

New Brighton, Saturday 10th December 2022

Preparation to Christmas with St Francis de Sales

“Holy Church usually prepares us for great solemnities with vigils to help us appreciate more the great benefits we have received from God in the events celebrated.”¹

The purpose of this Advent retreat we would like to offer you today is to help us to come deeper into the Mystery of Christmas, the Mystery of the Incarnation of Our Lord, following the teaching of St Francis de Sales, our Patron Saint, and mainly through his homilies.

Although we still must wait two weeks before the Feast of the Nativity, it seems that the Vigil of Christmas has already started all along this Advent Season. As per the very ancient tradition of the Church, taken itself from the Old Testament, every major feast day of the Liturgical Calendar was preceded with a Vigil, as a day of penance and meditation about the mystery the Church wanted us to contemplate. Some of these vigil days are still kept in our liturgical calendar.

For the most important feasts of the year, commemorating the days when the Mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption were accomplished, it is not only a day, but several weeks that Our Holy Mother the Church offers us as a gift to be well prepared to these days of Joy.

Advent is a retreat from the world, inviting us to a silent meditation over the empty crib. Jesus came in the middle of the night, unnoticed, silently, hidden in poverty. The only way to make ours this wonderful mystery is throughout a meditation, a contemplation of this Nativity Scene.

Jesus came upon Earth in the silence of a grotto by Bethlehem; He wants to be introduced in the silence of our hearts. The silence of our hearts begins with the silence around us, and with us, and in us.

“Silence of the lips would be of small use unless silence of the heart were joined to it (...) We might live in a Carthusian monastery and not be recollected, if we allowed our imagination to wander over an immense field of memories and insignificant things, if we dreamt of these futilities and opened our mind to vain thoughts. It is distressing to see how lightly we often squander our thoughts. In God’s sight, a thought is worth more than all the material universe; heaven may be gained, it may be lost by a thought... Let us then watch over ourselves; let us guard our imagination and our mind, which we have consecrated to God, from all tendency to run after deceptive mirages and unwholesome or useless thoughts: as soon as they appear, let us dash them as St. Benedict wishes, against the rock which is Christ”²

We just heard the great abbot and spiritual author, Dom Columba Marmion, about the strong need and desire our soul have for an exterior and interior silence. This is also wanted by God, who can only speak to us in the silence we offer Him. Our soul desires, more than anything

¹ *Sermon for Christmas Eve, 24th December 1613*

² Dom Marmion, *Christ Ideal of the Monk*, chp XV, Monastic prayer, 7th conference

else to be able to communicate directly with God. This is because of the intimate wish God planted as a small seed in the soil of our heart, which made it capable of God, able to know Him as far as our small brain can, able to entertain a proper dialogue between the Creator and a creature.

“Was it not in interior recollection that the Blessed Virgin lived? The Gospel writes of her that she kept the words of her Divine Son in her heart, so that she might meditate upon them: *Maria conservabat omnia verba haec conferens in corde suo*³. The Blessed Virgin did not speak many words: filled with grace and light from on high, inundated with the gifts of the Spirit, she remained, silent, in the adoration of her Son; she lived on the contemplation of the ineffable mystery wrought in her and through her; and from the sanctuary of her immaculate heart a hymn of praise and thanksgiving rose up unceasingly to God. Our monasteries are like other Nazareths where, in virginal souls, divine mysteries should likewise be wrought. Let us then live in recollection and try to remain closely united to our Lord.”⁴

When this needed recollection will be at least started, we will be able to start our initiation of the contemplation of the mysteries of our Faith. In the darkness of the Faith, we will try to approach the unknown, the inapprehensible, which is attracting our attention more than anything else.

St Francis de Sales uses the following parable to describe this attraction:

“Christians have been more enlightened and have had the honour of knowing of the Incarnation, that man is God and God is man, although even they are incapable of completely penetrating its mystery. For this is a mystery hidden in the obscurity of night's darkness. Of course the mystery is not really dark at all, for God is only light⁵. Just as our unaided eyes cannot look directly into the sun's brilliant light without our having to close them immediately, being momentarily blinded, so, in a similar way, our understanding is blinded and darkened by the brilliant light and splendour of the mystery of the Incarnation. Our understanding, the eye of our soul, cannot consider this mystery for any length of time without becoming clouded, humbly confessing that it cannot penetrate it deeply enough to understand how God became incarnate in the virginal womb of the most holy Virgin and how He became one like us to make us like God.”⁶

Although we are blinded with the Light of the Truth, we still desire to contemplate it. When we look at the sun, following St Francis de Sales' parable, we have to divert our glance, because our vision might be affected, deteriorated by starring at it for too much time. At the very difference of the sun, which could burn the eyes of our body, the contemplation of the Mystery of the Incarnation will never hurt the eyes of our soul. We will never find anything boring in the sight of the Infant Jesus, “Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men,

³ Luke, II, 19

⁴ Dom Marmion, *Christ Ideal of the Monk*, chp XV, Monastic prayer, 7th conference

⁵ John, I, 5,9; 1 Jn., I, 5

⁶ *Sermon for Christmas Eve*, 24th December 1613

and in habit found as a man. He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.”⁷

Following the example of Our Divine Lord, especially throughout the celebration of the Mystery of the Incarnation at Christmas, we must ask and beg this beautiful virtue Our Lady practiced so well all along her life: Humility. “To do this better let us first humble our understanding, realizing that we are totally incapable of exhausting the great depth of this uniquely Christian mystery,”⁸ continues St Francis de Sales in his homily to the Sisters of the Visitation, on the 24th December 1613.

If the necessary silence we began our meditation with, is fully practiced, it will be the excellent prelude for the practice of the virtue of Humility. Being in silence, better also in words, than just in our hearts, we will avoid pointless talking, or any possible useless chatting or gossip. When we remain silent, the Lord is able to come to us, to talk to us, to open to us the treasure of his divine mystery, His Divine Heart.

The virtue of Humility will be the fruit of our interior and exterior spirit of recollection, of our silence:

“We may ask ourselves why it is that the monk who has scaled the degrees of humility and has attained solid virtue is to keep the attitude of a culprit, why it is that St. Benedict, who yet writes nothing without reflection, places ever – semper’– upon this monk’s lips and in his heart the words of the publican : “ My God, I am not worthy to raise mine eyes to Heaven ” ? It is because in prayer God has given this humble soul a light upon the greatness of His perfections; in this divine light, the soul has beheld its own nothingness, and its least faults appear as intolerable stains. A ray from on high has touched the monk, and whether he be with his brethren, or alone, in prayer, in his cell, in the garden, he knows that the eyes of the Sovereign Master penetrate into the innermost recesses of his soul ; he lives in adoration, and his whole exterior bears witness to this adoration.”⁹

In the intimacy we created, in this silence, the Lord will reveal himself to us. Following the Canticle of Our Lady, we would be able to sing alongside Her: “Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid, (...) He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble.”¹⁰

“Thus we are celebrating the Saviour's birth on earth. But before speaking of that birth let us say something of the Word's divine and eternal birth. The Father eternally begets His Son, who is like Him and co-eternal with Him. He had no beginning, being in all things equal to His Father. Yet we speak of the Son being born for us from the Father's bosom, from His substance, as we speak of the rays coming forth from the bosom of the sun, even though the sun and its rays are but one and the same substance. We are forced to speak thus, recognizing the inadequacy of our words. Were we angels we would be able to speak of God in a far more adequate and excellent way. Alas, we are only a little dust, children who really do not know what we are

⁷ Philip., II, 6-8

⁸ *Sermon for Christmas Eve*, 24th December 1613

⁹ Dom Marmion, *Christ Ideal of the Monk*, chp XI, Humility, 6th conference

¹⁰ Luke, 1, 48, 52

talking about. The Son then, begotten of the Father, proceeds from the Father without occupying any other place. He is born in Heaven of His Father, without a mother. As sole origin of the Most Blessed Trinity the Father remains the Virgin of virgins. On earth the Son is born of His Mother, Our Lady, without a father.”¹¹

All our meditations about the mystery of faith are introducing us more and more into the intimate life of God, something we’re looking after without being able to understand it, but

“this knowledge acquired by faith, in prayer, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is truly the fountain of living water springing up unto everlasting life : *Fons aquae salientis in vitam aeternam*.¹² For—and here is a great truth upon which more light will be thrown in the course of these conferences—the Eternal Father has placed in Christ Jesus, all the graces, all the gifts of sanctification that He destines for souls. We can only go to the Father by Christ : *Nemo venit ad Patrem, nisi per me*¹³; without Christ, we have nothing, but with Him we have everything, we “can do all things¹⁴”; « for in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead corporeally.¹⁵ Whosoever understands the mystery of Christ, and lives by it, has found the pearl of great price of which the Gospel speaks;¹⁶ the treasure that alone is worth all other treasures: for with it eternal life is gained.

The more we know Christ, the more we enter deeply into the mysteries of His Person and of His life, the more we study, in prayer, the circumstances and details that Revelation has given to us,—the more also will our piety be true and our holiness real.”¹⁷

To help us to come closer to that mystery of the Incarnation, and as a better introduction to the Mysteries of the Redemption, and then the Gift of the Most Blessed Sacrament, St Francis de Sales, used quite often the explanation upon the Manna, this heavenly food God provided for 40 years to His chosen people, while they were wandering in the desert, expecting the divine permission to enter Holy Land:

“The manna had three kinds of tastes which were proper and particular to it, besides having every taste¹⁸ that one could desire it to have. If the Israelites wanted to eat bread, the manna had the taste of bread; if they wanted to eat partridge and other such things, the manna had that taste. The majority of the Fathers doubt whether both bad good Israelites enjoyed this favour. Be that as it may, the manna had the particular taste or flavor of flour, honey and oil.¹⁹ These symbolize the three substances which are found in the most blessed Infant, whom we shall see tomorrow lying in the manger. Just as these three tastes were found in one single food, manna, so in the person of

¹¹ *Sermon for Christmas Midnight Mass, 25th December 1622*

¹² John, IV, 14

¹³ John, XIV, 6

¹⁴ Philip., IV, 13

¹⁵ Col., II, 9

¹⁶ Matth., XIII, 46

¹⁷ Dom Marmion, *Christ in his Mysteries*, chp I, The mysteries of Christ are our mysteries, 3rd conference

¹⁸ Wis., XVI, 20, 25

¹⁹ Ex., XVI, 31; Num., XI, 8.

Our Lord there are three "substances" which constitute but one same Person who is at once both God and man.

In this most blessed Baby are found the divine nature, the nature of the soul and that of the body. In the manna was the taste of honey, which is actually a heavenly liquid; for although bees gather honey from among flowers, they do not take it from flowers. Rather, they imbibe with their little mouth the honey which falls upon the flowers from Heaven along with the dew, and this only at a certain time of the year. Likewise, at the very moment of His Incarnation, Our Lord's divine nature descended from Heaven onto this blessed flower, the most holy Virgin our Lady, where human nature gathered It and preserved It in the hive of the Virgin's glorious womb for nine months. After that It was placed in the crib, where we shall see It tomorrow.

The taste of oil found in the manna represents the nature of Our Lord's most holy soul. What else is His most blessed soul but an oil, a balm, a spreading perfume²⁰ whose excellent fragrance infinitely satisfies those who smell it? What fragrance did it not spread forth in the presence of the Divine Majesty, seeing itself in union with It without having done anything to merit it! What acts of perfect charity and profound humility did it not make at this very moment of Incarnation when it entered into a sacred and incomparable union with the Eternal Word! And what incomparably sweet fragrance has it not poured forth so as to move us to follow and imitate its perfections!²¹

Finally, the taste of flour, also found in manna, represents the other aspect of Our Lord's most holy humanity, His adorable body, which, when crushed on the tree of the Cross, was made into a very precious Bread to nourish us unto life eternal²². O savoury Bread, anyone who eat You worthily shall live forever and can never die the eternal death²³. What an incomparably delightful taste 'this Bread has for souls who eat It worthily! How wonderful to be nourished on the Bread come down from Heaven, the Bread of angels!²⁴ It is even more wonderful by the love with which It is given to us by Him who is at once both Gift and Giver."²⁵

This beautiful explanation upon the Incarnation of Christ, already leads us up to the Mount Calvary, source of all the graces we received to be given this so uncomplete, but still amazing understanding of the mystery.

St Francis de Sales, before giving us this explanation upon the link between the manna and the Holy Humanity of Christ, also provided us another comparison between the Manna and the Holy Grace:

“God rained manna in the desert night for the children of Israel²⁶. To increase their gratitude to Him, He Himself arranged the feast and set the table. For Moses said: "You will know that the Lord brought you out of the land of

²⁰ Cant., I, 2

²¹ Cant., I, 3

²² John, VI, 55

²³ John, VI, 50, 52, 55, 59

²⁴ Ps. LXXVII, 23-25; Wis., XVI, 20; John, VI, 33, 41, 50-51, 59

²⁵ *Sermon for Christmas Eve*, 24th December 1613

²⁶ Num., XI, 9

Egypt, and in the morning you shall see His glory." He first made a sweet dew descend from Heaven to serve as a tablecloth upon the desert. Then the manna fell like little coriander seeds. Finally, to show that He honoured them as one now serves princes with covered plates, He made a little dew rain down to preserve the manna until the morning when the Israelites gathered it up before the sunrise.²⁷

But God desired an even greater and more loving gift for us who live on earth as in a desert, and who long for the joy of the Promised Land, our heavenly country. He came Himself to bring us this gift, and He came in the middle of the night.²⁸ This special gift is the grace which helps us to attain what would otherwise be impossible for us: the joy and happiness of glory. Thus, in the darkness of the night Our Lord was born and appeared to us as an infant lying in a manger, as we shall see tomorrow."²⁹

Such attentions from our Divine Lord to offer to us this contemplation of his divine Humanity request a high level of both respect and love. God is give us in the same time a glance of the mystery, with the grace to catch it, without being made too much blind, as He veils it under a human appearance, making Himself looking like one of us.

"This contemplation of the mysteries of Jesus will only produce such great fruit in us if we bring thereto certain dispositions which can be summed up into three: faith, reverence and love.

Faith is the primordial disposition for placing us in vital contact with Christ. We celebrate mysteries, that is to say human and visible signs of a divine and hidden reality. 'To comprehend, to touch this reality, faith is needed. Christ appears as both man and God in each of these mysteries ; often even, as in the Nativity, and in the Passion, the divinity is more than ordinarily hidden; in order to grasp it, to pierce the veil and reach to it, to see God in the Child lying in the manger, or in the One Who was "made a curse for us"³⁰ hanging on the gibbet of Calvary, or again under the Eucharistic appearances, faith is needed : *Praestet fides supplementum sensuum defectui.*³¹

Without faith we shall never penetrate into the depths of the mysteries of Jesus; but with it, we have no need to envy Christ's contemporaries. We do not see Our Lord as those who lived with Him, but it is given to us by faith to contemplate Him, to dwell with Him, and be united to Him in a no less efficacious way than it was for those who were His contemporaries. (...)

It is the measure of this faith that, for our part, determines the degree of our participation in the grace of Jesus contained in His mysteries. See what took place during His terrestrial life: those who lived with Him, who were in material contact with Him, like the Shepherds and Wise Men at the manger, the Apostles and all who sought Him during the years of His public life, St.

²⁷ Ex., XVI, 13, 14, 21, 31; Num., XI, 7, 9; Wis., XVI, 27-28

²⁸ Wis., XVIII, 14-15

²⁹ *Sermon for Christmas Eve*, 24th December 1613

³⁰ Gal., III, 13

³¹ *Pange Lingua*

John and St. Mary Magdalen at the foot of the Cross, the disciples who saw Him risen and ascending to Heaven, all received grace according to the degree of their faith. It is always to faith that He grants the miracles asked of Him; every page of the Gospel shows us that He made faith an indispensable condition for receiving His grace.”³²

The veil of the humanity of Christ we are invited to contemplate at Christmas, is the same veil which hide Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. God chose the town called Bethlehem to be born of the Virgin Mother. Bethlehem is a Hebrew word which means ‘House of the Bread’. The city of David was named after the incredible mystery it would host, at the beginning of the History of the Redemption.

Like the Manna came down upon Earth to feed the chosen people, God came down from heaven, and dwelt amongst us. As the Manna was coming down silently during the night, to be harvested by the Hebrews early in the morning, Jesus was born in the silence of the middle of the night, to become the spiritual food of many, veiled under the appearance of the Bread.

“And this “Word was made Flesh”: *Et verbum caro factum est.*

Let us adore this Word become Incarnate for us: *Christus natus est nobis, venite adoremus,*³³ A God takes our humanity: conceived by the mysterious operation of the Holy Ghost in Mary’s womb, Christ is born of the most pure substance of the blood of the Virgin, and the life that He has from her makes Him like unto us! *Creator generis humani de virgine nasci dignatus est, et procedens homo sine semine.*

This is what faith tells us : this Child is the Incarnate Word of God; He is the Creator of the human race become man. *Creator generis humani* ; if He needs a little milk to nourish Him, it is by His hand that the birds of heaven are fed. (...)

Let us contemplate this Infant lying in the manger. His eyes are closed, He sleeps, He does not manifest outwardly what He is. In appearance, He is only like all other infants, and yet, being God, being the Eternal Word, He, at this moment, is judging the souls that appear before Him. “He lies upon straw, and as God, He sustains the universe and reigns in heaven”: *Jacet in praeseptio et in caelis regnat*³⁴. This Child, just beginning to grow, *Puer crescebat... et proficiebat aetate*³⁵, is the Eternal Whose divine nature knows no change: *Tu idem ipse es, et anni tui non deficient.* He Who is born in time is likewise He Who is before all time; He Who manifests Himself to the shepherds of Bethlehem is He Who, out of nothing, created the nations that, “are before Him as if they had no being at all”³⁶ (...)

To the eyes of faith there are two lives in this Baby; two lives indissolubly united in an ineffable manner, for the Human Nature belongs to

³² Dom Marmion, *Christ in his Mysteries*, chp II, Our contact with the mysteries of Jesus, 3rd conference

³³ *Invitatory for Christmas Matins*

³⁴ *Monastic Breviary*, 12th response at Matins of the Sunday of the Octave of Christmas

³⁵ Luke, XI, 40, 52

³⁶ Isa., XL, 17

the Word in such wise that there is but a single Person, that of the Word, Who sustains the Human Nature by His own Divine existence.

Undoubtedly, this human nature is perfect: *perfectus homo*: nothing of that which belongs to its essence is lacking to Him. This Babe has a soul like to ours; He has faculties: —intelligence, will, imagination, sensibility— like ours. He is truly one of our own race Whose existence will be revealed, during thirty three years, as authentically human. Sin, alone, will be unknown to Him. *Debit per omnia fratribus similari*³⁷... *absque peccato*³⁸. Perfect in itself, this human nature will keep its own activity, its native splendour. Between these two lives of Christ—the Divine, which He ever possesses by His eternal birth in the bosom of the Father; the human which He has begun to possess by His Incarnation in the bosom of a Virgin—there is neither mingling nor confusion. The Word, in becoming man, remains what He was; that which He was not, He has taken from our race; but the divine in Him does not absorb the human, the human does not lessen the divine. The union is such, as I have often said, that there is however but a single Person —the Divine Person,— and that the human nature belongs to the Word, is the Word’s own humanity”³⁹

This union of the two natures, divine and human are the mystery we are invited to meditate all along this Christmas season. We placed all along Advent a wreath in our sanctuary, in our homes. We light the four candles one by one, as we are approaching the anniversary of the Birth of Christ. This wreath, ornated with leaves and ribbons, represent a crown, but when you remove the leaves and ribbons, the main structure appears, made of wood, with all its harshness, maybe splinters and thorns coming out. This wreath is here to introduce us to the mystery of the Incarnation, in the beauty and silence of the Light coming at Christmas, but also prepare us for the Mystery of the Redemption. It’s the season to contemplate the Incarnation, let’s never forget the reason of it: our Redemption, through the Sacrifice of the Cross.

Let’s conclude these few words of contemplation of Christ asleep in the silence of an unknown manger with the conclusion of the Homily of St Francis de Sales for Christmas Eve 1613:

“Bees are restless while they are without a queen. They incessantly flutter hither and yon. There is scarcely any rest in their hive. But as soon as their queen is born, they all gather round her, leaving only for gathering their spoils and, it seems, by her command or permission. In the same way our senses, interior powers and spiritual faculties are like mystical bees. Until they have a ruler, that is, until they have chosen our newly born Lord for their king, they are restless. Our senses ceaselessly wander about, drawing our interior faculties after them, dissipated now on one object they encounter and then on another. There is nothing but a constant waste of time, restlessness and disquietude, all of which shatter the peace and tranquillity which are so necessary for our souls. But as soon as they have chosen Our Lord for their king they ought, like chaste and mystical bees, to place themselves near Him, never leaving their hive except for the exercises of charity which He commands them to practice toward their neighbour. Immediately after each charitable

³⁷ Hebr., II, 17

³⁸ Ibid., IV, 15

³⁹ Dom Marmion, *Christ in his Mysteries*, chp VII, *O Admirabile Commertium*, 1st conference

exercise they should retire and gather round this most lovable King to distil store up the honey of the holy and loving thoughts that they draw from the sacred presence of our Sovereign Lord. His simple look into our souls causes unparalleled affections in them, as well as the zeal to serve Him and love Him more and more perfectly.

This is the grace I desire for you, my dear souls: that you remain very near to this sacred Saviour who is about to gather us all around Himself in order to keep us always under the standard of His most holy protection, just like the shepherd who has care of his sheep and of his flock, or like the queen bee who cares so much for her swarm that she never leaves her hive without being surrounded by all her little people. May His goodness grant us the grace to hear His voice, as sheep hear that of their shepherd⁴⁰, so that in recognizing Him as our sovereign Shepherd we will not stray away nor listen to the voice of the stranger who remains near us like an infernal wolf, always ready to ruin and to devour us.⁴¹ May we have the fidelity to keep ourselves submissive, obedient and subject to His wishes and commands, as the bees do with their queen, in order that we might begin in this life what, with the help of God's grace, we shall do eternally in Heaven, where may the Father, Son and Holy Spirit lead us. Amen."⁴²

⁴⁰ John, X, 27

⁴¹ 1 Pet., V, 8

⁴² *Sermon for Christmas Eve*, 24th December 1613