

without sensation, and the lids had been immovably closed; and she had scarcely removed the relics from her eyes, than a humour distilled from them. She cried out, begging that the relics might be applied a second and a third time; which being done, at the third touch she cried out, that she saw. In that instant her sight was perfectly restored to her, and she distinguished all the objects about her. Then, prostrate on the ground, she gave thanks to the author of her recovery, and the whole assembly joined their voices in glorifying God.(1) The certificates and affidavits of the surgeons and physicians who had treated her, and the affidavits of the eye-witnesses of the fact were juridically taken by the bishop of Meaux, (John de Vieupont,) who, by a judicial sentence, given on the 9th of December, 1622, declared, that the cure of the said blindness was the miraculous work of God. The abbess, Frances de la Chastre, and the community of nuns, signed and published a certificate to the like purport; in which they also mention the miraculous cures of two other nuns, the one of a palsy, the other of rheumatism.(2) Other miracles performed through her intercession are recorded by Carcat(3) and Du Plessis, who appeal to memoirs of the abbey, drawn up in an authentic manner, &c. The name of St. Fara is exceedingly honoured in France, Sicily, Italy, &c. See the life of St. Burgundofara ascribed to Bede, but really the work of Jonas, of whom some account is given at note* under the life of St. Columban, on the 21st of November; he wrote at Faremoutier the lives of St. Columban and his successors, St. Attalus and Bertulfus at Bobio, St. Eustatius at Luxeu, and St. Fara. See also Du Plessis, *Hist. de l'Eglise de Meaux*, t. 1, l. 1, n. 21, &c. t. 2, p. 1.

DECEMBER VIII.

THE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY.

So great are the advantages we reap from the incarnation of the Son of God, and so incomprehensible is the goodness which

(1) Du Plessis, t. 1, l. 5, n. 12, pp. 433, 434.

(2) *Ib.* *Pièces Justif.* t. 2, pp. 320, 322.

(3) August. Carcat, *Vie de S. Fare*, p. 238, &c.

he hath displayed in this wonderful mystery, that to contemplate it, and to thank and praise him for the same, ought to be the primary object of all our devotions, and the employment of our whole lives. In the feast of the Conception of the immaculate Virgin Mother of God we celebrate the joyful dawning of that bright day of mercy, the first appearance which that most glorious of all pure creatures made in the world, with those first seeds of grace which produced the most admirable fruit in her soul. Her conception was itself a glorious mystery, a great grace, and the first effect of her predestination. Her Divine Son, the eternal God, in the first moment of her being, considered the sublime dignity to which he had decreed to raise her, and remembered that august, dear, sacred, and venerable name of his mother, which she was one day to bear; and he beheld her with a complacency, and distinguished her in a manner suitable to the near relation she was to bear. He called her not his servant in whom he gloried, as he did Israel, (1) but his mother, whom for the sake of his own glory he decreed exceedingly to exalt in grace and glory. From that instant the eternal Word of God, which was to take flesh of her, looked upon it as particularly incumbent on him, in the view of his future incarnation, to sanctify this virgin, to enrich her with his choicest gifts, and to heap upon her the most singular favours with a profusion worthy his omnipotence. She could say with much greater reason than Isaiah: (2) *The Lord hath called me from the womb: from the bowels of my mother he hath been mindful of my name.* From that very moment he prepared her to be his most holy tabernacle. When Almighty God commanded a temple to be built to his honour in Jerusalem, what preparations did he not ordain! What purity did he not require in the things that belonged to that work, even in the persons and materials that were employed in it! David, though a great saint, was excepted against by God, because he had been stained with blood spilt in just wars. Again, what purifications, consecrations, rites, and ceremonies did he not order to sanctify all the parts of the building! This for a material temple, in which the ark was to be placed, and men were to offer their homages and sacrifices to his adorable Majesty. What then did he not do for Mary in spiritually

(1) Isa. xlix. 3.

(2) Isa. xlix. 1.

decking her, whose chaste womb was to be his living tabernacle, from whose pure flesh he was to derive his own most holy body, and of whom he would himself be born! So tender a mercy was this great work to him, that the church, in her most earnest daily supplications, conjures him, as by a most endearing motive, that he will be pleased to hear her prayers, and enrich her children with his special graces, by his effusion and liberality towards her, when he most wonderfully prepared and fitted both her body and soul, that she might be made a worthy dwelling for himself.

The first condition in the spiritual embellishing of a soul is perfect purity, or cleanness from whatever can be a blot or stain in her. A skilful statuary is careful, in the first place, that there be no irregularity or deformity in the piece which he is going to carve. And if a house is to be put in order and adorned, to receive some guest of great distinction, the first thing is to remove all filth, and whatever is offensive. Almighty God therefore was pleased to preserve this holy Virgin from contracting any stain of sin, whether original or actual. Without the privilege of an extraordinary grace, the greatest saints daily fall into venial sins of surprise and inadvertence, through a neglect of a universal watchfulness over all the secret motions of their hearts in the course of action. But Mary was distinguished by this rare privilege, and by the succour of an extraordinary grace was so strengthened, that her interior beauty was never sullied with the least spot, and charity or the divine love never suffered the least remission or abatement in her soul; but from the moment in which she attained the use of reason, increased, and she continually pressed forward with fresh ardour towards the attainment of higher perfection of virtue and holiness. Her exemption from original sin was yet a more extraordinary privilege of grace. It is an undoubted truth, in which all divines are agreed, that she was sanctified and freed from original sin before she was born, and that she was brought forth into this world in a state of perfect sanctity. Some have thought it more consonant to the sacred oracles that she was thus sanctified only after her conception, and after the union of the rational soul with the body. But it is the most generally received belief, though not defined as an article of faith, that in her very con-

ception she was immaculate. Many prelates, and a great number of Catholic universities,⁽¹⁾ have declared themselves in strong terms in favour of this doctrine; and several popes have severely forbidden any one to impugn the same, or to dispute or write against it. Nevertheless, it is forbidden to rank it among articles of faith defined by the church, or to censure those who *privately* hold the contrary. It is needless here to produce the passages of holy scripture usually alleged by theologians, and other proofs by which this assertion is confirmed. It is sufficient for us, who desire, as dutiful sons of the church, to follow, in all such points, her direction, that she manifestly favours this opinion, which is founded in the clear testimonies of the most illustrious among the fathers, in the decrees of several particular councils, and the suffrages of most learned and eminent masters of the theological schools.* The very respect which we owe to the

(1) See their suffrages enumerated by F. Francis Davenport, called in religion F. Fr. of St. Clare; and by Frassen, t. 8, p. 188.

* The question concerning the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary had been agitated with great warmth in the university of Paris, when both the university and bishop, in 1387, condemned certain propositions of John de Montesano, a Dominican, in which this privilege was denied. The council of Basil, in 1439, (Sess. 36,) declared the belief of her Immaculate Conception to be conformable to the doctrine and devotion of the church, to the Catholic faith, right reason, and the holy scriptures, and to be held by all Catholics. But this council was at that time a schismatical assembly, nor could its decree be of force. It was, nevertheless, received by a provincial council held at Avignon in 1457, and by the university of Paris. When some gave scandal by warmly contesting the Immaculate Conception, this famous university passed a decree in 1497, in which it was enacted, that no one should be admitted in it to the degree of doctor of divinity who did not bind himself by oath to defend this point. (See Spondan, Contin. Baron. ad an. 1497. Bulaeus, Hist. Universit. Paris, t. 5, p. 815. Fleury, cont. t. 24, p. 336. Frassen, t. 8, p. 227.) The council of Trent declared, in the decree concerning original sin, that it was not its intention to include in it the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and ordered the decree of Sixtus IV. relating to this point to be observed. That pope, in 1476, granted certain indulgences to those who assisted at the office and mass on the feast of her Conception; and, in 1483, by another constitution, forbade any one to censure this festival, or to condemn the opinion which asserted the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception. St. Pius V. by his bull in 1570, forbade either the opinion which affirmed, or that which denied it, to be censured. Paul V. in 1616, reiterated the same prohibition, and, in 1617, forbade any one to affirm in sermons, theses, or other like public acts, that the Blessed Virgin Mary was conceived in original sin. Gregory XV. in 1622, forbade any one to affirm this even in private disputations, except those to whom the holy see gives a spe-

Mother of God, and the honour which is due to her divine Son. incline us to believe this privilege most suitable to her state of spotless sanctity. To have been one moment infected with sin was not agreeable to the undefiled purity of her who was chosen to be ever holy, that she might be worthy to bring forth the author of sanctity. Had she ever been in sin, notwithstanding the advantages of her other privileges and graces, and her predestination to the sublime dignity of Mother of God, she would have been for that moment before she was cleansed, the object of his indignation and just hatred. St. Austin thought this reason sufficient for exempting her, whenever mention is made of sin. "Out of reverence," says he, "and for the honour which is due to her Son, I will have no question put about her when we speak of any sin." (1) Christ was no less her Redeemer, Reconciler, and most perfect Saviour and Benefactor, by preserving her from this stain, than he would have been by cleansing her

(1) S. Aug. 1, de Nat. et Grat. c. 36, n. 42, p. 144.

cial license to do it, which he granted to the Dominicans; provided they do it privately, and only among themselves: but he ordered, that in the office or mass of this festival no other title than simply that of the Conception should be used. Alexander VII., in 1671, declared that the devotion of honouring the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is pious; yet prohibits the censuring these who do not believe her Conception immaculate. Philip III. of Spain demanded of Paul V. and Philip IV. of Gregory XV. a definition of this question, but could obtain nothing more than the foregoing bulls. See Luke Wadding, (the learned Irish Franciscan, who lived some time in Spain, and died at Rome in 1655.) De legatione Philippi III. et Philippi IV. ad Paulum V. et Greg. XV. pro definiendâ Controversia de Conceptione Virginis. In the latest edition of the Roman Index, a certain little office of the Immaculate Conception is condemned; but this censure is not to be extended to other such little offices. In the prayers themselves it is called the Conception of the Immaculate Virgin, which phrase is ambiguous, and may be understood to imply only she was spotless from all actual sin, and was cleansed from original sin before she was born, in which all Catholics agree. Benedict XIII. granted to the subjects of Austria and the empire a weekly office of the Immaculate Conception on every Saturday; but the epithet Immaculate Conception occurs not in any of the prayers, but only in the title of the office. This prudent reserve of the church in her public prayers is a caution to her children, whilst they maintain this pious sentiment, not to exceed the bounds which she has prescribed them: though certain devotions are used in many parts, in which the Conception is called immaculate in the prayers themselves. It is the mystery of the Immaculation, or Sanctification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is the object of the devotion of the church on this festival, rather than her bare Conception; according to the remark of the ingenious author of Observations. Hist. et Crit. sur les Erreurs des Peintres, &c. anno 1771, t. 1, pp. 35, 36.

from it; as by descending from Adam she was liable to this debt, and would have contracted the contagion, had she not been preserved from it through the grace and merits of her Son.

To understand how great a grace, and how singular a prerogative this total exemption from all sin was in Mary, we may take a survey of the havoc that monster made amongst men from the beginning of the world, excepting Mary. The most holy amongst the saints all received their existence in sin; they were all obliged to say with St. Paul: *We were the children of wrath, even as the rest.*(1) The fall of our first father Adam involved all mankind in guilt and misery. From that time, for the space of four thousand years, sin reigned without control on every side. By its dire effects the greatest part of the world was plunged into the most frightful state of spiritual darkness and blindness. Even the sons of light were born under its slavery: Abraham, Moses, Elias, Jeremy, Job, and all the other saints confessed with David: *Behold, I was conceived in iniquities, and in sin my mother conceived me.*(2) Sin was become a universal leprosy, a contagion which no one could escape; an evil common to all mankind, and infecting every particular individual that descended from Adam, as his own inherent guilt; something accidental, and foreign to our nature, yet so general an attendant upon it, that it might almost seem a constituent part thereof. It was communicated with the flesh and blood which men received from their parents, and from their first father, Adam. Every child contracted this infection with the first principle of life. Mary, by a singular privilege, was exempted from it, and entered a world of sin, spotless and holy. *Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in array!*(3) These words we may understand as spoken by the angels at the first glorious appearance of the Mother of God, astonished to behold her, after the dismal night of darkness and sin, as the morning rising, beautiful as the moon, shining as the sun, decked with the brightest ornaments of grace, and terrible to all the powers of hell, as the face of an army drawn up in battalia, displaying her beams on the horizon of the earth, which had been hitherto covered with the hideous deformity of sin. What a

(1) Ephes. xi. 3.

(2) Ps. l. 7.

(3) Cant. vi. 9

glorious spectacle, what a subject of joy was it to the heavenly spirits, to see the empire of sin broken, and a descendant of Adam come forth free from the general contagion of his race, making her appearance pure, holy, and beautiful, richly adorned with the most precious gifts of grace, and outshining the highest angels and cherubims! Shall we refuse to her our admiration and praises? Shall we not offer to God our best homages in thanksgiving for such a mercy, and for so great a present which he has bestowed on the world in Mary?

The grace which exempted Mary from original sin, preserved her also from the sting of concupiscence, or inordinate love of creatures, and tendency to evil. The first sin of Adam brought on us a deluge of evils, and by the two wounds of ignorance and concupiscence which it has left in us, its malignity has spread its influence over all the powers of our souls. Through it our understanding is liable to be deceived, and to be led away with errors; our will is abandoned to the assaults of the basest passions: our senses are become inlets of dangerous suggestions: we are subjected to spiritual weakness, inconstancy, and vanity, and are tyrannized over by inordinate appetites. Hence proceeds in us a difficulty in doing good, a repugnance to our duties, a proneness to evil, the poisoned charm of vice, and the intestine war of the flesh against the spirit. All this we experience and groan under; yet under the weight of such miseries, by a much greater evil, we are blind, proud, and insensible. The excess of our misery is, that though it be extreme, we do not sufficiently deplore it, humble ourselves under it, and labour by watchfulness, mortification, and prayer to acquire strength against our dangers. Mary employed earnestly these arms during the course of her life, though free from this inward proneness to evil and from the *fomes peccati* or dangerous sting of concupiscence, which we inherit with original sin, and which remains after baptism, for the exercise of our virtue and fidelity. We court our dangers, indulge and fortify our enemies, and caress and adore those idols which we are bound to destroy. To procure for ourselves some part in the blessing which Mary enjoyed, in the empire over our passions, we must check them, restrain our senses, and die to ourselves. We must never cease sighing to

God, to implore his aid against this domestic enemy, and never enter into any truce with him. *Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am weak: heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.*(1) If our weakness and dangers call for our tears, we have still much greater reason to weep for our guilt and repeated transgressions. Whereas grace in Mary triumphed even over original sin; we, on the contrary, even after baptism and penance, by which we were cleansed from sin, return to it again, increase our hereditary weakness and miseries: and, what is of all things most grievous, infinitely aggravate our guilt by daily offences. *Who will give water to my head, and a fountain of tears to my eyes?"*(2) O Mother of Mercy let your happy privilege, your exemption from all sin and concupiscence, inspire you with pity for our miseries: and by your spotless purity and abundant graces, obtain for us strength against all our dangers, the deliverance from all our miseries, and the most powerful remedies of divine grace. Thus, from this mystery, we are to draw lessons of confusion and instruction for ourselves.

Mary, in her conception, was not only free from stain, but moreover was adorned with the most precious graces, so as to appear beautiful and glorious in the eyes of God. And the grace she then received was the seed of the great virtues which she exercised, and the higher graces to which, by the improvement of her first stock, she was afterwards raised, during the whole course of her mortal life. By the first graces she was free from all inclination to accursed pride, and from all inordinate self-love, and remained always perfectly empty of herself. This disposition she expressed when honoured with the highest graces, and exalted to the most sublime and wonderful spiritual dignity; under which, sinking lower in her own abyss of weakness and nothingness, she sincerely and purely gave all glory to him. She confessed aloud that he chose her not for any merit, or anything he saw in her, but because he would signalize his omnipotence by choosing the weakest and meanest instrument, and because he saw in her the nothingness in which he most fitly exerted and manifested his infinite power and greatness. By a lurking pride we obstruct the designs of the divine mercy in our favour. The vessel of our heart cannot receive

(1) Ps. vii. 3.

(2) Jer. ix.

the plentiful effusion of divine grace, so long as it is filled with the poison of self-love. The more perfectly it is cleansed and empty, the more is it fitted to receive. As the prophet called for vessels that were empty, that they might be filled with miraculous oil; so must we present to God hearts that are perfectly empty, when we pray that he replenish them with his grace. The exercise of humility, meekness, patience, resignation, obedience, self-denial, rigorous self-examination, compunction and penance begin the work: but prayer and divine love perfect the cleansing of the fountain from which they spring. Thus are we to attain that purity of heart and affections by which we shall bear some degree of resemblance to the holy Mother of God. This grace we ought earnestly to beg of God, through her intercession, and particularly to commend to him, through her, the preservation of the holy virtue of purity. The venerable and pious John of Avila gives this advice in the following words: "I have particularly seen much profit received through her means, by persons molested with temptations of the flesh, who recited some prayer in memory of her spotless conception, and of that virginal purity with which she conceived the Son of God."

The Immaculate Conception of the holy Mother of God was not only in itself a great and glorious mystery, but likewise joyful to mankind. Certain glimmerings of the benefit of our redemption had gone before from the fall of Adam in several revelations, types, and figures; in which the distant prospect of this wonderful mercy filled the patriarchs and other saints of the old law with comfort and holy joy. But the Conception of Mary displayed the first rays of its approaching light, and may be said to have been its rising morning, or the dawning of its day.* In this mystery she appeared pure and glorious, shining

* St. Bernard reproves the canons of the church of Lyons, because, by their own private authority, they celebrated a festival of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, without consulting the Roman see. (ep. 174.) Long before that time this festival was kept with great devotion in the eastern churches; and was a holiday before the Emperor Emmanuel Comnenus enforced its observance, about the year 1150, (ap. Balsam, in *nomocan Photii*.) George, bishop of Nicomedia, in the reign of Heraclius, calls it a feast of ancient date. Baronius, Benedict XIV., &c. suppose, that in the West it was first instituted in England, by St. Anselm, about the year 1150. But St. Anselm's letter on which this opinion is founded, seems not to be genuine. See

among the daughters of Adam as a *lily among thorns*. (1) To her from the moment of her Conception God said: *Thou art all beautiful my love, and there is no spot in thee*. (2) She was the *enclosed garden*, which the serpent could never enter; and the *sealed fountain* which he never defiled. (3) She was the Throne and the Tabernacle of the true Solomon, and the Ark of the Testament, to contain, not corruptible manna, but the Author of the incorruptible life of our souls. Saluting her with these epithets, in exultation and praise, let us sing with the church: "This is the Conception of the glorious Virgin Mary, of the seed of Abraham, sprung from the tribe of Juda, illustrious of the house of David, whose life, by its brightness, illustrates all churches."

ST. ROMARIC, ABBOT.

Remiremont the court of Clotaire II. in which he enjoyed the highest honours and dignities, he sold great part of his estates for the benefit of the poor; and, with the residue, founded two monasteries, one for men the other for women, at the foot of Mount Vosge, now in Lorrain. He took the monastic habit at Luxeu, and procured St. Amatus, a monk of that house, to be appointed first abbot at Remiremont, which was the name of the monastery which he had built. He spent several years under his direction in the same house, to which he removed. Upon the death of St. Amatus he was compelled to take upon him the government of that abbey. The world, from which he fled, he viewed at a distance with a pious dread, and in his sanctuary enjoyed that peace which heaven alone can give. The example of his life, and the severity which he used towards himself, were alone a censure of the slothful. Charity, sweetness, and humility formed the character of his virtue. Having

(1) Cant. xi. 2.

(2) Ib. iv. 7.

(3) Ib. iv. 12.

Lupus, ad Conc. Mogunt. sub Leone IX., t. 3, p. 497. And Jos. Assemani demonstrates, from the marble calendar of Naples, engraved in the ninth age, that this feast was then kept in that city, and that the church of Naples was the first in the West which adopted it in imitation of the Orientals. Pope Sixtus IV., in 1483, commanded it to be kept a holiday. See Bened. XIV. De Festis B. Mariæ V., c. 15, p. 348. Jos. Assemani, in Calend. Univ. t. 5, p. 433, ad p. 462, and Mazocchi, in Vet. Marmoreum Neap. Calendarium.