

At the crib with Our Lady

“He, who was God, was made man, in taking that which He was not, but without losing that which He was: thus God became man, herein thou hast that which is needful to thy weakness, and thou hast that also which is needful to thy perfection. may Christ raise thee by His “being” as man: may He guide thee by His “being” as God- man: may He bring thee even to His “being” as God”¹

I could not introduce you to this retreat in preparation for Christmas with better words than the ones of the great Doctor and Father of the Church St Augustine. They are also the words that Blessed Columba Marmion, Benedictine Abbot of Maredsous, chose to introduce his conferences about the Life of Christ: Christ in his mysteries, which I will use along this brief introduction to some of the mysteries which were revealed to us at Christmas.

Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation of Christ, of God taking our flesh, and “dwelling amongst us.”²

“Christ 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, and in habit found as a man.”³

As you know, Christ came upon Earth for our salvation, and to give us a model to follow, to merit, and to deserve the eternal reward He prepared for us.

Although He was a man, His way of perfection might seem a bit too hard for us to follow and practice sometimes. This is why He also gave a woman, a mother to whom we could go and through whom we would attain Him. Mary, the Mother of God is the perfect expression of God’s merciful bounty, kindness and leniency towards us.

We will try together to contemplate today the mystery of the Incarnation through Her eyes at the crib. The little Infant King let Her take care of Him, showing us perfect obedience that the Lord desires us to follow. St Francis de Sales explains:

“Look at Him in the manger: “You will find Him,” said the angels, “wrapped in swaddling clothes.” He certainly does not need to be bound thus. Infants are wrapped in swaddling clothes because, being still tender, if they were not thus bound they might make a false turn and so become maimed. They are also bound so as to prevent injury to their eyes or face. Were their hands free they might strike and harm themselves. After all, they do not yet know any better. Why fear that this might happen to Our Lord, since He had the use of reason from the moment of His Conception? He could not make a false turn, being Uprightness itself. O God! what goodness in this lovable Saviour! He submitted

¹ St. Augustine, in Joan. XXIII, 6.

² John, I, 14.

³ Philip., II, 6-7.

to doing as other children in order that He might appear as any other poor little baby subject to the necessities and laws of infancy. He truly weeps, but it is not from tenderness over Himself, nor from bitterness of heart, but quite simply to conform Himself to other children.⁴

There was still another reason why Our Lord wanted to be bound and wrapped and subject to His most holy Mother, letting Himself be handled, carried and wrapped just as it pleased her without showing any annoyance whatever. He wanted to teach us how to govern and rule over our spiritual flock, that is, our passions, affections and spiritual faculties.

There are two principal faculties on which all the others depend, namely concupiscence and irascibility. All other powers, faculties and passions seem to be subject to these two faculties and act only through their commands. By concupiscence we love and desire what seems good and profitable to us. By it we rejoice in prosperity and are saddened in adversity, in mortification, and in all things repugnant to our self-will. Irascibility produces sadness, repugnances, anger, despair and so on. Our Lord wants us to learn from Him how to order these things according to reason. We see Him wrapped and fastened in bands and clothes by His most blessed Mother. He intends thereby to motivate us to bind and fasten with the swaddling clothes of obedience all our passions, affections, inclinations; all our powers, both interior and exterior; our senses, humours and all that we are. Lest we mismanage ourselves He wants us to give up such self-management except insofar as obedience permits it.

See this sweetest of infants who lets Himself be so governed and led by His most blessed Mother that truly it seems that He cannot do otherwise. His sole purpose in this, my dear souls, is to show us what we ought to do, especially religious who have vowed their obedience. Our Lord could never misuse His will or His liberty. Yet He desired that all should be hidden under these swaddling clothes: His eternal knowledge and wisdom,⁵ all that He was as God, equal to His Father, as well as the use of reason, the power of speaking—in short, all that He was to be when He had attained the age of thirty years. Everything without reserve was enclosed and hidden under the veil of the holy obedience that He bore His Father, who obliged Him to be like all other infants in everything.”⁶

When we listen to this sweet description and comments of the scene of the first crib ever, we can imagine and understand the model God desires us to have: the Son and the Mother, the Son through the Mother of God.

“All God’s blessings that come down upon us have their source in the election that He made of our souls, throughout eternity, to make them “holy and unspotted in His sight.”⁷ In this divine decree so full of love is contained

⁴ Wis., VII, 3.

⁵ Col., II,3.

⁶ St Francis de Sales, Sermon for Christmas Eve, 24th December 1613.

⁷ Eph., I, 4.

our adoptive predestination as children of God and all the favours thereto attached.”⁸

Amongst all elected souls, one was particularly ornated with Divine Grace, the Immaculate Conception. This Immaculate soul directly participated to accomplish the eternal decree:

“by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.”⁹

Through the contemplation of His Immaculate Mother, Mary, “full of grace,”¹⁰ we may prepare our hearts with the best manner ever, to welcome the Infant coming at Christmas. Her purity in all her actions and intentions must be our direction and model.

When the Church proposed to our Faith the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, She gave us a precious teaching for our own life. Of course, it would be useless to search for any likeness between us and Our Lady. We were born with the stain of the Original Sin, and although, we were washed through the waters of Baptism, concupiscence, which is the root of all disordered passions and affections, remains within us. The devil still comes to tempt us, using this thorn left in our flesh that St. Paul described.¹¹ But, we can still overturn his attacks, and win the battle, if we call for it. Divine help will raise us above everything. Each single effort we do towards that, will bring us closer to God. But fleeing from sins and any occasions of sin, even venial, is not enough. It’s only the first part of our task, a kind of destruction. The building task is a job for a lifetime: the practice of the virtues, and especially those which were practiced by Our Lady.

“The virtues are all linked together, so the soul participates in the same measure in the various divine attributes. The more we share in God's greatness, the more we share in his simplicity.

Mary only asks to communicate her treasure to us. Although our lives have not been as immaculate as Her’s, God's mercy knows no bounds. Mary is the mother of mercy. Let us be truly simple with Mary, and with her help, we will be truly great with her.”¹²

Her virtues, her whiteness should fill us with joy, at the sight of the Glory of our Mother. Let’s imagine the vibe of joy which animated her at the first instant of her life, already dedicated to Our Lord. She gave herself to Him, as He decorated Her with every perfect virtue. This joy developed throughout all Her life, uniting her praises of thanksgiving to the Passion of Her Son, until her last instance on Earth, when she came to heaven to share the Glory of the Resurrection with Her Son.¹³

⁸ Dom Marmion, Christ in his mysteries, VI, Divine preparations, Introduction.

⁹ Blessed Pius IX, Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8th December 1854.

¹⁰ Lk., I, 28.

¹¹ I Cor., XII, 7-9.

¹² Dom Jean Roy, Contempler Marie, I, Place de Marie dans le plan de Dieu. Translated with www.deepl.com.

¹³ Dom Ludovic Baron, l’expression du Chant Grégorien, Immaculée Conception.

Thanks to Jesus, and to Her cooperation with His work of Redemption, we are enveloped in the same protective mantel, ornated with the same jewels, living with the same joy, because we are called to share the same glory.¹⁴ The following prayer of St. Alphonsus Liguori may summarize our thoughts and aspirations:

“Ah, my Immaculate Lady, I rejoice with thee, seeing thee endowed with such great purity. I give thanks, and make the resolution always to give thanks to our common Creator, for having preserved thee from every stain of sin, as I certainly believe; and to defend this great and peculiar privilege of thy Immaculate Conception I am ready, and swear to give even my life if it is necessary. I wish that all the world might know thee, and acknowledge thee for that beautiful aurora, which was always resplendent with the Divine Light; that chosen ark of salvation, safe from the common shipwreck of sin; for that perfect and immaculate dove, as thy Divine Spouse declared thee; that inclosed garden, which was the delight of God; that fountain sealed up, which the enemy never entered to trouble; finally, that spotless lily, which thou art, springing up among the thorns of the children of Adam; for whereas all are born defiled with original sin, and enemies of God, thou wast born pure, all spotless, and in all things a friend of thy Creator.

Let me, then, also praise thee as thy God himself hath praised thee when he said: Thou art all fair, and there is not a spot in thee: “Tota pulchra es et macula non est in te.” Oh most pure dove, all white, all beautiful, and always the friend of God: “O quam pulchra es, amica mea, quam pulchra es.” Oh most sweet, most amiable, Immaculate Mary, thou who art so beautiful in the eyes of Our Lord, do not disdain to look with thy pitying eye upon the loathsome wounds of my soul. Behold me, pity me, and heal me. Oh powerful magnet of hearts, draw also my miserable heart to thee. Thou who even from the first moment of thy life wast pure and beautiful in the sight of God, have pity on me, for I was not only born in sin, but after baptism, I again have defiled my soul with sin. Will God, who hath chosen thee for his child, his mother, and his spouse, and therefore hath preserved thee free from every stain, refuse any grace to thee? Virgin Immaculate, you must save me; I will say to thee with St. Philip Neri, make me always remember thee, and do not forget me. It seems to me a thousand years before I shall go to behold thy beauty in paradise, to praise and love thee more, my mother, my queen, my beloved, most lovely, most sweet, most pure, Immaculate Mary. Amen.”¹⁵

The preparation of the Infant coming was necessarily going through the preparation of the Mother, whom we just talked about her Immaculate Conception. From Our Lady, we learn detachment of sin. Which virtues ought we to replace the empty space that the sin left in our soul, to avoid the terrible state that Jesus’ parable of the unclean spirit tries to prevent us from falling into:

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ St. Alphonsus Liguori, *The Glories of Mary*, Discourse I, on the Immaculate Conception of Mary, conclusive prayer.

“When an unclean spirit is gone out of a man he walketh through dry places seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith: I will return into my house from whence I came out. And coming he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then he goeth, and taketh with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is made worse than the first.”¹⁶

St Francis de Sales warn us not to leave our precious soul, unoccupied after being just purified from sins, to prevent it from any further evil attacks.

“When we struggle against some vice, in as far as it is possible, we ought to embrace the practice of the contrary virtue, relating all others to it. By this means, we shall overcome our enemy and we shall not cease to advance in all other virtues. If I am not attacked by pride or anger I should in all circumstances incline and direct myself to the practice of humility and gentleness; and make use of the practices such as prayer, the Sacraments, prudence, constancy and temperance to this end.”¹⁷

The contemplation of Our Lady during her nine months expectation, and at the crib, will lead our final preparation for Christmas. Imitation of her virtues will change our lifestyle forever.

“If we allow ourselves to be guided by her, our dispositions will be perfect, and the solemnity of the Birth of Jesus will produce within us all its fruits of grace, of light and life.”¹⁸

I think Dom Marmion’s conferences are useful:

“What are these dispositions?”

Purity of heart. Who was the best disposed for the coming of the Word to earth? Without any doubt, it was the Blessed Virgin Mary. At the moment when the Word came into this world, He found Mary’s heart perfectly prepared, and capable of receiving the Divine riches which He willed to heap upon her. What were the dispositions of her soul?

Assuredly she possessed all the most perfect dispositions; but there is one which shines with particular brilliancy: that is her virginal purity. Mary is a virgin. Her virginity is so precious to her that it is her first thought when the angel proposes to her the mystery of the divine maternity.

Not only is she a virgin, but her soul is stainless. [...] It was necessary that the tabernacle that Our Lady offered Him should recall, by its incomparable purity, the indefectible brightness of the light eternal where, as God, He ever dwells.

¹⁶ Mt., XII, 43-45.

¹⁷ St. Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chp. 1.

¹⁸ Dom Columba Marmion, Christ in His Mysteries, VI, Divine preparations, III.

Thus the first disposition that attracts Christ is a great purity. But as for ourselves, we are sinners. We cannot offer to the Word, to Christ Jesus, that immaculate purity which He so much loves. What is there that will take the place of it in us? It is humility.

God possesses in His bosom the Son of His delight, but upon this bosom He also presses another son, – the prodigal son. Our Lord Himself tells us so. When, after having fallen so low, the prodigal returns to his father, he humbles himself to the dust, he confesses himself to be miserable and unworthy; and, at once, without a word or reproach, the father receives him into the bosom of his compassion.¹⁹

Do not let us forget that the Word, the Son, only wills what His Father wills. If He becomes Incarnate and appears upon earth, it is in order to seek sinners and bring them back to His Father: “I am not come to call the just, but sinners.”²⁰ This is so true that later Our Lord will often be found, to the great scandal of the Pharisees, in the company of sinners; He will allow Magdalen to kiss His Feet and bathe them with her tears.

We have not the Virgin Mary’s purity, but let us at least ask for the humility of Magdalen, a contrite and penitent love. O Christ Jesus, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst come to me; my heart will not be for Thee a dwelling-place of purity, misery dwells there. But I acknowledge, I avow this misery; come and relieve me of it. O Thou Who art mercy itself; come and deliver me, O Thou Who art almighty: come and deliver us, O Lord God of hosts!

A like prayer, joined to the spirit of penance, draws Christ to us because the humility that abases itself in its nothingness thereby renders homage to the goodness and power of Jesus: “and him that cometh to me, I will not cast out.”²¹

The sight of our infirmity ought not, however, to discourage us; far from that. The more we feel our weakness, so much the more ought we to open our soul to confidence, because salvation comes only from Christ.

“Ye faint-hearted, take courage and fear not: behold God, our God, will come and will save us.”²² See what confidence the Jews had in the Messiah. For them, the Messiah was everything; in Him were summed up all the aspirations of Israel, all the wishes of the people, all the hopes of the race; to contemplate Him was all their ambition; to see His reign established would have fulfilled all their desires. And how confident and impatient the desires of the Jews became: “Come, O Lord and do not delay.”²³ “Shew us Thy face, and we shall be saved.”²⁴

¹⁹ Lk., XV, 20

²⁰ Mt., IX, 13; Mark. XI, 7; Lk., V, 32.

²¹ John, VI, 37.

²² Communion for the 3rd Sunday of Advent, cf. Is. XXXV, 4.

²³ Alleluia for the 4th Sunday of Advent.

²⁴ Ps. LXXIX, 4.

Oh, if we who possess Christ Jesus, true God as well as true Man, really understood what the Sacred Humanity of Jesus is, we should have an unshaken confidence in it; for in His Humanity are all the treasures of knowledge and of wisdom; in it the Divinity itself dwells. This God-Man, Who comes to us is the Emmanuel, He is “God with us,” He is our Elder Brother. The Word has espoused our nature, He has taken upon Himself our infirmities so as to know by experience what suffering is. He comes to us to make us partakers of His divine life; all the graces for which we can hope He possesses in their fulness in order to grant them to us. [...]

Let then our hearts yield themselves up to an absolute confidence in Him Who is to come. It is to render ourselves very pleasing to the Father to believe that His Son Jesus can do everything for the sanctification of our souls. Thereby we declare that Jesus is equal to Him, and that the Father “hath given all things into His hand.”²⁵ Such confidence cannot be mistaken. In the Mass for the first Sunday in Advent, the Church thrice gives us the firm assurance of this. “None of them that wait on Thee shall be confounded.”

This confidence will above all be expressed in the ardent desire to see Christ come to reign more fully within us. *Adveniat regnum tuum!* The liturgy gives us the formula of these desires. At the same time that she places the prophecies, especially those of Isaias, under our eyes, and causes us to read them again, the Church puts upon our lips the aspirations and the longings of the just men of old time. She wills to see us prepared for Christ’s coming within our souls in the same way as God willed that the Jews should be disposed to receive His Son. “Come, O Lord, come and forgive the sins of Thy people.”²⁶ “Shew us, O Lord, Thy mercy, and grant us Thy salvation.”²⁷ “Come and deliver us, Lord, God Almighty! Raise up Thy power, and come.”²⁸

The Church makes us constantly repeat these aspirations. Let us make them our own, let us appropriate them to ourselves with faith, and Christ Jesus will enrich us with His graces.

Doubtless, as you know, God is master of His gifts; He is sovereignly free, and none may hold Him to account for His preferences. But, in the ordinary ways of His Providence, He hears the supplications of the humble who bring their needs before Him: “The Lord hath heard the desire of the poor.”²⁹ Christ gives Himself to us according to the measure of the desire that we have to receive Him, and the capacity of the soul is increased by the desires that it expresses: “open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.”³⁰

If then we want the celebration of Christ’s Nativity to procure great glory for the Holy Trinity, and to be a consolation for the Heart of the Incarnate

²⁵ John, III, 35

²⁶ Alleluia for the 4th Sunday of Advent.

²⁷ Offertory for the 2nd Sunday of Advent.

²⁸ Collect for the 4th Sunday of Advent.

²⁹ Ps. IX, 17.

³⁰ Ps. LXXX, 11.

Word, a source of abundant graces for the Church and for ourselves, let us strive to purify our hearts, let us preserve a humility full of confidence, and above all let us enlarge our souls by the breath and vehemence of our desires.

Let us ask our Lady to make us share in the holy aspirations that animated her during those blessed days that preceded the Birth of Jesus.

The Church has willed—and what is more just? — that the liturgy of Advent should be full of the thought of the Blessed Virgin; she continually makes us sing the divine fruitfulness of a Virgin, a wonderful fruitfulness that throws nature into astonishment: “Mother of Him who thee from nothing made. Sinking we strive and call to thee for aid.”³¹

Mary’s virginal bosom was an immaculate sanctuary whence arose the purest incense of her adoration and homage.

There is something veritably ineffable about the inward life of the Virgin during these days. She lived in an intimate union with the Infant-God Whom she bore in her bosom. The soul of Jesus was, by the Beatific Vision, plunged in the Divine light; this light, radiated upon His Mother. In the sight of the angels, Mary truly appeared as “a woman clothed with the sun,”³² all irradiated with heavenly brightness, all shining with the light of her Son. Her feelings indeed reached the high level of her faith. She summed up in herself all the aspirations, all the impulses, all the longings of humanity awaiting the world’s Saviour and God, at the same time going far beyond them and giving them a value that they had never hitherto attained. What holy intensity in her desires! What unshaken assurance in confidence! What fervour in her love!...

This humble Virgin is the Queen of Patriarchs, since she is of their holy lineage, and since the Child Whom she is about to bring into the world is the Son Who resumes in His person all the magnificence of the ancient promises.

She is, too, the Queen of Prophets, since she is to bring forth the Word by Whom all the prophets spoke, since her Son is to fulfil all prophecy and announce to all people the good news of redemption.³³

Let us humbly ask her to make us enter into her dispositions. She will hear our prayer; we shall have the immense joy of seeing Christ born anew within our hearts by the communication of a more abundant grace, and we shall be enabled, like the Virgin, although in a lesser measure, to understand the truth of these words of St. John: “The Word was God... and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory... full of grace and truth... And of His fulness we have all received, and grace for grace.”³⁴³⁵

³¹ Antiphon Alma Redemptoris Mater,

³² Apoc., XII, 1.

³³ Lk., IV, 19.

³⁴ John, I, 14-16

³⁵ Dom Columba Marmion, Christ in His Mysteries, VI, Divine preparations, IV.

The master of spiritual life who was Dom Columba Marmion gave us a quick overview of the interior life of Our Lady, at the time of the first Christmas. Let's conclude this meditation with the words of Dom Guéranger, presenting the mystery of the Incarnation for Christmas Midnight Mass:

“Midnight comes. The Holy Virgin has been longing for this happy moment. Her heart is suddenly overwhelmed with a delight which is new even to her. She falls into an ecstasy of love. As her Child will one day, in his almighty power, rise through the unmoved barrier of his Sepulchre; so now, as a sunbeam gleaming through purest crystal, he is born, and lies on the ground before her. With arms outstretched to embrace her, and smiling upon her: this is her first sight of her Son, who is Son also of the Eternal Father! She adores - takes him into her arms - presses him to her heart - swathes his infant limbs - and lays him down in the manger. Her faithful Joseph unites his adoration with hers; and so, too, do the Angels of heaven, for, the Royal Psalmist had sung this prophecy of their adoring him on his entrance into the world.³⁶ Heaven opens over this spot of earth, which men call a Stable; and from it there mount to the Throne of the Eternal Father the first prayer, the first tear, the first sob of this His Son, our Jesus, who thus begins to prepare the world's salvation.”³⁷

³⁶ Ps. XCVI, 7; Heb. I, 6.

³⁷ Dom Guéranger, Liturgical Year, Christmas, Midnight Mass.