

Mary

A LIFE CLOSE TO JESUS



JOSE ANTONIO LOARTE

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An account of the life of the Virgin Mary in twenty scenes, based on the Gospels
and the Tradition of the Church

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Foreword

It is not easy to write a life of Mary. Firstly, because the Gospels provide little information about the Mother of God and our mother, sufficient though it is to allow us to marvel at the holiness of the Virgin and nurture a filial devotion to her. In addition, there are books which have already been written on the life of Our Lady, which make use of the exegetical, historical and literary resources available. Since Vatican Council II, biblical studies have greatly enriched our knowledge of the Virgin of Nazareth, highlighting the most special place she occupies in history salvation.

These pages therefore do not claim to be a historical narrative of the earthly journey of the Mother of Jesus. They are, rather, a sketch written in a manner accessible to all, but rooted in the conclusions of the contemporary Mariology.

Before the Second Vatican Council, the branch of dogmatic theology devoted to the role of Mary in God's plan of salvation we call Mariology, considered the figure of the Virgin from a devotional point of view. However, such studies lacked reference to Scriptural and the patristic tradition, and it was not easy to integrate these with the existing devotional approach, so ingrained in the Christian people.

Chapter VIII of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* - dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in

the mystery of Christ and the Church - was aware of these problems and sought to remedy them. Anchoring Mariology to its primary sources, and presenting Mary in the context of the history of salvation and of the mystery of Church, the Council brought about a renewal in this part of theology in keeping with the great tradition of the Church. This magisterial document provoked a renewed desire in many theologians to delve more deeply into the information that revelation (Scripture and Tradition) provides about the Blessed Virgin.

Many of these contributions were in turn taken up by the ordinary magisterium of the Church: Blessed Paul VI, Benedict XVI and especially Saint John Paul II, who developed a cycle of weekly catechesis on the Virgin over several years. We Catholics have a special debt of gratitude towards those theologians and popes who have made it possible for the image of Mary shine more brightly in the firmament of the Church, giving devotion a solid theological foundation.

However, these contributions have generally been confined to treaties of Mariology or in books only accessible to specialists in the field, and have not, therefore, reached the general public.

It is this that has prompted me to write these episodes from the life of Mary. The first edition was released in 2011, on the Opus Dei website. Now in e-book form, are twenty chapters that comprise a complete portrait of the Virgin Mary. Whoever wishes to read the appendices of each chapter, can consult the book 'The Virgin Mary. Magisterium, Saints, Poets' published in 2012 by Palabra, Madrid. Each topic of this book is enriched by a

corresponding chapter containing texts from the Magisterium, saints and poets from various eras¹

Hopefully these pages will help the reader to marvel even more at the supernatural riches the Blessed Trinity has showered upon the Blessed Virgin, so that Marian devotion, firmly rooted in Scripture, in the liturgy and the Magisterium, be more deeply rooted in his life.

JOSE ANTONIO LOARTE

Rome, August 15, 2015

Solemnity of the Assumption of Our Lady

¹ Translator's Note: 'The Virgin Mary. Magisterium, Saints, Poets' is not yet available in English. However, each individual chapter can be found on the Opus Dei website, in the Section 'Life of Mary'

The Immaculate Conception

The history of mankind is the history of God's mercy. From all eternity, *he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph 1:4).*

Nevertheless, through the prompting of the devil, Adam and Eve rebelled against the divine plan: *you will be like God, knowing good and evil (Gen 3:5)*, the father of lies insinuated to them. And our first parents accepted his words. They didn't want to owe anything to God's love. They tried to attain, by their own strength alone, the happiness to which they had been called.

But God didn't turn his back on mankind. From all eternity, in his infinite Wisdom and Love, foreseeing how we would misuse our freedom, he had decided to become one of us through the Incarnation of the Word, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Therefore he decreed to Satan, who under the disguise of the serpent had tempted Adam and Eve: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed (Gen 3:15)*. We see here the first announcement of the Redemption, in which we already glimpse the figure of a Woman, Eve's descendent, who will be the Mother of the Redeemer and, with Him and under Him, will crush the head of the infernal serpent. A light of hope is enkindled for mankind in the very moment when we fell.

Thus there began to be fulfilled the inspired words—written many years before our Lady came into the world—that the liturgy places on the lips of Mary of Nazareth: *The*

Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old...before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth; before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world (Prov 8:22-26).

The Redemption of the world began to be accomplished right from the beginning of mankind. Little by little, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the prophets unveiled the features of this daughter of Adam whom God—in anticipation of the merits of Christ, the universal Redeemer of mankind—would preserve from original sin and all personal sin, and fill with grace to make her the worthy Mother of the incarnate Word. *The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (Is 7:14).* Mary is also foreshadowed in Judith, the heroine of the Jewish people who attained victory against a fearsome enemy, winning these words of praise: *You are the exaltation of Jerusalem, you are the great glory of Israel, you are the great pride of our nation...May the Almighty Lord bless you for ever! (Jud 15:9-10).*

Carried away by Mary's beauty, Christians have always addressed her with every possible praise, which the Church repeats in her liturgy: *garden enclosed, lily among thorns, sealed fountain, gate of heaven, tower of victory over the infernal dragon, paradise of God's delights, guiding star for the shipwrecked, Mother Most Pure*

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Birth of Mary

Many centuries had passed since God promised our first parents, at the gates of Paradise, the coming of a Messiah. Throughout those centuries the people of Israel kept alive the hope of that divine promise, centered on a maiden from the House of David, who *will conceive and bring forth a Son who will be called Emmanuel, which means 'God with us'* (Is 7:14). Generation after generation, devout Israelites looked forward to the birth of the Mother of the Messiah, *who would bring him forth*, as Micah said on the basis of the prophecy of Isaiah (cf. *Mi 5:2*).

After the return from the Babylonian captivity, the messianic expectation became more intense in Israel. A wave of emotion coursed through that land in the years immediately prior to the Christian era. Many of the old prophecies seemed to point to the Messiah's coming. Men and women eagerly awaited the Desired of the nations. The Holy Spirit had made known to the old man Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the realization of the promise (*Lk 2:26*). Anna, a widow of advanced age, fasted and prayed for the redemption of Israel. These two people would have the immense privilege of seeing the Child Jesus and holding Him in their arms (*Lk 2:25-38*).

Even in the pagan world (as some narratives from ancient Rome attested) signs were present that something very great was imminent. The "Pax Romana" itself, the universal peace proclaimed by the Emperor Octavius

Augustus, a few years before our Lord's birth, was a harbinger that the true Prince of Peace was about to come into this world. The time was ripe to receive the Savior.

In the fullness of time, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, that they might receive adoption as sons (Gal4:4-5). God put great care into selecting his Daughter, Spouse, and Mother. And the holy Virgin, the most exalted of women, the creature best loved by God, conceived without original sin, came into our world. She was born amid a deep silence. It was autumn, when the fields are ready for sleep. No one living at that time was aware of what was happening. Only the angels in heaven rejoiced.

Of the two genealogies for Christ that appear in the Gospel, the one recorded by St. Luke is most likely Mary's. We know that she was of illustrious lineage, a descendant of David, as the prophet had said when speaking of the Messiah: *A shoot shall spring from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom (Is 11:1).* And St. Paul, when he writes to the Romans, says that Christ was *born of the line of David according to the flesh (Rom 1:3).*

An apocryphal writing from the second century known as the *Protoevangelium of James* tells us the names of her parents, Joachim and Anne, whom the Church has inscribed in the liturgical calendar. Various traditions locate Mary's birthplace in Galilee or, what is more likely, in the holy city of Jerusalem, where ruins of a Byzantine basilica from the fifth century have been found, built over what was called "the house of St. Anne," very near the Probatic Pool. Rightly does the liturgy place on the lips of Mary some phrases from the Old Testament: *He established me in Sion. In the beloved city he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my dominion (Sir 24:11-12).*

Prior to Mary's birth, the earth was in darkness, wrapped in the shadows of sin. With her birth the dawn of salvation arose, as a herald of the coming day. As the Church prays on the feast of our Lady's Nativity: "By your birth, O Virgin Mother of God, you bring joy to the whole world; of you was born the Sun of Justice, Christ, our God" (Office of Lauds).

But the world was still unaware of it. The earth was sleeping.

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Presentation of Our Lady

The years of Mary's childhood were quiet, as befits her humility. Holy Scripture tells us nothing about them. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand why the early Christians were eager to know more about her life prior to the Gospel account of the Annunciation. And so, popular piety gave rise quite early to some simple stories inspired by passages from the Old and New Testament, and these found their way into Christian art, poetry, and spirituality.

One of these stories, perhaps the most typical, speaks about Mary's Presentation in the Temple. Joachim and Anne offered their daughter to God in the Temple at Jerusalem, just as another Anne, the mother of the prophet Samuel, had offered her son to God's service in the tabernacle where his glory was manifested (cf. *1 Sam* 1:21-28). In the same way, some years later, Mary and Joseph would bring the newborn Child to the Temple to present him to the Lord (*Lk* 2:22-38).

Strictly speaking, no history exists of our Lady's early life; we have only what tradition has handed down to us. The first written text that refers to this event (which became the basis for later accounts) is the *Protoevangelium of James*, an apocryphal document from the second century. "Apocryphal" means that it does not belong to the canon of books inspired by God. But this doesn't mean it contains nothing true. In fact, the Church includes this scene in her liturgy, omitting possibly legendary elements. In Jerusalem, in the year 543, a basilica was dedicated to our Lady in memory of her Presentation. In the fourteenth

century, this observance was commemorated in the West as a liturgical feast on November 21.

Mary in the Temple. All her beauty and grace, in both soul and body, was for the Lord. That is the theological content of the feast of her Presentation. The liturgy applies to our Lady some phrases from the Old Testament: "In the holy tent I ministered before him, and in Zion I fixed my abode. Thus in the chosen city he has given me rest, in Jerusalem is my domain. I have struck root among the glorious people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage" (*Sir* 24:10-12).

Just as Jesus after he was presented in the Temple, Mary would have continued living a normal life at home with Joachim and Anne. Subject to her parents, growing towards womanhood, Mary was "full of grace" (*Lk* 1:28), her heart ready for a complete self-giving to God and mankind for the love of God.

No one would have noticed anything unusual about Mary's behavior, though without doubt she charmed those around her because holiness is always attractive—more so in the case of one who is All-Holy. She was a smiling, hard-working young girl, always immersed in God, pleasant to everyone at her side. When she prayed, with a deep understanding of Holy Scripture, she would have often reflected on the prophecies that announced the coming of a Savior. That interior richness would later be poured forth in the marvelous verses of the *Magnificat* when she heard the greeting of her cousin Elizabeth.

Everything in our Lady's life was wholly oriented towards Jesus' Most Holy Humanity, the true Temple of God. The feast of Mary's Presentation teaches us that our Lady belonged only to God, that she was completely dedicated,

in soul and body, to the mystery of salvation, which is the mystery of our Creator drawing near to his creatures.

“Like a cedar of Lebanon I am raised aloft, like a cypress on Mount Hermon, like a palm tree in Engedi, like a rose bush in Jericho, like a fair olive tree in the field, like a plane tree growing beside the water" (*Sir* 24:13-14). Holy Mary brought God's love to fruition around her. She did so without being noticed, because her deeds were those of every day, little things imbued with love.

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Betrothal to Joseph

The fullness of time is drawing near. The person predestined to be God's Mother is still unaware of her future role. Mary is now a young woman, and the Holy Trinity has prepared for her a holy marriage to safeguard her virginity. The Son of God made man, Israel's Messiah and the Redeemer of the world, is to be born and brought up in a family.

All the indications point to the fact that our Lady's parents are probably already deceased. Mary was most likely living in the home of a relative who was caring for her. Having reached the age when it was customary in Israel for a young maiden to enter into marriage—about the age of 15—the head of her adoptive family, taking the place of Miriam's father, would have arranged for her union with Joseph, a craftsman from Nazareth.

The Gospels provide few details about Mary's spouse. We know that he, too, was of the house of David, and that he was *a just man* (Mt 1:19)—that is, a man who *walked in the Law of the Lord, and meditated upon it night and day* (Ps 1:2). The liturgy applies to him these inspired words: *The just man shall flourish like a palm tree, and grow up like a cedar of Lebanon* (Ps 91[92]:13).

The Gospel of St. Luke tells us that when the Archangel Gabriel brought God's message that Mary was to conceive a son, she responded: *How shall this happen, since I do not know man?* (Lk 1:34). Mary's response, when she was already betrothed to Joseph of Nazareth, has only one

explanation: Mary was firmly resolved to remain always a virgin. No human motive could justify that decision—quite rare in those days. Every Israelite maiden—even more so if she belonged to the line of David—harbored in her heart the hope of giving birth to the Messiah. The Tradition of the Church sees in Mary's firm determination here the fruit of a very special inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who was preparing her to become the Mother of God. The same Spirit also led her to the man who was to be her virginal spouse.

We don't know how Mary and Joseph met. If Mary, as is quite likely, also lived in Nazareth, a small village in Galilee, they would have met on previous occasions. In any case, before the espousal, Mary must have informed Joseph of her intention to remain a virgin. And Joseph, prepared by the Holy Spirit, must have sensed in this revelation a voice from heaven. Most probably, he too would have felt an interior call to dedicate himself soul and body to the Lord. It is impossible to imagine the harmony that united those two hearts, the interior peace that welled up in their souls after their betrothal.

Everything about this scene in Mary's life is deeply supernatural, and also deeply human. The very simplicity that is so proper to divine realities explains the pious stories that soon grew up around the espousal of Mary and Joseph—filled with wondrous events immortalized in art and literature. According to these sources, when Mary reached the age for marriage, God miraculously showed the priests in the Temple of Jerusalem and all the people the man He had chosen to be Mary's spouse.

The actual fact must have been much simpler. The betrothal ceremony could very well have been in Nazareth. When Mary's family reached an agreement with Joseph, the espousal celebration would have been held, which in the

Mosaic Law had the same effect as marriage. After some time had elapsed, the groom was to bring the bride into his own home. It was during this time that the Annunciation took place.

Mary's betrothal with Joseph has great importance in her life. Joseph was descended from the royal house of David and, by virtue of his marriage with Mary, the legal title, son of David, would be conferred upon Mary's child, thus fulfilling the prophecies. The Church applies to Joseph, of noble lineage and even more noble in spirit, the praise that divine Wisdom gives to Moses: *He was beloved of God and men, and blessed is his memory* (Sir 45:1).

Israel knows nothing about this recently married couple. As always, Joseph keeps silent and Mary is discreet. But God is well pleased and the angels marvel in admiration.

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The Annunciation

The most important conversation in history took place in a small house in Nazareth. It was a conversation between God himself, through the ministry of an Archangel, and a Virgin named Mary, from the house of David, espoused to a craftsman named Joseph.

Most likely, Mary was recollected in prayer, perhaps meditating on a passage of Sacred Scripture referring to the Lord's promise of salvation. That is how Christian art has depicted the scene, in some of its most beautiful representations of our Lady.

Or perhaps she was busy at her household tasks, in which case she would also have been praying. For everything in Mary's life was an occasion and a motive to carry on a constant dialogue with God.

—*Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you! (Lk 1:28).*

On hearing those words, *Mary was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be (Lk 1:29).* Not only the angel's sudden appearance, but also what he says causes her to be perplexed. Alarmed, she asks what the reason could be for such praise. In her humility, she sees herself as of little significance. Knowing the Scriptures well, she realizes immediately that this heavenly messenger is transmitting to her an unheard of message. Who is she to deserve such praise? What has she done in her brief life? Certainly, she wants to serve God with all her heart and soul. But she considers her life to be very far from the heroic deeds that

won praise for Deborah or Judith or Esther, women so renowned in the Bible. Still, she realizes that this divine announcement is meant for her: *Hail, full of grace!*

St. Luke, in recounting the title given to Mary by Gabriel, *full of grace*, uses a Greek word that signifies that our Lady has been completely transformed and sanctified by God's grace. As the Church would later clarify, this had already occurred in the first moment of her conception, in consideration of the mission she was to carry out: to be the Mother of God in his human nature, while remaining always a Virgin.

The Archangel, aware of Mary's unease, seeks to calm her by explaining—now using her proper name—the reason for so exceptional a greeting:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son the of Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Lk 1:30-33).

Well aware of the messianic prophecies, on which she has often meditated, Mary understands that she is to be the Mother of the Messiah. In her reply there is not the least shadow of doubt or disbelief. Since her earliest childhood, her only concern has been to fulfill the divine will. But she wants to know how such a marvelous event will come about, since inspired by the Holy Spirit she has resolved to give herself to God with a virginal body and heart.

St. Gabriel then informs her of the divine way in which motherhood and virginity will unite in her womb: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born*

will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible (Lk 1:35-37).

Mary doesn't hesitate: With all the strength of her will she responds to the invitation from heaven. She doesn't limit herself to simply giving permission; she pronounces a yes—*fiat!*—in which she commits her entire soul and heart, in full accord with God's will: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to your word (Lk1:38).*

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us (Jn 1:14). As we contemplate once again this mystery of God's humility and the humility of his creature, we break forth in an exclamation of gratitude that can never end: “Oh, Mother, Mother! With that word of yours—*fiat*, 'be it done'—you have made us brothers of God and heirs to his glory. Blessed art thou!” (*The Way*, 512).

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Visitation to Saint Elizabeth

Elizabeth, who had been called “barren,” is going to be a mother. Gabriel, sent by God, had informed Mary of it. Shortly afterwards, *Mary set out in haste for the hill country, to a town of Judah (Lk 1:39)*. She is not motivated by curiosity, nor does she make the journey to discover for herself whether the angel's message is true. Humble, filled with charity—a charity that leads her to be more concerned for her elderly cousin than for herself—Mary goes to the home of Elizabeth because she has discerned in the heavenly message a hidden relationship between Elizabeth's child and the Son she carries within her.

It is a long way—nearly a hundred miles—from Nazareth to Ain Karim, the little town in the hills of Judea where, according to tradition, Zachary and Elizabeth lived. Most likely it was Joseph who arranged the trip, looking for a caravan in which the Blessed Virgin could travel safely. He himself may have accompanied her, at least as far as Jerusalem; some commentators even think he went with Mary right to Ain Karim, which is only five miles from the capital. If so, he would have needed to return immediately to his workshop in Nazareth.

Mary entered the house of Zachary and greeted Elizabeth (Lk 1:40). According to a local tradition, the meeting of the two cousins took place, not in the town, but in a country place where Elizabeth—as the sacred text affirms (*Lk 1:24*)—had secluded herself for five months from the sight of curious relatives and neighbors, to raise up her heart in gratitude to God for such an immense gift.

After the long and tiring trip, Mary greets Elizabeth with an embrace. Mary rejoices with her cousin and promises to stay at her side. With Mary, God's grace enters that house, for he has made her his mediatrix. Her arrival produces a spiritual upheaval. *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, St. Luke recounts, the infant leapt in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:41).*

Mary brings with her three gifts (Lk1:42-45). First, she fills that house with glory: *How is it that the mother of my Lord should visit me?* If a visit from an important earthly figure brings great honor to the person visited, what could be said of the honor of receiving the only-begotten Son of God the Father, incarnate in our Lady's womb? The unborn Baptist quivers and exults with joy, sanctified by Jesus' presence. And Elizabeth, enlightened by God's Spirit, breaks forth with a prophetic acclamation: *As soon as your greeting reached my ears, the child leapt with joy in my womb; blessed are you who has believed that the things spoken to you by the Lord will be fulfilled (Lk 1:44-45).*

The Blessed Virgin had come to serve, but she finds herself praised, blessed, and proclaimed Mother of the Messiah, Mother of God. Mary knows this is so, but she attributes everything to the Lord: *because he has seen the lowliness of his handmaid; wherefore all generations shall call me blessed. For he who is all-powerful has done great things in me, and holy is his name (Lk 1:48-49).*

The *Magnificat*, the canticle composed by our Lady under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit with expressions from the Old Testament, is a portrait of Mary's soul. It is a song to the mercy of God, who is great and all-powerful, and at the same time a manifestation of our Lady's humility. Although I have done nothing myself, she says, the Lord has wished to accomplish in me what He had announced to our forefathers, to Abraham and his posterity forever. *My soul*

magnifies the Lord, not because my soul is great, but because the Lord has done great things in it.

Mary is the humble handmaid of God and the servant of mankind. She remains three months in Elizabeth's home, until the birth of John. And with her presence, she will fill Zachary with grace as well, so that he might sing to the Lord a hymn of praise and repentance, with all the strength of his recovered speech: *Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people (Lk 1:68)*.

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Birth of Christ

Octavius Cesar Augustus has decreed that a census be taken of all the people living in the Roman Empire. The order affects everyone, from the richest to the poorest. In Palestine, the census must conform to Jewish practice, with each one going to his home town. *Because Joseph was of the house and lineage of David, he went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, to be enrolled with Mary his betrothed, who was with child (Lk 2:4-5).*

Thus, with great naturalness, the evangelist begins his narration of the event that is going to change mankind's history. The journey was a long one: over 80 miles. It would take four days—if everything went well—in one of the caravans that traveled south from Galilee. Mary was not obliged to go, since the census was the duty of the head of the family. But how could Joseph leave Mary on her own when she is about to give birth? And above all, wouldn't Mary want to accompany Joseph to the city where—according to the Scriptures—the Messiah was to be born? Joseph and Mary discover in that strange caprice of the far-off Emperor God's hand guiding them in all their steps.

Bethlehem was a small town. But the census means that there is much more activity than usual. Joseph and Mary go to the imperial officer to pay the tribute and to be enrolled in the book of the Emperor's subjects. Then Joseph looks for a place to spend the night. Tradition tells us that he went in vain from door to door. Finally, he goes to the “khan” or public inn where there would always be a corner free. It

was nothing more than a walled-in patio. In the center was a cistern with water, around which the pack-animals were sheltered, and next to the wall there were some sheds for the travelers, covered with a primitive roof. Frequently these were divided by partitions so that each group could find at least a bit of privacy.

It was not a fitting place for our Lady to give birth. We can imagine Joseph's suffering as the hour for Mary's delivery drew near. *There was no room for them in the inn (Lk2:7)*, St. Luke remarks tersely. Someone, perhaps the owner of the inn, must have told them that on the outskirts of the town there were some caves used to house the animals on cold nights; perhaps they could stay there until the crowds dispersed and a room opened up in the town.

Divine Providence made use of these circumstances to show that the Son of God had decided to come into our world in poverty and humility. This was to be an example to all those who would follow him down through the centuries. As St. Paul said: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor 8:9)*. The King of Israel, the Desired of all the nations, the eternal Son of God, comes into the world in a place meant for animals. And his Mother has to offer him, as his first crib, a narrow manger.

But the Almighty does not want this prodigious event to pass entirely unnoticed. *There were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night (Lk 2:8)*. The lowly ones of this earth, whose humble state obliges them to care for the flocks of others, are the first to receive the news of this great portent: the birth of the promised Messiah.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them: Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of great joy which will come for all the people " (Lk 2:9-10). After giving them this Good News, the angel also gives them the sign by which they would be able to recognize him: You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger (Lk 2:12). And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased (Lk 2:14).

The shepherds make their way to the town. Perhaps they take some presents to offer the Mother and the new-born Child. Mary and Joseph see in their homage a proof that God is watching over his Son. They too are filled with joy on seeing the sincere joy of the shepherds, and they would have pondered in their hearts how God is pleased with those who are poor in spirit and humble.

The shepherds return to their flocks, *praising God for all they had heard and seen (Lk2:20)*. Two thousand years later, we too are invited to proclaim God's marvelous deeds. "A holy day has dawned upon us. Come, you nations, and adore the Lord. For today a great light has come upon the earth" (Third Mass of Christmas, Gospel acclamation).

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Jesus' Presentation in the Temple

The gathering of pilgrims in Bethlehem has ended. After Christ's birth, Joseph found a more worthy place to house the Holy Family. There, after eight days, he carried out the rite of circumcision by which the male children begin to form part of the people of Israel. And the child officially received the name Jesus, *the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb (Lk 2:21)*. Forty days later, Mary and Joseph took the Child with them to Jerusalem, *when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses...to present him to the Lord as it is written in the law of the Lord...and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons" (Lk 2:22-25)*.

Neither Jesus nor Mary was obliged to follow these prescriptions. Mary had not contracted any legal impurity for she had conceived and given birth in a virginal way. Nor did the law affecting the redeeming of the first-born apply to Jesus, the true Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. And yet, three times in just a few verses, special mention is made of the fact that everything was done in strict observance of the Law of God.

The Church discovers a deeper meaning in this episode. In first place, the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi: *The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight (Mal 3:1)* Besides, Mary understood that Jesus had to be brought to the Temple, not to be redeemed like other first-born

children, but to be offered to God as a true sacrifice. As the Letter to the Hebrews says: *When Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifices and offerings you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not take pleasure. Then I said: 'Lo, I have come to do your will, O God,' as it is written of me in the roll of the book"* (Heb 10:5-7). To some extent, Jesus' Presentation in the Temple can be linked with the Offering of the Sacrifice of Calvary that the Mass makes present in all times and places. In the preparation of this sacrifice, as later in its accomplishment on the summit of Golgatha, a special place was reserved for the Mother of Jesus. From the very first moments of his earthly life, Jesus united Mary to the redeeming sacrifice that he had come to fulfill.

This sharing in the mystery of the Redemption was revealed little by little to the Virgin Mary. At the Annunciation the archangel had said nothing about this. But now it would be communicated through the words of Simeon, a just and God-fearing man far advanced in years: *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ* (Lk 2:26).

The encounter between our Lady and Simeon would have taken place in front of the Gate of Nicanor that led into the court of the Jews. That was the place where one of the priests received the women who came to offer the sacrifice for themselves and their children. Mary, accompanied by Joseph, stood in the line. While our Lady waited her turn, something happened that caused the on-lookers to be amazed. An old man approached the line. His face was glowing with joy. *When the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said: "Lord,*

now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Lk 2:29-32).

On hearing these words, Mary and Joseph were overcome with wonder, for Simeon confirmed what the angel had communicated from God. But immediately his other words cast a shadow over their joy: the Messiah would fulfill his mission by suffering, and the Mother would be mysteriously associated with her Son's sorrows. *Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Lk 2:34-35).* Anna as well, a woman over 80 years old, joined in Simeon's announcement: *coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Lk 2:38).*

From St. Luke's Gospel we know that our Lady presented the Child Jesus only after listening to the prophecy. She offered *a pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons*, the offering of the poor, instead of the lamb prescribed by the Law of Moses. Nonetheless, in light of Simeon's words, she understood that Jesus was the true Lamb of God who would redeem men from their sins. And that she, as Mother, in a way she did not yet fully grasp, would be closely united to her Son's fate.

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Adoration of the Magi

After Jesus' Presentation in the Temple, the Holy Family returned to Bethlehem. In the hearts of Mary and Joseph, Simeon's prophetic words about the Child continued to resound. Mary would also have recalled texts in which the prophets of old spoke about the Messiah, her Son, saying that he would receive homage as King not only by Israel, but also by all the peoples of the world.

With particular eloquence, Isaiah had announced: *The nations will walk in thy light, kings in the splendor of thy dawn. Lift up thine eyes and behold the scene: all will gather and come to thee... A multitude of camels will come to thee, dromedaries from Madian and Epha, all those from Saba will come bearing gold and incense, and singing the praises of the Lord (Is 60:3-6).*

In the meantime, the days passed by in complete normality. Nothing indicated that anything out of the ordinary was about to occur. Until one day something extraordinary took place.

After the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, Magi came from the East to Jerusalem, inquiring: 'Where is the newborn King of the Jews? For in the East we have seen his star, and have come to adore him' (Mt 2:1-2). St. Matthew records that when he heard of their inquiry, King Herod was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him (Mt 2:3).

We know very little about those illustrious persons—only what the Scripture passage tells us. They were traveling from the East, where they had observed a star of extraordinary brilliance that led them to set out in search of the King of the Jews. Everything else—how many they were, their country of origin, the nature of that celestial light, the road they took—is a matter of conjecture, more or less well founded. Western tradition speaks of “three kings,” as they came to be called in the popular imagination, and even gives us their names—Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. Other Christian traditions increase their number to seven, and even twelve. Their point of origin could have been Mesopotamia, or more likely Persia. Their Persian origin gains weight from an historical event: When the Persian king Cosroes II invaded Palestine towards the beginning of the seventh century after Christ, he destroyed all the basilicas that Christian piety had built in the Savior's memory, except for one: the basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem. And the reason he left it standing was that at its entrance was a representation of several men clothed in Persian robes, shown rendering homage to Jesus in the arms of his Mother. The word “magi,” as the Gospel refers to them, had quite a different meaning than what we understand by that word today. These were not men who practiced magic, but most likely part of a priestly caste in Persia dedicated to studying the stars, disciples of Zoroaster, who are mentioned by numerous authors in classical Greece. Furthermore, it is a fact that the messianic expectation of Israel was known in the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire, and even in Rome itself. It is not strange, then, that some wise men belonging to the scholarly group known as magi—enlightened interiorly by God—had interpreted their discovery of a star of extraordinary splendor as a sign of the birth of the longed-for King of the Jews.

Although popular piety has closely connected the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi in Palestine, we don't know exactly when it took place. All we know is that Herod felt threatened and *inquired carefully from them the time when the star had appeared (Mt 2:7)*. Then he consulted doctors of the Law about the place where the Messiah was to be born. The Scribes responded by citing the prophet Micah: *Thou, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are not the least among the principal cities of Judah; for out of thee shall come a leader who will bring peace to my people, Israel (Mt 2:6)*. Trying to deceive them, Herod sent the Magi to Bethlehem: *Go and inquire diligently about this child, and when you have found him, notify me so that I may also go and adore him (Mt2:8)*. His real intention was quite different, since Herod will soon kill all the male children two years old and under in Bethlehem and its environs, so as to be certain of the death of the one he thinks has come to claim his throne. From this we can deduce that the Magi may have arrived a year or a year-and-a-half after Jesus' birth.

After receiving this information, the Magi set out in haste for Bethlehem, rejoicing that the star was once again guiding them after it had mysteriously disappeared in Jerusalem. This fact points to the conclusion that the star was not a natural phenomenon—a comet, a conjunction of stars, etc., as many have tried to show—but a supernatural sign God gave to those chosen men, and only to them.

As soon as they left Jerusalem, St. Matthew continues, *the star they had seen in the East went before them until it stopped above the place where the Child was. And entering the house, they saw the Child with Mary, his Mother; and prostrating themselves they adored him. Then they opened their coffers and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Mt 2:9-11)*.

The hearts of Mary and Joseph must have been filled with joy and gratitude—joy, because the prophecies about Jesus were beginning to be fulfilled; gratitude, because the gifts of those generous men, predecessors in the faith of so many Christians among the nations, contributed perhaps to relieving their precarious financial situation. Joseph and Mary could not repay their generosity. But those men considered themselves sufficiently recompensed by the smile from Jesus that brought new light to their souls, and by the warm words of gratitude from Mary, his Mother.

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Flight into Egypt

Soon after the Magi left Bethlehem, *an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: Rise, take the Child and his Mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the Child to destroy him (Mt 2:13)*. Our Lady's joy at the visit of those distinguished men who had recognized her Son as the Messiah was instantly turned into sorrow and anguish. The cruelty of Palestine's elderly king, ever fearful that someone might seize his throne, was well known. As we learn from several historical accounts, he had already assassinated several of his own sons, as well as other persons he viewed as threats. The danger, then, was great. But the ambition and wickedness of a tyrant could not thwart God's salvific plans. He does not perform striking miracles, but counts on the cooperation of those who are faithful to him. Thus the Magi, *being warned in a dream not to return to Herod...departed to their own country by another way (Mt 2:12)*.

Joseph, acting with complete docility, *rose up, took the Child and his Mother by night, and fled into Egypt (Mt 2:14)*. Thus began the first of the persecutions that Christ Jesus would undergo on earth all throughout history, whether against Himself or against members of his Mystical Body.

There were two main roads to Egypt. The easier road was also the more traveled one; it passed through Gaza and then

ran south along the Mediterranean coast. The other road, less used and therefore the more prudent one, passed through Hebron and Bersabee before crossing the Idumean desert and entering the Sinai peninsula. In either case, it would be a long trip of several hundred miles lasting from ten to fourteen days.

In Hebron or Bersabee (the latter about forty miles from Bethlehem), they could procure provisions before setting out across the desert. In that initial stage of the trip, they may very well have joined up with a small caravan, for it would have been almost impossible to travel that road alone. The oppressive heat, lack of water, and danger of bandits, made it advisable not to cross the desert on their own. The historian Plutarch writes that, in 155 B.C., Roman soldiers making the same trip to fight in Egypt were more fearful of the hardships to be faced in the desert than of the battles to be fought ahead.

According to tradition—likely a true one—Mary held the Infant in her arms while seated on a donkey, which Joseph led by its bridle. But the imaginative inventions of apocryphal authors have spread numerous legends about their flight: palm trees bending their fronds to provide shade for the wayfarers, wild animals becoming tame, bandits turning kind, fountains of water springing up to relieve their thirst.... These accounts have influenced popular piety through paintings and poetry, with the laudable purpose of embellishing the care shown by divine Providence. But in reality the flight would have been quite normal, including their physical sufferings and the fear of being overtaken at any moment by a detachment of soldiers. Only when they reached Rhinocolura on the Palestine-Egypt frontier would they have felt safe.

Meanwhile in the neighborhood of Bethlehem, infants two-years-old and under were being wrenched from their

mothers' arms and slain. St. Matthew writes: *Then were fulfilled the words of the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Rama, wailing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, inconsolable, for they are no longer'* (Mt 2:18). Doubtless, this passage is hard to understand, and on occasion has been a stumbling block for many. How could God permit the suffering of the innocent, especially babies? The response to this question rests on two firm points: God does not treat human being like puppets; he respects their freedom, even when it is used to do evil. At the same time, in his wisdom and Providence, He knows how to draw good from evil. God writes straight with the crooked lines men have twisted to their own purposes. In any case, this puzzle is solved only in the light of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. The Redemption is accomplished through the suffering of the Just One, the Innocent One *par excellence*, who wants his human creatures to share in his sacrifice.

Tradition is uncertain about where in Egypt the Holy Family took up residence—perhaps in Memphis, Heliopolis, or Leontopolis. The broad delta of the Nile sheltered many Jewish communities, where Joseph could have found employment to support his family in a worthy manner, even if they remained poor. The most accepted accounts place them in Egypt for at least a year, until the angel told Joseph to return to Palestine.

They were months of quiet work and hardship, spent with nostalgia for their homeland, but also with the joy of seeing Jesus growing up healthy and strong, far from the danger they had left behind. All around them they saw numerous signs of idolatry—all the strange Egyptian gods with the faces of beasts. But Mary knew that Jesus had come into the world to save those people as well, and that they too

were destined for Redemption. And so Mary embraced them in her maternal heart.

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Return to Nazareth

We don't know for certain how long the Holy Family remained in Egypt. The most likely conjecture is that it was between one and two years. St. Matthew, the evangelist who records this episode, gives us quite a succinct account, as he does on other occasions. All he tells us is that *when Herod was dead, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in Egypt as he slept and said: 'Rise up, take the Child and his Mother, and go into the land of Israel, for those who sought the Child's life are dead'* (Mt 2:19-20).

The Patriarch responds, as always, without delay: *Joseph arose, took the Child and his Mother, and went into the land of Israel* (Mt 2:21). He doesn't hesitate even for a moment. Taking only the time needed to collect his tools and few possessions, he would have said a quick goodbye to those who had been their neighbors during those months and set about preparing for the return journey.

Coptic tradition tells us that the Holy Family traveled by sea, not by land. It is a likely hypothesis. Now that the danger had passed, the sea route was more economical and entailed fewer privations than the overland path of the caravans. They probably traveled on one of the numerous vessels that went down the Nile from the city of Memphis (today's Cairo) to Alexandria, where they could board a small boat for the four or five day trip along the Mediterranean coast to Ascalon, Joppa, or Yamnia.

On disembarking, Joseph would have inquired about the new king in Judea, Archelaus, one of Herod's sons, whose

cruelty almost matched his father's—he had just beheaded several thousand of his subjects in the very Temple itself. At first, Mary's spouse had planned to settle in Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Messiah. But since the angel had not indicated a specific destination—only that he return to the land of Israel—it seemed better to go to a place outside that king's jurisdiction. The Lord confirmed Joseph in his plan through an angel: *But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee (Mt 2:22)*. The prophecy of Micah had announced the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but other oracles—as Matthew recalls—pointed to Nazareth as the place where the Messiah would grow to maturity. *So he went to dwell in a city called Nazareth, so that what was said by the prophets would be fulfilled: 'He will be called a Nazarene' (Mt 2:23)*.

The trip to Nazareth was calm and peaceful, made without haste. We can imagine how happy our Lady and Joseph were when they crossed the plains of Esdraelon and reached Galilee. They felt at home in that familiar countryside where they had spent the years of their childhood and adolescence. In Nazareth they were reunited with relatives and friends, surprised to see them back after so many months without news. There would have been no lack of embarrassing questions, motivated both by affection and a healthy curiosity. But Mary and Joseph were discreet in their responses and didn't reveal the truth about Jesus that they kept in their hearts.

They returned to their small house built onto one of the many caves around Nazareth. They may have found it in bad repair, having been gone for so long. But Joseph would have restored it skillfully, and Mary set about giving it a thorough cleaning, assisted perhaps by her cousin, Mary of

Cleophas, the mother of James and Joseph, and also of Simon and Jude, and by other relatives.

The daily life and work of the Holy Family gradually returned to normal, without anything extraordinary. St. Luke, who resumes his account at this point, states simply that *the Child grew stronger, full of wisdom, and the grace of God was in him (Lk 2:40)*. Our Lady, like all mothers, watched over the human growth of her Son and Lord with loving eyes, full of admiration at how God was working so naturally. Joseph worked hard, grateful that his labor was of service to the mystery of the Redemption. In this Family, love for God and neighbor centered on loving attention to Jesus, the Father's eternal Word, who learned how to talk with human words and to love with the heart of a man.

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Jesus with Doctors of the Law

The Mosaic Law obliged all the men in Israel to present themselves before the Lord three times a year—at Passover, Pentecost, and on the feast of Tabernacles. This duty did not apply to women, nor to boys under 13, the age when they became subject to the dictates of the Law. Nevertheless, among devout Israelites, women often accompanied their husbands to adore God in Jerusalem, sometimes joined by their children.

In our Lord's time, it was customary that only those who resided within a day's journey made this pilgrimage, and then only for the Passover feast. Since it took several days to reach Jerusalem from Nazareth, the precept did not strictly oblige Joseph. Nevertheless, Joseph and Mary *went up to Jerusalem every year for the feast of Passover (Lk 2:41)*. The Evangelist does not say whether Jesus accompanied them each year, as often happened among devout families. St. Luke mentions Jesus' presence only on this occasion, perhaps to clarify the time frame in the episode he is about to relate, or because Jesus, now in his thirteenth year, could be considered bound by the precept. So *when he was twelve, he went with them to the feast (Lk 2:42)*.

Jerusalem was overflowing with pilgrims and traders. Caravans had come from the most remote regions—the Arabian desert, the shores of the Nile, the mountains of Syria, Jewish cities in Greece.... Confusion reigned

everywhere: donkeys, camels, baggage of all sorts filled the streets and outlying areas of the Holy City. And the faithful crowded into the Temple, offering their sacrifices and prayers.

Afterwards, in the confusion of preparing to return homes, men and women sometimes were separated, and the children, depending on their ages, could join one or another group. There was no fixed plan, only the place and approximate time of departure. It is not surprising, then, that *when the time came to return, the boy Jesus remained in Jerusalem, and his parents knew it not (Lk 2:43)*.

Mary and Joseph didn't notice his absence until nightfall of the first day on the road, when the caravans returning to Galilee stopped to spend the night. How great must have been their concern when they realized Jesus wasn't there! The hours went by as they *looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances (Lk 2:44)*. With all haste, perhaps that very night, they returned to Jerusalem in search of him. They went back to the place where they had eaten the Paschal lamb and questioned friends and acquaintances along the street. But it was all in vain: no one had seen Jesus. We can imagine what our Lady would have been thinking: was this the sword of sorrow foretold by Simeon that would pierce her own heart?

The second day passed in the same way, amid anxiety and sorrow. They returned again and again to the places they had been, until on the third day the search led them back to the Temple. There they found Jesus, probably in one of the rooms adjoining the atriums where the scribes often instructed the people. It was a frequent scene during festival days: the teacher, from his elevated chair (so as to be seen and heard well) with a roll of the sacred book in his hands, explaining a passage from Scripture to the listeners seated on the floor. From time to time the scribe would pose

a question, which one of his brighter students would try to answer. But Joseph and Mary found Jesus: *seated in the midst of the doctors, listening to them and asking them questions. On hearing him, they marveled at his wisdom and his answers (Lk 2:46-47).*

Our Lady and St. Joseph too *on seeing him, wondered (Lk 2:48).* But their astonishment was due not to the wisdom of his answers, but because it was the first time Jesus had acted in this way. The most obedient of sons, he had remained in Jerusalem without informing them. He had not been lost; but had left them intentionally.

Son, why have you done so to us? Your father and I have been seeking you anxiously. And he answered them: 'Why have you been seeking me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?' But they did not understand what he said to them (Lk. 2:48-50).

Mary and Joseph, although not understanding Jesus' answer, respected God's plans with complete humility and docility. This is a lesson for all Christians, even if sometimes we fail to understand the workings of divine Providence.

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The Nazareth Years

After relating how the boy Jesus was found among the doctors of the law in the Temple, St. Luke continues: *He went down with them to Nazareth and was subject to them. And his Mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom, age, and grace before God and men (Lk 2:51-52).*

The Gospel summarizes in just two verses the next eighteen years of the life of Jesus and Mary—years when the Holy Family lived just like other families in Nazareth, but with a special love. They were years decisive for the Redemption, which the incarnate Word was already accomplishing through his obedience and daily work in ordinary life.

What had happened in the Temple was soon forgotten, but the words Jesus addressed to them there gave Joseph and Mary much to think about. They grasped with new clarity the meaning of Jesus' life on earth—completely given over to the mission the heavenly Father had entrusted to Him. And although this must have left a deep imprint on their souls, life in Nazareth continued as usual.

Each day brought its effort and toil. Mary's tasks were those of any homemaker: trips to the only fountain in town to fill her jug with fresh water; preparing dough for the oven to make a week's supply of bread; keeping the house clean and pleasant, quite likely with wildflowers to add color and fragrance; spinning bleached wool and softened flax to weave the necessary garments; making required purchases whenever a peddler came to town hawking his wares....the

thousand domestic tasks Mary carried out like other women in the village, but with immense love.

When the Child was still small, he would accompany his Mother on her daily rounds, at home or in the village. But as He became older, Jesus began to spend more time with Joseph. During the years we are considering here, Jesus would have begun to help Joseph in his abundant daily work. Joseph's workshop was like any other in those times in Palestine. His may have been the only such shop in the small town of Nazareth. The work of a craftsman (as the Gospel calls him) would have been quite varied: constructing a winepress or fashioning a simple cabinet, straightening a table or a roof, planing a door that didn't fit well.... Jesus the adolescent and then the young adult learned from Joseph how to work well, with care for details and a ready smile for customers, charging a just price and working out easy payments for anyone in financial straits.

One day Joseph died. Jesus had by now grown up and could take charge of the home and his Mother. Mary and Jesus must have wept in those final moments as the holy Patriarch passed away in peace, accompanied so closely by his two great loves. He had completed his mission faithfully.

With Joseph's death, Mother and Son would have drawn even closer together. How often they would have recalled Joseph, whether alone or with relatives, on long winter nights beside the glowing fire! They would dwell on many small memories—how he forgot about himself, and always served others—that summed up the life of Joseph the craftsman.

In the peace and tranquility of their home, Mary continued at her daily tasks: cooking, scrubbing pots and pans, grinding and kneading flour, sewing clothes for Jesus,

amiably greeting people who dropped by....but doing so with ever greater love, since she had at her side the Source of all Love. Yet nothing in her life seemed out of the ordinary to relatives and neighbors—not even the tactful gentleness that drew everyone to her and made it so pleasant to be with her, just as the dew freshens and brightens the fields, and yet is scarcely noticed.

And as Jesus carried out his daily work, our Lady *kept all these things in her heart* (Lk2:51), pondering and meditating on them in her uninterrupted dialogue with God.

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Wedding Feast at Cana

After spending many years in Nazareth, our Lord sets out to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God. All the evangelists report the first act in this new stage of Christ's life: his baptism by John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan. But only St. John the Evangelist mentions our Lady's presence at the beginning of Jesus' public life: *On the third day, a wedding feast took place in Cana of Galilee, and the Mother of Jesus was there. Jesus, too, and his disciples were invited to the wedding "* (Jn 2:1-2).

There Jesus, at the request of his Mother, carries out his first miracle. A Jewish wedding feast usually lasted seven days, and in a small town like Cana, it is likely that everyone took part in the celebration, in one way or another. Jesus came accompanied by his first disciples. With so many people attending, it is not surprising that the wine ran short. Ever attentive to the needs of those around her, Mary was the first to realize it and told her Son: *They have no wine* (Jn 2:3). After his reply (which is not easy to interpret), Jesus complied with his Mother's request and performed a great miracle by converting water into wine.

But what John wishes to tell us does not end there. Writing his Gospel at the end of a long life and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he would have meditated at length on Christ's miracles and teachings. Thus he brings out for us the deepest meaning of this first sign, as recent Popes have pointed out, in agreement with many modern Scripture scholars.

The Evangelist's chronological care in situating this event has a deep significance: According to the book of *Exodus*, the manifestation of God to Israel when establishing the Covenant took place three days after reaching Mount Sinai. Now, "the third day" since his return to Galilee in the company of his first disciples, Jesus is about to manifest his glory for the first time. Similarly, the full glorification of his Sacred Humanity will take place "on the third day" after his death, through the Resurrection.

Going beyond the historical fact of the wedding, John stresses that Mary's presence at the beginning and at the end of Jesus' public life corresponds to a divine plan. The name our Lord uses to address her in Cana ("woman," rather than "mother") seems to show his intention to form a family founded, not on the bonds of blood, but on faith. This is the same way God addressed Eve in Paradise, when promising that from her progeny would come the Redeemer (*Gen 3:15*). In Cana, Mary realizes that her maternal mission does not end on the natural plane: God is relying on her to be the spiritual Mother of his Son's disciples. Thanks to her intervention, the disciples' faith in the promised Messiah begins to grow. John himself states this at the end of his account: *And so, it was in Cana of Galilee that Jesus performed the first of the signs by which he manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him (Jn 2:11)*.

Most scholars say that this wedding feast is symbolic of the Word's union with mankind. As the prophets had announced: *I will seal with you an eternal alliance ... Nations that do not know you will run to you (Is 55:3, 5)*. The Fathers of the Church see in the water contained in the stone jars, *prepared for the Jewish purifications (Jn 2:6)*, a symbol of the Old Law which Jesus is bringing to

perfection through the New Law of the Spirit imprinted on hearts.

In the Old Testament, a New Covenant is promised for the messianic times, often with the image of a wedding feast, which will abound with every kind of good, especially wine. It is significant that, in John's account, wine is the main protagonist. It is mentioned five times, with the clear statement that the wine Jesus brings about by his power is better than the one that was beginning to run out (*Jn 2:10*). The quantity of water changed into wine (more than 130 gallons) is also remarkable. Such superabundance is typical of the messianic times.

Woman, what is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come (Jn 2:4). Whatever the exact meaning of these words (which would have also been reflected in his tone of voice, the expression on his face, etc.), our Lady continues to trust her Son. Mary leaves the matter in his hands and directs the servants to *do whatever he tells you (Jn2:5)*—her last recorded words in the Gospels.

That brief phrase recalls what the people of Israel told Moses when, on the Lord's behalf, he asked their consent to the Sinai Covenant: *We will do all that the Lord has spoken (Ex 19:8)*. Those men and women were to be repeatedly unfaithful to the covenant with God. In contrast, the servants in Cana obeyed promptly and completely: *Jesus said to them: 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them to the brim. Then he told them: 'Take them out now and bring them to the steward.' And they did (Jn 2:7-8)*.

Mary's trust inaugurates her Son's messianic mission. She precedes the disciples in faith, who come to believe in Jesus after the miracle occurs. Thus our Lady assists her Son in the first moment of the formation of Christ's new family.

The Evangelist seems to suggest this when he brings his account to a close: *After this he went down to Capharnaum with his Mother, his brethren, and his disciples, and they stayed there for some days (Jn 2:12)*. Everything is now ready for our Lord, by announcing the Good News through his words and deeds, to begin forming the new People of God, his Church.

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Beside the Cross of Jesus

Almost three years have gone by since Jesus' first miracle, in Cana of Galilee. The Gospel hardly mentions our Lady during that long interval. On some occasions, she may have been part of the group of women who accompanied Christ on his journeys (cf. *Lk* 8:1-3). Nevertheless, the evangelists mention his Mother's presence only once, when she came to see Jesus accompanied by other relatives. Unable to enter the house where Jesus was because of the large crowd, they announced their presence and asked to see him. Our Lord's response was eloquent: *Who is my mother and who are my brethren?* " And looking at those seated around him, he said: *Here are my mother and my brethren, for whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother* (*Mk* 3:33-35). This was the highest praise possible of our Lady, the person who best fulfilled the heavenly Father's will.

The silence of the Gospels leads us to assume (as Pope John Paul II said in his Marian catechesis) that our Lady ordinarily did not accompany her Son on his travels around Palestine. Mary followed Him from afar, even as she was spiritually united to Him at every moment, much closer than the disciples and the holy women. In any case, John makes clear that she was in Jerusalem during her Son's final Passover. Our Lady may have been in the Holy City on similar occasions, but the evangelist only now expressly mentions it, and in the context of the Redemptive Sacrifice: *Beside the Cross of Jesus were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary*

Magdalene (Jn 19:25). Right after this John records the words Christ spoke to his Mother and to him—words of immense significance.

Seeing our Lord's words here, at the supreme moment of the Redemption, as simply the concern of a son for the care of his mother he is leaving behind, would mean missing the essential point. Rather we find here one of the keys for understanding our Lady's role in the work of salvation. Already in Cana Jesus had made it clear that Mary's maternal mission in Nazareth, during the years of his hidden life, would be prolonged in the new family of his Church. Recent studies in Mariology stress (as the ordinary magisterium of the Church has also affirmed) that we have before us here a "revelation scene" typical of the fourth Gospel, the "Gospel of signs" *par excellence*. Jesus addresses his Mother as "woman," as at Cana of Galilee, and says with reference to the beloved disciple: *Woman, behold your son!* (Jn 19:26). Then looking at John, Christ says: *Behold your mother!* (Jn 19:27).

Neither Mary nor John is addressed by their name. Mary is the new Eve who, united to the new Adam and subordinate to Him, is called to incorporate her maternal mediation into the work of the redemption. And the evangelist is present there as the faithful disciple, representing all those who will come to believe in Christ until the end of time. Our Lord's words—words of God and therefore creative words like those at the beginning of the world—do what they signify. From that moment, Mary is made Mother of all who will come to the Church: *Mater Ecclesiae*, as Paul VI called her at the close of Vatican Council II. Her womb will be fruitful with a new motherhood, one that is spiritual but real. And it will be a painful one, because the prophecy of the old man Simeon is being fulfilled to the letter: *a sword will pierce through your own soul also* (Lk 2:35).

Moreover, in the disciple's heart the awareness arose that he was truly a child, a brother of Jesus and son of the same Mother. Thus as John adds: *from that moment, the disciple took her into his home (Jn 19:27)*. That is, he welcomed her into his interior life, as a true Mother, counting her among his most precious goods. From then until the moment of the Holy Virgin's Dormition (her "falling asleep in the Lord"), John would never be separated from her.

Only after giving the disciple to the Mother, and the Mother to the disciple, could Jesus say that everything is consummated, as St. John expressly tells us. After saying "I thirst," to fulfill the Scriptures (a thirst above all for souls), Jesus cries out in a loud voice: *consummatum est!*, everything is fulfilled. *And bowing his head, he gave up his spirit (Jn 19:30)*.

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Burial of Christ

The death of Jesus occurred about three in the afternoon, the hour when the lambs were sacrificed in the Temple for the Passover meal. The fourth Gospel emphasizes that symbolism right from its opening chapters, when John the Baptist, before a group of his disciples, points to Jesus with these words: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29)*. Mary remains standing with John and the holy women beneath the Cross. Unable to move, her eyes are still fixed on her Son.

With the setting of the sun, about six in the evening, the Sabbath would begin—that year a most solemn one, since it fell on the Jewish Passover. On such a great feast, the condemned should not be left hanging on the crosses, and so several officials approached Pilate to request *that their legs be broken and the bodies taken away (Jn 19-31)*. The Roman Procurator sent soldiers to perform that painful assignment. We can imagine Mary's apprehension on seeing soldiers arrive at Calvary, armed with hammers and lances. St. John describes the scene: *They broke the legs of the first and then of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus, seeing that he had already died, they did not break his legs, but one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance. And immediately blood and water flowed out (Jn 19:32-34)*.

The lance pierced the heart of Jesus, already dead, and also Mary's soul, in fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy: *a sword will pierce your soul (Lk 2:35)*. St. John, an eye-witness, saw in this event the fulfillment of other prophecies, especially the one that refers to the paschal lamb: *You shall not break even one of its bones (Jn 19:36; Ex 12:46)*. And

another Scripture passage says: *They shall look upon him whom they have pierced (Jn 19:37; Zach 12:10).*

With time pressing, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, God-fearing members of the Sanhedrin and secret disciples of Jesus, came before Pilate daring to ask him to hand the Lord's body over to them. Once he was assured that Jesus was dead, Pilate granted their petition. Then Joseph returned to the Cross accompanied by several servants bringing ladders so as to lower the body, along with wrappings and a large cloth. Nicodemus *also brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing a hundred pounds (Jn 19:39)*—an enormous amount, worthy of a king's burial. *They took the body of Jesus down and wrapped it in the cloth with the spices, according to the Jewish manner of burial (Jn 19:40).*

Christian piety has paused at this passage in the Gospel to contemplate with sorrowful recollection the figure of Mary with her dead Son in her arms. This is the celebrated scene of the *Pietà*, immortalized in art by innumerable painters and sculptors. Perhaps it was at that moment, while beholding the martyred body of Christ, after its preliminary cleansing, when our Lady and the women chanted their lamentations, as was habitual among the peoples of the Middle East in those days, and even now is frequently done in many places. The Gospel gives few details, but ancient documents help to supply them. In tones similar to the lamentations of St. Ephrem in the fourth century, for example, Mary would have given expression to her immense sorrow while at the same time totally accepting the divine will.

Finally, the body of Jesus was taken a few paces from Calvary to property owned by Joseph of Arimathea. *There was a garden with a new tomb that had not yet been occupied. As it was the Eve of the Passover of the Jews, and*

the tomb was close by, the body of Jesus was laid there (Jn 19:41-42). Joseph had a large stone rolled across the entrance to the tomb and departed (Mt 27:60). That great and solemn Sabbath was about to begin. The following day, in spite of the feast, an embassy from the high priests and Pharisees approached Pilate to request a guard of soldiers, and he consented. To make certain that the grave remained sealed the guard was posted there (Mt 27:66).

Faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Son of God, was seemingly extinguished from the face of the earth. But it shone brightly in the heart of his Mother, who had not forgotten her Son's promise: *I will rise again on the third day (Mt 27:63).*

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Christ's Resurrection and Ascension

At daybreak on the third day, with the Sabbath over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome set out for Jesus' tomb. Love impelled them to complete the burial rites for the body of the Lord, so hastily begun on Friday afternoon. As they walked, they asked one another: *Who will remove the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?* (Mk 16:3). For the stone sealing the tomb was a mill wheel that had taken several men to set in place.

It is striking that the Evangelists make no mention of the Blessed Virgin here. After stressing her presence at the foot of the Cross, the Gospel accounts don't refer to our Lady again until after the Ascension, when St. Luke tells us at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles that she was present in the Cenacle with the Apostles, the holy women who had followed our Lord from Galilee, and several of his relatives (cf. Acts 1:12-14).

This silence is very eloquent. Unlike everyone else, Mary firmly believed her Son's words when he foretold his resurrection from the dead on the third day. Thus, from earliest antiquity, Christians have liked to think that Mary spent the night of Saturday to Sunday morning in vigil, awaiting the moment when Jesus would fulfill his promise. We can easily speculate that Mary, with the help of John (who had not left her side since he had received her as mother at the foot of the Cross), had also tried to reunite the Master's disciples, in order to strengthen their faith and hope, especially those who had been cowards in those sorrowful moments.

While waiting for the new day to dawn—the *dies dominicus*, the Lord's day, as it soon came to be called—Mary was ever more deeply immersed in prayer. The faith and hope of the newborn Church was concentrated in her. Christian tradition has long taken it for granted that the first appearance of the risen Lord was to his Mother—not to help her to believe, but to reward her for her fidelity and to console her in her sorrow. Then, as the hours passed, the news spread from mouth to mouth—first among the disciples, who heard it from the women returning from the tomb, and then in ever wider circles.

But in Jerusalem, Christ's Crucifixion had failed to allay the animosity of the priests and the elders. The Apostles faced a serious accusation: that they had stolen and hidden their Master's body. Perhaps that is why the angels reminded the women (so that they might pass it on to the disciples) of what Jesus himself had told them before the Passion: that they should return to Galilee (cf. *Mk* 16:7).

That first Sunday saw frequent trips back and forth between the Cenacle and the empty tomb, ending with the appearance of Jesus to the Apostles in the Cenacle. A week later he would appear to them in the same place (cf. *Jn* 20:19 ff.). Then they would have started back to Galilee, accompanied by Mary, along the roads they had often traveled in the joyful company of Jesus.

Awaiting further meetings with the Master, the Apostles returned to their work as fishermen (cf. *Jn* 21:1 ff.), while our Lady, staying in the house in Capernaum where she had previously lived, continued to strengthen them all in faith and love.

Each encounter with the Lord (the Evangelists relate only some of them) increased the disciples' joy and optimism regarding the future. Then, as the moment for the definitive

departure drew near, Jesus met in Jerusalem with his closest followers to give them his last instructions and advice.

One afternoon, after their final meal together, they went to the Mount of Olives, with Jerusalem at their feet. There they had their last family gathering with the Master. Their hearts must have been sad, since they thought they would never see him again. But our Lord, knowing what they were thinking, assured them that he would stay with them in a new way.

He told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to await there the promise of the Father (cf. *Acts* 1:4). Then he ascended into heaven to share in God's lordship in his Sacred Humanity. As St. Luke recounts in detail: *He took them out as far as Bethany and lifting up his hands he blessed them. And as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and began to ascend into heaven. They adored him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy (Lk 24:50-52).* With them was the Mother of Jesus, who was also the Mother of each of them. And closely united to her, they awaited the coming of the promised Holy Spirit.

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The Coming of the Holy Spirit

After Jesus ascended to heaven, the witnesses of that marvelous event *returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away; and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James (Acts 1:12-14).*

They were fulfilling Jesus' command to wait in the Holy City for the sending of the promised Consoler. There they waited for ten days, united around Mary.

How humanly logical we find what Holy Scripture tells us! Upon losing the physical company of their Master, the closest of his followers gathered around his Mother, who reminded them so much of Jesus: in her features, in the tone of her voice, in her affectionate and maternal glance, in the refinement of her heart, and above all in the peace she spread around her. Along with the apostles and the holy women, we also find there our Lord's closest relatives, the same ones who earlier had doubted him, and now, after converting, gathered closely around the Virgin of Nazareth.

It is easy to imagine life in that Cenacle, which must have been quite large to hold so many people. Tradition doesn't tell us to whom that house belonged, although it seems likely that it was either the house of the mother of Mark, the future evangelist, whom the Sacred Text refers to further on (see *Acts 12:12*), or possibly a house that the family of John the Evangelist had in the Holy City. In any case, the united prayer of the disciples with Mary quickly produced a first result: the choice of Matthias to take the place of Judas Iscariot. Once the number of the twelve

apostles was complete again, they continued praying while awaiting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised them.

But they couldn't spend their whole time praying. They would have had to look after many other tasks, although, in the end, everything they did was really prayer, because their thoughts were continuously on Jesus and they had Mary with them. We can imagine their conversations—real family get-togethers—with our Lady. Now that they had seen the Risen Christ and contemplated his ascension to heaven, they wanted to know many details of their Master's life, including his infancy. And his Mother was there to evoke for them the memories that were always alive in her heart: the annunciation by Gabriel in those now distant years in Nazareth; the espousal with Joseph, whom many of them had never met; the birth in Bethlehem; the adoration of the shepherds and the Magi; the flight into Egypt; the years of hard work in the workshop at Nazareth.... How many topics Mary's words offered for the disciples' prayer! They saw with a new light all the events they had lived alongside the Master, during the three years spent accompanying him throughout the land of Palestine. Alongside Mary, the ever-faithful Virgin, their faith, hope and love were enkindled: the best preparation to receive the Paraclete.

And finally, on the day of Pentecost, *suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2-4).*

News of the marvelous event reached the multitude of people present in Jerusalem: *Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and*

Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia (Acts 2:9 ff). Peter, enkindled with the power of the Holy Spirit, addressed the crowds. Afterwards the apostles dispersed throughout Galilee, Samaria and to the furthest corners of the world, carrying everywhere the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Mary gave thanks to God for those first fruits of the apostolic preaching, and for the countless faithful who would come to the Church over the centuries. All found a place in her heart of a mother, which God had given her at the moment of the incarnation of the Word and which Christ had confirmed from the wood of the Cross, in the person of the beloved disciple.

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Dormition and Assumption

Mary's final years on earth—from Pentecost to the Assumption—are wrapped in obscurity. Scripture says nothing, and Tradition contains only faint and uncertain echoes. Her days would have been spent quietly and busily—like the unseen spring that gives the garden its fragrance, the orchard its fruitfulness. The Church's liturgy, making use of words from Scripture, describes Mary as the *enclosed garden and sealed fountain* (*Song* 4:12), the *well of living waters that flow down from Lebanon* (*ibid*, 15). Just as when Jesus was still on earth, she passed unnoticed, keeping watch over the Church's first steps.

One thing we know for certain is that Mary lived with St. John, for he had been entrusted to care for her as a son. And St. John, in the years immediately following Pentecost, lived in Jerusalem, where we see him constantly at the side of St. Peter. Just prior to the Council of Jerusalem, about the year 50 (cf. *Acts* 15:1-34), Paul refers to the beloved disciple as one of the *pillars of the Church* (*Gal* 2:9). If Mary was still at his side, she would have been about 70, as some ancient traditions suggest: the age Sacred Scripture sees as the mature fulfillment of human life (cf. *Ps* 89:10).

But Mary's place was in heaven, where her Son awaited her. And so, on a day that remains unknown to us, Jesus brought her into heavenly glory. When Pope Pius XII declared the dogma of the Assumption in 1950, he left open the question whether Mary died and rose again immediately, or whether she went directly to heaven without experiencing death. Today, as in the early Church,

most theologians think that Mary did in fact die, but (as with Christ) not on account of any sin (for she is the Immaculate One!) but in order to resemble Jesus more completely. And thus, in the sixth century, the Eastern churches began to celebrate the feast of Our Lady's Dormition, to try to express that her passage was more like falling asleep than dying. Mary left this earth, as some saints have said, in a transport of love.

The writings of the Fathers and sacred authors, especially beginning in the fourth and fifth centuries, pass on some details about Mary's Dormition and Assumption based on accounts dating back to the second century. According to these traditions, when Mary was on the point of leaving this world, all the Apostles (except St. James the Greater, who had undergone martyrdom, and St. Thomas, who was on his way back from India) gathered in Jerusalem to accompany her in her last moments. Then one quiet and bright afternoon they closed her eyes and placed her body in a tomb. A few days later, when Thomas arrived and insisted on seeing Mary's body, they found the tomb empty and heard celestial music.

Along with fragments of truth that these accounts may contain, what is absolutely certain is that the Virgin Mary, by a special privilege of Almighty God, did not experience corruption: her body, glorified by the Most Blessed Trinity, was united to her soul, and Mary was assumed into heaven, where she reigns, living and glorious, at the side of Jesus, to glorify God and intercede for us here below. Pius XII defined this truth as a dogma of faith.

In spite of Scripture's silence, a passage from the book of *Revelation* allows us to glimpse that glorious triumph of our Lady: *A great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars*(Rev 12:1). The Magisterium

sees in this scene not only a description of the Church's final victory, but also an affirmation of the victory of Mary (type and figure of the Church) over death. It is as though the book's author, the disciple who had cared for Mary until she went to heaven, wanted to leave us a discreet testimony to this historical and salvific event, which the Christian people, inspired by the Holy Spirit, accepted and venerated from the first centuries.

And we, inspired by the liturgy of the Vigil Mass for this feast, acclaim our Lady with these words: "Glorious things are said of thee, O Mary, who today art exalted above the choirs of angels: 'Blessed are you, O Mary, for along with Christ, you have attained eternal victory.'"

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Coronation and Queenship

The crowning of Mary as Queen of all creation is the culmination of all the privileges granted to our Lady. The Mother of God, assumed body and soul into heaven, is raised by the Most Holy Trinity above the choirs of angels and all the saints: *Greater than you, only God*, exclaim the Christian people.

A messianic psalm sings of the King's glory, and also of the glory of the Queen: *Thou art the fairest of the children of Adam; grace is poured out on thy lips, for God has blessed thee forever and ever...Thy throne, O God, is forever, without end; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy reign (Ps 44/45:3-7)*. Then the psalmist turns to the Queen: *Listen, daughter, and see, give ear, forget thy people and the house of thy father, and the King will give thee beauty; he is thy Lord, turn to him... She is brought to the King, the bejeweled daughter of the King, radiant with glory, in robes of gold, trimmed in rich colors. With her virginal court following in procession...in happiness and rejoicing she is brought into the palace of the King (Ibid, 11-16)*.

The liturgy applies this psalm to Christ and Mary in heavenly glory. This interpretation is based on passages in the Gospels that refer explicitly to our Lady. At the Annunciation, St. Gabriel reveals to Mary that her Son *will reign forever over the house of Jacob and his reign will have no end (Lk 1:33)*. Mary is to be mother of a son who, at the very instant of his conception as man, is King and Lord of all creation; and the mother who is to give birth to

him will share in his kingship. St. Elizabeth, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, proclaims in a loud voice: *Who am I that the Mother of my Lord should come to visit me?* (Lk 1:43). And St. John the Evangelist, in his vision of the Apocalypse, describes *a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars* (Rev 12:1). According to the Church's liturgy and tradition, this woman is Mary, who with Christ defeats the infernal dragon and is enthroned as Queen of the universe.

The Christian people have always attested to Mary's exalted glory as a sharer in Christ's royalty. Like him, it is hers by birth (as Mother of the King) and by right of conquest (as his faithful co-worker in the Redemption). Our Lord has placed in her hands the superabundant merits He gained by his death on the Cross, so that she might distribute them according to God's Will.

The Queenship of Mary is a consoling truth for all mankind, especially when we feel deserving of divine punishment as a just penalty for our sins. The Church invites us to have recourse to Mary, our Mother and our Queen, in all our necessities. The certainty that Mary is the Mother of God and Mother of all mankind is what grounds our filial trust in her powerful intercession, and encourages us to get up after our falls.

As this series on our Lady's life comes to an end, we invoke her with the words of an ancient prayer: "Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy; our life, our sweetness, and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping...." We place all our trust in Mary, because a mother always hears the supplications of her children. "Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mother of God," we tell her, "when you stand in the sight of the Lord, to speak well of us" (cf. *Jer 18:20*). Our Lady will always speak well of us before the Father, the

Son, and the Holy Spirit, and obtain from God all that we need—above all, the grace of final perseverance, which will open to us the gates of heaven: “Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

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