

VIGILS READINGS Fourth Week of Advent and Christmas Octave
December 24-30, 2017

MY-25
12.24.17

Sermon on the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary – by St Bernard of Clairvaux ¹

Behold , O Virgin, you have been told by the angel that you shall conceive and bear a Son; you have been told that this shall not be by man but by the working of the Holy Spirit. Behold the Angel now awaits your answer. We also, O Lady, await from your lips the sentence of mercy and compassion, we who are miserably groaning under the sentence of condemnation. O Virgin most loving, Adam, now exiled from Paradise with all his miserable offspring, implores this favor of you. For this does Abraham entreat you; for this David, for this all the other holy fathers, your own ancestors, who are now dwelling in the region of the shadow of death. See, the whole world, prostrate at your feet, awaits your answer. And not without cause. For on your word depend the consolation of the miserable, the redemption of the captives, the pardon of the condemned, the salvation of the children of Adam, of the entire human race. O Virgin, delay not to answer. Speak the word, O Lady, speak the word which all on earth, and all in limbo, and even all in paradise are waiting to hear. Christ Himself, the King and Lord of all, longs for your answer with a longing equal to the ardor with which He “has desired your beauty”, for it by means of your consent that He has decreed to save the world. Until now you have pleased Him by your silence, but now your speech shall give Him more pleasure. For behold He calls to you from heave, saying: “O fairest among women, let your voice sound in my ears”. Make haste, therefore, to answer the Angel, or rather to answer the Lord through the Angel. Say the word and receive the Word. Utter your human word and conceive the divine Word. Pronounce the transitory word and embrace the Word everlasting. Believe, consent, and receive into your womb the Word of the Father. Let your humility take courage, let your modesty be confident. O happy Virgin, open your heart to faith, open your lips to consent, open your bosom to your Creator.

And Mary said: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word”. Divine grace is always found in intimate oneness with humility, because “God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble”. The Virgin therefore replies with humility, in order that the seat of grace may be prepared in her. “Behold”, she says, “the handmaid of the Lord”. O how sublime is the humility here manifested, which does not know how to yield to honor or to be elated with glory. She is chosen to be the Mother of God and she calls herself His handmaid! As if she says: “Let the Word, I pray, become to me not as a spoken word which passes away, but a Word conceived and abiding; a Word enclosed in a body of flesh, not a word expressed by the sound of the voice. Let Him become to me not

¹ St Bernard’s Sermons for Festivals of Year – vol. 1 – The Carroll Press – Westminster, MD, 1950 – pg 124f

an audible word which sounds in the ear, but a visible Word that my eyes may see Him, a tangible Word that my hands may hold Him. And let Him not become for me a written and silent word, but a Word incarnate and living; that is to say, not a word inscribed upon dead parchment, but the Word of God in humans form impressed on the living page of my chaste bosom, impressed not by the agency of mortal hand, but by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Therefore let the Word of God condescend to be made flesh in me and for me, according to your word. According to your word, let him be made flesh for the whole world, but in a more particular way for me.

01SN0202

12/25.17

From a Letter of St Basil on the Incarnation ²

You have written that there are some among you who are doing away with the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as much as they are able, and rejecting the grace of the great mystery kept secret from eternity but manifested in His own time, when the Lord, after having gone through all things pertaining to the care of the human race, in addition to all else bestowed upon us His own sojourn among us. For He aided His own creature, first through the patriarchs, whose lives have been set forth as examples and rules for those desiring to follow in the footsteps of the saints and through a zeal like theirs to arrive at the perfection of good deeds. Then, He gave a law for our assistance, delivering it by angels through Moses; then Prophets, who proclaimed beforehand the salvation that was to be, judges, kings and just men, who performed mighty works with hidden hand. After all these, in the last days, He Himself was manifested in the flesh, >born of a woman, born under the Law, that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons=.

If, therefore, the sojourn of the Lord in the flesh did not take place, the Redeemer did not pay the price for us, and He did not by His own power destroy the dominion of death. For, if that which is subject to death were one thing, and that which was assumed by the Lord were another, then death would not have ceased performing its own works, nor would the sufferings of the God-bearing flesh have become our gain; He would not have destroyed sin in the flesh; we who had died in Adam would not have been made to live in Christ; that which had fallen asunder would not have been restored; that which was shattered would not have been repaired; that which had been estranged through the deceit of the serpent would not have been again made God=s own. For, all these things are done away with by those who say that the Lord made His sojourn with a heavenly body. And what was the need of the blessed Virgin, if the God-bearing flesh was not to be assumed from the substance of Adam? But who is so bold as now to revive once more through sophistic words and the testimony, as they pretend, of the Scriptures

²The Fathers of the Church - Letters of St Basil, vol. II, pg. 232 - New York - Fathers of the Church, Inc. - 1955

the teaching of Valentinus which was silenced long ago? This impiety of the Appearance@, in fact, is not something new, but it was begun long ago by the weak-minded Valentinus, who, taking a few detached phrases of the Apostle, constructed the impious fiction for himself, saying that He had taken on the nature of a slave@, and not the slave himself, and that the Lord had been made in the form@, but that humanity itself had not been assumed by Him.

It is evident that the Lord took on the natural feelings for a confirmation of the true Incarnation and not of one according to the appearance, but rejected as unworthy of the undefiled Godhead the feelings arising from vice which soil the purity of our souls. For this reason it is said that He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh@, not, indeed, in the likeness of flesh, as these men think, but in the likeness of sinful flesh. Accordingly He took our flesh with its natural feelings, but He did not sin@. Yet even as death in the flesh, which was handed down to us through Adam, was swallowed up by the Godhead, so also sin was utterly destroyed by the justice which is in Jesus Christ, so that in the resurrection we resume our flesh, which is neither liable to death nor subject to sin.

12SN2604

12/26/17

From a Lecture by St Edith Stein ¹

On the very day after Christmas the Church puts aside its white festal vestments to robe itself in the color of blood. Stephen the martyr, who was the first to follow the Lord in death, gathers round the Child in the manger, forming his retinue. What does it all mean? Where, now, is the rejoicing of the heavenly hosts. Where the silent blessedness of the holy night, where the peace upon earth? *Peace on earth to people of good will*. But all are not of good will.

The Son of the eternal Father had to come down from the glory of heaven because the mysterious power of evil had shrouded the earth in night. Darkness covered the earth and he became as a light shining in the darkness, but the darkness did not receive him. To those who did receive him, he brought light and peace: peace with the Father in heaven, peace with all who, like them, are children of the light and children of the Father in heaven, peace that lies deep in the heart; but not peace with the children of darkness. To them the Prince of Peace brings not peace but the sword. For them he is the stumbling-block which they run against and which breaks them. That is the grievous and grave truth which the poetic charm of the Child in the manger must not conceal from us. The mystery of the incarnation and the mystery of evil are closely connected. Against the light which has come down from heaven the night of sin appears all the more sombre and sinister.

The Child in the manger stretches out his small hands, and already his smile seems to say what later the lips of the man will say: *Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened*. Some answer his call. When the poor shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem saw the radiance of the sky and heard the angel's glad tidings, they said with simple trust: *Let us go to Bethlehem*, and set out upon the way. The kings from distant lands in the Orient followed the marvelous star with the same simple faith. The Child's hands poured the dew of his grace upon them all, and *they rejoice with great joy*.

Those hands give and at the same time they demand. You who possess wisdom, lay it aside and become simple like children; you kings, hand over your crowns and your treasures and do obeisance to the King of Kings; accept without hesitation the pains and sorrows and burdens his service entails. You children, who cannot give anything of your own free will: the Child's hands take away your tender life when it has scarcely even begun. It cannot be better used than as a sacrifice for the Lord of life.

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Follow me, say the hands of the Child, and later the lips of the man. The young Stephen heard this call. He followed the Master in his combat against the blindness of obstinate unbelief, and witnessed to him by his word and his blood. He walked in the Master's spirit, the spirit of love that combats sin but loves the sinner and which even in death defends the murderer before God.

Ways part before the Child in the manger. He is the King of Kings, the Lord of life and death. He says: *Follow me*, and whoever is not for him is against him. He says it also to us; he asks you to choose between light and darkness.

[1](#)A Word in Season – vol. IV – Augustinian Press – 1991 – p 254

12SN2703

12/27/17

From a Sermon by Blessed John Henry Newman [1](#)

Saint John the apostle and evangelist is chiefly and most familiarly known to us as *the disciple whom Jesus loved*. He was one of the three or four who always attended our blessed Lord, and had the privilege of the most intimate intercourse with him; and, more favored than Peter, James and Andrew, he was his bosom friend.

Much might be said of this remarkable circumstance. I say *remarkable*, because it might be supposed that the Son of God Most High, could not have loved one man more than

another; or again, if so, that he would not have had only one friend, but, as being all-holy, he would have loved all more or less, in proportion to their holiness. Yet we find our Savior had a private friend; and this shows us, first, how entirely he was a man, as much as any of us, in his wants and feelings; and next, that there is nothing contrary to the spirit of the gospel, nothing inconsistent with the fullness of Christian love, in having our affections directed in a special way towards certain objects. Towards those whom the circumstances of our past life, or some peculiarities of character, have endeared to us.

There have been those before now, who have supposed Christian love was so diffusive as not to admit of concentration upon individuals; so that we ought to love everyone equally. Now I shall here maintain, in opposition to such notions of Christian love, and with our Savior's pattern before me, that the best preparation for loving the world at large, and loving it duly and wisely, is to cultivate an intimate friendship and affection towards those who are immediately about us. The real love of humans *must* depend on practice, and therefore must begin by exercising itself on our friends around us; otherwise it will have no existence. By trying to love our relations and friends, by submitting to their wishes, though contrary to our own, by bearing with their infirmities, by overcoming their occasional waywardness by kindness, by dwelling on their excellences, and trying to copy them, thus it is that we form in our hearts that root of charity, which, though small at first, may, like the mustard seed, at last even overshadow the earth.

We know that Saint John is celebrated for his declarations about Christian love. *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God. If we love one another, God dwells in us, and his love is perfected in us. God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him.* Now, did he begin with some vast effort at loving on a large scale? No, he had the unspeakable privilege of being the friend of Christ. Thus he was taught to love others; first his affection was concentrated, then it was expanded. Next he had the solemn and comfortable charge of tending our Lord's mother, the Blessed Virgin, after his departure. Do we not discern here the secret sources of his special love of the brethren? Could he who first was favored with his Savior's affection, then trusted with a son's office towards his mother, could he be other than a memorial and pattern (as far as mortals can be). Of love, deep. Contemplative, fervent, unruffled, unbounded?

And now I have suggested to you a subject of thought for today's festival – and surely a very practical subject, when we consider how large a portion of our duties lies at home. Should God call upon us to preach to the world, surely we must obey his call; but at present, let us do what lies before us, *Little children, let us love one another.*

12SN2802

12/28/17

A Reading from GOD SPEAKS, Religious Poetry by Charles Peguy.³

No one could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. Apoc. XIV,3

Who were redeemed from the earth. So many others died in my Son's name, In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti, So many died to preserve the honor Of my Son's name; and they Who are alone to bear that name on their foreheads And alone can sing that new song, Are assuredly the only ones on earth To whom my Son's name was totally unknown. Such is my decree. That name for which they died, they did not know, They never knew it on earth. That is what I like, says God. Now, perhaps, they know it. For ever and ever, it can be read On one hundred and forty-four thousand foreheads. On none other. On not one more. But when they were alive and on earth, One can say that they never knew what people were talking about, Nor even that people were talking, nor that one could talk, (about something). That is what pleases me, says God. Now, they were crying, and laughing, and sucking, and screaming, and sleeping. It was their great, it was their most serious occupation. And a day came When, A day (they did not know the name of Herod any more than that of Jesus) (and they did not know the name of Jesus any more than that of Herod. I shall venture to say That they were equally indifferent to both those names.) Now both those men, Jesus, Herod, Herod, Jesus, Antagonists, were simply going to obtain for them The glory of my paradise, The kingdom of heaven and eternal glory. A day came When a horde of soldier brutes, attending to their business (But exceeding a little its limits, all the same),

3 God Speaks, Religious Poetry Charles Peguy. Pantheon 1945. "The Holy Innocents" p.42

An onrush of brutes went by, gendarmes of a kind, ogres as
 in fairy tales, bogey men for children,
 Carrying sabres that were like big cutlasses,
 And they were Herod's soldiers.
 An onrush, a tumult. An uproar, arms with sleeves rolled up,
 an outcry.
 Shrieks. Teeth. Glistening looks.
 Women fleeing, women biting,
 Just as they always do when they are not the strongest;
 And there was nothing in the blood and the milk
 But a great stewing of dead bodies,
 A cemetery of babes and of young Jewish women.
 You know, says God, what we have done with them.
 Those eyes that had hardly opened to the light of the carnal sun,
 Forever and ever were shut to the light of the carnal sun;
 Those eyes that had hardly opened to the light of the earthly sun,
 Forever and ever were shut to the light of the carnal sun;
 Those eyes that had hardly opened to the light of the temporal sun
 Forever and ever were closed to the light of the temporal sun;
 Those gazes that had hardly ascended towards the day and the sun of time
 Forever and ever were closed to those transient,
 To those perishable lights.
 Those voices, those lips that had never sung the praises of God on earth,
 That had never opened but to ask to suck (But so does it suit
 me, says God),
 Are thus the only ones, are today the only ones,
 Are also the only ones that can sing that new song.
Who were redeemed from the earth. You see what we have done with them,
 says God.
Let the Innocents' hands be filled. Here is a case in point.
 These Innocents had simply picked up in the scuffle
 The kingdom of God and eternal life...
 As in a battle, after the battle
 The prowlers, the robbers come and rifle the wounded and the
 dead and the dying to take away and steal all that is worthwhile.
 All that is worth something, novel prowlers, novel thieves,
 those innocents
 In that battle, after that battle, rifled themselves
 And in the clangor of arms, in the tumult and among the shrieks,
 In the maddening galloping, in the frenzied pursuit, among
 the women felled to the ground, they snatches up all that counts,
 They stole all that was worth something, for they plundered
 Like those who rob corpses and they robbed themselves, and
 what they snatched up in the scuffle was no less

Than the kingdom of heaven and eternal life. *These are redeemed from among men.*
They alone,
Who alone perhaps on earth not only had never sung the praises of God,
But had never pronounced even my name nor my son's name,
They too, only they do not have at the corners of their mouths
that ineffaceable line,
That line of misfortune and ingratitude
And of a bitterness that can never be satiated...

TM-CHR07
12.29.17

From The Hymns on the Nativity, by St.Ephrem the Syrian.⁴

Praise to you, fair Child of the Virgin!
Joseph caressed the Son
as a babe. He served Him
as God. He rejoiced in Him
as in a blessing, and he was attentive to Him
as to the Just One - a great paradox!
"Who has given me the Son of the Most High
to be a son to me? I was jealous of Your mother
and wanted to divorce her. I did not know
that in her womb was a great treasure
that would suddenly enrich my poverty.
David the king arose from my race
and put on a crown. Great ignominy
have I attained, for instead of a king
I am a carpenter. A crown has found me
for in my bosom is the Lord of crowns."
With rival tones Mary was aglow.
She, too, sang: "Who has granted
to the barren one to conceive and give birth
to the One Who is also many, to the small Who is also great,
Who is fully present in me yet fully present in the universe.

⁴Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns Ephrem the Syrian, tr.Kathleen E.McVey, Paulist Press CWS. 1989. Hymn 5 p.108-9.

"The day when Gabriel entered
my poor presence, he made me immediately
a free woman and a servant; for I am servant
of your divinity, but I am also mother
of Your humanity, my Lord and my son.
Suddenly a handmaiden has become daughter of the King
by You, Son of the King. Behold, the lowly one is
in the House of David because of You!
O son of David, behold, the daughter of the earth
has reached heaven by the Heavenly One.
Indeed, how much I am amazed that an aged Babe
is set before me - One who lifts His gaze
entirely to heaven without ceasing.
The murmuring of His mouth - how it seems to me
as if His silence were speaking with God!
Indeed, who has seen a Babe who gazes
entirely everywhere? He gazes
as the Director of all creation
above and below. He looks as
the Commander of the universe.
How shall I open the fount of milk
for You, the Fount? How shall I give
sustenance to You, the All-sustaining,
from Your own table? How shall I approach
with swaddling clothes the One arrayed in streams of Light?

TM-CHR01
12/30/ 2017

THE NATIVITY KERYGMA from a book by Thomas Merton⁵

In its prayers, the Church plunges us into the Light of God shining in the darkness of the world, in order that we may be illuminated and transformed by the presence of the newborn Savior, and thus that he may be born and truly live in us by making all our thoughts and actions light in himself. What joy, then, that he who dwells eternally in the

⁵SEASONS OF CELEBRATION by Thomas Merton (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, NY 1965) pp. 108-08.

inaccessible light and peace of the Father has left the throne of his glory and descended to be one of us! Or rather, without leaving the bosom of the Father, veiling the too brilliant light of his glory in the cloud of human nature, he who is enthroned above the cherubim takes up his abode among us in a poor manger. This Child who the shepherds, dazzled by the brilliance of the angelic host, can scarcely see in the darkness of the cave lit by Joseph's lantern, this Child is (by his divinity) the Ancient of Days, the Creator and Judge of Heaven and earth, of whom the prophet Daniel wrote: "I beheld till thrones were placed and the Ancient of Days sat, his garment was as white as snow, and the hair of his head like clean wool; his throne like flames of fire: the wheels of it like a burning fire. A swift stream of fire issued forth before him: thousands of thousands ministered to him and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before him." This, is Daniel's vision of the divinity of the Word Who, in his human nature, lies here helpless in the dark. But the Son of Man, who is here born, is himself the Word, consubstantial with the Father. To this only-begotten Son, who is equal to the Father in all things as God, but less than the Father in so far as he is human, all power is given by the Father. So, Daniel says again: "I beheld therefore in the vision of the night, and lo one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and he came even to the Ancient of Days and they presented him before him, and he gave him power and glory and a kingdom, and all peoples, tribes and tongues shall serve him, his power is an everlasting power that shall not be taken away and his kingdom that shall not be destroyed." This, then is the King promised from the beginning of the world and of whose Kingdom there shall be no end.

Do not be afraid of him. God has emptied himself and come to us as a child, in order that we who have not been saved by fear, but only destroyed by it, may now take heart and be saved by confidence. In "Emptying himself" and taking the form of a servant the Lord laid aside his majesty and his divine power, in order to dwell among us in goodness and mercy.