ought to consecrate it to devotion, and principally to the exercises of adoration, praise, and love. This is the tribute we must offer to our new-born Saviour; when we visit him in spirit with the good shepherds. With them we must enter the stable, and contemplate this mystery with a lively faith, by which, under the veils of this infant body, we discover the infinite majesty of our God; and in this mystery we shall discern a prodigy of omnipotence to excite our praise, and a prodigy of love to kindle in our souls the affections of ardent love of God.

To contemplate immensity shut up in a little body, omnipotence clothed with weakness, the eternal God born in time, the joy of angels bathed in tears, is something far more wonderful than to consider God creating a world out of nothing, moving the heavens, and weighing the universe with a finger. This is a mystery altogether unutterable; to be adored in silence,

* "Sed utinam de festivitato, non de vanitate."

and in raptures of admiration, not to be declared by words. "How can any one speak of the wonder which is here wrought amongst us?" says St. Fulgentius.(1) "A man of God, a creature of his Creator, one who is finite and was born in time of Him who is immense and eternal." Here, He who is wonderful in all his works, has outdone what creatures could have known to be possible to Omnipotence itself, had they not seen it accomplished. Another eminent servant of God cries out upon this mystery:(2) "O Lord our God, how admirable is thy name over all the earth! Truly thou art a God working wonders. I am not now astonished at the creation of the world, at the heavens, at the earth, at the succession of days and seasons; but I wonder to see God inclosed in the womb of a virgin, the Omnipotent lain in a manger, the eternal Word clothed with flesh. Ought we not to invite the heavenly spirits to exert their might in praising the Lord for this incomprehensible effort of his power, goodness, and wisdom? to glorify their God in this state of humiliation which his infinite love has moved him to put on to save sinful man? *Adore him, all you his angels.*"(3) But these devout spirits have received a strict injunction to acquit themselves of this duty. The eternal Father, when he brought his Son into the world, laid on them his commands, saying: *Let all the angels of God adore him.*"(4) Though they neither wanted invitation nor command, their own devotion being their prompter. O! what must have been their sentiments, when they saw a stable converted into heaven by the wonderful presence of its king, and beheld that divine infant, knowing his weak hands to be those which framed the universe, and bordered the heavens with light; and that by Him both the heavens and the earth subsist? Are they not more astonished to contemplate him in this humble, hidden state, than seated on the throne of his glory? In the most profound sentiments of adoration and love they sound forth his praises in the loudest strains, and, with their melody, fill not only the heavens, but also the earth. Shall not man, for whom this whole mystery is wrought, and who is so much

(1) St. Fulgentius, Sermon. 2, de Nativ.

(2) Arnoldus Bonnevallus, Sermon. de Nativ. inter Opera S. Cypriani

(3) Ps. xcvi. 7.

(4) Heb. i. 6.

favoured, and so highly privileged and ennobled by the same, burn with a holy ardour to perform his part in this duty, and make the best return he is able of gratitude, adoration, and praise? To these exercises we ought to consecrate a considerable part of our devotions, especially on this festival, repeating with fervour the psalms, which chiefly consist of acts of divine praises, the hymn of thanksgiving used by the church, commonly ascribed to St. Ambrose and St. Austin,* and the angelical hymn, Glory and praise be given by all creatures to God alone in the highest heavens; and peace (or pardon, reconciliation, grace, and all spiritual happiness) to men of goodwill.† In our devotions, also, acts of love ought to challenge a principal part, the Incarnation of the Son of God being the mystery of love; or properly a kind of ecstasy of love, in which God strips himself, as it were, of the rays of his glory to visit us, to become our brother, and to make himself in all things like to us.

Love is the tribute which God challenges of us in a particular manner, in this mystery: this is the return which he requires of us for all he has done and suffered for us. He says to us: *Son, give me thy heart.* To love him is our sovereign happiness, and the highest dignity and honour to which a creature can aspire. To be suffered to make him a tender of our love ought alone to have engaged us not to neglect any means of corresponding with such a grace; but we are bound to it upon the title of the strictest justice. God being infinite in all perfections, is infinitely worthy of our love, and we ought to love him with an infinite love, if we were capable of it. We are also bound to love him in gratitude, especially for the benefit of his incarnation, in which he has given us himself, and this in order to rescue us from extreme miseries, and to bestow on us the most incomprehensible graces and favours.

* Berti (in vitâ S. Aug.) maintains it to be their work: but the style alone seems to disprove that popular opinion, though it is near as old as the age in which they flourished. Bishop Atterbury justly admires the energetic plainness and simplicity of this hymn, far superior to all rhetorical strains, or pompous illustrations and similes.

† The present Greek text reads this passage: *Good will to men, so as to make it a third member of the sentence, and to signify, peace or pardon to the earth, and divine favour and grace to men.* The sense is nearly the same.

Man had sinned, and was become the associate of the devil. God mercifully sought him out, and, by his promise of a Redeemer, raised him from the gulf into which he was fallen. Nevertheless, almost all the nations of the earth had, by blindly following their passions, at length fallen into a total forgetfulness of God who made them, and deified first inanimate stars and planets, afterwards dead men, the most impious and profligate of the human race; also the works of their own hands, often beasts, monsters, and their own basest passions; the most infamous crimes they authorized by the sanction of pretended religious rites; the numbers and boldness of the criminals screened them from the danger of disgrace; and from every corner of the earth vice cried to heaven for vengeance. The Jews, who had been favoured by God above all other nations, and declared his peculiar people, were nevertheless abandoned to envy, jealousy, pride, and other vices; so that even amongst them the number of privileged souls which remained faithful to God, appeared to be very small. Are we not affrighted to consider this deluge of iniquity, this monstrous scene of horror! Yet such was the face of the earth when the Son of God honoured it with his divine presence and conversation. Who would not have imagined when he heard that God was coming to visit the earth, that it must have been to destroy it by fire from heaven, as he had done Sodom, and to bury its rebellious inhabitants in hell? But no; whilst the world was reeking with blood and oppressions, and overrun with impiety, he came to save it. How does the ingratitude and baseness of man set off his love! At the sight of our miseries his compassion was stirred up the more tenderly, and his bowels yearned towards us. He came to save us when we deserved nothing at his hands but eternal torments. Also the manner in which he came to visit us, shows yet in a more astonishing manner the excess of his goodness and charity for us. To engage our hearts more strongly, he has made himself like to us, taking upon him our nature. *God was seen upon earth, and has conversed with men.*(1) *The Word was made flesh.*(2) God is born an infinite babe, the Eternal is become a young child, the Omnipotent is made weak, he who is essentially infinite

(1) Baruch. iii. 38.

(2) John i. 14.

and independent, is voluntarily reduced to a state of subjection, and humbled beneath his own creatures. It is love, and the love of us sinful men that hath done all this. "O strong wine of charity!" cries out St. Thomas of Villa Nova,(1) "O most powerful triumph of love! thou hast conquered the invincible: the Almighty is become thy captive. O truly excess of charity!" Can we contemplate this divine infant, or call to mind this adorable mystery, without melting in love? So sweetly do all its circumstances breathe the most tender love: which the church expresses by saying, that on this day the heavens flow with honey. Can we ever satiate the affection of our souls by repeating to ourselves those amiable words, and reciting them every time with a fresh effusion of joy and love? *A little One is born to us: a Son is given to us.*(2) Or, *This day is born to you a Saviour.*(3)

St. Francis of Assisium appeared not able to contain himself through excessive tenderness of love, when he spoke of this mystery, and named the Little Babe of Bethlehem. St. Bernard says: "God on the throne of his majesty and greatness commands our fear and our homages: but in his littleness especially our love."* This father invites all created beings to join him in love and adoration, and to listen in awful silence to the proclamation of the festival in honour of this mystery made in the Roman Martyrology. "Hear ye heavens," says he, "and lend your ears, O earth. Stand in raptures of astonishment and praise, O you whole creation, but you chiefly, O man. *Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, was born in Bethlehem of Juda.* O short word of the Eternal Word abridged for us! but filled with heavenly sweetness. The affection of this melting sweetness struggles within, earnestly labouring widely to diffuse its teeming abundance, but finds not words. For such is the grace and energy of this speech, that it relishes less, if one *iota* in it be changed." In another sermon, having repeated the same words, he adds: "At these words my soul melts, and my spirit boils within me, hastening with burning desire to publish to you

(1) S. Tho. de Villâ-Novâ, Conc. 3, in Dom. 1, Ad.

(2) Isa. ix. 6.

(3) Luke ii. 11.

* "Magnus Dominus, et laudabilis nimis: Parvus Dominus, et amabilis nimis." S. Bern. Sermon 1, in Nativ. Dom. in verba Martyrol. p. 755

this exultation and joy.”(1) If this love were kindled in our breast, nothing were sweeter to us than to abide in spirit at the feet of Jesus, pondering the motive, that is, the excess of divine love, which brought him from heaven, and contemplating the other circumstances of this mystery. How ought we to salute and adore those sacred hands which are weakened, wrapped in clouts, or stretched on the manger, for love of us, but which move the heavens, and uphold and govern the universe. Also those divine feet, which will undergo so many fatigues, and at length be bored on the cross for us. That blood which purples his little veins, and dyes his blessed cheeks, but which is the price of our redemption, and will be one day poured out upon the cross. How is this sweet countenance, which is the joy of angels, now concealed? But it will one day be buffeted, bruised, and covered with filthy phlegm. How ought we respectfully to honour it? His holy flesh, more pure than angels, even now begins to suffer from the cold and other hardships: do we not desire to defend it from these injuries? But this cannot be allowed. Nor could any one oppose the work of our redemption. Sin is the cause of all that he suffers, and shall not we detest and shun that monster? The loving eyes of the divine Jesus pierce our souls. They are now bathed in tears; though, as St. Bernard says, “Jesus weeps not as other children, or at least not on the same account.” They cry for their wants and weakness, Jesus for compassion and love for us. May these precious tears move the heavenly Father to show us mercy; and may they soften, wash, and cleanse our souls. “These tears excite in me both grief and shame,” says the same father, “when I consider my own insensibility amidst my spiritual miseries.” But nothing in this contemplation will more strongly move us than to penetrate into the interior employment of this divine Saviour’s holy soul, and to consider the ardour of his zeal in the praises of his Father, and in his supplications to Him on our behalf; his compassion for us, and the constant oblation which he made of himself to obtain for us mercy and grace. Such meditations and pious entertainments of our souls will have great force in kindling the fire of holy love in our hearts. But all endeavours would be weak, so long

(1) S. Bern. Serm. 6, in Vigil. Nativ. p. 771

as we do not labour effectually to remove all obstacles to this holy love in our affections. To cure these disorders is the chief end of the birth of Christ; he purchased the grace for us by his sufferings, and he taught us the remedies by his example.

Christ's actions are no less instructions to us than his discourses. His life is the gospel reduced to practice. It is enough to study it to understand well his doctrine; and to become perfect we must imitate his example. By this he instructs us in his very activity, beginning first to practise, then to preach.⁽¹⁾ Hence the manger was his first pulpit, and in it he teaches us the cure of our spiritual maladies. The Jews, addicted to their senses and passions, blinded themselves, mistook the prophets, and framed an idea of a Messiah agreeable to their own fancy, who should be a rich and mighty conqueror, and should make Jerusalem the greatest city, and their nation the most flourishing empire in the world. But this was not such a Messiah as we wanted. Gold and silver, and a magnificent city, would only have us more in love with our exile, so as to forget more our heavenly country. Such a Saviour could have only served to nourish, not to heal our corruption. He would have raised our desires and passions, and made himself the instrument to feed and gratify them. He would have been a tempter and deceiver; to have been shunned by those who knew their distempers, and sought their true remedies. But the prophets give the Messiah the very opposite characteristics. The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah alone, not to mention many other prophecies, evinces this truth, and ought to have opened the eyes of the carnal Jews. The saints, who had all learned a spirit of contempt of such goods, would never have languished for the coming of such a Saviour: as gold, worldly honours, or empire were not the presents they asked or expected from him, but the cure of their infirmities, and the abundance of his heavenly graces. He is come such as the holy prophets had desired and foretold, such as our miseries required, our true physician and Saviour. He wanted not on earth honours or sceptres; he came not to taste of our vanities: riches and glory he abounded with. He came among us to seek our miseries, our poverty, our humiliation, to repair the injuries our pride had offered to

(1) Acts i. 1.

the Godhead, and to apply a remedy to our souls. Therefore he chose not a palace, or a great city; but a poor mother, a little town, a stable. He who adorns the world, and clothes the lilies of the fields beyond the majesty of Solomon in his glory, is wrapt up in rags, and laid in a manger. And this he chose to be the great sign of his appearance. *And this 'shall be a sign to you: said the angel to the shepherds: you shall find the child wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and laid in a manger.* Are then rags and a manger the wonderful sign of our God appearing on earth? Are these the works of the great Messiah, of whom the prophets spoke such glorious things? This it was that scandalized the Jews in his birth. "Take from us those clouts, and that manger," said Marcion, unjustly preposessed against the humility of such an appearance.* But this is a sign which God himself hath chosen, and set up for his standard; a sign to be the contradiction to our pride, covetousness, and sensuality. And do not we wonder at the stupendous virtue and efficacy of this sign, so shocking to the senses and passions, when we see how it drew to it the little and great, the magians and the shepherds, who knew their Saviour by it, and returned glorifying God? How many have enrolled themselves under the same standard! Yet is it still a scandal and a contradiction to many who call themselves its followers, who blush at it, not in Christ indeed, but by a strange inconsistency in themselves, whilst they pretend to walk in his spirit. Would not these nominal Christians have rejected Jesus with the Jews, had they been then alive? Do they not now exclude him from their hearts?

Christ set up this his mark for us: it is our powerful instruction. *The grace of God the Saviour hath appeared to all men, instructing us,* says the apostle.(1) All men, the rich and the poor, the great and the small, all who desire to have a share in his grace or in his kingdom. And what breast can be so stony as not to be softened at this example? Our inveterate diseases seemed almost unconquerable. But Christ is come, the omnipotent Physician, to apply a remedy to them. Our disorders

(1) Tit. ii. 11.

*"Aufer a nobis pannos et dura præsepia." *Ap. Tert. 1, adv Marcion.*

flow from three sources. *All that is in the world, is the concupiscence of the flesh, and the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life.*(1) What is concupiscence of the flesh, but the inordinate inclination to gratify the senses? Christ, to encourage us to renounce this love of sensual pleasures, and to satisfy his justice by his own sufferings for our offences in this way, begins to suffer as soon as he begins to live. At his very birth he exposes his delicate body to the inclemency of the severest season of the year, to the hard boards of the manger for a cradle, to hunger, and to privation of the most ordinary conveniences and necessities of human life. His tender and divine limbs tremble with cold, his eyes stream with tears, and he consecrated the first moments of his life to suffering and pain. He who directs the seasons, governs the universe, and disposes all things, has ordained every thing for this very end. Yet we study in all things to flatter our senses, to pamper our bodies in softness and every gratification, and to remove every thing that is hard or painful. Is this to imitate the model of penance and mortification that is set us? Christ, by these sufferings, and this privation of all things, shows us that he came to satisfy the justice of his Father, and to repair the injury done to his glory by our sins. But by the same he teaches us the remedies of our disorders, and shows us how they are to be applied to our souls; as he came to instruct us in all we want to know and do in order to save our souls, and to reform all our irregular passions and manners. Could he have preached this more powerfully than he has done by the example of his birth? How comes it, notwithstanding, that we are not yet sufficiently persuaded that we cannot be saved at a cheaper rate than by a constant practice of self-denial and penance? "Either Christ is deceived, or the world errs," says St. Bernard.* The former is impossible: the very thought would be blasphemy. It is then clear, that notwithstanding the torrent of the example in the world, a life of softness, intemperance, and sensual delights is the incentive of vice, and the sure road to eternal perdition.

(1) 1 John ii. 16.

* "Aut Christus fallitur, aut mundus errat." *S. Bern. Serm 3, de Nat.*

By concupiscence of the eyes is understood the love of riches; the second root of the disorders which reign in the world, and the foundation of its false maxims. This our Saviour teaches us to root out of our hearts by embracing the most austere poverty, and consecrating it in his divine body, to use the expression of St. Bernard. He shows us the danger of riches, and the crime and disorder of a love or eager pursuit of them. Riches are good in the designs of Providence: and what is more noble than to have the means of relieving the distressed of others? This motive all pretend in amassing riches; but seek in them only the interest of self-love. Riches are a fruit which the sin of our first parent has infected with a mortal poison. They make salvation very difficult by the dangers which attend them, and by the great obligations they lay men under, and which are little thought on. The woe which the gospel pronounces against the rich, falls not upon them because they gather the fruits of the earth, but because they seek them with too great eagerness, or set their hearts too much on them. The rich and the poor adore them in their desires. This is the disorder. Men may be poor in spirit in the midst of riches. But this is truly an extraordinary grace. Those that are blessed with riches must fear them, lest they find admittance into their hearts. They must watch over themselves against this danger, always bearing in mind that they are things so frail, so troublesome, and such incentives of vice, that reason taught the philosophers amongst the heathens to despise them. They are moreover most frequently either the effect or the cause of iniquity; faulty either in their acquisition or in their use. In their acquisition, in which injustices are so frequent, that Seneca says: "Every rich man is either unjust, or the heir of one who was unjust." And the organ of the Holy Ghost declares: *He that maketh haste to be rich, shall not be innocent.*(1) At least a desire of riches usually attends the acquisition, which is many ways inordinate; and is always a spiritual fever which destroys the relish of heavenly goods, and consumes the very vitals of the interior life. It is an idolatry, as St. Paul calls it,(2) and the same master who commanded idols to be banished out of the world, obliges us to banish the love of riches out of

(1) Prov. xxviii. 20.

(2) Col. iii. 5.

our hearts. The least reserve draws on us the curse of heaven. This desire in the rich is insatiable. The prophet Isaias said to them : (1) *Wo to you that join house to house, and lay field to field, even to the end of the place : shall you alone dwell in the midst of the earth ?* And the Roman satirist reproached one that seemed to design to make all Rome a single house for himself.* The rich are anxious for superfluities, and are tormented by extravagant desires. The poor have here often as much to correct ; the desire of possessions is as criminal as an attachment to the possession ; it often exposes to a thousand injustices, under subtle disguises, and shuts the heart to divine grace. Let all labour in the world, but not for the world ; and let all inordinate desires and anxiety be cut off. Let the poor place themselves nearest to Jesus Christ, and, learning from him the happiness of their condition, study their own sanctification in it. Let the rich look upon their possessions as a burden hard to bear well, and labour to sanctify them by a good use, and by imitating Christ, our model, in a perfect spirit of disengagement and poverty. For in the use of riches there are still greater dangers than in the acquisition. These are, lest a man forget himself and his miseries ; feel a complacency in his plenty, and be puffed up with pride ; live in pleasures and softness which custom seems to authorize, and in a circle of amusements which flatter the senses ; gratify his passions which riches inflame ; think himself by riches qualified for everything, and take upon him employments and obligations for the discharge of which he has not abilities ; refuse the debt which he owes to the poor of all his superfluities ; live in luxury, which damned the rich glutton, and practise neither mortification nor penance. Is not sloth a crime which damns souls, and is the mother of all vice ? Yet how many among the rich fly study and labour, as if they thought sloth, vanity, and pleasure the privilege of their rank ! Is not the life of a Christian to be penitential ? Where is that of the rich such ? Vicious inclinations are roused and strengthened by riches ; and by incentives and opportunities the passions often reign in the heart

(1) Isa. v. 8.

* "Roma domus fiet."

of the rich with uncontrollable empire. If they sometimes confess the vanity and illusion of the world, and condemn their own folly, this sentiment is stifled almost in its birth, and in a short time they are again plunged into a forgetfulness of themselves, and by a relapse are more culpable than before. To other dangers we must add the misfortune that the rich are surrounded by flatterers, and that others artfully conspire to blind and betray them amidst their dangers. How often does it happen that ministers of God deceive them, calling evil good, and good evil; soothing their passions or disguising their obligations. But without entering into this detail, do not the curses of Christ suffice to make all Christians tremble at the dangers of this state? This fear alone can render those that are in it secure, by making them always watch over their own hearts, that they be not led into any snares. By this means, though Christ declares riches one of the most dangerous obstacles of grace, many saints have changed them into the means of their salvation, joining with their possession a spirit of poverty and disengagement, and making them the instruments of justice and charity. It is therefore neither to riches nor to poverty that Christ promises the kingdom of heaven; but to the disengagement of the heart from the love of riches in whatever state persons live. But that of poverty he recommends by his own choice, as the easier and happier for the practice of the most perfect virtues. The world indeed abounds with poverty; but not with that of which Christ sets up the standard. Because worldly poor complain and groan under the hardships of their condition, and blush at its humiliations, which they ought to esteem as the means of grace, opportunities of virtue, remedies of their evils, and the livery of their God and Redeemer.

Pride being the third and principal source of our disorders, and our deepest wound, humility is displayed in the most wonderful manner in the birth of the Son of God. What is the whole mystery of the Incarnation but the most astonishing humiliation of the Deity? To expiate our pride, and to repair the injury offered to the adorable Trinity by our usurpation, the eternal Son of God divests himself of his glory, and takes upon him the form of Man. Neither is he content with making

this infinite descent, but every circumstance in the manner of making it, is carried to the most amazing degree of humiliation. Who would not expect to hear, that when God descended upon earth, the heavens would bend beneath him, the earth be moved at his sight, and all nature arrayed with magnificence? Who would not think that the whole creation would be overwhelmed with the glory of his presence, and tremble with awe before him? But nothing of this was seen. "He came, not," says St. Chrysostom, (1) "so as to shake the world at the presence of his majesty: nor did he appear in thunder and lightning, as on Mount Sinai; but he descended sweetly, no man knowing it." *While all things were in deep silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, thy Almighty Word came down from heaven, from thy royal throne.* (2) No one of the great ones of the world is apprized of this great mystery. Those few chosen persons to whom he is pleased to reveal himself are called to adore him in the closest secrecy and silence. If this be the manner in which he comes, what is the appearance which he makes among men? At this sight what must be our astonishment! To what a condition do we see the king of glory reduced! He appears the outcast of the world, is rejected by his own people, who refuse to receive him under their roof, is lodged in a stable, wrapped in rags, and laid in a manger. Is this abandoned shelter of cattle, this crib of beasts, the place where God was to repose on earth? Are these rags the ensigns of infinite majesty? How different was the lodging, the clothing, the attendance of many princes who at that very time were born into the world, laid in down, lodged in palaces, and served by many hands. How comes the King of heaven to make his appearance in such a state of abasement, and so destitute of due honour and every convenience! His birth is, notwithstanding, the master-piece of infinite wisdom, mercy, and omnipotence. These perfections nowhere shine more admirably than in this mystery; for he came thus to be our physician, to correct our mistaken judgment of things, to heal our pride, to bring, and to encourage us to use the remedy to our grievous maladies, and to overcome our reluctance to its bitterness by taking it first himself. Therefore humility was to be his en-

(1) S Chrysost. in Ps. 50, p. 536, t. 5.

(2) Wisd. xviii. 14, 15.

sign, and the angel gave his rags and manger to the shepherds, for the mark by which he was to be known. *This shall be to you a sign.* Does not the reproach which his example makes to us, open our eyes, and touch our hearts? What do we behold! A God poor, a God humbled, a God suffering! And can we any longer entertain thoughts of sensuality, ambition, or pride?

If this humility of a God be most astonishing, is not the blindness and pride of man, after such an example, something, if possible, still more inconceivable? Christ is born thus only to atone for our pride, to shew us the beauty of humility, and to plant it in our hearts. Humility is his standard; and the spirit of sincere humility is the mark by which his disciples must be known to be his. Can we profess ourselves his followers, can we look upon the example which he has set us, and yet continue to entertain thoughts of ambition and pride? To learn the interior perfect spirit of humility and all other virtues, we cannot make use of any more powerful means than serious and frequent meditation on his nativity and divine life. Placing ourselves in spirit at the manger, after the tender of our homages by acts of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, and love, we must study in him the lessons of all virtues, and must present to our new-born king, our earnest supplications to obtain of him all those gifts and graces which he comes to bestow upon us. Let us learn humility from the lowliness in which he appears, and from the humility of his sacred heart. Let us learn meekness by beholding the sweetness and patience with which this God-man receives all injuries from men and from the elements. Let us learn resignation from the indifference with which he bears cold, wants, wrongs, and whatever is sent him. Let us learn obedience from the most perfect submission of our blessed Saviour to the will of his heavenly Father, from his birth offering himself without reserve even to the death of the cross. Let us learn charity from the ardour of his divine love. Let us learn a contempt of the world and its perishable goods from the extreme poverty which Christ made his voluntary choice. Let not the spirit and maxims of the world reign any longer in our hearts, since Christ has shewn us such powerful motives, and presented

us such sovereign remedies against them.* If we still continue possessed with them, when will our follies be corrected?† Have we not hitherto been idolaters of ourselves by pride, idolaters of the world by vanity and avarice, and idolaters of our flesh by living enslaved to our senses? These idols we renounced at baptism: but have we not lived in a perfidious violation of these vows? Unless we now sincerely renew these engagements, and banish these idols out of our affections, Jesus can never be spiritually born in our souls, and we can never inherit his spirit, which was the end of his carnal nativity. He is meek and the king of peace, the lover of purity and of chaste affections, and the avowed enemy to every spirit of pride, hatred, and revenge. Bees cannot approach filth and stench: infinitely more Christ flies with abhorrence from souls that are defiled with sinful or earthly affections. In such he finds no place, any more than he did in the inns at Bethlehem. We must earnestly invite and entreat him who vehemently desires to be born in our hearts, that he prepare our souls to receive him by his graces, that he cleanse them by his mercy and by inspiring us with sincere compunction, that he banish every inordinate passion, fill us with his holy spirit, and by it reign in all our affections, thoughts, and actions; that as by his nativity he is become all ours, so we may be altogether his. Without this condition we frustrate in ourselves the end of his coming; he is not born for us, unless by his spirit he be born in us. Let us conjure him by the infinite love with which he came for this very purpose, that he suffer us not wretchedly to defeat this his mercy. For this happiness we ought ardently to repeat that petition which he himself has put into our mouths: *Thy kingdom come*. The devout Thauler teaches us to ask it by the following prayer: (1) "Come, O my Lord Jesus Christ, take away all scandals out of thy kingdom, which is my soul, that you who ought, may reign in it alone. Pride, lust, envy, detraction, anger, and other passions fight in my heart, to usurp portions to themselves.

(1) Thauler. Sermon in Domin. 8, Adventus.

* Saltem usque ad adventum Filii Dei error vester duraverit. S. Aug. En. in Ps. iv.

† "Quando habituri finem fallaciarum?"

Through your grace I watch and resist with all my strength. I cry out that I belong to you alone, and am all yours; and stretching out my hands to you, I say: I have no king but the Lord Jesus. Come, therefore, O Lord; disperse your enemies in your mighty strength, and you will reign in me, because you are my King and my God."

The custom of one priest celebrating several masses on the same day prevailed in many places on great festivals.(1) Prudentius, in his twelfth hymn, *On the Crowns of Martyrs*, mentions, that on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, the 29th of June, the pope said mass first at the Vatican, and afterwards in the church of St. Paul, without the city. The popes on Christmas-day formerly said three masses, the first in the Liberian basilic, the second in the church of St. Anastasia, the third in the Vatican, as Benedict XIV. proves from ancient Roman orders or missals. St. Gregory the Great speaks of saying three masses on this day.(2) This custom of the popes was universally imitated, and is every where retained, though not of precept. Pouget(3) says, that these three masses are celebrated to honour the triple birth of Christ; the first, by which he proceeds from his Father before all ages; the second, from the Blessed Virgin Mary; and the third, by which he is spiritually born in our souls by faith and charity. That Christ was born on the 25th of December, Pope Benedict XIV. proves by the authority of St. Chrysostom, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Austin, &c. and answers the objections of Scaliger and Samuel Basnage.(4) He doubts not but the Greek Church originally kept this festival on the same day;(5) and he takes notice, that among the principal feasts of the year it holds the next place after Easter and Whitsunday.(6)

SAINT ANASTASIA, M.

HER name is mentioned in the canon of the mass, in the sacramentary of St. Gregory, and in other ancient catalogues of mar-

(1) See Bona Ber. Liturg. l. 1, c. 18, n. 6. Joseph. Vicecomes, *De antiquis missæ ritibus*, l. 3, c. 28, &c.

(2) St. Greg. hom. 8. in Evang.

(3) *Instit. Cathol.* t. 1, p. 814.

(4) *De Festis Christi* a. c. 17, n. 45, p. 411. See F. Honoré, *Règles de Crit.* l. 3, diss. 2, art. 1, and Tillemont, note 4.

(5) N. 67, loco cit. p. 422.

(6) N. 57, p. 417.