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THE THREE GREATEST PRAYERS

*Commentaries on the Our Father, the
Hail Mary and the Apostles' Creed*

by
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EXPOSITIO ORATIONIS DOMINICAE

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COMMENTARY ON THE ANGELIC SALUTATION,
NAMELY, THE HAIL MARY!¹

HAIL MARY, *full of grace, the Lord is with thee.* This salutation is divided into three parts. (a) The first contains the words of the angel: *Hail full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women.* (b) The second part is composed of the words of Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist: *Blessed is the fruit of thy womb.* (c) The third part was added by the Church, namely, *Mary*: for the angel did not say, *Hail Mary*, but *Hail full of grace*; which name, according to its interpretation, is in keeping with the angel's words, as will be made plain.

(a) With regard to the first part, we must observe that of old it was no mean occurrence that angels appeared to men, or that men paid reverence to them: such thing being recorded as deserving of great praise. Hence it is mentioned in praise of Abraham that he gave hospitality to angels and paid them reverence. But it had never been heard that an angel should show reverence to a human being until one of them greeted reverently the Blessed Virgin, saying: *Hail*. That of old reverence was not shown by angels to men, but by men to angels, was because an angel was greater than a man, in three respects. Firstly, in point of dignity, in as much as an angel is of a spiritual nature: *Who maketh his angels spirits* (Ps. ciii, 4), whereas man is of a corruptible nature: for which reason Abraham said (Gen. xviii, 27): *I will speak to my Lord, whereas I am dust and ashes.* Hence it was not fitting that a spiritual and incorruptible creature should show reverence towards a corruptible

¹ At the time of St. Thomas the 'Hail Mary' consisted only of what is known as the first part, ending with the words, *The fruit of thy womb*. The addition of the Holy Name probably began about the time of St. Thomas. The second half was definitely added during the sixteenth century. Cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. *Hail Mary*.

THE HAIL MARY!

one, namely, man.—Secondly, in point of his familiar association with God, being a member of God's household and standing by His throne: *Thousands of thousands ministered to him, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before him* (Dan. vii, 10); whereas man is like a stranger and far away from God on account of sin: *I have wandered afar off* (Ps. liv, 8). Wherefore it is fitting that man should revere an angel who is intimate and familiar with the King.—Thirdly, the angel is pre-eminent by reason of his fulness of the splendour of divine grace: in as much as he partakes of the divine light in the greatest plenitude: *Is there any number of his armies? and upon whom doth not his light arise?* (Job xxv, 3). For this reason angels always appear surrounded by light. On the other hand, although men partake somewhat of this same light of grace, their share is but small and not without some darkness. Hence it was not fitting that an angel should pay respect to a man until one should be found in human nature who would surpass the angels in these three ways; and such was the Blessed Virgin. Wherefore in order to show that she excelled him, the Angel was fain to show reverence to her by saying: *Hail*.

Accordingly the Blessed Virgin surpassed the angels in these three points. Firstly, in the fulness of grace, which is greater in her than in any angel: and to indicate this the Angel paid reverence to her by saying: *Full of grace*: as if to say: I bow to thee because thou dost surpass me in fulness of grace.

The Blessed Virgin is said to be full of grace¹ in three respects. Firstly, as regards her soul wherein there dwelt all the plenitude of grace. For God's grace is given for two purposes, namely, the performance of good deeds and the avoidance of evil. As regards both, the Blessed Virgin received grace in the most perfect degree: in as much as after Christ she was free from sin more than any other saint. For sin is either original—and from this she was cleansed in the womb—or mortal, or venial, from which she was free. Thus it is said (Cant. iv, 7): *Thou art all fair, O my love: and there is not a spot in thee*: and Augustine says (*De Nat. et Grat.*, xxxvi): *Except the holy Virgin Mary, if all*

¹ *Sum. Th.*, III, Q. xxvii, art. 5.

the saints both men and women while living here below had been asked whether they were without sin, all would have cried aloud with one voice: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'—except, I repeat, this holy Virgin, about whom, for our Lord's honour, I wish to exclude all mention whatsoever in the matter of sin. For we know that an abundance of grace was given her that she might be in every way the conqueror of sin, seeing that she conceived and brought forth Him who most certainly was guilty of no sin. But Christ surpassed the Blessed Virgin in that He was conceived and born without original sin: whereas the Blessed Virgin was conceived but not born in original sin.¹ Moreover, she practised the works of all the virtues, while other saints were conspicuous in certain particular virtues, one for humility, another for chastity, another for mercy; for which reason each one is an example to us of some special virtue—thus, for instance, the Blessed Nicholas is an example of mercy—and so on. But the Blessed Virgin is an example of all virtues: thus thou findest in her a model of humility: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord* (Luke i, 38), and further on (verse 48): *He hath regarded the humility of his handmaid: of chastity: Because I know not man* (ibid., 34): and of all other virtues as can easily be shown. Therefore, the Blessed Virgin was full of grace both in performing good works and in avoiding evil deeds.—Secondly, she was full of grace as regards the overflow of grace from the soul into the flesh or body. For while it is a great thing in the saints to be so endowed with grace that their souls are holy, the soul of the Blessed Virgin was so full of grace that it overflowed into her flesh thus fitting it for the conception of God's Son therefrom.² Thus Hugh of St. Victor says: *The Holy Ghost had so kindled in her heart the fire of divine love that it worked wonders in her flesh, yea, even so that she gave birth to God made man.—For the Holy One that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God* (Luke i, 35).—Thirdly, she was so full of grace that it overflows on to all mankind. It is, indeed, a great thing that any one saint has so much grace that it conduces to the salvation of many; but most wondrous is it to have so much as to suffice for the salvation of all mankind: and thus

¹ See Editor's note at the end of the Commentary.

² *Sum. Th.*, III, Q. xxxi, arts. 4, 5.

is it in Christ and in the Blessed Virgin. Thus in every danger thou canst find a refuge in this same glorious Virgin: *A thousand bucklers* (i.e. protections from peril) *hang therefrom* (Cant. iv, 4).—Again, thou mayest obtain her assistance in every virtuous deed: In me is all hope of life and of virtue (Eccles. xxiv, 25). She is, therefore, full of grace, surpassing the angels in that plenitude: for which reason she is rightly called 'Mary,' which signifies 'enlightened'—in herself: *The Lord will fill thy soul with brightness* (Isa. lviii, 11)—and enlightening others throughout the world below: wherefore she is compared to the sun and to the moon.

(b) She also surpasses the angels in her close association with God, and to indicate this the Angel said: *The Lord is with thee*, as if to say, 'I bow to thee because thou art more familiar with God than I am, seeing that *the Lord is with thee*'—the Lord, quoth he, i.e. the Father whose Son is also thy Son, which cannot be said of any angel or of any creature whatever: *For the Holy One who shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God* (Luke i, 35).—The Lord God the Son was in her womb: *Rejoice and praise, O thou dwelling of Zion, for great is he that is in the midst of thee, the Holy One of Israel* (Isa. xii, 6). Wherefore the Lord is with the Blessed Virgin otherwise than with an angel: with her He is as her Son, with the angel as his Lord.—The Lord God the Holy Ghost was with her as in a temple: thus we say¹: *Temple of the Lord, sanctuary of the Holy Ghost*, because she conceived of the Holy Ghost.² *The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee* (Luke i, 35). Wherefore the Blessed Virgin is more intimately associated with God than an angel is, in as much as with her are the Lord the Father, the Lord the Son, and the Lord the Holy Ghost; in a word, the whole Trinity: for which reason the words of the chant: *Throne wherein the three Divine Persons recline.*³ Hence no greater praise could be addressed to her than that which is contained in the words: *The Lord is with thee*: and she well deserved to be thus revered by the Angel, in that being the Mother of our Lord she is our Lady. Consequently, she is fittingly named 'Mary,' which in the Syrian tongue signifies 'Lady.'

¹ Antiphon, *Beata Dei Genitrix* . . . from Little Office of our Lady.

² *Sum. Th.*, III, Q. xxxii.

³ *Totius Trinitatis nobile Triclinium.*

apocrypha

(c) Thirdly, she excels the angels in purity, because not only was she pure in herself, but obtains purity for others. In fact, she was most pure, being most immune both from sin—for she was free from both mortal and venial sin—and from punishment. Because a triple curse befell man on account of sin. The first fell on woman, namely, that she would conceive in corruption, bear with weariness, and bring forth in pain.¹ But the Blessed Virgin was immune from these, since she conceived without corruption, bore with ease, and with joy gave birth to our Saviour: *It shall bud forth and blossom and shall rejoice and praise* (Isa. xxxv, 2).—The second curse was pronounced on the man, namely, that he should *eat his bread in the sweat of his brow*. The Blessed Virgin was free from this, since as the Apostle says (1 Cor. vii, 34), a virgin is free from care for the things of this world and gives her mind to God alone.—The third curse fell upon both man and woman, to wit, that they would return to dust. From this also was the Blessed Virgin exempt, seeing that she was taken up bodily into Heaven: for we believe that after her death she was raised up and carried into Heaven: *Arise, O Lord, into thy rest: thou and the ark which thou didst sanctify* (Ps. cxxxii, 8). Accordingly she was free from every curse, and, therefore, *blessed among women*; in as much as she alone lifted the curse, brought us a blessing, and opened the gates of Heaven. Thus is the name 'Mary' befitting to her, for it signifies 'Star of the sea': since just as the star of the sea guides the sailor to port, so are Christ's followers guided by Mary to heavenly glory.

Blessed is the fruit of thy womb. The sinner at times seeks but finds not, whereas the righteous seeks and finds: *The wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just* (Prov. xvi, 22). Thus did Eve seek the fruit, but found not therein all that she coveted: whereas the Blessed Virgin in her fruit found all that Eve had desired. Thus in her fruit Eve sought three things. First, that which the devil falsely promised, namely, that they would be like gods, knowing good and evil: *Ye shall be, quoth the liar, as gods* (Gen. iii, 5). Thus he lied, for *he is a liar, and the father thereof*. For through eating the fruit, Eve did not become

¹ Sum. Th., II-II, Q. clxiv, art. 2.

like God, but unlike: in as much as by sinning she turned away from God her salvation, and was expelled from paradise. On the other hand the Blessed Virgin found this—and so also do all followers of Christ—in the fruit of her womb: since through Christ we are united and likened to God: *When he shall appear, we shall be like unto him, for we shall see him as he is* (1 John iii, 2).—Secondly, Eve in her fruit sought pleasure, in as much as it was *good to eat*; yet she found it not for at once she perceived that she was naked, and tasted sorrow. Whereas in the Fruit of the Blessed Virgin we find sweetness and salvation: *He that eateth my flesh . . . hath eternal life* (John vi, 55).—Thirdly, Eve's fruit was *fair to the eyes*; yet fairer far is the Virgin's Fruit: *on whom the angels long to gaze.—Thou art fairer than the sons of men* (Ps. xlii, 3)—and this is because He is the *brightness of the Father's glory*. Accordingly Eve could not find in her fruit that which no sinner can find in his sin: and therefore let us seek in the Virgin's Fruit that which we desire to have.

Moreover, this fruit is blessed by God, because God so filled Him with all grace that it overflows upon us who bow to Him in adoration: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing on high in Christ* (Eph. i, 3). He is blessed by the angels: *Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever* (Apoc. vii, 12); and by men: *Let every tongue confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father* (Phil. ii, 11). *Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord* (Ps. cxvii, 26). Thus then is the Virgin blessed; but still more blessed is her Fruit.