

St. William in the wood. Mr. Weever writes that, "the Jews in the principal cities of the kingdom, used sometimes to steal away, circumcise, crown with thorns, whip, torture, and crucify some neighbour's male-child, in mockery and scorn of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. St. Richard of Pontoise, in France, was martyred by them in that manner. As also St. Hugh, (according to Matthew Paris and John Capgrave,) a child crucified at Lincoln, in 1255. Nevertheless it is a notorious slander of some authors, who, from these singular and extraordinary instances, infer this to have been at any time the custom or maxim of that people. The English calendars commemorated St. William on the 24th of March. See the history of his martyrdom and miracles by Thomas of Monmouth, a contemporary monk; also the Saxon Chronicle of the same age, and Bloomfield's History of Norfolk.*

MARCH XXV.

THE ANNUNCIATION

OF

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY.

THIS great festival takes its name from the happy tidings brought by the angel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary, concerning the incarnation of the Son of God. It commemorates the most important embassy that was ever known: an embassy sent by the King of kings, performed by one of the chief princes of his heavenly court; directed, not to the kings or emperors of the earth, but to a poor, unknown, retired virgin, who, being

* Pope Benedict XIV. l. 1. de Canon. c. 14. p. 103. shows that children who die after baptism before the use of reason, though saints, ought not to be canonized, because they never practised any heroic degree of virtue; and because this was never authorized by tradition in the church. Martyrs only, or infants, whether baptized or not, which were slain out of hatred to the name of Christ, are to be accepted, as is clear from the example of the Holy innocents, who are styled martyrs by St. Irenæus, Origen, and other fathers, and the most ancient missals and homilies of fathers on their festival, prove them to have been honoured as such from the primitive ages. Hence infants murdered by Jews, out of hatred to Christ, have been ranked among the martyrs; as St. Simon of Trent, by the authority of the bishop of that city, afterwards confirmed by the decrees of the Popes Sixtus V. and Gregory

endowed with the most angelic purity of soul and body, being withal perfectly humble and devoted to God, was greater in his eyes than all the sceptres in the world could make an universal monarch. Indeed, God, by the choice which he is pleased to make of a poor virgin, for the accomplishment of the greatest of all mysteries and graces, clearly demonstrates that earthly diadems, dignities, and treasures are of no consideration with him; and that perfect humility and sanctity alone constitute true greatness. God, who is almighty, can do all things by himself, without making use of the concurrence of creatures. Nevertheless, he vouchsafes, in his exterior works, most frequently to use their co-operation. If he reveal his will and speak to men, it is by the intervention of his prophets, and these he often enlightens by the ministry of angels. Many of the ancient patriarchs were honoured by him with the most sublime commissions. By Moses, he delivered his people from the Egyptian slavery; by him he gave them his law, and he appointed him mediator in his alliance with them. When the Son of God became man, he could have taken upon him our nature without the co-operation of any creature; but was pleased to be born of a woman. In the choice of her whom he raised to this most sublime of all dignities to which any pure creature could be exalted, he pitched upon her who, by the riches of his grace and virtues, was of all others the most holy and the most perfect. The design of this embassy of the archangel is as extraordinary as the persons concerned in it. It is to give a Saviour to the world, a victim of propitiation to the sinner, a model to the just, a son to this Virgin, remaining still a virgin, and a new nature to the Son of God, the nature of man, capable of suffering pain and anguish in order to the satisfaction of God's justice for our transgressions. And the

XIII. also St. William of Norwich, in England, (though this child having attained to the use of reason, is rather to be called an adult martyr) and St. Richard of Pontoise, also about twelve years old, murdered in 1182, by certain Jews in the reign of Philip Augustus, who for this and other crimes banished the Jews out of France, in April, that same year. The body of St. Richard was translated to Paris, and enshrined in the parish church of the Holy Innocents, where his feast is kept on the 30th of March, but at Pontoise on the 25th. The celebrated F. Gaguin has written the history of his martyrdom, with an account of several miracles wrought at his shrine. His head is still shown in that church; the rest of his relics are said to have been carried off by the English, when they were masters of Paris.

Son of God being to take a human body formed of her substance, the Holy Ghost, who, by a power all-divine, was to her in place of a spouse, was not content to render her body capable of giving life to a Man-God, but likewise enriched her soul with a fulness of grace, that there might be a sort of proportion between the cause and the effect, and she the better qualified to co-operate towards this mystery of sanctity.

The angel begins his address to her with *Hail! full of grace*.(1) This is not the first time that angels appeared to women. But we find not that they were ever treated with that respect which the angel Gabriel shows to Mary. Sarah and Agar were visited by these celestial spirits, but not with an honour like that wherewith the angel on this occasion addresses the Blessed Virgin, saying, *Hail! full of Grace*. He considers her as the greatest object among creatures of God's favour, affection, and complacency. He admires in her those wonderful effects of the divine liberality, those magnificent gifts and graces, those exalted virtues, which have placed the very foundation of her spiritual edifice on the holy mountains,(2) in a degree of perfection surpassing that of all pure creatures. He admires that perfect gratitude with which she always received God's grace, and her perfect fidelity in corresponding with it, and advancing in sanctity, by the help thereof, with a solicitude answerable to her love and gratitude, for the preservation and increase of so inestimable a treasure. *Full of grace*. The first encomium which St. John gives us of the glory of the *Word made flesh* is, that he was *full of grace and truth*.(3) God forbid that we should say that Mary was full of grace in the same manner as her Son; for he is the very source and origin of it, *from whose fulness all* the saints, Mary not excepted, *have received*(4) whatever degree they possess of grace and sanctity. St. Luke assures us also, that St. Stephen was full of grace and the Holy Ghost,(5) but it was a fulness in regard to a less capacity, and in relation to a lower function. Moreover, to St. Stephen and other saints, who have received large portions of heavenly grace, we may say, in those other words of the angel, *You have found favour with God*: but those very favours, though very great in themselves, were not

(1) Luke i. 28.

(2) Ps. lxxxvi.

(3) John i. 14.

(4) Ibid. 16.

(5) Acts iv. 8.

to be compared with that which from all eternity was reserved for Mary. God made the saints the object of his gratuitous election, and he qualified them with his graces to be the messengers of his Son, the preachers and witnesses of his gospel; but Mary was his choice, and was furnished with his graces to bear the most illustrious, the most exalted title of honour that heaven could bestow on a pure creature, to conceive of her proper substance the divine Word made man. If, then, the grace of God so raise a person in worth and merit, that there is not any prince on earth who deserves to be compared with a soul that is dignified with the lowest degree of sanctifying grace; what shall we say or think of Mary, in whom the fulness of grace was only a preparation to her maternity? What shall we think of ourselves (but in an opposite light) who wilfully expose this greatest of all treasures on so many occasions to be lost, whereas we ought wilfully to forego and renounce all the advantages and pleasures of this world, rather than hazard the loss of the least degree of it, and be most fervent in our supplications to God for the gaining, preserving, and increasing so great a treasure: forasmuch as it is a pledge of God's love, a participation of his Spirit, and a title to the possession of his heavenly kingdom.

But who can be surprised at those inestimable treasures which God, on this occasion, with so liberal a hand, bestows on Mary, if he consider the purport of the following words of the angel to her: *The Lord is with thee.* He is with her in a manner more intimate, more perfect, and more divine, than he ever was or will be with any other creature. He is with her not only by his essence, by his presence, by his power; for he is thus with all his creatures: He is with her, not only by his *actual* grace touching her heart and enlightening her understanding; he is thus many times with the sinner: He is with her, not only with his sanctifying grace, making her agreeable in his sight, and placing her in the number of his children; he is present in this manner with all the just; He is with her, not only by a special protection guiding her in his ways, and leading her securely to the term of salvation; this he does for the elect: but he is also with her by a substantial and corporeal presence, residing personally and really in her. In her, and of her substance, is this day formed his adorable body; in her he reposes for nine months with his

whole divinity and humanity. It is in this ineffable manner that he is with Mary, and with none but Mary. O glorious Virgin, thrice happy Mother, from this source and ocean of all grace what heavenly blessings in so long a space of time must have flowed upon you! and what honours must be due to one so nearly allied to our great Creator! What intercession so prevalent as that of the *Mother of divine grace!*

The angel concludes his address with these words; *Blessed art thou among woman.*(1) *Blessed*, as being chosen pre-ferably to all of her sex. to be the glorious instrument, in the hand of God, for removing the maledictions laid on mankind in punishment of their sins, and in communicating to them the source of all good. And on that account it was, that *all succeeding generations*, as she foretold of herself, *should call her Blessed*;(2) regarding her as the centre in which all the blessings of the Old and New Testament are drawn together.

Though we are obliged to consider the eminent quality of Mother of God as the source of all other graces bestowed on the Blessed Virgin, it must yet be owned it is not the greatest, and that she was happier in loving Jesus Christ, than in having conceived him and brought him forth. She is *blessed among women* and above the rest of creatures, not precisely on account of her maternity, but because she received a fulness of grace proportioned to the dignity to which she was chosen. So that, according to the remark of the holy fathers, she was happier for her sanctity than for her dignity: for her virtues, than for her privileges. Among her virtues, that of purity seems particularly deserving of notice on this solemnity, as the epistle for this festival records that memorable prophecy of Isaias, *That a virgin should conceive, and bring forth a son*;(3) the most remarkable of all the signs God had promised the world for making known the accomplishment of the mystery of man's redemption. And, indeed, right reason seemed to require, that she who was to be the mother of God, should be of an integrity above reproach, and incapable of yielding to any solicitation: it was highly fit her virginity should be perfectly pure, and removed as far as possible from the least suspicion of blemish. For this reason, the moment God had chosen her to be his mother, he exacted from her the most authentic proofs of an

(1) Luke i. 28.

(2) Ibid. 48.

(3) Isai. ii. 14.

inviolable attachment to purity. Thus, it is not in a crowd, or in idle conversation, but in a retreat, that the angel finds her. It is not from the distraction or diversions and entertainments that he calls her aside to deliver his message: no; she is alone in her house, with the door shut; "and," as Saint Ambrose says, "he must be an angel that gets entrance there."* Hence, according to the same holy father, it was not the angel's appearance that gave her trouble, for he will not have it to be doubted but heavenly visions and a commerce with the blessed spirits had been familiar to her. But what alarmed her, he says, was the angel's appearing in human form, in the shape of a young man. What might add to her fright on the occasion, was his addressing her in the strain of praise, which kind of words flattery often puts in the mouths of ill-designing men. And how few, alas! are able to withstand such dangers? But Mary, guarded by her modesty, is in confusion at expressions of this sort, and dreads the least appearance of deluding flattery. Such high commendations make her cautious how she answers, till in silence she has more fully considered of the matter: *She revolved in her mind*, says St. Luke, *what manner of salutation this should be.*(1) Ah! what numbers of innocent souls have been corrupted for want of using the like precautions! Mary is retired, but how seldom now-a-days are young virgins content to stay at home! Mary is silent when commended, and answered not a word till she had well considered what she ought to say: but now it is to be feared that young women never think so little as when they are entertained with flattery. Every soothing word is but too apt to slide from the ear to the heart; and who can tell what multitudes by their unwary methods, suffer shipwreck of their modesty, and then of their purity. For how can this be long-lived after having lost all its guardians? No, it cannot be. Unless a virgin be assiduous in prayer and spiritual reading, modest in her dress, prudent and wary in her choice of company, and extremely careful in the government of her eyes and tongue when she happens to be in conversation with the other sex, there is but too much reason

(1) Luke i. 29.

* O hospitium solis angelis pervium! S. Amb. in Luc.

to apprehend that either her heart is already betrayed, or in danger of being vanquished by the next assault of her spiritual enemy. A dread of, and a speedy flight from, all dangerous occasions is the only security of virtue and innocence. Presumption wants no other tempter. Even Mary, though confirmed in grace, was only secure by this fear and distrust in herself.

A second cause why Mary was disturbed at the words of the angel was, because they contained her praises. Humble souls always tremble and sink with confusion in their own minds when they hear themselves commended; because they are deeply penetrated with a sense of their own weakness and insufficiency, and they consider contempt as their due. They know that the glory of all gifts belongs solely to God, and they justly fear lest the poison of praise should insinuate itself into their minds; being sensible how infinitely dangerous honours and flattery are to humility. Are these our sentiments? Do we never speak of ourselves to our own advantage? Do we never artfully praise ourselves, or willingly lend an ear to what flatterers say to applaud us? Are we troubled when we hear ourselves praised? What gives trouble but to too many is, that men give them not what they take to be their right; and that their praises equal not the notion they have framed of their merits. The high eulogiums bestowed on Mary by the angel she answers no otherwise than by a profound silence, by a saintly trouble of mind, which, with a modest blush, appears in her countenance. The angel, to calm her disquiets, says to her: *fear not Mary, for thou hast found favour before God.* He then informs her, that she is to conceive and bring forth a son whose name shall be called Jesus, who shall be great, and the son of the Most High, and possessed of the throne of David, her illustrious ancestor. Mary, who, according to St. Austin,* had consecrated her virginity to God by vow, is not at all weakened by the prospect of such a dignity, in her resolution of living a virgin: but, on the contrary, out of a just concern to know how she may comply with the will of God without prejudice to her vow, neither moved by curiosity, nor doubting of the miracle or its possibility, she inquires, *How shall this be?* Nor does she give her consent till the heavenly messenger acquaints her

* Quod profecto non diceret nisi se virginem ante vovisset. L. de Virg. c. 4. t. 6. p. 343.

that it is to be a work of the Holy Ghost, who, in making her fruitful, will not intrench in the least upon her virginal purity, but cause her to be a mother, still remaining, as she desires, a pure virgin.

Moreover, had not Mary been deep rooted in humility, what impression must not these great promises have made in her heart, at a time especially when the first transports are so apt to overflow the soul on the sudden news of an unexpected glory. The world knows, from too frequent experience, how strongly the promise and expectation of new dignities raise the spirits, and alter the words, the looks, and the whole carriage of proud men. But Mary is still the same, or rather much more lowly and meek in spirit upon the accession of this unparalleled dignity. She sees no cause to pride herself in her virtues, graces, and privileges; knowing that the glory of all these are due only to the divine Author and Bestower of them. In submission, therefore, to God's will, without any further inquiries, she expresses her assent in these humble but powerful words: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word.* What faith and confidence do her answer express! What profound humility and perfect obedience! She was saluted mother of God, yet uses no word of dignity, but styles herself nothing more than his handmaid, to be commanded and employed by him as he shall think fittest. The world, as heaven had decreed, was not to have a Saviour till she had given her consent to the angel's proposal; she gives it, and behold the power and efficacy of her submissive Fiat! That moment, the mystery of love and mercy promised to mankind four thousand years before, foretold by so many prophets, desired by so many saints, is wrought on earth. That moment, the Word of God is for ever united to humanity; the soul of Jesus Christ, produced from nothing, begins to enjoy God, and to know all things past, present, and to come: that moment, God begins to have an adorer, who is infinite, and the world a mediator, who is omnipotent; and, to the working of this great mystery, Mary alone is chosen to co-operate by her free assent. The prophets represent the earth as moved out of its place, and the mountains as melting away before the very countenance of God looking down upon the world. Now that he descends in person, who would not expect that the whole heavens should be moved? But another kind of appearance best suited his coming on this occasion, which was

with the view of curing our pride by his wonderful humiliations, and thereby repair the injury the Godhead had suffered from our unjust usurpation; and not to show forth his grandeur, and display his all-glorious majesty. How far are the ways of God above those of men! how greatly does divine wisdom differ from human folly! how does every circumstance in this mystery confound the pride, the pomp, and the vain titles of worldly grandeur, and recommend to us the love of silence and sincere humility! Shall the disciples of Christ have other sentiments.

But what tongue can express the inward feelings and affections which then filled the glowing heart of the most pure Mother of God? What light shone in her understanding to penetrate the mysteries and the excess of the unfathomed goodness of God! what ardours of holy love inflamed her will! what Jubilee filled her soul! Let men redeemed exult and praise, returning to God their best homages of adoration, thanksgiving, and love. It is for this duty that the Church has appointed this present festival, which we ought chiefly to consecrate to the contemplation of this adorable mystery with hymns of love, praise, and thanksgiving. It was the hope and comfort of all the ancient saints, and the great object of all their earnest prayers, tears, and sighs. The prophets had a view to it in all their predictions, this being the principal point in all the wonderful revelations of God made to his Church since the fall of Adam in Paradise, whom he immediately comforted with a promise and glimpse of this glorious mercy. Every ordinance in the law which he gave the Jews was typical, and had either an immediate, or at least an indirect relation to Christ, and our redemption by him. Among the numberless religious rites and sacrifices which were prescribed them, there was not one which did not in some manner represent or allude to this mystery. How high an idea ought this circumstance to give us of its incomprehensible greatness, which its nature and wonderful effects and fruits must enhance beyond the power of words! We are lost in astonishment, when we contemplate this prodigy of omnipotence, and infinite wisdom and mercy, and adore it in raptures and silence.

Gerson cries out on this mystery: "What ought every heart to say or think! every religious, every loving and faithful heart? It ought to rejoice exceedingly in this singular comfort, and to salute you with Gabriel: *O blessed among women*. On this day is accomplished the great desire of the holy ancient patriarchs

and prophets, who often languished to hasten it, in their sighs, prayers, and writings, crying out aloud to *the desire of the eternal hills*. On this day is the Saviour of mankind, true God and man, conceived in the womb of Mary. This day our Lady received a name more sublime than can be understood, and the most noble of all names possible, after that of her Son, by which she is called the Mother of God. On this day the greatest of miracles is wrought. Hear the wonders of love and mercy on this festival: God is made man; and man, in the divine person, God: he that is immortal is become mortal, and the Eternal is born in time. A virgin is a mother, a woman the mother of God; a creature has conceived her Creator!" Saint Peter Chrysologus expresses the fruits of this mystery as follows: "One virgin so receives and contains God in the lodging of her breast, as to procure peace for the earth, glory for heaven, salvation for the lost, life for the dead, an alliance of those on earth with the blessed in heaven, and the commerce of God with the flesh." (1)

From the example of the Virgin Mary in this mystery, how ardent a love ought we to conceive of purity and humility! According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Jerom, (2) she would rather be the spouse of God in spirit, by spotless virginity, than his mother in the flesh; and so acceptable was this her disposition to God, that she deserved immediately to hear, that she should bring forth the Son of the Most High, still remaining a most pure virgin: nor would God have otherwise raised her to this astonishing honour. The holy Ghost is invited by purity to dwell in souls, but is chased away by the filth of the contrary vice. The dreadful havoc which it now-a-days makes among Christian souls, calls for torrents of tears, and is the source of the infidelity and universal desolation which are spread on every side. Humility is the foundation of a spiritual life. By it Mary was prepared for the extraordinary graces, and all virtues with which she was enriched, and for the eminent dignity of Mother of God.

St. Austin says, that according to an ancient tradition, this mystery was completed on the 25th of March. (3) Both eastern and western churches celebrate it on this day, and have done so at least ever since the fifth century. This festival is mentioned by Pope Gelasius I. in 492. The council of Constantinople,

(1) Serm. 146.

(2) St. Greg. Nyss. Tr. de Nativ.

(3) L. 4. de Trin. c. 5.

in 692, orders the myssa præsanctificationum, as on Good-Friday, to be said on all days in Lent, except Saturdays, Sundays, and the feast of the Annunciation.(1) The tenth council of Toledo, in 656, calls this solemnity The festival of the Mother of God,* by way of excellence. To praise the divine goodness for this incomprehensible mystery of the incarnation, Urban II., in the council of Clermont, in 1095, ordered the bell to be rung every day for the triple Angelical Salutation, called Angelus Domini, at morning, noon and night. Which practice of devotion several popes have recommended by indulgences, as John XXII., Calixtus III., Paul III., Alexander VII., and Clement X. The late Benedict XIII. has augmented them to those who at the aforesaid hours shall devoutly recite this prayer kneeling.

ST. CAMMIN, ABBOT.

AMONG the most celebrated saints of Ireland, published by Usher, is placed St. Cammin, who in his youth retired from the noise of the world into the island of Inish-Kealtair, in the lake of Derg-Derch, or Dergid, in the confines of Thomond and Galway. Here several disciples resorting to him, he built a monastery, which out of veneration for his extraordinary sanctity, was long very famous among the Irish. The church of that place still retains, from him, the name of Tempul-Cammin. His happy death is placed in the Inis-Fallen annals about the year 653. See Usher's Antiqu. p. 503.

(1) See Thomasin des Fêtes, p. 229.

* Festum Sanctæ Virginis Genitricis dies, festivitas matris—nam quod festum est matris nisi incarnatio Verbi? Conc. Tolét. X.
