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Commentary

of Saint Ambrose

on the Gospel

according to Saint Luke

Donație
PROTOSINGHEL
CONSTANTIN CHIRILĂ

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DEDICATION

to the memory of my friends

Ann and Frank Coyle,

who, after ten years of happy married life, died within some weeks of each other, towards the close of the Jubilee Year, 2000.

"Death is a pilgrimage, a lifetime's pilgrimage which none must shirk, a pilgrimage from decay to imperishable life, from mortality to immortality, from anxiety to unruffled calm. Do not be afraid of the word death; rather rejoice in the blessings that follow death."

(Saint Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*)

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FOREWORD

What might be said in a short space about a work that offers such an abundance of rich themes and imagery? Ambrose's *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* is a patchwork of homilies that addresses various theological themes. Yet, no matter what the theme Ambrose treats, his primary purpose is to bring his reader to a greater knowledge and love of the Lord Jesus.

It may seem odd when considering the volumes of Ambrose's scriptural commentary that *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* is his single work drawn from the New Testament. This might be explained by Ambrose's approach to scriptural exegesis. Ambrose states that the Scriptures must be searched, not with the eyes of the body, but with spiritual eyes *(Ex. Luc., 6.33)*. The person who reads the Scriptures, which Ambrose describes as the clothing of the Divine Word, is to see beyond the mere words, to recognise the *Verbum dei* hidden within those words *(Ex. Luc., 7.13)*. Likewise, Ambrose understood Christ to be more accessible to the reader of the New Testament, while He could easily remain hidden in the events and figures of the Old Testament. He therefore understood his task, as teacher and pastor, as explaining those obscure passages, usually from the Old Testament, whose Christological meaning was not readily discernible to his flock.

We are still left with the question of why he chose to write a commentary on Luke's Gospel. Most likely Origen having written a commentary on the same Gospel played some influence. Perhaps Ambrose gives us a hint when he states that Luke's Gospel devotes greater attention to describing the events of Christ's life than formulating precepts *(Ex. Luc., Prologue, 7)*. Such material allowed Ambrose to take full advantage of his gift of rhetoric to teach his congregation through rich imagery. This beautiful imagery fills the pages of Ambrose's commentary. One is moved by Ambrose describing the Son carrying His flesh with the wounds He suffered for us and showing this flesh to His Father *(Ex. Luc., 10.170)*. The most recurring theme found in Ambrose's commentary on Luke's Gospel is the immeasurable mercy of God. Ours is a God who desires to be sought and found by us, a God who desires to reside in each of our souls.

It is important to recall that Ambrose's writing was first formulated in a liturgical setting and that Ambrose understood Christ to be truly present in the place and the moment these sermons were delivered *(cf.Ex. Luc., 2, 13)*.

This becomes apparent when we count the number of times Ambrose interrupts his sermons with prayers addressed to the Lord Jesus. This occurs at least eleven times in *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*. This was not a mere preaching device, but rather a conviction on Ambrose's part that Christ is present to us at such times and we need only recognise His presence.

Finally, I would like to thank Sr. Íde Ní Riain for her wonderful translation of the venerable Ambrose's commentary. It is truly a noble work she has accomplished. May it be a work that bears much fruit, leading the reader to a recognition of Christ's inexhaustible love for each of us.

Fr. Michael Mee, O.S.B., S.T.D.,
Mount Angel Abbey.

Easter 2001.

INTRODUCTION

"What is your first impression of Saint Ambrose?" An Ambrosian scholar asked me many years ago when I first tackled the arduous task of translating the hitherto untranslated works of Ambrose. "Maybe my answer will surprise you," I replied, "because my first impression is that he is spiritual. And what is your own impression of him?" I asked. "Passionate," he replied.

Now, after much reading of Saint Ambrose, I am confirmed in my conviction that his spirituality is profound. But I also agree that he is passionate. Passionate in his love for our Lord, passionate in his enthusiasms, passionate in his hatred of falsehood and injustice. To these aspects of Saint Ambrose I shall return later.

As a writer, he is complex, difficult, highly allegorical and mystical. Often he employs a poetical style, flavoured with Virgilian phrases and images. He is steeped in the literature of Rome's Golden Age. At other times he appears as the skilful advocate, defending an imaginary client. Sometimes we find him knocking together the heads of the Arians, the Sabellians, and all other heretics; at other times he is tender as a lover. One minute he is blasting us with his rhetoric, and another minute he is quite dry and prosaic.

According to Tissot who has been my "guide, counsellor and friend" throughout this translation – and to whom I am deeply indebted for his excellent analysis and introduction – the Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke was written between the years 377 and 389 A.D. References made by the commentator to current events, or to works already published by him, provide internal evidence for this. Therefore the book we have in hand was written during the period covering the greater part of his episcopate.

It was probably pieced together – though with much art and skill – from homilies or fragments of homilies preached at various times. Probably it was after this great work had been completed that Ambrose wrote his eloquent prologue.

The result of this "piecing together" is that within the ten "books" that make up this Commentary, there are passages that are obviously addressed to packed congregations; passages that seem intended for consecrated virgins; and finally passages that look as though they were written – and written briskly – to act as a bridge between homilies.

Though the title is "Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Luke," Ambrose is far from keeping rigidly to this one evangelist, though he obviously has a predilection for this Gospel which has so much to tell us of

the Blessed Virgin. Ambrose was famous for his enthusiasm for virginity, and in his works on that subject he alluded frequently to the Virgin Mary. Apart from that, he would have recognised that Luke had the unique distinction of acting as a link between the Gospel and Saint Paul. Luke is an evangelist, and therefore thoroughly conversant with the life and preaching of Jesus. He is also the author of the Acts of the Apostles, and the personal friend and physician of Saint Paul. But Ambrose is not going to confine himself to the Gospel according to Luke. As is his custom, he constantly compares one passage in Scripture with another. So, since, for example, he is giving us a detailed commentary on the infancy narrative according to Luke, he is equally copious in his commentary on the infancy narrative of Matthew.

The reader will be a little disconcerted to find no eulogy on the *Benedictus* or on the *Magnificat*, and many other much loved texts. As Tissot says: "You will find less than Saint Luke and more than Saint Luke". For though he leaves out texts in Luke that would have been of great interest, he freely and generously inserts texts from the other three evangelists. Towards the end of the book, when we come to the Passion and more especially the Resurrection, Ambrose is really commenting on all four evangelists at once. He compares one with another until the head spins. At one stage he gets very tired, and revealing the humorous side of his nature he exclaims: "Would to God that having come to the end of the Gospel, I had also come to the end of my Commentary!"

There is a quite marvellous peroration – not at the end but in sight of the end. Using all his powers of imagery, Ambrose compares his commentary to a vessel coming in sight of the shore. Having skimmed lightly over a vast expanse of sea, it slows down in order not to be wrecked on the hidden rocks around the water's edge. In contrast, the actual end, as I have several times noticed with Ambrose, is in a low key. It is as if the music of a great orchestra has died down, a few notes are heard, and "the rest is silence".

Among the well assimilated sources used by Ambrose in this massive work are: Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Hilary of Poitiers. Readers who want extensive references to sources will find them in the C.S.E.L. or in the Tissot editions of the Commentary. Those are critical editions with full critical apparatus and appendices. My own edition is not intended by its sponsors to be a critical edition. It is simply a translation which will, it is hoped, be both profitable and pleasurable as *lectio divina* and as material for Office of Vigils.

Sometimes Saint Ambrose is complex, or elliptical, to the point of not making sense. When this happens, do not lose heart. Keep on reading and the gist of what he is saying will come to you. Always he is true to himself; true to his Saviour, true to the Virgin Mary, and true to the Church. His interpretation of Scripture follows much the same pattern as in his other works: he weighs the literal or moral meaning, then ponders on the mystical

or allegorical meaning. Always he thinks it important that we should look for the spiritual sense that lies behind the words.

His moral teaching is refreshingly frank (whereas his mystical interpretation is, I must admit, sometimes strained and unenlightening). His moral lessons to his flock are as applicable to-day as they were seventeen centuries ago, and are delivered "straight from the shoulder". They are fresh, sometimes very amusing. One feels that these, for sure, spring not so much from Ambrose's reading as from first hand knowledge of human nature in the raw. I think he enjoyed these parts of his sermons.

If much of the material of this Commentary is straight from homilies, why does he nearly always use the singular form of the second person *[tu]*? This device is found in his other works as well. I think that here it is particularly applicable seeing that Saint Luke, his chosen evangelist, uses the same literary device when he addresses his immortal Gospel to "Theophilus", an imaginary friend – and, indeed, is quoted by Saint Ambrose for so doing. Ambrose has chosen to address this Commentary to you, personally, whoever you may be who at this moment are reading or hearing his words. That is why, to convey this sense of immediacy conveyed by the Latin but untranslatable in modern English, I occasionally make use of the address: "You, my friend."

Some themes that recur in the Commentary are: the Humanity and the Divinity of Jesus Christ, both to be firmly believed and firmly grasped ("Else the moth of heresy will eat you"); the Trinity, three persons who are One in nature, power, eternity and activity; the Church as Virgin and Mother, "the lily among the thorns"; Mary as model of Christians, and always the Virgin *par excellence*; justice as something that must be seen to be practised – for example by equal distribution of the good things of the earth.

A word now on the spirituality of Saint Ambrose: so tender is his love for our Lord and Saviour, that the prayers he addresses spontaneously and frequently to Jesus savour more of medieval and post-medieval devotion than of early Christianity. Ambrose waxes indignant that we, his hearers or readers, are so indifferent to our salvation when Jesus underwent so much toil for us, and carried with Him – and still carries – the wounds that He suffered so that we could be healed. Ambrose encourages us to respond to so great love, to put up a good fight against our sexual urges and our selfish inclinations, and to be good soldiers of so good an Emperor. In using this image of the knight loyal to his King or emperor, Ambrose sounds a little like Ignatius of Loyola – the gallant knight turned saint.

I began this introduction by saying that the thing that first struck me about Saint Ambrose was that he was spiritual. I think that as you read the Commentary you will understand what I mean. I think, too, that you will find yourself agreeing with that lovely description which Tissot, in his

famous Introduction, gives of his hero: "his was a heart of singular humanity and nobility."

Mount Anville,

Feast of the Annunciation

A.D. 2001

Chronology of Events

AD c.340 Birth of Ambrose (probably at Trier), son of Ambrose, Governor of Gaul. On the father's death, the family return to Rome where Ambrose is educated.

AD c.373 Ambrose is appointed Governor of Upper Italy by Emperor Valentinian I.

AD 374 On 7 December Ambrose is ordained bishop of the Imperial City of Milan.

AD 375 Death of Emperor Valentinian I. He is succeeded in the West by his sons Gratian and Valentinian II (then an infant under the care of his mother, the Arian Empress Justina).

AD 377 Probably at this time Ambrose commences his Commentary on the Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke.

AD 378 In the East, Emperor Valens (Arian brother of Valentinian I) is defeated by the barbarians and dies. Gratian summons the Catholic Theodosius from Spain to lead his armies.

AD 379 Theodosius (later surnamed the Great) is elevated by Gratian to the dignity of Emperor of the East.

AD 381 THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE. With the agreement of the Fathers that the Holy Spirit is equally God with the Son and the Father. Arianism is dealt its death blow in the East.

AD 383 The tyrant Maximus usurps the throne of Gratian and takes his life. The Empress Justina sends Ambrose to make a treaty of peace on behalf of her young son. Augustine comes to Milan.

AD 385 Commencement of the persecution of Saint Ambrose by Justina. He refuses to yield the Portian Basilica to the Arians. He and his people are besieged there day and night. He institutes the singing of Vigils and composes hymns.

AD 386 Discovery in Milan of the relics of Saints Gervasius and Protasius (19 June).

AD 387 Baptism of Saint Augustine. Ambrose is sent to Trier on a mission to Maximus. The tyrant Maximus invades Italy. The Empress Justina and her young son take refuge in Constantinople where Theodosius receives them with kindness.

AD 388 Defeat and death of Maximus. Theodosius restores peace to Italy and freedom to the Church. He reinstates Valentinian II. The Arian Empress dies and the young Valentinian is reconciled to Ambrose and the Catholic Faith. Ambrose corrects Theodosius and obliges him to retract orders that he had given to the Bishop of Callinicum to rebuild a Synagogue that had been burned down by some Christians. Probably at this period Ambrose is beginning his series of sermons on Psalm 118.

AD 389 Probably sees the continuation and the completion of the Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Luke.

AD 390 The Massacre at Thessalonica, ordered by Emperor Theodosius as a punishment for insubordination. Upon the insistence of Saint Ambrose, the Emperor does public penance for his sin in the Cathedral of Milan. From then on he is the firm friend of Saint Ambrose. Between AD 390 and AD 397 Ambrose wrote his Commentary on Twelve Psalms.

AD 392 Valentinian II is slain in Gaul by Count Arbogastes, a pagan, who gives the Throne to Eugenius. This is the signal for the pagans to revolt.

AD 393 The usurpers enter Italy and occupy Milan. Ambrose retires for a time to Florence and refuses Communion to Eugenius (a Christian in name).

AD 394 Theodosius the Great crosses the Alps to avenge the death of Valentinian. He ascribes to the prayers of Saint Ambrose his decisive victory over the pagan forces at the BATTLE OF FRIGIDUS.

AD 395 Sole Emperor of East and West, Theodosius the Great, worn out by his labours, dies at Milan with the name of Ambrose on his lips. The East he bequeaths to his elder son Arcadius, the West to his younger son Honorius.

AD 397 On the night following Good Friday, his arms outstretched in form of a cross, and praying silently to the end, Saint Ambrose

departed this life, "to enjoy", says his secretary, "the fellowship of the Angels whose life he had lived on earth." *(Vita 47)*

Acknowledgements

Again it is my privilege to thank Dom Augustine de Noble of Mount Angel Abbey, Oregon, for inviting me to undertake this translation; for supplying me with the Latin texts from which I worked; and for zealously circularising monasteries, universities and libraries in the English-speaking world.

Next I must thank Sister Joan Hutchinson of the English Department, Mount Anville. Despite her busy teaching schedule she made time to read and comment on the entire MS. I much enjoyed her wry remarks on the wisdom and earthiness of Ambrose.

John Prendergast and his collaborators did, as always, superb work on the computer; presenting me with a totally camera-ready typescript. Thank you, John, for making light of every difficulty.

Finally, I express my warm thanks to my own community here at Mount Anville, who provide the perfect *ambience* for my work of translating.

May God bless and reward each one.

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Guide to use of References

The vast majority of references are to Scripture. The abbreviations used are such as are found in the Jerusalem Bible. It might be mentioned here that the Greek Septuagint which is largely used by Ambrose does not always agree with the Vulgate, and the reader has to make allowances for this. As regards the New Testament, Ambrose uses the original Greek and pre-Vulgate Latin translations.

There are occasional references given to other works by Saint Ambrose, and to other authors. These are supplied only if the context seems to demand it.

The reader who would like to make a study of Saint Ambrose's sources is recommended to consult the excellent C. S. E. L. edition of this work.

COMMENTARY OF SAINT AMBROSE

On

The Gospel according to Saint Luke

PROLOGUE

1 In commenting on the Gospel according to Saint Luke, a book where he writes rather fully and in some detail on the deeds and actions of the Lord, I think I should begin by stating plainly what is his *genre* of writing. It is that which we call historical.

Undoubtedly Divine Scripture is not bound by the laws of worldly wisdom, nor by rules of writing that are more concerned with elegance of language than with truth and reality. Nevertheless, if you search the Scriptures you will find there, in these divine writings, much that you will admire.

2 There are three things that the philosophers of this world have judged to be pre-eminent *(cf.Cic. Acad. 1:19)*. What I mean is that they divide wisdom into three categories: natural, moral and rational. All three of these we have been able to find in the Old Testament. Otherwise there would be no significance in those three wells we read of – the Well of Vision *(cf.Gn 16:14)*, the Well of Abundance *(cf.Gn 26:33)*, and the Well of the Oath *(cf.Gn 21:32)*. These three wells prove that the threefold gift of wisdom existed already in the Patriarchs.

The Well of Vision represents reason or that which is rational, because reason sharpens the sight of the mind and clarifies the vision of the soul. The Well of Abundance represents morals, or that which is ethical, because it was only when the pagans had taken themselves off – these pagans signifying sensual vices – that Isaac discovered the living water of the soul. Good morals are a springhead of purity, and kindness of heart towards our fellow humans is a source of richness to them and at the same time acts as a restraint upon ourselves. The third well is the Well of the Oath, and it stands for natural wisdom. This comprises both that which is above nature and that which is within nature [physics and metaphysics]. For to affirm something and call on God, by an oath, to bear witness, is a kind of reaching up to that which is divine; at the same time one is calling upon the Lord of nature to witness to the truth of what one is saying.

You have to admit that Solomon's three books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, prove that he was a master in the three branches of

wisdom. In Proverbs he has written on matters moral and rational; in Ecclesiastes he has written on that which is natural – *"Vanity of vanities,"* he says of the things of this world, *"and all is vanity" (Qo 1:2).* For *"creation is subject to vanity" (Rm 8:20).* In the Song of Songs you find both that which is moral and that which is rational. For when love of the heavenly Word spreads in our heart and the devout soul enters –if I may say so – into the companionship of the spiritual, most marvellous mysteries are unveiled.

3 It is the same with the Evangelists. You surely do not imagine that they were lacking in wisdom? These sacred writers possess all types of wisdom, while at the same time each of them has his own particular *genre* in which he excels. In the Gospel according to John you will truly find natural wisdom. I make bold to say that no one has seen the majesty of God with such sublime wisdom as John, and no one has unfolded it to us more sublimely than he. He ascends above the clouds; he ascends above the heavenly Powers; he ascends above the angels and discovers the Word who was in the beginning *(cf.Jn 1:1).* He sees the Word who is in God. Regarding Saint Matthew, I doubt if any moralist has ever described more accurately and with greater detail the activities of man while giving us appropriate rules for the conduct of our lives. As for Saint Mark, nothing could be more rational, more eloquent, than those two utterances with which he chose to begin his Gospel: *"See, I send my angel" (Mk 1:2)* and: *"A voice cries out in the desert" (Mk 1:3).* At once he moves us to admiration and wonder; and teaches us that man can make himself pleasing to God only by humility, abstinence and faith – as did John the Baptist. For he ascended the steps to immortality by these three degrees: by his manner of dress; by his frugal diet; by his message *(cf.Mk 1:6 sq.).*

4 We come now to Saint Luke. His style is, we might say, more that of an historian, and he has related to us more of the miracles worked by our Lord. Nevertheless, there is woven into the history of this Gospel every gift of wisdom. It is Luke who has revealed to us the rôle of the Holy Creator Spirit in the actual Incarnation of our Lord *(cf.Lk 1:35).* I ask you, can anything more marvellous than this be presented to the eye of natural wisdom? You see, here you have a lesson in natural wisdom: creation by the Spirit. David, when he was teaching natural wisdom, said: *"Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created" (Ps 103:30).* In the same Gospel Luke teaches me more wisdom, for in the Beatitudes I learn how to conduct myself; I learn how I must love my neighbour *(cf.Lk 6:27);* I am taught not to strike back or return one blow for another *(cf.Lk 6:29);* I learn to do good, and to lend without the slightest hope of ever getting back what I lent *(cf.Lk 6:34 sq.)* – and yet, I shall not go unrewarded. The reward comes all the more willingly to one who expects nothing. He teaches me also rational wisdom, as for example when I read the words: *"One who is faithful in little things is faithful, too, in greater things" (Lk 16:10).* To return to the

division of natural wisdom, Luke also teaches us that the heavenly powers will be shaken *(Lk 21:26);* that the sun acknowledges as its Master the only Son of God, and that during his Passion day was turned to night, the earth was shrouded in darkness, and the sun hid its light *(cf.Lk 23:44 sq.).*

5 Therefore all that supremacy which worldly wisdom falsely claims to be its own prerogative, quite simply belongs already to spiritual wisdom. I shall even go so far as to say – audacious though it may be – that our very Faith itself, the very mystery of the Trinity, cannot be without this threefold wisdom. For we have to believe that the Father really and naturally is the Father of the Redeemer; that the Son is moral because as man he became obedient even to death to redeem us *(cf.Ph 2:8);* and that the Spirit is rational because he has poured into the human heart the gift of worshipping God and of regulating one's conduct.

Let no one think that we are making out that there is a difference between them as regards power and activity. With such a calumny as this even Paul was attacked. But in fact he was not pretending that there was any difference when he said: *"Now there are diversities of graces, but the same Spirit. There are diversities of ministries, but the same Lord. There are diversities of activities, but the same God who works all things in all" (1 Co 12:4-6).* We know that the Son worked all things in all, for we read in another part: *"Christ is all and in all" (Col 3:11).* The Holy Spirit too works all things, for *"one and the same Spirit is at work, dividing to everyone according as he wills" (1 Co 12:11).* So there is no difference of activity, no separation, seeing that in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit resides the plenitude of power without detriment to any One of the Three.

6 As we read, we should be attentive to these things. Everything will become more clear as we study the text. For, *"the one who searches shall find; and for him who knocks the door shall be opened" (Mt 7:8).* Diligence and attention will force open the door of truth. So let us obey the precepts of Heaven, for it was not without good reason that man alone, of all the animals, was told: *"In the sweat of your brow you shall eat your bread" (Gn 3:19).* As regards the other animals, on whom nature has not bestowed the gift of reason, the earth has been commanded to supply them with pasture *(cf.Gn 1:11).* Man alone – so that he might use his God-given reason – has been commanded, as a rule of life, to work.

Human beings are not content with pasture such as the other animals have. Not sufficient for them are the varieties of fruit nor the nourishment that is common to all *(cf.Gn 1:11; 2:16).* Oh, no; they have to search out varied and delicate dishes. Delicacies have to be fetched for them from abroad; seas and rivers must be searched for their delight. Taking all this into consideration, and bearing in mind that the food they enjoy is procured with labour, humankind must not refuse to endure a little hard work in return for eternal life. Whoever, then, steps forward to engage in the toil and struggle of this holy research; whoever, I say, sheds the pre-occupations of

this present life – so prone to error – and strips himself of all evil; whoever stands forth as a champion of good, and has anointed the limbs of his soul with the Holy Spirit, has entered into combat for the cause of truth. He will without any doubt win the victor's crown and the reward of everlasting life. For *"good work brings forth illustrious fruit" (Ws 3:15)*, and the greater the number of combats the richer will be the crown of virtue *(cf.2 Tm 4:8)*.

7 But let us get back to our subject. As I was saying, this book of the Gospel is written, as we would say, in the *genre* known as historical. We therefore find that – compared to the other books – it is more concerned to relate facts than to lay down precepts. And, as is the way when writing history, the Evangelist actually begins by telling a story: *"There was,"* he says, *"in the days of Herod, King of Judea, a priest named Zachary" (Lk 1:5)*. He continues this story to the end. Actually, this narrative gives us the reason why the emblem of the calf is associated with the Gospel of Saint Luke. For, as you know, it is believed by many that the Four Animals revealed in the Apocalypse *(cf.Rv 4:6 sq.)* symbolise the Four Gospels. You see, the calf is the victim offered by priests *(cf.Lv 4:3)*. This fact establishes a link between Luke's Gospel and the calf. Luke's Gospel begins with the priests (who offer sacrifices), and it ends with the Calf who takes away the sins of all people and is sacrificed for the whole world.

This is a priestly calf. This is He who is both Victim and Priest. Priest, because he intercedes for us – for *"we have an advocate with the Father" (Jn 2:1)*, and this advocate is He – the innocent calf who has washed and redeemed us with his blood.

It is also appropriate, and not to be omitted, that a man is the emblem of the Gospel, according to Matthew. For that Gospel, as we have said, deals with moral matters; and morality pertains to man.

8 But there are many who think that our Lord is symbolised by all Four Animals. It is He who is the man; He who is the lion; He who is the bull-calf; He who is the eagle. Man, because born of the Virgin; Lion, because He is strong; Bull-calf, because he is Victim; Eagle,because He is Resurrection.

You will find, too, certain characteristics of these animals in each of the books. The contents of each accords, in some fashion, with the nature of these animals, with their strength, their special prerogative, their grace, their marvellous power. Undoubtedly all of these traits can be found in all of the books; nevertheless, each book contains one or other characteristic to a greater extent than the others.

One book tells at fuller length the Lord's human origin, and fashions man's morality by an abundance of precepts. Another begins by expressing His divine might: King from King, strength from strength, truth from truth. With such vital forces as these, He thoroughly despised death. The third book has, as its prelude, a priestly sacrifice, and enlarges on the theme by

introducing the immolation of the bull-calf. The fourth deals more copiously than the others with the miracles of the divine Resurrection.

To sum up: *"All are but one, and the Lord is all and in all" (Col 3:11; Ep 4:6)*. Christ does not vary from one Gospel to another, but is truly Himself in all.

But it is time now to tackle the actual text of this Gospel.

BOOK ONE

1 ***"Since many have attempted to relate these events in their proper order"*** *(Lk 1:1).*

We have in common with the Jews of antiquity many things that have the same causes and the same origins: similar episodes unfold at the same pace and with the same outcome; events tally, one with the other, from beginning to end. It is certainly a fact that among the Jewish people there were many prophets inspired by the Spirit of God. But there were also those who presumed to prophesy and who brought their profession into disrepute by their lies. These were false prophets, not true prophets. Such, for example, was Ananias, son of Azur *(cf.Jr 28:1)*. However, the Jewish people had the gift of discerning spirits, and knew whom to number among the prophets and whom to reject *(cf.Dt 18:21 sq.)*. In this they were like a good officer of the mint, discarding base and tarnished metal that lacked the brilliancy and splendour of the true light.

So, too, in our days, in the New Covenant, there are many who have attempted to write gospels that have not been passed by experienced officers of the mint. To the latter there is but one Gospel – set out in four books – that appears worthy to be kept.

2 One hears tell of another gospel, supposedly written by the twelve Apostles. Basildes was bold enough to write one, called "the gospel according to Basildes". They also say that Thomas wrote a gospel. I myself have come across one attributed to Matthias.* We read them merely in order that others might not read them. We have read them so as not to ignore them. We have read them not with a view to retaining them but in order to reject them. We wanted to learn what precisely was the quality of work that inflated the pride of these fantastical and self-important people.

The Church, however, with her four evangelical books fills the whole world with evangelists. But the heretics with all their books, do not have even one. Yes indeed, *"Many have attempted,"* but they failed for want of God's grace. Then there are those eclectics who have gathered into a single volume whatever in the four gospels seemed to them suited to their poisonous doctrines. The Church, however, has but one Gospel and teaches the one true God. Those who distinguish between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament have created, with the aid of a multiplicity of gospels, not one God but many.

* Those apocryphal gospels are for the most part lost.

3 ***"Since many have attempted"***. They evidently attempted but did not succeed. Therefore many took up the task but did not complete it. Saint Luke, for his part, explicitly testifies to this fact when he says that many have attempted. One who has attempted to compose a work has tried to do so by his own endeavour, but has never brought his work to completion. But the gifts and the grace of God do not require effort. For when God pours Himself out somewhere, He waters the place so well with his spiritual grace that the writer is not dry and parched, but the words flow from him. It cost Matthew no effort; it cost Mark no effort; it cost John no effort; it cost Luke no effort. On them the divine Spirit poured out such abundance of words and deeds, that without strain they happily brought their work to its proper conclusion.

Therefore Luke is right to say: *"Since many have attempted to relate in their proper order these things that have come to pass among us,"* or *"that have been poured out among us in abundance."*

4 Where there is abundance, nothing is wanting. That the work has been completed, none can doubt, for the result is there – plain to see. The completed task is there to give witness. So the Gospel is finished, and it pours itself out on all the faithful of the entire world, falling like gentle rain on the mind, and making the heart steadfast and brave.

Therefore, whoever stands firmly on the Rock *(cf.Lk 6:48)*, whoever has received the Faith in all its fullness, and accepted the true foundation of constancy, can say: *"those things that have come to pass in us."* For it is not signs and wonders, but discernment, that makes us distinguish true from false in those who recount what deeds the Lord has done for our salvation, or who fix their minds on His miracles. When you read of deeds that are above the power of man, it is only reasonable to believe that these powers belong to a nature higher than ours; and when you come across signs of mortality, it is likewise reasonable to believe that the body assumed by the Lord was subject to suffering. So you see, it is not miracles that serve as the basis of our Faith, but discernment and right reason*.

5 ***"As they have been handed down to us by those who were eye-witnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word"*** *(Lk 1:2).*

We must not think from this that the service of the word is of greater moment than the hearing of it. There is question here not of a word that one articulates, but of the substantial Word, the Word that *"was made flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14)*. This is not simply any word, but the divine Word whom the Apostles served as His ministers.

Yet we read in Exodus that *"the people saw the voice of the Lord" (Ex 20:18)*. Obviously a voice is not seen, but heard. What else is a voice but sound perceived by the ear, and not discerned by the eye? Nevertheless,

* The apocrypal gospels abounded in miracles but were unsound in doctrine.

Moses is conveying to us a very profound intuition when he says that one sees the voice of God: in the depths of the heart one sees and contemplates it.

But in the Gospel it is not a voice that is seen; it is something superior to a voice; it is the Word that is seen. So, John the Evangelist declares: *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard and seen; which we have gazed on with our eyes and touched with our hands – the Word of life. For that life was made manifest. We give witness of this to you, and we declare to you the Life which was with the Father and which has appeared to us" (1 Jn 1:1-2).*

You see, the Word of God has been both seen and heard by the Apostles. They saw the Lord, not merely in the flesh but in the Word. Yes, they saw the Lord – those Apostles who, with Moses and Elijah, saw the glory of the Word *(cf.Mt 17:3)*. These men who saw Him in His glory, truly saw Jesus; not the others, for they saw Him merely in the flesh. To see Jesus is not granted to bodily eyes, but to the eyes of the soul *(cf.Mt 13:13)*.

6 So the Jews, though they saw Him, saw Him not. Abraham saw Him for it is written: *"Abraham saw my day and was glad" (Jn 8:56)*, but we know that he did not see Him in the flesh. Yet again, one who sees the Lord in spirit sees Him too in bodily form. On the contrary, to see Him in the flesh without seeing Him in the spirit means that even physically one is not really seeing what one appears to see.

Isaiah saw Him. He saw Him in spirit; he saw Him, too, in bodily form. For did he not say: *"There is no beauty in Him nor comeliness" (Is 53:2)*? But the Jews did not see Him, for *"their foolish heart was blinded" (Rm 1:21)*. The Lord Himself witnesses to the fact that the Jews could not see: *"Blind guides,"* He says, *"you strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Mt 23:24)*. Pilate saw Him not, nor did those who shouted out: *"Crucify Him, crucify Him" (Jn 19:6). "For had they seen, they never would have crucified the sovereign Lord" (1 Co 2:8)*.

To see God means to see Emmanuel. It means to see *"God-is-with-us"*. Whoever has not seen God who is with us, has not seen him whom the Virgin bore. Likewise, if anyone has not believed the Son of God neither has he believed the Son of the Virgin.

7 What, then, does it mean to see God? Do not ask me. Ask the Gospel, ask the Lord Himself. Better still, listen to Him: *"Philip,"* he says, *"whoever sees me, sees the Father also. How can you say: 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me?" (Jn 14:9-10)*. This, of course, is not to say that one sees in one the body of the other, that one sees in one the spirit of the other. It means that only the Father is seen in the Son, or that the Son is seen in the Father. We are not seeing in each other two dissimilar persons, but where there is the oneness of essence and of power, the Son is seen in the Father and the

Father is seen in the Son. *"The works that I accomplish,"* says Jesus, *"He also accomplishes" (Jn 5:19)*. We see Jesus in His works; and in the works of the Son we see also the Father. We saw Jesus when we saw the sign He performed in Galilee *(Jn 2:9)*. For no one but the Master of the world can transform the elements. I see Jesus when I read that he mixed clay with spittle and smeared it on the eyes of the blind, restoring to him his sight *(cf.Jn 9:6)*. There I recognise Him who fashioned man from clay, breathed into him the breath of life, and gave light to his eyes. I see Jesus when He forgives sins, for *"no one can forgive sins except God alone" (Mk 2:5, 7)*. I see Jesus when He restores Lazarus to life – yet the eye-witnesses saw without seeing. I see Jesus; I see His Father too when I lift up my eyes to heaven, when I turn them towards the sea, when I look again upon the earth. For, *"His invisible perfections are seen and grasped by means of those things that He has made" (Rm 1:20)*.

8 ***"According as they have been transmitted to us by those who, from the beginning, have seen and served the Word"*** *(Lk 1:2)*.

In the perfect man you find a two-fold faculty: that of intention and that of carrying out one's intention. The holy Evangelist attributes both these faculties to the Apostles. Not only, says he, did they hear the Word, but they also served it. Intention has to do with seeing; service has to do with action. The goal of intention is action, and the source of action is intention. Let us take the Apostles as an example. Peter and Andrew were at the stage of intention when they heard the Lord saying to them: *"I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:19)*. Without delay they left their boat and followed the Word. But action is not simultaneous with intention. In the same way there is intention, but not yet the carrying out of that intention, when Peter says: *"Lord, why cannot I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (Jn 13:37)*. The intention of being martyred was there, but not yet the carrying out of that intention. Though I grant that there was already a realisation of it by means of fasting, vigils, and mortification of the senses. For here we have Christianity in action.

In fact, in all things, intention and action are not simultaneous. Action is one thing and intention is another. Peter himself had long persevered in apostolic virtue, but it was only afterwards that the Lord said to him: *"Follow me" (Jn 21:22)*, and he took up his cross, followed the Word, and suffered martyrdom. But in Peter, Andrew, John and the other Apostles the intention was equal to the action.

9 It can, of course, happen that a person's intention is greater than their performance. We see this in the Gospel where there is a difference between Mary and Martha. For one was listening to the Word, and the other was running about and serving. Then she stood and said: " *'Master, do you not care that she has left me alone to serve? Tell her to help me'. But he said to her: 'Martha, Martha, Mary has chosen the better part, which shall*

not be taken from her' " (Lk 10:40-42). In one sister you have ardour of intention, in the other you find overflowing service in action. Each supplied for that perfection of virtue which was wanting in the other. For Martha, only that she had heard the Word, would not have been serving the Lord, and her activity is indicative of her good intention. As for Mary, she possessed to such perfection the grace and virtue of her sister that she anointed the feet of Jesus; wiped them with her hair, and filled the whole house with the perfume of her faith *(cf.Jn 12:3).*

Also, it quite often happens that with the very best intention, the actual performance comes to nothing. It is as if someone were to devote his mind to the study of medicine and then, when he had learnt all the theory of healing, never practised his skills. And so, because the performance is void and empty, the intention too becomes void and empty. Another point is that in many people their action or performance is abundant, but their intention is meagre and insufficient. Take the example of one who is aware of the saving sacraments of Baptism but is not inclined to fix their attention on learning all the precepts and studying the various virtues. Usually in such a case, that person loses the fruit of action for want of strong motivation. We must try hard to hold in generous measure both the one virtue and the other. This is what the Apostles were able to do, for of them the sacred writer says: *"They, from the beginning, saw and were ministers of the Word" (Lk 1:2).* From the fact that they saw, we can see that divine knowledge was their aim and intention; and the fact that they were ministers of the Word declares plainly that they were active.

10 ***"It seemed good to me also, having diligently applied myself to learning all things exactly from the beginning and in their proper order, to write them down, most excellent Theophilus"*** *(Lk 1:3)*

"It seemed good to me also" (Lk 1:3). In declaring that to him it seemed good, it is quite possible that he is not the only one to whom "it seemed good". For it is not merely to his own human will that it seemed good, rather it was the good pleasure of *"Him who speaks in me, the Christ" (2 Co 13:3).* He it is who can make something that is good appear to us, too, to be good. The Lord calls him on whom he has pity. That person then follows Christ, and if you ask him why he wanted to become a Christian he will reply: "It seemed good to me." In speaking in this way he does not deny that it seemed good to God. If some holy person honours God, it is by God's grace. In short, many have wanted to write the Gospel but only four – having found favour in the eyes of God – merited this grace.

11 ***"It seemed good to me also, having diligently applied myself to learning all things exactly from the beginning and in their proper order"*** *(Lk 1:3).*

No one will doubt that this Gospel goes into more detail than the others. So Luke is making no false claims but speaking the truth. Moreover, the

Apostle Saint Paul himself witnesses to his diligence. Listen to how he praises Luke: *"whose praise is in the Gospel through all the churches" (2 Co 8:18).* One who deserved to be praised by the Doctor of the Gentiles is truly praiseworthy. He searched out, so he says, not just a few things, but all things. Then, when he was satisfied that he knew all, he decided not to write all but to set down the gist of the full story. He knew it all, but he did not write it all. For, as you know, *"there are many other things which Jesus did. If all were written, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books." (Jn 21:25).*

You will notice that he deliberately omits things put down by the others. This makes the Gospel shine with a diversity of graces. Each book has its miracles, its mysteries, its great deeds; and so each book is distinguished one from the other. After all, did not the soldiers divide out the garments of Christ *(cf.Lk 25:34)*?. This we shall comment on more fully in its proper place.

12 This Gospel was written "for Theophilus", which simply means "for God's beloved one". My friend, if *you* love God, this Gospel is written for *you*. If, then, it is written for you, accept this gift from the Evangelist. Preserve with care, in the very depths of your heart, this sacred pledge given to you by a friend. *"Keep the good thing committed to your trust by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (2 Tm 1:14).* Look at it frequently, examine it often. Fidelity is the first duty of one who has received something in trust. The next duty is to treat it with diligent care so that the precious deposit may not be consumed by moth or rust *(cf.Mt 6:19).* Because what was confided to you so trustingly could be destroyed or damaged. The Gospel is a precious pledge, and you must see to it that it is not devoured in your heart by moth or rust. It is eaten by the moth if, having read it well you believe it badly.

13 The moth is the heretic, the moth is Photinus; your moth is Arius.* To separate the Word from God is to tear his garment. Photinus tears the garment when he reads: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in God, and was God."* The integrity of the garment demands that we should read: *"And the Word was God" (Jn 1:1).* Separating Christ from God is tearing his garment. You tear his garment if you read: *"Now eternal life is this, to know you, the one true God" (Jn 17:3).* You must also know Christ *(cf.Jn 17:3),* for to know only the Father as true God is not Eternal Life. Rather it is to know Christ, too, as true God – true God from true God. This is Eternal Life. But to know Christ without believing in His divinity, without believing in the mystery of His body, that is what I call being a moth. Arius is a moth, Sabellius is a moth! These moths attack fluctuating souls. They attack souls that do not believe that Father and Son are one in

* Photinus, Arius and Sabellius were all notable heretics.

their divinity. They tear apart what Scripture says: *"My Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30)*, for they are dividing this unity into different substances.

This moth attacks the soul that does not believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. This soul is itself a moth, for it is Antichrist *(cf.1 Jn 4:2 sqq.)*. Those, on the other hand, who belong to God keep the Faith and have no knowledge of the moth that devours the garment. Anything that is divided within itself – such as the kingdom of Satan *(cf.Mt 12:25)* – cannot last for ever.

14 There is also a rust that devours the heart. The gaze once fixed on holy things is covered over with the stains of sordid desires and worldly concupiscence. Or, the purity of faith is obscured by the murky clouds of unbelief. The rust that eats the soul is the desire for riches; the rust that eats the soul is carelessness: the rust that eats the soul is an insatiable longing for high office and honours – if in these transient things of earth you place all your hope.

Let us turn instead to the things of God; let us sharpen our wits, let us exercise our love. Then we shall always have our sword ready, brightly shining, and hidden – so to speak – in the scabbard of our heart. This is the sword of which our Lord spoke when he said that we should sell our tunic and buy in its place a sword *(cf.Lk 22:36)*. The soldiers of Christ should always have, at the ready, their spiritual weapons, *"mighty in the sight of God and able to pull down fortresses" (2 Co 10:4)*. Otherwise the General of the heavenly hosts might find, on His arrival, that our weapons were in a bad state of repair; and He might exclude us from the ranks of His Legions.

15 ***There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zachary of the tribe of Abia. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both just in the eyes of God, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord without blame"*** *(Lk 1:5-6)*.

Divine Scripture teaches us to praise not only the virtues of praiseworthy people, but to praise their parents too. It is as though the heritage of stainless purity distinguishes those whom we wish to extol. What, in this passage, is actually the intention of the holy evangelist? I reply that he wishes to ennoble John the Baptist by quoting the nobility of his parents, by signs and wonders, by his life, his function, and his martyrdom. In the same way is Anna praised *(cf.1 S 1:2)* – mother of holy Samuel: Isaac, too, received from his parents the noble heritage of piety and passed it on to his descendants.

So we learn that Zachary is not only a priest but a priest of the tribe of Abia. That is to say, he had the distinction of belonging to one of the most ancient families.

16 ***"His wife was of the line of Aaron"*** *(Lk 1:5)*.

Saint John's nobility is traced not only to his parents, but to his ancestors. It is not a nobility to be measured in terms of worldly power, but a lineage to be venerated for its religious observance. It was only right that Christ's Herald should have ancestors such as these. In this way the faith that he preached in the coming of the Lord was not something suddenly conceived; but a faith received as a heritage from his ancestors, and infused by right of birth.

17 ***"They were both just in the eyes of God, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord without blame"*** *(Lk 1:6)*.

We now have to reply to those who, anxious to excuse their sins, consider that man cannot exist without frequently sinning. They make use of that verse from Job: *"No one is clean from stain, not even the infant of one day. And man has still many months to pass on earth" (Jb 14:4, Septuagint)*. My answer is as follows.

In the first place, let them define precisely what they mean by "sinless". Does it mean to have absolutely never sinned, or does it mean to have given up sinning? If they think that to be sinless means to have given up sinning, I agree with them, for *"all have sinned and stand in need of the glory of God" (Rm 3:23)*. But take the case of a person who has corrected his sinful ways and adopted a way of life where he steers clear of sin. If my opponents state that such a person cannot persevere in leading a blameless life, I cannot agree with them. For we read in Scripture that *"the Lord loved the Church ... that He might present it to Himself, a glorious Church not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but holy and immaculate" (Ep 5:25-27)*.

Since the Church was gathered together from among the Gentiles, which is to say from among sinners, how could she emerge sinless from the midst of sin? This was done only by the grace of God that purified her of her sin; and then, having washed her clean, preserves her from further sin. She is not free from stain from the start – a thing impossible to human nature – but by the grace of God, and by her manner of living. Now that she sins no more, she has the appearance of one who is immaculate.

18 With good reason the Evangelist says that they were *"just in the eyes of God, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord" (Lk 1:6)*. For "Lord" includes both the all powerful Father and the Son. The holy Evangelist himself declares that it is the Son who brought the Law and imposed the precepts.

Advisedly he says that they were "just in the eyes of God", because not all those who appear to the world to be just are equally just in the sight of God. People see things differently from the way God sees them. People judge by the surface, but God sees the heart. And so it can happen that a person can put on a mask of goodness and make himself popular; but in

God's sight he is not just if his justice does not spring from the purity of his heart but is only a pretence to win favour. Man cannot detect things hidden in the heart. Perfect merit is, therefore, to be just in God's sight. This is why the Apostle says: *"Their praise is not of men, but of God" (Rm 2:29).* Truly happy is one who is just in God's eyes; truly blessed is the one of whom the Lord in His kindness says: *"Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no guile" (Jn 1:47).*

The true Israelite is one who sees God; who knows that God sees him, and who shows God the secrets of his heart. One cannot really be perfect unless one is found pleasing in the sight of Him who cannot be deceived. *"God's judgements are true" (Ps 18:9),* whereas our judgements are often wrong. The result is that the world frequently attributes to the unjust the merit of justice; while at the same time persecuting and hating those who are truly just, or blackening their characters with lies. *"The Lord, He it is who knows the ways of the undefiled" (Ps 36:18).* He does not make any mistake. He does not deem a sinner to be worthy of praise; nor does He think that one who is praiseworthy is a sinner. No, He judges each one according to their merits. He is judge, at the same time, of both the heart and the deed.

The divine judgements measure the merits of the just by that person's interior dispositions, not by the result – whatever it may be – of his actions. For often an excellent intention results in an action that is blameworthy and so the intention appears ignoble; while at the same time an evil purpose can be masked by an action that appears beautiful and noble. You may have done something good, but if your intention was evil, the Divine Judgement will not approve of what you have done. As it is written: *"You shall follow justly after that which is just" (Dt 16:20).* I ask you, unless it were possible to do a just act unjustly, why would Scripture say: *"You shall follow justly after that which is just"*? And indeed, the Saviour Himself has taught us that one can do a just act unjustly when He says: *"When you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you" (Mt 6:2);* and *"when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites" (Mt 6:5).* Mercy is an excellent thing; prayer, too, is an excellent thing. But the intention is wrong if, for the sake of showing off you give to the poor so that people will see and admire you.

19 So the holy Evangelist says that not only were they *"just in the eyes of God, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord",* but also adds *"without blame" (Lk 1:6).* This accords wonderfully well with what holy Solomon says in Proverbs: *"Take care always to do what is right before God and man" (Pr 3:4).* A person is without blame when the good intention accords with the deed. Justice, I might add, when it is too inflexible is blameworthy.

20 But note, I beg you, with what niceness, with what exactitude he has chosen his words and put them in their proper order: *"Walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord" (Lk 1:6).* First the commandment, and after that the justification. So, when we obey the heavenly commandments, we walk according to the commandments of the Lord. When we give judgement, and give it in the way we ought, it would seem that we are observing the justifications of the Lord.

21 No eulogy could be more complete, for it embraces the race, the conduct, the function, the deeds, and the judgement of these two: the race, by speaking of their ancestry; the conduct by speaking of their goodness; function by speaking of the priesthood; deeds by speaking of their observance of the commandments; and judgement by speaking of their observance of the justifications.

22 ***"Now it came to pass that when Zachary was performing the priestly function in the order of his course – according to the custom of the priestly office – it was his lot to offer incense, going into the Temple of the Lord.***

All the multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense" (Lk 1:8-10).

The Evangelist seems to indicate here that Saint Zachary is a high priest. For he – as we read in Scripture – entered but once a year into the inner sanctuary, passing through the outer sanctuary. It was the latter part of the Temple that the priests entered daily to perform their sacred duties. *"Into the second [the inner] tabernacle, the high priest alone is allowed to enter, and this but once a year. There he makes an offering for his own sins and those of the people" (Heb 9:7).* The high priest here spoken of is one chosen by lot *(cf.1 Ch 24:5),* for of the True High Priest they were in ignorance. If they had to draw lots to choose him, it means that human judgement could not discern him. What they were looking for was the true High Priest, the other was only a type or figure. What they sought was the true and eternal Priest, to whom was said: *"You are a priest for ever" (Ps 109:4).* It was He would offer His own blood – not the blood of victims *(cf.Heb 9:12)* – and so reconcile His Father to the human race. But first the blood was poured out figuratively, symbolically; so; too, a priest was ordained figuratively. Now that the truth has come, we let go of the symbol and we follow the truth.

In those days, the priests each took their turn; but this Priest is for ever. Indeed and indeed, those others were only taking the place of One who was to come *(cf.Heb 10:1 sq.).*

23 So, they drew lots to see which priest was to enter the Temple. And if, in that age of types and figures, none was allowed to assist the priest, [he had to enter alone], this surely was a sign that a Priest was coming whose sacrifice could in no way be shared by anyone else. Was not

this He who would sacrifice not in temples built by man *(cf.Ac 17:24)* but, in the temple of his own body, would wipe away our sins?

They drew lots to choose their priest. Maybe that is why the soldiers cast lots to decide who would have the Lord's robes *(cf.Lk 23:34)*. The Lord was preparing Himself for the sacrifice, within His own temple, that He would accomplish for us. He, too, wanted to have lots cast for Him in order to fulfil the precept of the Law. (It is because of this that He said: *"I came not to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it" (Mt 5:17)*). There is no doubt that the Old Testament was waiting for Him, and that He alone was the one chosen by God's decree. Besides, the Apostle Matthias was also chosen by lot *(cf.Ac 1:26)*, the Apostles not wishing to choose in any way other than that prescribed by the ancient Law.

24 ***"And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense"*** *(Lk 1:11)*.

It is with good reason that the angel appears in the temple. At long last the coming of the True Priest is heralded, and the heavenly sacrifice prepared – that sacrifice at which the angels would serve.

"Appeared" is *à propos,* because it conveys the idea that Zachary saw the angel suddenly. This is the way that divine Scripture specially likes to speak of apparitions of angels or of God. Someone whom one could not have expected to see, is said to "appear". You read for example: *"God appeared to Abraham near to the oak of Mambre" (Gn 18:1)*. One whom one has not in the least expected and who suddenly makes himself visible, is said to appear. It is not in the same way that we see objects visible to the senses and Him who either chooses or does not choose to be seen. By nature, God is invisible to us; if he does not wish us to see Him, we do not see Him; if He wants us to see him, then we see Him. God appeared to Abraham by His own free choice. To another, likewise by His own choice, God does not appear. Stephen too, when he was being stoned by the people, saw Heaven open. He also saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God *(Ac 7:55)*. But the people did not see. Isaiah saw the Lord of hosts *(Is 6:1)*, but no one else saw Him. He appears only as He pleases.

25 But why speak of humankind when we read regarding the very Virtues and heavenly Powers themselves that *"no one has ever seen God" (Jn 1:18)*? And John speaks then of one who surpasses the heavenly Powers: *"The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has revealed Him to us" (Jn 1:18)*. But if no-one has ever seen God, we have to admit that it is the Son who showed Himself in the Old Testament. The heretics must, therefore, give up believing that he began to exist only from His conception by the Virgin: for even before being born of the Virgin He had already shown Himself.

At any rate, no one will deny that neither the Father, the Son, nor the Holy Spirit (should there be a vision of the Holy Spirit) ever manifest Themselves unless it be under some appearance They have chosen. It does not belong to Their nature to be seen. The Holy Spirit, for example, allowed Himself to be seen in the form of a dove *(cf.Mt 3:16)*. If no one has ever seen God, it is because no one has perceived the plenitude of divinity dwelling in God *(cf. Col 2:9)*: no one has either grasped it with his mind nor taken it in with his eyes *(cf.1 Tm 6:16)* – both these meanings can be given to the verb "has seen". When the sacred writer adds: *"The only Son Himself has revealed Him to us"(Jn 1:18)*, he is thinking more of the eyes of the mind than of those of the body. Appearance is seen, power is revealed. One is perceived with the eyes, the other with the mind.

26 We need not speak only of the Trinity. The seraphim have appeared when they wished, and only Isaiah heard their voice *(Is 6:6)*. The angel too has appeared – he is there at this moment, but we do not see him. It is not in our power to see him, but it is in his power to appear. However, though we may not have the power to see him, grace is not lacking to obtain for us the means of seeing. He who has the grace, obtained power to see. As for us, we do not receive this faculty because we do not have the grace to see God.

27 But is it so very surprising that, in this world, the Lord is seen only when He wants to be? Even at the resurrection only the pure of heart will be allowed to see God. That is why it is written: *"happy the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8)*. Think how many the Lord had already proclaimed blessed, and yet He had not promised them that they would be able to see God! If, therefore, the pure of heart are to see God, it must mean that the others will not see Him. Those who are not worthy will not see God, and anyone who has not wanted to see God will be unable to see God.

It is not in this place or that, that one sees God; one sees Him by means of a pure heart. It is not the eyes of the body that search out God. He is not attained by a glance nor reached by a touch, nor heard in conversation, nor recognised by His walk. When you think He is absent, you see Him. When you think He is present, you do not see Him. What is more, not even all the Apostles saw Christ. That is why he says: *"So long a time I have been with you, and you do not know me yet" (Jn 14:9)*! Paul saw Christ, saw the Father too, for he knew *"what is the length and breadth, the height and depth; the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge" (Ep 3:18-19)*. As for us, it is no longer by the flesh that we know Christ *(cf.2 Co 5:16)*, but by the spirit. *"The Spirit that is before our face is the Lord Christ" (Lm 4:20 Septuagint)*. May He in His kindness fill us with all the fullness of God, so that we might see Him!

If, then, the angel appeared to Zachary *"at the right side of the altar of incense" (Lk 1:11)*, he appeared because he wanted to. So long as he did not want to, he did not appear.

28a He appeared at the right side of the altar of incense as a sign that he was conveying divine mercy. For it is written: *"The Lord is at my right hand, so that I may not be moved" (Ps 15:8)*. In another place you read: *"The Lord is your protection at your right hand" (Ps 120:5)*. I pray Heaven that we too, when we incense the altar and offer sacrifice, may be assisted by the angel. Better still, if we could see him! Indeed, one cannot doubt that the angel is there when Christ is offered in sacrifice: *"For Christ our pasch is sacrificed" (1 Co 5:7)*.

28b Have no fear that your heart will be troubled when you see the angel – for generally we are troubled and beside ourselves with fear when we encounter some supernatural power – this very same angel who comes to us can give us strength. Zachary was troubled, but the angel re-assured him by saying: ***"Do not be afraid, Zachary, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth shall bear you a son. You shall call his name John. You shall have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice at his birth"*** *(Lk 1:13-14)*.

29 When God gives, he gives with *largesse*. His gifts overflow, they are without measure; his gifts are piled high and given out in abundance. You see here how first the angel promises that Zachary's prayer will be answered; then he says that the wife that was barren will become a mother; next he speaks of the joy that will be felt by many people and the greatness of God's power. He speaks of a prophet of the Most High; and – to remove all shadow of doubt – he even gives the name of this child who is to be born. Graces such as these far exceed the limit of desire, and Zachary was very fittingly punished for his disbelief by being struck dumb. We shall explain that later.

There is something quite special about the joy experienced at the conception and birth of a saint. This is because a saint not only brings joy to his parents, but also he brings salvation to a great many people. This passage teaches us how we should rejoice at the birth of saints.

30 At the same time, it is a warning to parents to be properly grateful not only for the merits of their children, but for their birth. It is no slight gift on the part of God when he gives you children to continue your race, heirs to succeed you. Read how Jacob rejoiced to have fathered twelve sons *(cf.Gn 49:28)*. Abraham received one son *(cf.Gn 2:2)*; Zachary's prayer was answered. Fertility is a gift of God to parents. So fathers should be grateful to have begotten sons: sons should be grateful to be begotten; mothers should be grateful for the honour of giving birth to children – for children

are the rewards of matrimony and the prizes that mothers receive for their courage and endurance. Let earth be radiant in praise of God and be thankful that it is cultivated; let the world rejoice because God is known; let the Church be glad to see the number of her faithful people augmented.

It is not in vain that right from the beginning God's order has created the bond of marriage *(cf.Gn 2:24)*. This He did to destroy heresy.* God approved so much of marriage, that He joined man and wife together. God so generously rewarded marriage that even when sterility prevented a couple from having children, He, in His great kindness, has made them fruitful.

31 ***"He shall be great in the sight of God"*** *(Lk 1:15)*.

It is not bodily stature that is intended here, but greatness of soul. In the Lord's eyes there is greatness of soul; there is greatness of virtue. There is also pettiness of soul and childishness so far as virtue is concerned. We calculate a person's age – whether of soul or body – not chronologically but by the degree of virtue that person has attained. The perfect man *(cf.Col 1:28)* is one who has outgrown the faults of childhood, left the slippery paths of adolescence, and reached maturity of soul. But the weakling, the petty of soul, has as yet made no progress at all in virtue. This is why we have that text in Jeremiah where the Lord takes pity on Ephraim, weeping and lamenting his sins: *"'From my youth,' he says, 'Ephraim is my well loved son; a child enjoying pleasure and delight'" (Jr 31:20)*. You see, if as a child he had not indulged in pleasure and delight, he would not have sinned. See how well Scripture puts the two concepts: "enjoying pleasure and delight" and "a child". For there *is* a child who does not sin: *"My Child, whom I have chosen" (Is 43:10)*. Those whom the Lord created innocent, sinned through pleasure. If, then, he had not been a child delighting in pleasure, and if he had grown up and progressed in virtue until he became a man *(cf.Ep 4:13)*, he never would have fallen. He never would have needed to implore mercy for his faults; on the contrary, he would have reason to hope for a reward for his merits. It is to this that the Lord seems to refer when He says in the Gospel: *"Take care not to despise one of these little ones" (Mt 18:10)*. But I shall keep the rest for the appropriate time.

Little is opposite to great. *"When we were children, we were under the elemental principles of this world" (Ga 4:3)*. That must mean that those who are full-grown are above the elemental principles of this world.

32 John will be great, not because of physical stature, but because of greatness of soul. He did not roll back the frontiers of any empire; he never aspired to conquest or the spoils of war. What he did was greater than that. He preached in the desert, and by the greatness of his soul he trampled on pleasure and voluptuous enjoyments. According to this world he was little; but in spirit he was great. So great was he, so unfettered by the

* The heresy of the Manichaeans

enticements of the flesh, that, when taken captive, love of this life could not make him alter the constancy of his mind.

33 ***"From his mother's womb he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit"*** *(Lk 1:15).*

There can be no doubt that what the angel promised proved to be true. Saint John, even before he was born and while still in his mother's womb, gave signs of the wonderful grace that he had received from the Spirit. Though neither his father nor his mother had performed any miracles, that child – by leaping in his mother's womb – announced the coming of the Saviour. You have read what was written: when the mother of the Lord came to visit her cousin, Elizabeth said: *"See, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk 1:44).* He had not yet the breath of life, but he had the Spirit of grace. I might add that we find elsewhere evidence that sanctifying grace precedes the reality of existence, for the Lord has said: *"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you left the womb I sanctified you and made you a prophet to the nations" (Jr 1:5).* The breath or spirit of this life is one thing; that of grace is another. Our breath begins at birth and ends at death; but grace is not limited by time nor age – it is not extinguished by death nor shut out by our mother's womb. Holy Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied *(cf.Lk 1:46)*; a dead man was brought back to life when his body touched the bones of Eliseus *(2 K 13:21)*; and Samuel, even in death, prophesied events to come – as we have on the evidence of Scripture *(cf.1 S 28:16 sq.).*

34 *"He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 1:15).* He who possesses the Spirit of grace wants for nothing; and whoever receives the Holy Spirit has in full measure the greatest of virtues.

35 ***"He shall convert many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God"*** *(Lk 1:16).*

We have plenty of evidence that Saint John converted many hearts. We have the testimony of Scripture, both Old Testament and New. We have: *"a voice cries out in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths" (Is 40:3)*; and we know from the crowds of people who flocked to John for baptism that he caused a considerable number of conversions. Those who believe in John, believe also in Christ, for Christ's Precursor was not preaching about himself, but about the Lord.

36 ***"He shall go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah"*** *(Lk 1:17).*

Here we have a happy juxtaposition, for you cannot have the Spirit without virtue nor virtue without the Spirit. It says, *"in the spirit and power of Elijah"*: this may be because holy Elijah possessed a remarkable degree

of virtue and of grace. He had the power and virtue to turn the souls of the people away from godlessness and back to the Faith. He had the virtues of abstinence and of patience. He had the spirit of prophecy. Elijah was in the desert *(cf.1 K 17:3 sq.)*; so, too, was John in the desert. The former had food brought to him by ravens *(cf.1 K 17:3 sq.)*; the latter lived on locusts *(cf.Mk 1:6)*. Treading underfoot all the attractions of pleasure, he chose austerity and despised luxury. Elijah made no effort to win the favour of the king *(cf.2 K 1:8 sq.)*; John despised Herod. Elijah separated the waters of Jordan *(cf.2 K 14)*; John used them to form a pool where salvation could be sought. John was the contemporary of the Lord; Elijah appeared with the Lord in glory *(cf. Mt 17:3)*. John was the precursor of the Lord's first coming; Elijah of his second coming. One made rain fall after earth had been parched for three years *(cf.1 K 3:18; 1 S 45)*; the other, at the end of three years, bathed the arid clay of our body with the waters of faith.

I know that you will ask me, what three years are these? *"Look,"* says the Lord, *"for three years I come here looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I find none" (Lk 13:7).* "Three" is a mystical number, and it signifies here the salvation of the people. One year stands for the patriarchs – for there never since has been such a number of remarkable men as in that "year". Another stands for Moses and all the other prophets. The third stands for the coming of our Lord and Saviour: *"Look, this is the year acceptable to the Lord, this is the day of recompense" (Lk 4:19).* In the same way, the Father who planted a vineyard did not send for the fruit only once. No, he sent for it many times. First He sent servants, then He sent more servants, and thirdly He sent his own Son *(cf.Mt 21:33 sq.).*

37 John, therefore, came in the spirit and power of Elijah. You cannot have one without the other as is clearly seen in what follows, where it is said: *"The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you" (Lk 1:35).*

But perhaps this passage can be applied to us, too, and to the Apostles. For when Elijah parted the torrent *(cf.2 K 2:14)*, the waters of the river flowed back to their source – *"the Jordan turned backwards in its course" (Ps 113:5).* Now, this signifies the mysteries of the saving font of Baptism, in which the newly-baptised are led back from evil to their original innocence. Also, why did the Lord Himself promise to give His Apostles the power of the Spirit? *"You shall receive,"* he says, *"the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon you" (Ac 1:8).* We later read: *"Suddenly there came a sound from Heaven, as of a wind coming with great might" (Ac 2:2).* Truly we can say "great might", for: *"By the breath of His lips He made all their force" (Ps 32:6).* This force is none other than that which the Apostles received from the Holy Spirit.

38 Equally true is it that Saint John will walk before the Lord. He is precursor by his birth and precursor by his death. Perhaps this

mystery is fulfilled even today in our own present life. There is something like the power of John that comes first into our soul when we are near to believing in Christ. This power prepares the paths of our soul for Faith; it comes to make straight the twisted, tortuous ways of our life and to set them right for our pilgrimage. Otherwise we would fall into some abyss of error. So, all the valleys of our soul will be filled in by the fruits of virtue, and all the high places of worldly pride and dignity will fall prostrate before the Lord in humble fear. For they will know that nothing so fragile, so vulnerable as we are can possibly be exalted.

39 ***"But Zachary said to the angel: 'How am I to know this? For I am old and my wife is advanced in years.' The angel replied to him in these words: 'I am the angel Gabriel and I stand in the presence of the Lord. I have been sent to announce these tidings to you. You shall be dumb, unable to speak until the day when these things shall come to pass, because you did not believe my words which shall be fulfilled in their proper time"*** *(Lk 1:18-20).*

The priest's lack of faith is punished by silence; but the faith of the prophets is proved by their oracles. *"The voice of one saying: 'Cry'. And I said: 'What shall I cry?' 'All flesh is grass' "* *(Is 40:6).* You see the order that is given; the eagerness to obey; the question that the prophet asks; the obedience with which he utters the oracle. When he asked what he was to cry, he believed; and because he believed, he prophesied. Zachary, because he did not believe, could not speak, but *"he made signs and remained dumb" (Lk 1:22).*

40 This mystery is not for one person only, neither is the silence for one person only. The priest is silent, the prophet is silent. If I am not mistaken, in that one person it is the voice of the entire people that is silent; because it was in the voice of one person that the people spoke to God through Moses. The prophet is dumb, the priest is dumb – this means that sacrifices have come to an end and the prophets are silent. *"I will take away the valiant and the strong; the prophet and the counsellor" (Is 3:1-3).* Truly, He took away the prophets when He took from them the words with which they used to prophesy; and He took away their power and might when God's power withdrew from them. He took from them their counsellor when *"The Angel of great counsel" (Is 9:6)* abandoned them. He took their voice, for the voice is meant for the word, not the word for the voice. If the word is not at work within us, then the voice gives no sound. The voice is John; he is *"the voice that cries in the desert" (Lk 3:4),* and Christ is the Word *(cf.Jn 1:1).* This is the word that is at work and which, having ceased to act, renders the voice suddenly silent. It is as though the tongue of the soul loses its inspiration and falls silent. The Word of God has come to us and is not silent in us. No longer can the Jew say: *"You seek a proof of Christ that speaks in me" (2 Co 13:3).* But the Christian can say it.

41 ***"And he made signs to them"*** *(Lk 1:22).*
So Zachary remained dumb, and he made signs to them. What else is a sign but a movement of the body unaccompanied by speech? It strives to indicate what the person wants, but does not actually express it. It is the dumb language of dying people who have lost the power of speech. Don't you think that this resembles the Jewish people? They are unreasonable to the point of not being able to account for their own actions. They have reached the stage when the hope by which they lived has been utterly extinguished; they have lost the voice that once was theirs. No longer able to speak in words they seek to express themselves by faltering motions of the body. This people, therefore, is dumb; it is without reason, without speech. You need not think that the person without speech is any more dumb than the person who is ignorant of the mystery. There is most definitely a language of deeds and a cry of faith, as we read: *"The blood of your brother cries out to me" (Gn 4:10).* That person cries, who in his heart cries all day long *(cf.Ps 87:10).* Whoever has lost the cry of his heart has lost, too, the cry of his tongue. For if you do not keep the discernment of faith, you cannot keep discernment of speech. Moses protested at first that he could not speak *(cf.Ex 4:10).* But once he had said this, he received the word and produced a great radiance of good works. Just as Moses was a type or figure both of the people and of the Law, so too Zachary, by falling dumb, was a type or figure.

42 See how each single word expresses agreement – the word in the womb and the Law in the silence. John is named and Zachary speaks. The word is brought forth, the Law is undone. But it is the loosening of the Law that is the utterance of the word.* He who uttered the word now speaks even though he could not speak before. The angel orders Zachary to be silent, the angel deprives the Jews of the word. For it is a command given by an authority not human but divine, that none should speak to God unless they believe in Christ.

Let us, therefore, believe so that we can speak. Let the Jew believe so that he can speak. We speak spiritually of mysteries; we understand the meaning of the ancient sacrifices and the oracles of the prophets. But one who does not understand the Law is dumb; one who does not understand the sequence of the divine scriptures is dumb. For it is our Faith that is our voice. That is why Paul says: *"I had rather speak five words to the assembly with my understanding, than ten thousand words in tongues" (1 Co 14:19).* For tongues *"are a sign given not for believers but for unbelievers; but prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers" (1 Co 14:22).*

* Zachary's tongue is here seen as a figure of the Old Law.

43 ***"After those days, Elizabeth his wife conceived and hid herself five months. She said: 'What is this the Lord has done for me in the days wherein it has pleased Him to take away my reproach among men?"*** *(Lk 1:24-25).*

The saints have a very great sense of modesty, so much so that they can even feel a kind of shame regarding what they have prayed for – as we see here in the case of Saint Elizabeth. She certainly wanted to have children, yet she hid herself for five months. Why would she hide herself, unless she felt some shame?

The reason is that for every function there is the appropriate and suitable time, what is becoming at one time is not becoming at another time, and difference in age quite alters a situation. Even within marriage there is a certain period of time during which it is honourable to give birth: in the vigour of one's youth when it is natural to expect offspring. Example shows that this is the time of life authorised for child-bearing; this is the time of life when marriage is to be desired. But once a person has reached a more advanced age, an age more apt for instructing children than for giving them birth, there is a sense of shame in presenting the outward signs of a marriage that has been consummated – however honourable and legitimate that union may have been. There is, I say, a kind of shame about bearing the burden intended for a more youthful person, and carrying in the womb fruit that is out of season. Old people tend to refrain from conjugal intercourse, feeling that it is unsuited to their advanced years and rightly fearing that they might appear to be lacking in self-control.

Even young people often put forward the excuse that they want children. They think to hide the heat of their desires by protesting that they desire to have a family. If, therefore, young people blush to admit openly their passion, how much greater must be the shame that old people feel! Yet, even among the young you will find some so filled with fear of God that they are able to rule and moderate their hearts. People such as this, once they have had a family, refrain from further intercourse.

44 Is this so surprising in human beings, seeing that even the very animals tell us silently by their example that they, once they have conceived offspring, cease to copulate? Once they feel their womb grow heavy with the seed that has been implanted in them, they give up physical intercourse. They no longer abandon themselves to passion but devote themselves to the care of their little ones. But as for humans, they have regard neither for their children nor for God. The former they defile, and the latter they provoke to anger. *"Before I formed you in your mother's womb,"* says the Lord, *"I knew you; before you came forth from the womb, I sanctified you" (Jr 1:5).*

Moderate your passion, therefore, by considering that your Creator's hands are at work – so to speak – fashioning a human being within the womb. He is at work, and do you dare to profane the sacred mysteries of the

womb by your lust? At least imitate the animals, or have respect for God. But I need not confine my remarks to the animals. The earth itself often takes a rest from the labour of bringing forth new life; and if the farmer, in over eager haste, loads it with more and more seeds, the earth punishes him for his impudence. She turns her fecundity into sterility. Therefore the elements themselves, and the beasts of the field, are deterred by a natural shame from interfering with the process of gestation.

45 So you see, Elizabeth had reason to blush at the grace she had received, even though she was conscious of her innocence. She blushed because of the advanced age at which she was with child, while at the same time rejoicing greatly that her reproach among men was taken away. Women feel that they are looked down on if they fail to produce the fruit of wedlock *(cf.Gn 30:23)* -- seeing that the sole reason why they marry is in order to have children. Elizabeth was greatly consoled to have her reproach removed, even though at the cost of embarrassment. This shame or embarrassment of which I speak was caused simply by her chronological age.

All this would make one suppose that the couple had ceased to have conjugal relations. For if she had not blushed to have intercourse with an old man, she would not have blushed to bear his child. Yet we know that she did blush to find herself with child, not knowing the sacred mystery of this conception.

46 She who hid herself because she bore a son in her womb, would presently exult because she was bringing into the world a prophet. She blushes; she gives thanks. She doubts; she is re-assured. ***"For,"*** says Elizabeth, ***"as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy"*** *(Lk 1:44).* She cried out in a loud voice when she sensed the arrival of the Lord, for she then believed in the sacred nature of the child she bore. There was no longer any question of shame once she realised that she was giving birth to a prophet. This childbirth was a gift of God; not something sought for in the pleasure of intercourse.

BOOK TWO

1 ***"At this same time the angel Gabriel was sent by the Lord into a town of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the House of David, and the virgin's name was Mary"*** *(Lk 1:26-27).*

Undoubtedly the divine mysteries are hidden from us. It is not easy for man, whoever he is, to penetrate the designs of God *(cf.Is 40:13)*. Nonetheless, from what we know of the actions and teachings of our Lord and Saviour we can understand that it was of express purpose that He chose as Mother of the Lord, a married woman. But why did He not make her a Mother before her marriage? Perhaps because it might have been said of her that she conceived in adultery.

Scripture very aptly points out two things: she was a wife, and she was a virgin. Virgin means that she had never had any sexual intercourse with man; while the status of wife preserves her from the stigma of being thought to have lost her virginity once her pregnancy became apparent. The Lord preferred that some should doubt His divine origins rather than that they should cast suspicion on the purity of His Mother.

In this way the virginity of holy Mary was preserved without detriment to her purity and without loss of her reputation. For saints ought to have a good reputation, even with those outside the Church *(cf.1 Tm 3:7)*. Also, it would never do to give virgins of somewhat doubtful conduct and shady reputation the excuse that even the Mother of the Lord seemed under a cloud.

2 Besides, how could one reproach the Jews, or Herod, if they had seemed to persecute a child born in adultery? Or how could the Lord Himself have said: *"I came not to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it" (Mt 5:17)* if he had begun his career by a violation of the Law? For to be born outside of marriage is condemned by the Law *(cf.Dt 23:17)*. Better still, Mary's purity finds a sure witness in her husband. For he would have resented the injury and would have avenged the insult to his honour, only that he recognised the mystery.

We might add that this lends more weight to Mary's words and spares her from being suspected of a lie. For if, though unmarried, she had become pregnant, she would have seemed to be covering up her condition by means of a lie. But being a wife, there would be no such reason, since for women the recompense of marriage and the blessing of wedlock is to have children.

3 Another reason – and it is not a slight one – is that Mary's virginity was to deceive the prince of this world. Seeing that she was a married woman, he was quite taken in when she gave birth. We can be certain that the Lord fully intended to deceive the world's prince, for His own words are a proof of it. He commanded His Apostles not to speak of the Christ *(cf.Mt 16:20)*. Those whom He cured were forbidden to tell anyone that they were healed *(cf.Mt 8:4)*. He ordered the demons not to speak of the Son of God *(cf.Lk 4:35)*. There can, as I have stated before, be no doubt that the Lord's intention was to deceive this world's prince; and the Apostle, too, declares it: *"As for us, we speak the wisdom of God that is hidden in mystery – a wisdom that none of the princes of this world recognised. For had they recognised it, they would never have crucified the Lord of majesty" (1 Co 2:7 sq.)*. In other words they never would have allowed me to be ransomed by the Lord's death.

It was for our sake that He deceived the devil. He deceived him in order to vanquish him. He deceived the devil when the latter tempted Him, implored Him, called Him Son of God. Never once did the Lord admit to His divinity.

But the princes of this world He deceived even more. For the devil, despite moments of uncertainty when he said: *"If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down" (Mt 4:6)*, recognised Him in the end and moved away. The demons knew Him too, for they said: *"We know who You are, Jesus, Son of God, Why have You come before the time to torment us?" (Mt 8:29)*. They recognised His coming because they knew in advance that He would come. But the princes of this world knew Him not. What better proof have we than that text from the Apostle: *"Had they known, they would never have crucified the Lord of majesty" (1 Co 2:8)*. Strange to say, the malice of the demons succeeds in penetrating things that are hidden; but those taken up by worldly vanities cannot recognise the things of God.

4 By a happy division of testimonies, all the Evangelists bear witness [to Mary's virginity]. Saint Matthew shows us Joseph being warned by an angel not to send Mary away *(cf.Mt 1:20)*. The Evangelist Luke gives his testimony that the marriage was not consummated, and Mary herself testifies to this when she says to the angel: *"How shall this be, since I know not man?" (Lk 1:34)*. Saint Luke proclaims her a virgin when he says: *"The virgin's name was Mary" (Lk 1:27)*. And the Prophet taught us this when he said: *"See, a Virgin shall conceive" (Is 7:14)*.

Joseph also gives his witness *(cf.Mt 1:19)*. He saw that his wife was expecting a child, was aware that he and his wife had never had marital intercourse, and was preparing to let her go. The Lord Himself, while on the Cross, witnessed to Mary's virginity by saying to her: *"Woman, behold your son,"* then to His disciple: *"Behold your mother" (Jn 19:26)*. Both the one and the other – both Mother and Disciple – are witnesses to this for *"from that hour the Disciple took her to his home" (Jn 19:27)*. Had there been conjugal union between Mary and Joseph, she would never have left her

husband, nor would that just man have allowed her to depart.* Besides, how could the Lord have prescribed this divorce, seeing that He had Himself pronounced that no-one should repudiate his wife (except in the case of fornication)?

5 As for Saint Matthew, he shows clearly what a just man should do if he discovers that his wife has been unfaithful *(cf.Mt 5:32)*: he must keep himself innocent of homicide and at the same time pure and innocent of adultery. For, *"he who is joined to a harlot is made one body with her" (1 Co 6:16)*. So, in every circumstance, Joseph remains the perfect picture of a just man, a man of grace. This greatly enhances the witness that he gives. For the mouth of the just can utter no lie and his tongue speaks justice *(cf.Ps 36:30)*. His judgement is true.

And do not be disturbed because Scripture frequently calls him "husband". This is not expressing any loss of virginity, but simply stating that they were espoused and solemnly married. Another point is that no man repudiates a woman whom he has not married. Therefore, to intend repudiating her is a recognition that one has, in fact, married her.

6 Nor need you be upset by those words of the Evangelist: *"And he knew her not until she had brought forth her Son" (Mt 1:25)*. In Scripture, this is a way they have of speaking. Take this text for example: *"until your old age, I am" (Is 46:4)*. Does it mean that after their old age God will have ceased to be? Or take the case of that verse in the psalm: *"The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right until I make your enemies my footstool'" (Ps 109:1)*. Does it mean that afterwards He will no longer sit at the Lord's right?

Or again, if you are pleading a cause, and have said all that is sufficient to prove your case, you do not enquire into what is superfluous. It suffices to deal with the case on hand, and not to enquire into what follows after. Having undertaken to show that the mystery of the Incarnation took place without carnal intercourse, the Evangelist did not consider that it was for him to make further protestation regarding Mary's virginity. Had he done so, he would appear to be defending the Virgin rather than asserting the Mystery. Truly, when he teaches us that Joseph was just, he has said enough to indicate that such a man as this would never have profaned the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Mother of the Lord, the Womb consecrated by the Mystery.

7 We have learnt the order of events; we have learnt the purpose of these events. But let us also learn the mystery. It is good that Mary is both a wife and a virgin, for she is a figure of the Church who is without stain

* The more general belief is that Saint Joseph was already dead at the time of the Crucifixion.

(cf.Ep 5:27), and yet a spouse. As a virgin she has conceived us by the Spirit; as a virgin she brings us forth without the pangs of labour. There may, too, be another reason why Holy Mary became fruitful by One who was not her husband, for the individual churches – made fruitful by the Holy Spirit *(cf.Rv 2:17)* and by grace – are visibly united to a mortal bishop.

8 ***"The angel came in and said to her: 'Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.' But she, on hearing this, was troubled at his entrance"*** *(Lk 1:28-29)*.

Recognise the Virgin by her behaviour, recognise the Virgin by her modesty, recognise the Virgin by her words, recognise her by the mystery. It is a fact that virgins are troubled and fearful when a man approaches them. They are apprehensive if a man speaks to them. Let women learn to imitate this attitude with regard to modesty. Mary was alone in her place of retirement, where no man could see her. None but the angel found her. She was alone, without a companion; alone with no witness at hand. There was not a person present to sully her mind with idle chatter. In her solitude, the angel greeted her. Learn from this, my sister, to avoid carelessness in speech. Mary was fearful even of the angel's greeting: ***"She asked herself what this greeting might mean"*** *(Lk 1:29)*.

9 She asked herself this with modesty, because she was afraid; with prudence, because she was taken aback by such a novel form of greeting – one she had never read anywhere, nor ever come across until then. For Mary alone was this salutation reserved. How right it is that she *alone* should be called full of grace; for she, and she only had obtained such a grace. It was a grace none other had received: to be filled with the Author of grace.

So Mary blushed, Elizabeth also blushed. We must now learn what distinguishes the modesty of the woman from that of the Virgin. The former had reason for blushing, the latter did so from modesty. In the woman a blush indicates a kind of modesty; in the Virgin, a blush renders her modesty more charming.

10 ***"The angel of the Lord said to her: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found grace before God. Look, you shall conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He shall be great.'"*** *(Lk 1:30-32)*.

True, the angel also said of John: *"He shall be great" (Lk 1:15)*. But John is great as man; Jesus is great as God. For, *"the Lord is great, worthy of all praise; and His greatness cannot be measured" (Ps 144:3)*. It is quite true that the other was great, since *"among those that are born of women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Lk 7:28)*. But he has one greater than he, for *"the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than*

he" (Lk 7:28). John, however, is great – but great in the eyes of the Lord. This great John drank no wine, touched no strong drink *(cf.Lk 1:15)*; the Lord, on the other hand, eats and drinks with sinners and publicans *(cf.Mk 2:16)*. John gained merit by his abstinence, but power did not belong to him as a natural prerogative; but Christ, whose nature gave him power to forgive sins, had no reason to avoid people whom He could make something better than abstemious.

11 There, too, lies a mystery: He who was going to give them the Sacrament, did not refuse to be a fellow-guest. Jesus eats; John fasts. Here we have a type or figure of the two Peoples. In the one he fasts; in the other He feasts. Of course Christ fasted too, so that you would not refuse to fast; and when He ate with sinners, it was so that you would perceive His graciousness and recognise His power.

Therefore John is great, but his greatness has a beginning and an end. But the Lord Jesus is Himself both the beginning and the end; He is at the same time the First and the Last *(cf.Rv 22:13)*. Before this "First" there is nothing; after this "Last" there is nothing.

12 You must not let the laws that govern human generation betray you into thinking that because Jesus is "Son" He cannot be "First". Hold fast to Scripture and you will not err. The Son is called "first". But you will also read there that the Father is "alone": *"He alone has immortality and inhabits light inaccessible" (1 Tm 6:16)*. You have likewise read: *"And to the one and only immortal God" (1 Tm 6:17)*.

But He is not first *before* the Father, nor is the Father alone *without* the Son. If you deny the one, you affirm the other. Hold on to both, and you confirm both. He did not say: *"I am before and I come after,"* but: *I am the first and the last" (Rv 1:17; 22:13)*. The Son is first, and by consequence co-eternal, for He has a Father with whom He is eternal. I make bold to say that the Son is the first, but He is not alone. I say this truly and I say it devoutly. Why, O heretics, do you listen to what is impious? Those snares you spread out for others, you fall into them yourselves. The Son is first, and He is not alone: first because He is always with the Father; not alone, because He is never without the Father. It is not I who say it, but He Himself. His own words are: *"Yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me" (Jn 16:32)*.

The Father is alone, because there is only one divinity – that of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and to be unique is to be alone. The Father is alone, the only Son is alone, so too the Holy Spirit is alone: for He who is Son is not also Father, and He who is Father is not also Son, nor is the Holy Spirit also the Son. The Father is distinct, the Son is distinct, the Holy Spirit is distinct. For we read: *"I will ask my Father and He shall give you another advocate" (Jn 14:16)*. The Father is alone because there is only one God from whom everything proceeds. The Son is alone because there is only one Lord through whom everything exists *(cf.1 Co 8:6)*. To be divine is to be alone; to generate testifies that there is both a Father and a Son, so that the Son is never seen without the Father nor the Father without the Son. In this sense the Father is not alone: He is not the only one dwelling in inaccessible light, for we read that *"no one has ever seen God except the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1:18)*. He it is who sits at the right hand of the Father. There are people who dare to say that there can be no access to the light in which the Father dwells! Is light more excellent than the Father? What light, then, can be inaccessible to Him to whom the Father is not inaccessible? He is the true light and the author of eternal light – that light of which Scripture says: *"This was the true light, which enlightens everyone who comes into this world" (Jn 1:9)*. Consider whether this be not that inaccessible light in which the Father dwells, and in which the Son equally dwells – for the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father *(cf.Jn 14:11)*.

13 He, truly, is great. Far and wide spreads the power of God. Far and wide extends the magnitude of the heavenly substance. For the Trinity, there is no term, no limit, no measure, no dimension. It is not enclosed by place, not grasped by intellect; it is not changed by the passage of time. Of course, to men too God has given greatness, for *"their voice has gone forth through all the earth and their words to the utmost bounds of the world" (Ps 18:5)*. But not to the limits of the universe, not to the limits of Heaven, whereas *"all things were created in the Lord Jesus, things in Heaven and on the earth, both visible and invisible" (Col 1:16 sq.)*.

Contemplate the sky, Jesus is there; look upon the earth, Jesus is there. By means of the Word ascend into Heaven, by means of the Word descend into Hell, Jesus is there *(cf.Ps 138:8)*. Today, as I speak to you, He is with me. He is with me at this instant, at this moment. And if, at this moment, there is a Christian speaking in Armenia, Jesus is there, for *"no-one says that Jesus is Lord, if not through the Holy Spirit" (1 Co 12:3)*. If, in imagination, you plunge into the depths, there too you will see Jesus. For it is written: *"Do not say within your heart: 'Who shall ascend into Heaven?' That would be to bring Christ down! Or: 'Who has descended into the abyss?' This would be to bring Christ back from the dead!" (Rm 10:6 sq.)*. Where, then, is He not? For He it is who brought to completion all that is in Heaven, in the abyss, and on the earth, Therefore He, truly, is great; and His power fills all the earth. He is everywhere, and will continue for ever, for *"His Kingdom shall have no end" (Lk 1:33)*.

14 ***"But Mary said to the angel: 'How shall this be done since I know not man?' "*** *(Lk 1:34)*

One might, at first glance, think that Mary lacked faith, but take very careful note of what she says. For one thing, it is quite out of the question that one who is lacking in faith would be chosen as Mother of the only Son

of God. True, a Mother's prerogative is unique, and to a Mother the very highest honour is due. Nonetheless, if her prerogative is very great, so too should her faith be very great. How come, then, that Zachary was condemned to silence for his unbelief, and Mary – supposing that she had not believed – would nevertheless receive the honour of being filled with the Holy Spirit?

Mary must neither refuse to believe, nor must she rush to take possession of what is divine. It is not an easy matter to know *"the mystery hidden from eternity in God" (Ep 3:9; Col 1:26)*. Even the Powers on high did not know it. Yet Mary did not refuse belief nor did she resist her rôle. She submitted her will and promised her services. For when she asked: *"How shall this be done" (Lk 1:34)*, she was not doubting the outcome but asking in what manner the event would come about.

15 Her reply was far more measured than those words of the priest. For she said: *"How shall this be done?"* But the priest replied: *"How am I to know this?" (Lk 1:18)*. Mary is already discussing the matter, but the other does not quite believe the news that is brought to him. In saying that he does not know, he declares his unbelief; and in order to believe he seems to be looking for further proof. Mary shows readiness to do what she is asked and does not doubt that the mystery will be accomplished. This is clear from the fact that she asks in what manner can it be done. As you read: *"How shall this be done, since I know not man?"* Childbirth such as this was incredible and unheard of, and the mystery of it had to be heard to be believed. For a Virgin to give birth is a sign not of something human but of divine mystery. That is why Scripture says: *"Take this for a sign. Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son" (Is 7:14)*.

Mary had read this, and had believed that it would one day happen. But she had not read in what manner it was to happen. The Lord had not revealed, even to so great a prophet, the manner in which the mystery would be accomplished. You see, the telling of a mystery such as this must come not from the lips of man, but from an angel. Today, for the first time, we hear: ***"The Holy Spirit shall come upon you"*** *(Lk 1:35)*. We hear and we believe.

16 Therefore she says: ***"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word"*** *(Lk 1:38)*.

Such humility! Such devotion! She calls herself the Lord's servant – she who is the chosen Mother – and the astonishing news she has received does not turn her head. In calling herself a handmaid she is claiming no privilege in consequence of the great grace she has received. She would do what she was told to do. For since she was to give birth to the Meek and Humble *(cf.Mt 11:29)*, it was only right that she herself should prove that she was humble.

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). You see there her obedience. You see there her earnest desire. *"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord"* indicates her readiness to serve. *"Be it done to me according to your word"* means that what she wishes has already been conceived.

17 How prompt Mary is to believe, even though the circumstances are quite extraordinary! For what two concepts could be more disparate than the Holy Spirit and a human body? Can anything be more unheard of than a virgin pregnant contrary to Law, to custom, to the maidenly modesty that is a virgin's greatest concern? Zachary, on the other hand, refused to believe not because intercourse with a wife is abnormal, but because of his advanced age. The conditions were otherwise perfectly normal. For a man and his wife to have children is the regular thing, and nothing that conforms with nature should be looked on as incredible. Age is dependent upon nature, not nature upon age, and it often happens that age puts an obstacle in the way of nature. But it is not contrary to reason that the lesser should cede to the greater, and that nature's privilege should prove itself mightier than the feebleness of age.

Add to this that Abraham and Sarah had a son in their old age *(cf.Gn 21:2)*; and that Joseph is spoken of as being the son of Isaac's *"old age" (Gn 37:3)*. Now, if Sarah is corrected for having laughed *(cf.Gn 18:13)*, it is still more just that Zachary should be condemned for having believed neither the message nor the precedent. Mary, on the other hand, says: *"How shall this be done, since I know not man?"* She does not appear to be doubting the fact, but only to be asking in what way it was to come about. It is quite clear that she believed in its accomplishment since she asked in what way it would be accomplished. Therefore she well deserved to hear those words: ***"Blessed are you because you have believed!"*** *(Lk 1:45)*. Yes, Mary was very, very blessed. She far surpassed the priest. The priest wouldn't believe. The Virgin corrected his error.

It is not surprising that when the Lord decided to ransom the world, He should begin his work with Mary. Through her he was preparing the salvation of all people, and it was only fitting that she should be the first to receive from her Son the fruit of salvation.

18 Mary was right to enquire in what way this event would be accomplished. She had read in Scripture that a Virgin would bring forth a Child, but she had not read *how*. She had read, as I have already told you: *"Behold a Virgin shall conceive" (Is 7:14)*; but how was she to conceive? In the Gospel, for the first time, the angel tells us how this would be done.

19 ***"And Mary, rising up in those days, went in haste into the hill country, into a city of Judah. She entered into the house of Zachary and greeted Elizabeth"*** *(Lk 1:39-40).*

When someone wants to be believed it is normal that he should give reasons why he should be believed. The angel, when announcing the mystery, gave Mary a proof or precedent that would enable her to believe him. He therefore announced to Mary, a virgin, that an old and hitherto barren woman was now expecting a child. This was to show that God can do what he likes. On learning this, Mary set off at once for the hill country. This was not from any lack of faith in the prophecy, not from any doubt regarding the precedent that he had spoken of. No, she went out of sheer joy, out of pure desire to fulfil a duty of love. Filled from now on with God, where should she hasten if not to the heights?

20 My sisters, learn from this to serve with the greatest eagerness those belonging to you who are with child. Mary had, up to this moment, lived in the strictest retirement. Neither that, nor her virginal dread of appearing in public, nor the ruggedness of the mountain paths, nor the length of the journey could deter her from fulfilling her duty. Towards the heights the Virgin hastens – the Virgin who thinks only of rendering service and is forgetful of the trouble to herself. Her strength lies not in her sex but in her love. She leaves her house and sets forth.

21 My sisters, learn not to go running about from one house to another *(cf.1 Tm 5:13)*, not to linger on the streets, and not to talk in public *(cf.1 Co 14:35)*. Mary lingers in her own home but hastens when she has to go out. She stayed three whole months with her cousin. Since she had come to render service she devoted herself to that service. She remained three months not because she enjoyed being in someone else's house, but because she did not like to be seen much in public.

22 My sisters, you have learnt Mary's purity and refinement. Learn, too, her humility. She comes as a cousin to her cousin, as a younger woman to an elder. Not only does she come, but she is the first to address a greeting. It is highly becoming that the more chaste a virgin is, the more humble she should be. She should show respect for her elders. If she professes chastity, then she should be a model of humility.

A sense of love and duty compels her to come, but there is too a lesson to be taught in doctrine. For we must consider that the superior comes to the inferior in order to help the inferior. Mary comes to Elizabeth; Christ comes to John. So too, at a later stage, the Lord came to baptism to sanctify baptism *(cf.Mt 3:13)*.

Immediately there could be seen the blessings that came from the arrival of Mary and the presence of the Lord. For: ***"When Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the infant leaped in her womb; and she was filled with the Holy Spirit"*** *(Lk 1:41)*.

23 But notice the careful choice, the delicate precision, of each word. Elizabeth was first to hear the voice, but John was first to feel the grace. The woman, in accordance with the laws of nature, heard; but the child, under the influence of mystery, leaped for joy. Elizabeth recognised the arrival of Mary, but the little one recognised the coming of the Lord. The woman saw the Woman, the child perceived the Child. The women speak words of grace; the little ones are at work within and engage in the mystery of love and mercy for the benefit of their mothers. And, by a double miracle, the mothers prophesy under the inspiration of their children. The child leaped for joy, the mother was filled with the Spirit. The mother was not filled before her son, but when the son had been filled with the Holy Spirit, then the mother too was filled.

John leaped for joy, and the spirit of Mary rejoiced. As John leaped, Elizabeth was filled. We are not told that Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit [this had already happened], but that her spirit rejoiced *(cf.Lk 1:47)* – for He who is incomprehensible was working within the Mother in a manner beyond our understanding.

In short, Elizabeth was filled after she conceived; Mary was filled before she conceived.

24 ***"You are blessed among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And whence is it to me that the Mother of my Lord should visit me?"*** *(Lk 1:42-43).*

The Holy Spirit knows what He has promised. He never forgets His word. The prophecy is realised not only in wondrous fashion, but in strict accord with the words of the prophecy. What is this "fruit of the womb", if not He of whom it was said: *"See, the Lord gives children as an inheritance, the reward of the fruit of the womb" (Ps 126:3)*. In other words, the Lord's inheritance are children; the reward of the Fruit which issues from the womb of Mary. He is the Fruit of the womb. He is the Flower of the root of which Isaiah prophesied well: *"A rod shall come from the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up from his root" (Is 11:1)*. The root is the Jewish race; the rod or branch is Mary; Mary's Flower is Christ. According as we progress in virtue Christ, like the fruit of a good tree, at one time flowers in us, at another time forms fruit in us; at another time is born again by the resurrection which restores life to His body.

25 ***"And how has it come to pass that the Mother of my Lord should visit me?"*** *(Lk 1:43).*

It is by no means ignorance that makes her speak like this – she knows perfectly well that grace and the Holy Spirit are at work and that it is for the benefit of her child that the prophet's mother is being greeted by the Mother

of the Lord – but she recognises the fact that this is not the result of any human merit, but is purely a gift of grace. Therefore she says: *"Whence is it to me?"* She means: what happiness for me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me! It is not due to me that such happiness should come, I know that. How come that this should be given to me? By what justice, what deeds, what merits? Among women, this is not the customary procedure *"that the Mother of my Lord should come to me."* I have a presentiment of the miracle, I recognise the miracle: the Mother of the Lord is pregnant with the Word. She is full of God.

26 ***"Hear this. At the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child leaped for joy in my womb. And blessed are you because you have believed"*** *(Lk 1:44-45).*

See, Mary did not doubt. She believed. And by believing she obtained the fruit of faith. *"Blessed,"* says Elizabeth, *"because you have believed."* But you too are blessed, because you have heard and have believed. For every soul that believes conceives and brings forth the Word of God and recognises His works. May Mary's soul reside in each one of us to glorify the Lord; may Mary's spirit reside in each one of us to rejoice in God. According to the flesh there is only one Mother of Christ, but by faith Christ becomes the fruit of each one. For every soul receives the Word of God – on condition that it keeps its chastity and that free from vice it preserves its purity immaculate.

27 Every soul that reaches such a state magnifies the Lord, as Mary's soul magnified the Lord and as her spirit rejoiced in God her Saviour. Truly, the Lord is magnified: for you read somewhere else, *"Magnify the Lord with me" (Ps 33:4).* This does not mean that human speech can add anything to the Lord; it means rather that the Lord grows within us. *"Christ is the image of God" (2 Co 4:4),* and therefore the soul that acts justly and devoutly magnifies this image of God, in whose likeness it was created *(cf.Gn 1:27).* It magnifies that image and – while magnifying it – participates in some sort in its grandeur and is made sublime. It appears to reproduce this icon within itself by the brilliant colours of its good deeds; and by its virtue it seems to copy the original.

Mary's soul, however, magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God because, soul and spirit, she is vowed to the Father and the Son. Devoutly, lovingly, she venerates the one and only God, from whom all things proceed; the one and only Lord through whom all things exist *(cf.1 Co 8:6).*

28 There follows Mary's prophecy. Its plenitude matches the greatness of the person who utters it. I consider it not without interest that Elizabeth prophesies before the birth of John, and Mary, too, prophesies before the birth of the Lord. The first beginnings of man's salvation

gradually emerge; and since sin began from women, it is right that good, too, should begin from women. Thus women, laying aside womanish things, might renounce weakness. And their soul, which has no sex, might apply itself religiously to imitating the chastity of sinless Mary.

29 ***"Mary remained with her three months and then returned to her own home"*** *(Lk 1:56).*

It is good that we are shown Mary rendering service, and good too that we are shown her faithfully observing the mystical number.* For it was not only because she was a cousin that Mary stayed so long, it was also for the benefit of a very great prophet. I assure you, if Mary's first entrance produced such an effect that at her greeting the infant John leaped in his mother's womb, and the child's mother was filled with the Holy Spirit, just imagine how great must have been the effect of the holy Virgin's presence over such a long period of time!

Mary stayed with her three months. In this way the prophet was well anointed and, like a good athlete, was exercised in his mother's womb. For the contest for which he was being strengthened was no slight one.

So Mary waited till Elizabeth's full time of being delivered was accomplished. I would like you to pay careful attention to the wording: you will find that a like expression is not used except in referring to the birth of the just. For example, it is written of Mary that *"her days were accomplished that she should be delivered" (Lk 2:6);* while of Elizabeth we read that *"her full time of being delivered was accomplished".* The fullness of time is accomplished when the saints have departed the course of this earthly life. Fullness of life awaits the just. But the days of the wicked are void and empty.

30 ***"Elizabeth brought forth a son, and her neighbours shared her joy"*** *(Lk 1:57-58)*

The birth of saints is a joy for many, because it is a good shared by all. For justice is a virtue that benefits others. At the birth of this just man one sees signs already of what his life will be; and the charm of the virtue that will be his is already signified by the joy of the neighbours.

It is fortunate that, [at John's birth], the time spent by the prophet in his mother's womb is mentioned, otherwise Mary's presence would not have been made known to us. But as regards the time of John's childhood, all that is veiled in silence. The reason is that the presence of the Lord had made him already strong and robust in his mother's womb, and he never knew the helplessness of infancy. So, in the Gospel we read nothing of John apart from his birth and his witness; his leaping for joy in his mother's womb, his words in the desert. You see, he never knew the age of infancy and

* Certain numbers, such as three and seven, were considered mystical.

childhood. Still in his mother's womb he was raised above nature, above age, and began life at the age of perfection; fully mature with the fullness of Christ *(cf.Ep 4:13)*.

31 ***"His mother replied and said: 'No, he shall be called John.' And they said to her: 'There is none of your kindred that is called by that name.' Then they made signs to his father, enquiring how he would have him called. He took a writing tablet and wrote: 'His name is John.' And they were all amazed. And immediately his tongue was loosed and his mouth was opened; and he spoke, blessing God"*** *(Lk 1:60-64)*.

It is rather striking that the holy Evangelist makes a point of telling us that many people thought that the child should be given the name of Zachary his father. Notice that the mother did not find it displeasing to give her son the name of a stranger, but had already received a communication to this effect from the Holy Spirit – who had previously announced the name to Zachary. He, being dumb, could not tell his wife the boy's name, but Elizabeth learnt by revelation what she could not be told by her husband. *"John,"* she declared, *"is his name."* It is as if to say: it is not we who give him a name, since he has already received his name from God. He has his name. We did not choose it, but we recognise it.

Saints have this privilege of receiving a name from God. For example, Jacob is called "Israel" because he saw God *(cf.Gn 32:28)*. So, too, our Lord is called "Jesus" before His birth; it is not the angel but the Father who confers this name upon Him: *"My Son Jesus,"* so Scripture says, *"will show Himself with those who share His joy, who are left for four hundred years. And after these years my Son the Christ shall die and the world be converted" (Vulgate, 4 Esdras 7:28-30)*. You observe that angels announce what they have heard, they do not take it on themselves to make an announcement.

You need not be surprised that this woman bears witness to a name that she had not even heard. The Holy Spirit, who had entrusted this name to an angel, revealed it to her Himself. Besides, it is unthinkable that she who had proclaimed Christ would be in ignorance regarding the Lord's Precursor.

32 There is a reason for adding that none of her kinsfolk bore this name. In this way you are made to understand that this name does not designate the family but the prophet.

Zachary, in turn, is interrogated by signs. But he who had lost his speech and his hearing because of incredulity, and who could not reply with his voice, spoke with his hand and his writing. For, *"he wrote saying: 'John is his name' "*. He does not give the name, but he testifies to it. It is right and proper that at once his tongue is loosed. It was tied by incredulity, and set free by faith. Let us, too, believe, in order that we might speak

(cf.Ps 115:1). May our tongue, held fast by the bonds of unbelief, be set free to speak words that are spiritual.

If we wish to speak mysteries, let us first write them in spirit. We should write Christ's message *"not on tablets of stone, but on the tablets of our heart's flesh" (2 Co 3:3)*. To speak of John means to prophesy Christ. We must speak of John, we must speak also of Christ, so that our lips too may be opened – those lips that even in a priest so great as Zachary were bridled, as though he were a dumb beast, and all because his faith hesitated.

33 ***"Zachary his father was filled with the Holy Spirit. And he prophesied in these words"*** *(Lk 1:67)*.

See how good God is, how prompt to pardon us our sins. What He takes away He restores again; and even what we had not hoped for He gives us. This man, though a long time dumb, prophesies. This is God's supreme grace – that those who have denied Him should confess Him. Let no-one lose heart. Let no-one, however conscious of their previous sins, despair of divine recompense. God knows how to modify His judgement, provided you know how to correct your fault.

34 ***"And you, little child, shall be called Prophet of the Most High"*** *(Lk 1:76)*. It is right that in prophesying on the Lord he should address a word to the Lord's prophet; and to point out that in the child, too, we have a great gift of God. Otherwise, in enumerating God's blessings in a general way, he would have seemed ungrateful not to make any mention of those blessings he had himself received, and which he recognised in his son. Perhaps some people will find it unreasonable and extravagant to address words to an infant of eight days. But when we come to think of it we understand perfectly that the child, once born, could hear his father's voice – seeing that he heard Mary's greeting even before he was born. Zachary, being a prophet, knew that a prophet has ears other than those which the rest of us have; ears which are opened not by physical development but by the work of the Holy Spirit. Love made John leap in the womb, and understanding made him grasp what was said to him.

35 Notice too how short Elizabeth's prophesy is, and how long Zachary's. Both spoke from the fullness of the Holy Spirit, but a proper regard for order required that the woman should be more zealous to learn than to teach *(cf.1 Co 14:35)*. It is not easy, therefore, to find any woman who prophesied at greater length than the Mother of the Lord. The prophetess Mary, sister of Aaron, ended her canticle somewhat abruptly *(cf.Ex 15:20 sq.)*. Whereas when she spoke at some length to her brother, she was well punished for her words *(Nb 12:1 sq.)*.

36 ***"Now it happened in those days that an edict went forth from Caesar Augustus that a census be taken of the whole world"*** *(Lk 2:1)*.

Seeing that we are going to speak of the Saviour's birth, we do not consider it irrelevant that we should make enquiries with regard to the time of His birth. There is a link between this declaration as to the period, historically speaking, when it occurred, and the Birth itself. The writer's purpose is to turn our attention, here again, to a divine mystery. Under cover of this statement regarding the historical or chronological time, a spiritual mystery unfolds: this "census" is accomplished not by the king of this world, but by the King of Heaven. This mystery is the Profession of Faith, the Census of Souls.

With the abolition of the ancient census of the Synagogue, a new one is being made ready. It is that of the Church who, instead of inflicting harsh penalties, removes them. Now, in a figurative or symbolic manner, the people are already being enrolled for Christ. There is no question here of measuring the extent of a person's land. Instead, their souls and minds are valued. Here we do not speak of defining frontiers and boundaries but of opening them up. There is no distinction made as regards age, but instead all are enrolled. Actually no-one is exempt from the Census. Every age pays its own tribute to Christ. Crying infants confess Him by their martyrdom *(cf.Mt 2:16)*; even the unborn witness to Him by leaping for joy in the womb *(cf.Lk 1:44)*. Fear nothing harsh or terrible or cruel in this Census. Faith alone will distinguish each one.

Do you want to know who are Christ's inspectors and collectors? They are ordered to make their census without the use of rods *(cf.Mt 10:10)*; to conquer the people not by fear but by kindness. They are to put away the sword *(cf.Mt 26:52)* and to possess no gold *(cf.Mt 10:9)*. Such are the censors who have conquered the world.

37 To put it in a nutshell: in order that you may learn that this Census belongs not to Augustus but to Christ, *all the world* is commanded to declare itself. At Christ's birth, all declare themselves; when the world is convoked, all are put to the test. Who, I ask you, could demand the census of the entire world if not He who has power over the entire world? The earth does not belong to Augustus, for *"the Lord's is the earth and its fullness, the world and all who dwell in it" (Ps 23:1)*. Augustus did not govern the Goths, not did he rule the Armenians. Christ governed them. They indeed welcomed Christ's censor, for they produced martyrs to Christ. Perhaps that is why they triumph over us – as we see at this actual moment,* for they by

* The year would seem to be A.D. 377 when the Arian emperor Valens was defeated by the Goths and Armenians.

the shedding of their blood confessed Christ, while the Arians deny his divine nature.

38 ***"This enrolling,"*** says Scripture, ***"was the first made"*** *(Lk 2:2)*. Now, we know that many regions of the world had already and frequently been enrolled – as history testifies. This is, therefore, the first enrolling of *souls*; and in this enrolling all must profess themselves, and there can be no exception. They are convoked not by a herald, but by the Prophet who said long ago: *"Clap your hands, all you nations. Shout to God with shouts of joy. For the Lord is supreme, greatly to be feared, High King over all the earth" (Ps 46:2)*.

Finally, to teach you that the tax demanded is justice, see who it is that comes: Joseph and Mary, the just man and the Virgin. The one who was to save the Word, and the other who was to bring Him into the world.. Where do the just and the Virgin declare themselves, if not at the place of Christ's birth? For *"every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God" (1 Jn 4:2)*. Yet, in a profounder sense, where is Christ born if not in your bosom? *"For the Word is very close; He is on your lips and in your heart" (Rm 10:8)*.

39 He does well to name the Governor as this situates the event in history. ***"This enrolling was first made by Cyrinus, the Governor of Syria" (Lk 2:2)***. It looks as though the Evangelist gives the governor's name just as one would give that of a Consul to mark or date the year of which one is writing. If the names of the current consuls are inscribed on deeds of purchase, how much more important is it that the date of the world's Ransom should be clearly indicated! Therefore, you have here all that it is customary to put on a contract: the name of the sovereign emperor then reigning, the day, the place, the title. It is also the custom to have witnesses. Christ certainly had witnesses to His birth and generation according to the flesh; witnesses who signed the Gospel. This He makes clear when He says: *"You shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem" (Ac 1:8)*.

40 ***"And it came to pass that when they were there, her days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son and wrapped Him up in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn"*** *(Lk 2:7)*.

In few words Saint Luke shows us how, when, and where Christ was born according to the flesh. But if you want to enquire into his heavenly generation, read Saint John. He begins in Heaven and descends to Earth. In Saint John you will find when He was and how He was and what He was. You will read what He had done, what He was in process of doing; and where He was and whither He came; how He came, at what time He came, for what motive He came. *"In the beginning,"* says John, *"was the Word"*

(Jn 1:1); in those words he tells us when the Word was. *And the Word was with God"* – this shows us in what manner He was. You also learn what He was: *"And the Word was God."* You discover what He had made: *"All things were made through Him" (Jn 1:3)*. You learn too what He was doing: *"he was the true light that enlightens every one coming into this world" (Jn 1:9)*. You are told where He was: *"He was in this world;"* you also learn where He came to: *"He came to His own" (Jn 1:11)*. You are told how He came: *"The Word was made flesh" (Jn 1:14)*. You hear when He came, for to this John the Baptist gives witness when he says of Christ: *"This is He of whom I spoke: 'there is one coming after me who is preferred before me because He was before me' " (Jn 1:30)*. As to why He came, John witnesses to this when he says: *"Look, this is the Lamb of God, this is He who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29)*.

We now know the dual generation of Jesus and the rôle of each, and are aware that His purpose in coming is – by His death – to take on Himself the sins of the world; and so to abolish our disgrace and, in Himself, to do away with death *(cf.2 Tm 1:10)* – death the unconquerable. It follows that Saint Luke should, in his turn, teach us the ways of the Lord, and show us how He grew up according to the flesh.

41 Please, let no-one be disturbed if, having attributed to a most profound design the omission of John the Baptist's childhood *(cf. 2:30, above)*, we now justify the description of Christ's childhood. For it does not belong to everyone to say: *"For the weak I have made myself weak. in order to win over the weak. I have made myself all things for all people" (1 Co 9:22)*. Nor could it be said of anyone else: *"He was wounded for our iniquity, He was made weak for our sins" (Is 53:5)*.

Therefore Christ became a little one, He became a child, so that you might become a perfect man. He was wrapped in swaddling bands, so that you might be freed from the bonds of death. He lay in a manger so that you might be raised to the altar. He dwelt on earth so that you might live among the stars. There was no room for Him in the inn, this was so that you might have many rooms in the heavenly mansions *(cf. Jn 14:2)*.

"He who was rich made himself poor for your sake, so that you might be rich" (2 Co 8:9). The Lord's poverty is my inheritance and His weakness is my strength. For Himself He preferred poverty and want, so that for others He might have abundant wealth. It is I who am washed by those tears that He shed as a crying infant, it is my sins that are wiped away by those tears.

My Lord Jesus, I owe more to You for the humiliation You suffered to redeem me than I do for the work You performed to create me.

42 But no-one is to think that the Lord's divinity was totally imprisoned in His body. Human nature is one thing and the glory of divinity is another. My friend, for your sake He was weak; but in Himself He was powerful. For your sake He was destitute, in Himself He was all riches. Do not judge these matters by what you see, but acknowledge that you have been redeemed. You see Him in swaddling bands; what you do not see is that He is in Heaven. You hear an infant wailing; what you do not hear is the lowing of an ox that recognises its Lord and Maker. For *"The ox knows his owner and the ass his master's crib [praesaepe]" (Is 1:3)*. Actually, I should not at all mind saying *praesaepium** since that is how the translator has written it. I care nothing about a difference in the word if there is no difference in the sense.

Cicero, the consummate orator among those who cultivate an ornamental style, says that the fortunes of Greece do not depend on whether you use this word or that. What is important, he says, is to examine well the matter under discussion *(cf.Cic. Orat., 27)*. Even their philosophers, those who spend whole days in argument, make use of words which are not quite what you could call correct Latin, or Latin such as is generally spoken, in order to hit upon the right term for expressing their ideas. If such is the case, need we be so very careful regarding words provided only that we consider the mystery [behind the words]? In the mystery we are assured of victory despite the poverty of our style. The marvels of works divine shine out without any need of literary devices. The light of their own truth gives sufficient *éclat*. The she-donkey at the manger is fed not by false delicacies but by the true and pure nourishment of the holy crib.

43 Here we have the Lord. Here we have the Manger. Through this a divine mystery is revealed to us. Namely, that the Gentiles – living like dumb beasts in a stable – would be fed in abundance by sacred nourishment. So the she-donkey, type and figure of the Gentiles *(cf.Ex 13:13)*, recognises her Master's crib. Therefore she can say: *"The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want" (Ps 22:1)*. These signs by which God is recognised are by no means to be disparaged; signs such as ministering angels *(cf.Lk 2:9)*, Magi coming to adore *(cf.Mt 2:1-16)*, and martyrs bearing witness. He emerges from the womb, but comes like lightening from the heavens. His bed is in a lonely stable, but the Child glows in light. A married lady gives Him birth, but a Virgin conceived Him. A wife conceived, but a Virgin brought Him forth.

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Saint Matthew has, in truth, taught us a most important mystery *(cf.Mt 2:1)*. But Saint Luke, finding that Matthew had already recounted it at

* Ambrose must have felt "praesaepe" was the more correct form of the Latin word for "crib".

some length, passes over it in silence. For him, it was treasure enough that he alone should attest to the Lord's Manger.

44 Magi came from the East, they undertook an arduous journey, to prostrate themselves in adoration before this little Child *(cf.Mt 2:2; 11)* whom you, faithless one, despise. They call Him King, and recognise that He will rise again – drawing from their treasures gold, frankincense and myrrh. What is the meaning of these gifts of true faith? Gold is for the King, incense for God, and myrrh for the dead. One is the sign of royalty, another is the sacrifice offered to the divine Power, the third is the honour bestowed at burial; intended not for the decomposition of the body but for its preservation.

We, my brothers and sisters who hear and read these things, should offer like gifts from our treasures. For, *"we have a treasure in earthenware jars" (2 Co 4:7)*. Even what is within you, you should not consider as being or originating from you; how much more, therefore, should you consider as belonging to Christ that which comes from Christ!

45 So, the Magi take out gifts from their treasures. Would you like to know what rich reward they receive? To them, the Star is visible *(cf.Mt 2:2)*; but to Herod it is invisible. Over the place where Christ is, it re-appears and points the way. Therefore this Star is the Way, and the Way is Christ *(cf.Jn 14:6)*. The fact is that in the mystery of the Incarnation, Christ is the Star: *"For a star shall arise out of Jacob and a man shall spring up from Israel" (Nb 24:17)*. It follows that where Christ is, there too is the Star, for Christ is *"the bright star of the morning" (Rv 22:16)*, and by His own light He signals to us.

46 There is another lesson to be learnt. The Magi came by one way and went back by another *(cf.Mt 2:12)*. Having seen Christ, having understood Christ, they surely return home better men than when they came. There are, in truth, two ways. One which leads to death *(cf.Mt 7:13)* and one which leads to the Kingdom. The former is the one taken by sinners and it leads them to Herod. The latter way is Christ *(cf.Jn 14:16)*, and leads one home to one's own country. For here below is but a passing exile; as Scripture says: *"Long has my soul been in exile" (Ps 119:6)*. Beware of Herod. Shun those who for a little time have power in this world. Strive to win an eternal dwelling in the heavenly Homeland.

47 God's chosen people are not the only ones to whom these rewards are offered, for *"Christ is all and in all" (Col 3:11)*. It is not without significance that Abraham came from the midst of the Chaldaeans, a people wonderfully versed in the secret lore of numbers, and Abraham believed in God. Nor is it without significance that the Magi, who study magical arts

with a view to finding favour with the Divinity, believed that the Lord had been born on earth. I repeat that none of this is by mere chance. It was so that people that had been enemies and Gentiles should give witness to the true religion and be an example of reverential fear of God.

48 But who are these Magi? They are – so one account tells us *(Origen, Hom. 13 on Numbers, 7)* – the descendants of Balaam who prophesied *"A star shall arise out of Jacob" (Nb 24:17)*. They are his heirs not only by descent but also by faith. Balaam saw the star in spirit; the Magi saw it with their own eyes and believed. They had seen a new star – a star that none had seen since the world began. They had seen a new creation and they searched not only on earth but also in the sky for the new man, the man of blessing. For so it was written in the prophetic text of Moses: *"A star shall arise out of Jacob and a man shall spring up out of Israel" (Nb 24:17)*. They recognised that this was the star that would point out the God-Man.

They adored the Little One. They would never have adored Him if they had thought that He was only a little baby. The Magi then knew that this was to be the end of their magic arts; can you, my friend, not understand that your treasure has come? They worship a stranger; can you not recognise the Promised One? They believe, even though at great cost to themselves; cannot you, in your own interests, bring yourself to believe?

49 The Magi herald the birth of a King *(cf.Mt 2:3 sq.)*. Herod is troubled. He gathered together the Scribes and Chief Priests and enquires as to the place where Christ is to be born. The Magi announce simply a King, but Herod enquires about Christ. This means that he knows that the King that the Magi ask about is Christ. Herod seeks to find out where the Christ is to be born – a sure sign that Christ's birth has been announced. If His coming had not been announced, Herod would never have started an enquiry into the matter. Senseless Jews! You do not believe in the coming of One whom you actually see; you do not believe in the coming of One you declare is to come!

"Bring me word," says Herod, *"so that I also may come and adore Him" (Mt 2:8)*. So Herod lays a snare. But he does not take into account the divinity of Him whom he professes to adore. Finally, he slays the little children *(cf.Mt 2:16)*. To whom, if not to God, could a sacrifice such as this be made? Though they had not reached the age of reason, these little ones give homage to God for whom they are sacrificed.

We have touched upon these passages from Saint Matthew to highlight the fact that the Divinity is at work in us even in our very earliest years. Because of its tender age, the infant can do nothing. But God is there; God is at work, and He by His divine power can turn to good account even the

age of infancy. He was at work in the shepherds, too, making them keep watch in that region, *"keeping the night watches over their flock" (Lk 2:8).*

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50 Take a look at the origins of the Church. Christ is born and shepherds begin their watch. Thanks to them the Gentile herds – until then living like cattle *(cf.2 P 2:12)* – are gathered together into the halls of the Lord. There they are not at risk, not exposed to the perils of the night or the attacks of diabolic beasts. The shepherds faithfully keep watch, for they have been formed by the Good Shepherd *(cf.Jn 10:11)*. The flock is the people; the night is the world; the shepherds are the bishops. Perhaps there is another, too, who is shepherd. I mean him to whom these words were addressed: *"Be watchful and supportive" (Rv 3:2)*. For the Lord has not set bishops only over His flock, but has destined the angels too *(cf.Heb 1:14)*.

51 *"Suddenly an angel appeared before them" (Lk 2:9)*. See how careful God is to establish their faith. An angel instructs Mary *(cf.Lk 1:26)*, an angel instructs Joseph *(cf.Mt 1:20)*, an angel instructs the shepherds *(cf.Lk 2:9)*. It is not enough to have sent an angel once, for *"every word must be witnessed to by two or three witnesses" (Mt 18:16)*.

52 ***"Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those who are of good will"*** *(Lk 2:13-14)*.

It is good to mention the army of angels who followed their Captain *(cf.Jos 5:14)*. How could they address their song of praise to any other than their Lord? For it is written: *"Praise the Lord from the heights of Heaven; praise Him, all you His angels" (Ps 148:1-2)*. That prophecy is now fulfilled. The Lord has been praised from the heights of Heaven, and has shown Himself on earth. This is He of whom Saint Mark says: *"He was with the wild beasts and the angels served Him" (Mk 1:13)*. From this we recognise, in the first place, signs of His mercy; and in the second place, indications of His divine power. In your lowly nature He puts up with beasts; in His own divine nature He is acclaimed by angels.

53 The shepherds said: ***"Let us see this word that has come to pass, which the Lord has revealed to us. And they came with haste"*** *(Lk 2:15-16)*. See how the shepherds hurry! No-one seeks Christ unless it is with eager haste. Notice how the shepherds believed the angel. You, too, my friend, must believe the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit; the angels, the prophets, the Apostles. Notice too with what precision Scripture speaks and how it weighs each word: *"They came with haste to see the Word."* Truly,

when they see the Lord in the flesh, they see the Word; that is to say they see the Son.

Do not think lightly of their example of faith; do not despise the shepherds. The greater their simplicity, the more precious is their faith. The Lord is not looking for learned academies filled with wise and intellectual circles. He wants simple people incapable of decking out in flowery language and falsifying what they have heard. What He desires is simplicity, not pretentiousness. Do not think that the shepherds' words are unimportant; do not look down on them. It is from these very shepherds that Mary gathers faith; it is these very shepherds that bring the people together to pay homage to God; for ***"all that heard wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds"*** *(Lk 2:18)*.

54 ***"As for Mary, she kept all these words in her heart, pondering on them"*** *(Lk 2:19)*.

See how chaste the holy Virgin is in all things, and learn from her. Modest in speech, no less than in deportment, she ponders in her heart the proofs of faith. Mary is ready to learn from the shepherds, but *you* decline to learn from your bishops. Mary keeps silence even before the Apostle had commanded this *(cf.1 Tm 2:11-12; 1 Co 14:34)*, why then, my sisters, now that the Apostle has given this commandment, are you more anxious to teach than to learn? The fault lies in the person, not in her sex. For your sex is holy. To put it briefly, Mary received no commandment, but she gave the example.

55 Then the Child is circumcised. What is this Child if not He of whom Scripture says: *"A Child is born for us, a Son is given to us" (Is 9:6)*? He placed Himself under the Law so that He might gain those who were under the Law *(cf.1 Co 9:20)*.

56 As regards His presentation to the Lord at Jerusalem, this is something I would speak of had I not already done so in my commentary on Isaiah.* Circumcised from vice, He was judged worthy in the eyes of the Lord; for *"the eyes of the Lord rest on the just" (Ps 33:16)*. See how the whole of the Old Law is a type or figure of the future. Circumcision itself prefigures purification from sin. But human flesh is inclined by sexual urges to sin. Our minds and souls are weak, and inextricably attached to vice. Therefore the eighth day was the day prescribed for circumcision, symbolising that the purification of all faults would take place only at the time of the Resurrection.**

* Not extant.

** Our Lord rose on the day following the Sabbath, which is the seventh day. Therefore the eigth is the Resurrection day.

We have here the clue to the text: *"every male opening the womb shall be called holy for the Lord" (Ex 13:12)*. These words of the Law are in fact a promise that the Virgin would bring forth a Child. This Child would be truly holy, truly immaculate. It becomes even clearer that He is the one designated by the Law when the angel uses the same expression, saying: *"The Child that shall be born to you shall be called holy, Son of God" (Lk 1:35)*. No human semen ever entered the sacred sanctuary of the Virgin's womb, but a stainless seed was placed there by the Holy Spirit. Of all who are born of woman the Lord Jesus alone is holy. He has been spared all stain of earthly corruption. Born in a manner that is without precedent, his divine majesty has preserved Him free from stain.

57 Taking the text in its literal sense, how can we call every male "holy" when it is notorious that many males were scoundrels? Was Achab a saint? And what about the false prophets on whom, at Elijah's prayer, fire fell from Heaven, devouring them *(cf.1 K:18)*, they surely were not saints, were they?

It is Christ who is the Holy One. In Him is accomplished the mystery pre-figured by the holy prescriptions of the divine Law. He is the long awaited one, the only one, destined to give the holy and virginal Church fruit to open her womb. Fertile and yet immaculate, she would bring forth the People of God. He – and He only – opened the womb. You need not be surprised. Already He had said to the Prophet: *"Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you; and before you came from the womb I sanctified you" (Jr 1:5)*. The Lord sanctified another womb so that the Prophet might be born; He also opened His own Mother's womb so that He might issue forth without stain.

58 ***"Now, there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. This man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel"*** *(Lk 2:25)*.

Not only angels and prophets; shepherds and kinsfolk, but old men and just bear their witness to the birth of the Lord. Every age in life and both sexes, marvels and miracles, affirm our faith. A Virgin conceives, a barren woman gives birth; Elizabeth prophesies, the Magi adore; the child in the womb leaps for joy, a widow gives thanks *(cf.Lk 2:38)*;and a just man waits. Truly he was just, for he was not waiting in expectation of his own profit, but rather that of the people. For his own part, all he wanted was to be delivered from the bonds of this wretched body *(cf.Ph 1:23)* – but first to see the promised Messiah. For he knew that *"blessed are the eyes that see" (Lk 10:23)*.

59 And so he says: ***"Now you may dismiss your servant"*** *(Lk 2:29)*.

You see this just man. He is shut up as though in a prison and

weighed down by the weary weight of this body of ours. He longs to be set free so that he can be with Christ. *"For to be dissolved and to be with Christ is the better thing" (Ph 1:23)*. But if you want to be set free you must come to the Temple, you must come to Jerusalem. You must await the Lord's Anointed; you must receive in your hands the Word of God, and embrace Him – so to speak – with the arms of your faith. Then you will be set free and never see death, for you will have seen Life.

60 You see what an abundance of grace Christ's birth brought on all; you see how prophecy is of avail not to unbelievers but to the just *(cf.1 Co 14:22)*. See how Simeon, too, prophesies that our Lord Jesus Christ came for the ruin and the resurrection of a great number of people: to discern with precision the merits of the just and the unjust. And He came, too, to judge the quality of our own deeds. He, the true and just Judge, will repay us with the punishment or the reward that we have merited.

61 ***"As for you,"*** says Simeon to Mary, ***"a sword shall pierce your soul"*** *(Lk 2:35)*.

Neither Scripture nor History mentions that Mary departed this life by way of martyrdom. But a material sword goes through the body, not through the soul. By this we are shown the wisdom of Mary and her understanding of the heavenly mystery. For *"the word of God is living and active; more piercing than any two-edged sword and reaching even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow. It sounds the secret thoughts of mind and heart" (Heb 4:12)*. To the Son, everything in our mind is naked and open, and there is no secret that our conscience can hold back from Him.

62 So Simeon has prophesied; a married woman had prophesied, and a Virgin had prophesied. All we want now is that a widow should prophesy, so that neither of the sexes and no state of life should be omitted. That is why Anna now appears on the scene. The merits of her widowhood and her entire conduct compel us to judge her as worthy to announce the coming of the Redeemer of all. In another work, my Exhortation to Widows *(cf.de viduis 21)*, I have already spoken of her merits and I do not think I should repeat the theme here, for we have to hasten on to other subjects. However, it is significant that the eighty-four years of her widowhood should be mentioned. Seven multiplied by twelve, and then again forty multiplied by two, would seem to indicate a sacred number.*

63 ***"When He was twelve years old"*** *(Lk 2:42)*.

It was when He was twelve, so we read, that the Lord first began to

* In Scripture, seven, twelve, and forty are among the numbers that are considered sacred or mystical.

teach; and twelve *(cf.Mt 10:1 sq.)*, as you know, was to be the number of those who would bring the Good News and preach the Faith. There is another significant point: it was at the end of three days that the Child was found in the Temple – this Child who could forget His parents according to the flesh, since though incarnate He was filled with the wisdom and grace of God. This was a sign that three days after his triumphant Passion He would be raised to life *(cf.Mt 26:61; 27:63)*, so that He might present Himself – to the eyes of our faith – on His heavenly throne surrounded by divine honours. And this is He whom men believed to be dead.

64 *"Why did you search for Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's affairs?" (Lk 2:49).*

In Christ there is dual sonship: one affiliates Him to His heavenly Father, the other to His Mother. The one by His Father is totally divine, whereas that by his Mother subjects Him to the weariness and labour that is our lot. Anything in His actions that surpasses nature, age and that which in general is common to mankind, must not be attributed to His human but to His divine powers.

In another passage His Mother presses Him to perform a miracle *(cf.Jn 2:3)*. But in this instance His Mother is checked for expecting Him to act as a human. But remember that here He is a child of twelve years, and that in the other case He is a grown man with disciples. You see how the Mother has learnt more about her Son, so much so that she asks Him, in His maturity, to perform a miracle – she who was so astounded by His display in childhood of wondrous powers.

65 *"He came to Nazareth and was subject to them" (Lk 2:51).*

Being the very Master of virtue, He could not fail to fulfil His filial duties. Need we be surprised at this deference to His Father when He was so submissive to His Mother? It is not weakness, but *pietas* that makes Him dependent on her – though the Serpent of Deceit, issuing from his darksome cave, lifts his head and spits out venom.

When the Son says that He was "sent" *(cf.Jn 8:26)* the heretic makes out that the Father is greater; that the Son is less than perfect since there is one greater than He is. The heretic is claiming that the Son, in calling Himself "sent", is admitting that He needs the help and support of another. Is it, then, because He had need of human help, that He obeys His Mother? Christ defers to a human creature, to His own handmaid – for she herself says: *"See, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38)*. He defers to His supposed father. Is it then astonishing that He defers to God? Is deference to man *pietas*, but deference to God weakness? From things human at least learn to appreciate things divine and to recognise what love is due to a father. *"The Father honours the Son" (Jn 8:54)*. Do you not wish the Son to honour *(cf.Jn 8:49)* the Father? The Father, speaking from Heaven

(cf.Lk 3:22) says that He is well pleased with His Son. And do you object to the fact that the Son – clothed in human flesh and speaking in human language – should declare His Father to be greater than He *(cf.Jn 14:28)*? For *"The Lord is great and worthy of all praise, his greatness cannot be measured" (Ps 144:3)*. If, then, His greatness cannot be measured, it is obvious that it cannot be increased.

But why should I be unwilling to hear and accept, in a devout spirit, that when the Son became man He showed obedience to His Father? After all, I devoutly believe that the Father showed honour to the Son.

66

Far better to learn precepts that will be useful to you, and to recognise the example Christ gives you of filial love and obedience. You have read that the Son does not separate Himself from the Father whether by choice, by activity, or in time. Learn from this what you owe to your parents. If Father and Son are two Persons, in power they are one *(cf.Jn 10:30)*; and the Father underwent no labour in generating His Son.

But you, my friend, only think what you cost your mother! You cost her the loss of her bodily integrity, the sacrifice of her virginity, the perils of labour, the long and weary waiting *(cf.Virgil, Bucolics 4:61)*. Think of the danger your mother was in, in giving you birth. Poor woman, in bringing forth the fruit she so much wished for, still greater peril awaits her. In giving birth she is delivered of her child, but not of her fears.

What shall I say of the anxiety of fathers regarding their sons' education? How heavy the expenses they incur for the benefit of others – seeds sown by the labourer for the profit of the next generation! Surely we should repay them for this by at least being submissive? And can it be that there are ungrateful wretches who thinks that their father lives too long, and who grudge sharing their patrimony? Yet Christ is not reluctant to make us co-heirs with himself *(cf.Rm 8:17)*.

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67 *"The Word of God came down on John, the son of Zachary, in the desert" (Lk 2:5).*

Before gathering His Church together, the Son of God acted in His servant. It is therefore quite *à propos* that Saint Luke should tell us that the Word of God came down on John, the son of Zachary, in the desert. So the Church began not from man, but from the Word. It is she, in fact, who is the desert, for *"the sons of the deserted wife are more numerous than those of the married woman" (Is 54:1)*, and *"Rejoice, barren one" (Is 54:1)*, and *"Exult, you deserts" (Is 52:9)*.

As yet she had not been cultivated by the labours of people come from afar; and those trees that could bear fruit had not yet lifted up the lofty peaks of their merits. The promised one had not yet come — He who would say:

"I am like a fruitful olive tree in the house of the Lord" (Ps 51:10). Not yet had the Heavenly Vine come to assure His branches that they would bear fruit *(cf.Jn 15:1 sq.)* by reason of His words. The Word came so that the earth, formerly a desert, would produce for us its fruit. The Word came, the voice followed. For the Word is already at work within us before the voice has performed its office. That is why David says: *"I believed, that is why I spoke" (Ps 115:1).*

68 The Word came, so that Saint John the Baptist might preach repentance. For this reason many people see in Saint John a type or figure of the Law, because the Law was able to denounce sin – but not able to pardon it *(cf.Rm 3:20).* If someone has been following the pagan way of life, the Law calls him back from error, restrains him from committing sin, and persuades him to do penance, so that he can obtain grace *(cf.Ga 3:24). "The Law and the prophets lasted until the time of John" (Lk 16:16),* and John is the fore-runner of Christ. In the same way, the Law introduces the Church, just as penance is the prelude to grace.

Saint Luke, therefore, was right, to speak briefly of John; declaring that he was a prophet and that the word of God descended on him. He added nothing. John was filled with God's word and needed no proofs or testimonials.

69 Saint Matthew and Saint Mark, on the other hand, are careful to prove he was a prophet by pointing out the clothing he wore, his belt, the sort of food he ate: they tell us that his garment was of camels' hair, that he wore a leathern belt about his loins, and that he ate locusts and wild honey *(cf.Mt 3:4; Mk 1:6).* Christ's Precursor did not disdain to wear the hair and skin of unclean beasts. He signified, even by his garments, the coming of Christ. For Christ would take upon himself the monstrosity of our ignoble actions all stained with sin – the sins of the pagan world — and on his glorious Cross would divest Himself of the garment of our flesh.

70 But why should John want a leathern belt tied about him? The significance is that this flesh of ours, which up to then had weighed down the soul, began – after Christ's coming – to be not an impediment but a girdle. For according to David: *"On the willows we hang up our lyres" (Ps 136:2).** And according to the Apostle we have confidence not in the flesh, but in the body *(cf.Ph 3:3).* Our trust is not in pleasure, but in suffering. For we are animated now by a feeling of spiritual fervour; we are

* The willow shoot is so pliant that, like a girdle, it can be used to tie up something. Ambrose sees both as representing "the body", and the lyre as representing "the soul". The point seems to be that the body has now become of service to the soul.

girded and ready to carry out all the commandments of Heaven – the soul keen and alert, the body free of impediment and all set for action.

71 Also the prophet's food indicates his mission and intimates a mystery. Could anything be more vain and useless for man than to collect locusts? At the same time, what a very deep mystery lies here concerning the prophet! The more useless the locusts are, the more unsuited to human consumption – running away if you touch them, jumping here and there, raucous in their cry – the more apt they are as a type or figure of the Gentile nations. For these nations did no useful work, the work they did bore no fruit, they were lacking in serious intent, unable to speak articulately they made querulous noises, and they were quite ignorant of the Word of life. These are the people that the prophets feed upon, for the more numerous the people that are gathered together, the richer and more abundant is the harvest of the prophetic mouth.

By the "wild honey" is prefigured the sweetness of the Church. This honey is not found in the hive of the Law. It is not the product of the Jewish people, but is scattered here and there, in field and in forest, having been lost by the error of the Gentiles. As Scripture says: *"We have found it in the fields of the wood" (Ps 131:6).*

72 John ate of this wild honey to foretell that the people would be filled with honey from the rock. As it is written: *"He filled them with honey from the rock" (Ps 80:17).* Remember how the ravens fed Elijah in the desert *(cf.1 K 17:6)* with food that they brought him and drink that they procured for him. This was a sign that the Gentiles, hideously black by reason of their wicked conduct, and who up to that moment had sought their nourishment from decaying corpses, were now going to offer in themselves food for the prophets. They would both offer it and bring it. For the food of the prophets is to do the divine will – as the Lord himself has told us in these words: *"My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn 4:34).*

73 ***"A voice cries in the desert"*** *(Lk 3:4).*

It is appropriate to call John "the Voice", for he is the herald of the Word. This is John's own reply to those who questioned him: *"What have you to say of yourself?"* He said: *"I am the voice that cries in the desert" (Jn 1:22 sq.).* If he declares: *"He that comes after me is before me"*, it is because the voice, which is the inferior, comes first; and is followed by the Word, that is the superior. This too is why He wanted to be baptised by John, because among men "the word" [i.e. discourse] is consecrated by the voice of one authorised to teach. And perhaps Zachary recovered his voice because he named "the Voice" *(cf.Lk 1:64).*

74 ***"Brood of vipers, who has taught you to flee from the wrath that is to come? Well then, bring forth fruits worthy of penance, and do not say: 'Abraham is our father'. I tell you, God has power to raise up from these stones children to Abraham"*** *(Lk 3:7-8).*

John seems here to be denouncing the perversity of the Jews. Polluted by the poison of their venomous soul, they prefer the twisting ways and the underground hiding places of the serpents to the mysteries and the knowledge of God. However, when he says, *"who has taught you to flee from the wrath that is to come,"* he shows that God's mercy has given them sufficient prudence to do penance for their faults, and sufficient foresight devoutly to fear the terrible judgement that is to come. This means that it is the race as a whole that is compared to vipers, not the individual members [who convert]. or perhaps we may understand it in this sense: *"Be prudent as serpents" (Mt 10:16).* In this case John is acknowledging their natural prudence. They see what is to their advantage and are eager to obtain it, but yet they do not give up their evil ways.

75 He warns them to look for justification not so much in their glorious ancestry as in the brilliance of their good deeds. Noble birth confers no privilege if it is not backed up by inheritance of faith. The latter, by God's will, is about to be transferred to the Gentiles; and John reveals this in prophetic language: *"God has power to raise up from these stones children to Abraham" (Lk 3:8).* Of course I know that God actually can change and transform the very nature of things; but I find that there is more profit in the mystery – the mystical interpretation – than in the miracle. Therefore what I ought to find in this foretelling of Christ is, quite simply, that Christ's Church will be built not with fragments of rock but with living stones*(cf.1 P 2:5).* These will rise up to form a dwelling-place for God; and we, by conversion of heart, will become a lofty temple *(cf.Ep 2:21).*

For God indeed was preparing to soften the hardness of our hearts and from stumbling stones *(cf.Is 8:14)* to raise up true worshippers. What else but stones could those people be called who had previously worshipped idols of stone *(cf.Ac 17:29)*, and most certainly resembled the images that they fashioned? It was therefore prophesied that the Faith should be poured into the Gentiles' heart of stone; and the prophetic oracles declare that that Faith will raise up children to Abraham, children whose hardness of heart had previously engendered in them souls of stone. Children who had once been unfeeling and without the use of reason.

The words of the Apostle compares to living stones those who are strong and vigorous in their faith: *"And you, like living stones, are built up into a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices" (1 P 2:5).* In a much more profound sense – so it seems to me – the prophet's words are here comparing to stones people who had lost human feeling and human reason. This they had done to such a degree that they

believed that the divine power and understanding could dwell in buildings of stone. In this way they themselves were turned to stone – I do not mean in a bodily sense, I mean it regarding their state of soul. So too Abraham's descendants in the flesh are called *"princes of Sodom" (Is 1:10)* and *"whited walls" (Ac 23:3).* The point is that the privileges of birth depend more on the imitation of ancestral merits than on the ancestral line.

But do not be surprised that people are compared by the prophet to stones, for I can show you that he also compares them to trees. For he says: ***"Already the axe is laid to the root of the trees"*** *(Lk 3:9).*

76 John uses a different image here. He tones down the metaphor to convey the idea that humankind is already becoming less hard-hearted. Before that they had been formless stones, bare of ornament, barren of fruit, irrational. But now they are represented under the image of trees. Trees are endowed with a kind of spiritual quality; they are beautiful to behold; to look on them is a delight; they are fertile and fruitful; they lift their heads high; they stretch out their branches; they are laden with fruit; they are clothed in foliage.

God grant that we may imitate the fertile tree. May we increase in merit; may we be upheld by the roots of steadfast humility. May we spring up from the earth and grow beautiful to the eye. May we lift up on high the vigorous peaks of our fruitful labours. Then there will be no fear that the gardener we read of in the Gospel will chop us down as a wild and useless stock!

For, *"Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Co 9:16).* These, however, are the words of an Apostle. As for myself, woe to me if I do not weep for my sins! Woe to me if I do not rise from my bed at night to praise you! *(cf.Ps 118:62).* Woe to me if I cheat my neighbour! Woe to me if I tell lies. The axe is already laid to the root. Let him who can produce the fruit of grace; let him who ought produce the fruit of penance. The Lord is there to collect the fruit, to give life to the fertile, to unmask the barren. For three years He has been coming *(cf.Lk 13:7).* He could not get fruit from the Jews; may He find it in us! He is going to give orders to cut down those who produce no fruit, for they are only cluttering up the ground; as for those who have not yet borne fruit, efforts will be made so that they can bear fruit in future. The Good Gardener who cultivates the orchard will intervene for us barren ones, He will put in a prayer for us who have no fruit. He will ask for a reprieve, ask that patience may be shown. And perhaps we, too, shall bear some fruit for God.

77 The holy Baptist has a reply suited to each and everyone *(cf.Lk 3:11 14).* For example he tells the tax-collectors not to demand more than the statutory tribute. He tells the soldiers not to do wrong to anyone and not to plunder – reminding them that the reason why a soldier receives his wages is so that he can support himself, without having recourse

to pillage or plunder. These and other precepts apply to particular professions. But the precept of mercy is intended for all. It is the universal precept. It is required of all professions and all ages. All must practise it. Neither publican nor soldier is exempt; neither the tiller of the soil nor the city-dweller; neither the rich nor the poor. All are warned to give to those who have not. For mercy is the plenitude of virtue. It is the consummate virtue and is recommended to all. We are not to be miserly to others, whether with regard to clothing or to food. However, even mercy has to preserve a certain measure. We are not to strip ourselves entirely of all that we have, but we are to *share* it with the poor.

78 ***"People were wondering, and thinking in their hearts of John, that perhaps he might be the Christ. But John answered them in these words: 'I indeed baptise you with water, unto penance'"*** *(Lk 3:15-16).*

John could read the secret thoughts of the heart. But let us now see from whom came this grace. How do prophets learn the secrets of hearts? Paul shows in these words: *"The secrets of his heart are made manifest. And so, falling down on his face, he will adore God. He will proclaim that truly God is among you" (1 Co 14:25).* You see that it is God's gift, and not the power of man, that reveals secret thoughts. By divine help man discerns that which, by his own natural powers, he could not see.

These thoughts that the Jews were entertaining point to something. They are evidence that already Christ has come. They were expecting someone, and that Someone had come. The Someone who came was not someone unexpected. Could anything be madder than to recognise a person in someone who is *not* that person, and to fail to recognise him in one who *is* that person? They thought that He would come by a woman; what they do not believe is that He has come by a Virgin. Could any birth according to the flesh, be more worthy of God than a virgin-birth? Think of it, the immaculate Son of God safeguarding – even in the act of taking flesh – the purity of an immaculate birth! And most certainly the sign given by God of the coming event was not that a woman would give birth, but that a Virgin would bear a Son *(cf.Is 7:14).*

79 ***"I baptise you with water"*** *(Lk 3:16).*

John is quick to prove that he is not the Christ, since the ministry he performs is but a visible one. The human person subsists in two natures, namely soul and body. The visible part is consecrated by visible elements; the invisible part by an invisible mystery. Water washes the body; The Holy Spirit purifies the soul of its faults. We do one part; regarding the other part, we implore. Even if, on the very fountain, the divinity breathes its sanctification, the water is not all the ablution required. No, there are two factors, and they cannot be separated. That is why baptism of repentance is one thing, and baptism of grace is another. The latter is composed of both

elements [spirit and water], the former is composed of one. Since sin touches both soul and body, a purification of both is required. Saint John's reply was a good one: he showed that he understood what was in their hearts, but without actually claiming to be able to read their hearts. Free from the faintest desire of grandeur he declared, not by his speech but by his works, that he was NOT Christ.

Man's task is to practise penance for his sins. God's gift is to fulfil the mystery.

80 ***"One is coming who is mightier than I"*** *(Lk 3:16).*

We must not think that John is making a comparison between himself and Christ in saying that the latter is mightier than he. Between the Son of God and mere man there is no comparison. He says it because there are many strong and mighty ones. Take for example the devil. He too is strong. Remember how Scripture says: *"No one can carry off the weapons of one who is strong without first tying up this strong person." (Mk 3:27).* So there are many who are strong, but none is stronger than Christ. So careful is John not to make any comparison that he at once adds: *"I am not worthy to carry His sandals" (Mt 3:11).* Here he shows that the grace to preach the Gospel is conferred on the Apostles, whose feet are shod for this preaching of the Good News *(cf.Ep 6:15).*

81 One may suppose, too, that when he speaks in this way John is very often personifying the Jewish people. This ties in with the following words: *"He must become more and I must become less" (Jn 3:30).* And, in truth, the Jewish people had to become less so that the Christian people might increase in Christ.

Moses, too, personified the Jewish people. But the shoes he wore were not those of the Lord but of his own feet. And yet, perhaps these shoes he wore were not truly his own; for he was told to cast them off *(cf.Ex 3:6)* to free the footsteps of his heart and soul from the bonds that tie this body, that they might be free to walk in the ways of the Spirit. As for the Apostles, they put away the shoes of the body when they were sent on their way without shoes, without staff, without purse, without belt *(cf.Mt 10:9 sq.).* But they did not at once put on the shoes of the Lord. Perhaps they began to wear them after the Resurrection, for before that they had been warned to tell no one the wonderful deeds of the Lord *(cf.Lk 8:56).* But later He said to them: *"Go out to the whole world and preach the Good News" (Mk 16:15),* so that advancing the progress of the Gospel they might cause the whole marvellous series of our Lord's actions to make their way all round the world.

The preaching of the Gospel is the "bridal shoe" – but of this mission I shall speak with great fullness in a more appropriate place *(cf.Book 7:44 sq.).*

82 ***"He shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, And He will purge His threshing floor and gather the wheat into His barn. But the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire"*** *(Lk 3:16-17).*

"His winnowing fan is in His hand." This image of the winnowing fan indicates that the Lord has the right to discriminate between the merits of this person and that. When the corn is being threshed on the threshing floor, the ear of wheat is separated from the chaff; what is fruitful is separated from what is dry, by the action and movement of the air blowing on them. This comparison shows that on Judgement Day the Lord will distinguish between the merits and fruits of solid virtue and the sterile levity of vain boasting – with the empty deeds that accompany such boasting. Then He will place those whose merits are ripe and genuine in His heavenly mansion.

To be fruit that is truly ripe, a person must imitate Him who, like a grain of wheat, has fallen into the ground *(cf.Jn 12:24)* to bear in us abundant fruits. One must be conformed to Him who detests chaff and hates empty, sterile works. *"A fire shall go before Him" (Ps 96:3)*, not a harmful fire, but one that will burn away what is evil and highlight the splendid and the good.

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83 ***"Now it happened that when all the people had been baptised, and when Jesus, too, had been baptised and was praying, Heaven opened and the Holy Spirit came down upon Him in bodily shape as a dove. Then a voice was heard from Heaven: 'You are my Son in whom I am well pleased' "*** *(Lk 3:21).*

So, then, the Lord was baptised. It was not that He wanted to be cleansed, but that He wanted to purify and sanctify the waters. Then the waters washed by the blood of Christ who knew no sin *(cf.2 Co 5:21)*, would have power to baptise. It follows that whoever comes to the fountain of Christ will leave his sins there. Saint Luke wisely sums up what the other Evangelists had said, and leaves it to be understood that the Lord received baptism from John – without actually stating this. As for the Lord's motive in being baptised, He Himself explains it in these words: *"Let it be so for the present. For so it becomes us to fulfil all justice" (Mt 3:15).*

84 God, in His divine goodness, did very great things for the building of His Church. He sent patriarchs, prophets *(cf.Heb 1:1)*, angels. Finally God's only Son descended from Heaven and came to be baptised. We ought surely be able to recognise that these words said of the Church are divinely true: *"Unless the Lord builds a house, in vain do the builders labour."* I quote this from a certain psalm *(Ps 126:1)*. But speaking for myself I would say that we can undertake nothing successfully unless the Lord goes before us on our way. So, too, it is written: *"You shall walk behind the Lord your God" (Dt 13:4)*, and *"It is the Lord who guides a person's steps" (Pr 20:24)*. Wise indeed is the one who understands that without the Lord he cannot make progress, and who therefore says: *"Teach me your ways" (Ps 24:4).*

Let us turn our attention now to history. Not simply to learn a series of events but so that we can, in our own actions, imitate the deeds of which we read in the Scriptures. The people went out from Egypt. They were quite ignorant of the way that would take them to the Holy Land. God sent a pillar of fire by night to lead them on their way; and by day He sent a pillar of cloud to direct His people *(cf.Ex 13:21 sq.)* so that they would stray neither to the right nor to the left. But you, my friend, do not require a pillar of fire; you do not have Moses; you do not receive a sign; for now that the Lord has come, signs are done away with and faith is required of you.

Fear the Lord and count on the Lord. For *"the Lord shall send His angels to encircle those who fear Him, and He shall deliver them" (Ps 33:8)*. Everywhere you look you can see how God's power co-operates with our efforts; in such a way that no-one can build without the Lord *(cf.Ps 126:1)*, no-one can keep guard without the Lord, no-one can undertake anything without the Lord. As the Apostle says: *"Whether you eat or whether you drink, do all for the glory of God" (1 Co 10:31)*. Do all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In two epistles He has given us this precept: saying in one, *"in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Col 3:17)*, and in the other [quoted above] *"for the glory of God"*. Understand from this that Father and Son have the same glory and the same power, and that as regards divinity there is no difference between the Father and the Son. Both protect us, in perfect unison.

Therefore David has taught me that no-one can build the house, no-one can guard the city, without the Lord.

85 Moses, too, has taught me that none but God made the world; for he says: *"In the beginning God made Heaven and earth" (Gn 1:1)*. Equally clearly he has shown me that God made man by His own work, and it is not without significance that he writes: *"God fashioned man from the slime of the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life" (Gn 2:7)*. In this way he is showing you that God built up man by a kind of physical operation. He teaches me too that God also made woman: *"The Lord God cast a deep sleep upon Adam; and when he was fast asleep, He took one of his ribs, and filled up flesh for it. The Lord God built the rib which He took from Adam into a woman" (Gn 2:21-22)*. As I said before, it is not unintentional that Moses should present God to us as working, as though with hands of flesh, to make Adam and Eve.

As for the world, God simply decreed that it should be, and it was made. Scripture tells us that by a word the whole creation of the world was

achieved *(cf.Ps 148:5)*. But when it came to man the prophet is very careful to tell us that God– if I may say so – made him with His own hands.

86 God fashioned us in this way. This is what I read, and what more I am to understand I do not know. Then, as I grope along, the Apostle comes to my aid, and with the help of the Holy Spirit he reveals to me the meaning of what I have read: *"This is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, and she shall be called 'woman' because she was taken from man" (Gn 2:23)*. The Apostle, speaking in the Holy Spirit, revealed to me the meaning of this when he said: *"We have there a great mystery" (Ep 5:32)*. What mystery? *"They shall be two in one flesh, and the man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife;"* and I read; *"because we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones" (Ep 5:30)*.

Who is this man for whose sake the woman must leave her parents? The Church left her parents. She left them and gathered together the Gentile people. To them these words were uttered in prophesy: *"Forget your people and your father's house" (Ps 44:11)*. But for what man? Might it not be He of whom John said: *"After me there comes a man who was before me" (Jn 1:30)*? From his side, as He slept, God took a rib *(cf.Gn 2:21)*. For He it is who slept, took his rest and rose up; because the Lord protected Him *(cf.Ps 3:6)*. What is this "rib"? It is the power of the Lord. For at the very moment that the soldier opened His side, blood and water burst out for the life of the world *(cf.Jn 19:34)*. This "life of the world" is Christ's rib; it is the rib of the second Adam. For *"the first Adam was a living soul; the last Adam is a life-giving spirit" (1 Co 15:46)*. The last Adam is Christ; is Christ's rib; is the life of the Church. Therefore we are *"members of His body, made of His flesh and of His bone" (Ep 5:30)*.

And perhaps the Lord was speaking of this rib when He said: *"I feel that power has gone out from me" (Lk 8:46)*. The rib has gone out from Christ but without diminishing His body; for this is not a corporeal rib, but a spiritual rib. Now, as you know, the spirit is not divided, but shares – as it wishes –with each one *(cf.1 Co 12:11)*.

Regard Eve, mother of all the living *(cf.Gn 3:20)*. For if you understand these words: *"Why do you seek the Living among the dead?" (Lk 24:5)*, you will also understand who the dead are. They are those who are without Christ and have no share in life. For since Christ is life *(cf.Jn 14:6)*, not to have part in Him means to be dead. The "mother of all the living" is therefore the Church. God built her up, using as His corner-stone Christ Jesus Himself. In Him the whole building is fitted together and grows into a Temple *(cf.Ep 2:20)*.

87 So, then, let God come. Let Him build up the woman. The other Eve was Adam's helper; this Eve is Christ's. I do not mean that Christ needs a helper, but we do. We desire a helper, and therefore strive, through

the Church, to attain to the grace of Christ. At the moment, the building process is going on. The Church is being constructed. The Woman is now being fashioned, now being created. Therefore Scripture makes use of a new expression, saying that we are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets *(cf.Ep 2:20)*. Now, too, a holy priesthood is being built up into a spiritual house.

Come, Lord God, build this Woman, this City. And let your Servant come also, for truly I believe you when you say: *"He shall build my city" (Is 45:13)*.

88 Look at the Woman, Mother of all the living; look at the spiritual dwelling, look at the City that lasts for ever, for she will never die. She is in truth the City of Jerusalem *(cf.Gn 4:26)*, that now you see on earth but which will be lifted higher than Elijah *(cf.2 K 2:11)* – for Elijah was but one person. She will be exalted higher than Enoch, who never died: *"He was taken away lest wickedness should alter his understanding, or deceit beguile his soul" (Ws 4:11)*. But this Woman is the beloved of Christ. She is glorious, holy, without stain or wrinkle *(cf.Ep 6:27)*. When the whole body will have been lifted up, how much more glorious it will be than he who was assumed into Heaven! Such is the hope of the Church. She will certainly be lifted up, carried off, transported into Heaven. Look, Elijah was carried up to Heaven in a fiery chariot *(cf.2 K 2:11)*. So, too, the Church. Can you, my friend, not believe me? At least believe Paul, in whom Christ spoke. Here are his words: *"We shall be taken up in the clouds to meet Christ, into the air. And so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Th 4:16)*.

89 Many were sent to build the Church: patriarchs were sent, prophets were sent, the Angel Gabriel was sent. Angels beyond count fly towards her, and the multitude of the heavenly army *(cf.Rv 19:14)* praise God because they see that the building of this City is at hand. Many are sent, but only Christ built her; yet He is not alone *(cf.Jn 16:32)*, for His Father is present with Him. And though He alone builds her, He does not claim for Himself alone the merit of constructing such a building.

Of God's Temple built by Solomon (and symbolising the Church), it is written that there were seventy thousand men to carry the building materials on their shoulders, and eighty thousand hewers of stone *(2 Ch 2:2)*. May the angels come, may they hack from our stones what is superfluous and polish to smoothness whatever is rough. And may those others come, those who carry burdens on their shoulders. For it is written: *"Your children shall be carried on their shoulders" (Is 49:22)*.

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90 So Christ comes to John – I skip over what you already know – Christ comes to John's baptism. But John's was a baptism of repentance for sin. So he stopped Jesus and said: *"It is I who should be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" (Mt 3:14)*. Why come to me? You have no sin. It is the sinner who must be baptised, but why would One who is without sin *(cf.1 P 2:22)* come to me asking for the baptism of penitence?

"Let it pass for the moment," says the Lord – meaning till the Church is built. *"At present it is fitting that we should fulfil all that righteousness demands" (Mt 3:15)*. What is justice or righteousness, if not mercy? As we read: *"He has opened His hand, He has given to the poor; His justice endures for ever" (Ps 111:9)*. He has given to me who am poor. He has given to me who am in need of grace and did not have it before. Therefore His justice remains for ever. What is justice if not that you should do what you would wish others to do *(cf.Lk 6:31)*, and by your own example encourage others? What is justice if not that He who, though God, took on Himself our flesh should not spare Himself the sufferings and needs of the flesh; but, as man, should overcome the flesh and teach me to overcome it? He taught me how and in what way to renew my flesh; to bury all that was sinful in it and to freshen up with virtues that which had become all soiled and spoilt by the vices of earth to which our flesh is prone.

91 O truly divine forethought and self-abasement of the Lord! The more profound the self-abasement, the more divine the forethought. God betrays Himself by the very excess of the insults that He endures, and by the remedies He employs. He who had no need of any remedy, proves that He is God. How divine the means Christ employed to encourage all people to come forward to baptism of grace, when He Himself did not refuse baptism of repentance! No-one now can say that he is without sin, seeing that Christ has come as the remedy of sin. If Christ was washed for our sake, or rather if He had washed us in His own body, how eager we should be to wash away our sins.! Although God is God in all things, nevertheless by no greater work, no greater mystery, does He show it than by this: throughout the whole world, wheresoever the human race has been scattered – across the vast extent of land, the mighty distances, separating one country from another – God has, in a single moment of time and in a single body, wiped out the ancient error of deceit and spread the grace of the heavenly Kingdom. He plunged down alone, but He raised all on high. He came down alone, so that we could all ascend *(cf.Ep 4:9)*. Alone He took on Himself the sins of all people so that, in Him, the sins of all might be purified. As the Apostle says, *"Purify yourselves" (Jm 4:8)*, since He, who had no need of purification, purified Himself for us. So far what I say concerns us.

92 But let us now consider the mystery of the Trinity. We say that God is unique, but we confess the Father and we confess the Son. True, it is written: *"You shall love the Lord your God and serve Him alone" (Dt 10:20)*; yet the Son has said that He is not alone: *"But I am not alone, for the Father is with Me" (Jn 16:32)*. Nor at this moment is He alone. The Father testifies that He is with Him; the Holy Spirit is present, too. Never can the Trinity be separated. So we read that *"the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit came down, in bodily form, as a dove" (Lk 3:22)*. How, then, can the heretics say that Christ is alone in Heaven seeing that He was not alone on earth? Study the mystery. Why those words: *"as a dove"*? It means that simplicity is required for the grace of baptism, and that we are to be *"simple as doves" (Mt 10:16)*.

Peace is required for the grace of baptism. That peace which in a type or figure long ago, a dove *(cf.Gn 8:10 sq.)* brought to the Ark – the sole survivor of the Flood. I have learnt what this dove symbolised, I have learnt it from Him who has now graciously descended in the form of a dove. He has taught me that by this olive-bough, this Ark, the peace of the Church is symbolised. And even amidst the floods of this world the Holy Spirit brings to His Church a fruitful peace. David has taught me this too. By prophetic inspiration he saw the mystery of baptism and he said: *"Who will give me the wings of a dove?" (Ps 54:7)*.

93 So the Holy Spirit has come. But be attentive to the mystery. He came to Christ, for *"in Him were all things created ... and by Him all things consist" (Col 1:16 sq.)*. See the kindness and goodness of the Lord. He alone submitted to the insults, but He has not claimed for Himself alone the honour. How has He built the Church? *"I will ask the Father and He shall send you another Advocate to be with you always. This is the Spirit of truth whom the world does not receive, because it neither sees nor knows Him" (Jn 14:16-17)*. We can see why He had to show Himself in a bodily shape, for the substance of the divinity is invisible.

94 We have seen the Spirit, but under a bodily form. Let us also see the Father. But we cannot see Him *(cf.Jn 1:18)*. Let us listen to Him, for He is there – this kind God of ours. He will not desert His Temple. He wants to build up every soul, He wants to shape it for salvation. He wants to carry these living stones *(cf.1 P 2:5)* from earth to Heaven. He loves His Temple, and we too should love Him. To love God means keeping His commandments; to love Him, is to know Him. For *"one who says he knows Him, but does not keep His commandments, is a liar" (1 Jn 2:4)*. How can one love God if one does not love the truth? For God is truth *(cf.1 Jn 5:6)*.

Let us listen to the Father, for the Father is invisible. In His divinity, the Son too is invisible, for *"no-one has ever seen God" (Jn 1:18)*. The Son is God and therefore, as Son of God, He is not seen. But He wanted to show us

Himself in a human body. And since the Father had no body, the Father wanted to prove that He is present in the Son, so He said: *"You are My Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Lk 3:22).*

If you wish to learn that the Son is always present with the Father, read those words that the Son said: *"If I climb the heavens, You are there: if I go down to Hell, You are there" (Ps 138:8).* Should you wish to have the Father's testimony, you have heard it from John. Trust in him to whom Christ entrusted Himself for baptism, and near whom the Father acknowledged His Son in words that came from Heaven: *"This is My Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17).*

95 Where, now, are those Arians who are not pleased with the Son, although the Father is well pleased in Him? It is not just I who am saying this. It is not just anyone who is saying this. God did not make this pronouncement through man or angel or archangel. It was the Father's own voice that was heard from Heaven. Elsewhere, too, the Father repeats these words: *"This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him." (Mt 17:5).* Yes, listen to Christ when He says: *"My Father and I are ONE" (Jn 10:30).* Not to believe the Son is not to believe the Father. The latter bears witness to His Son. To doubt the Son means that you do not believe the Father's witness. And when the Father says: *"In whom I am well pleased,"* what He praises in His Son is not that which belongs to another but what belongs to Himself. What is the meaning of: *"In whom I am well pleased"* if not this: all that the Son has is mine, just as the Son said, *"All that the Father has is mine" (Jn 16:15).*

There is no difference between the power of the Father and that of the Son, for the power of the Divinity is undivided. Father and Son have the same power. Let us. then, believe the Father, whose voice the very elements have re-echoed *(cf.Jr 50:42).* The world believed the elements. Well then, let it believe in men. It believed in inanimate objects, let it believe in living men. It believed in what is mute and senseless, let it believe those who can speak. It believed things without intelligence, now let it believe those who have the intelligence to know God.

BOOK THREE

1 ***"And Jesus was beginning about the age of thirty years. It was supposed that He was the son of Joseph"*** *(Lk 3:23).*

We are now going to speak about genealogies. We remark that there are some divergences between that given in the Gospel according to Matthew *(cf.Mt 1:1 sq.),* and the Gospel which is the subject of my present commentary. It is impossible that these holy men should contradict each other, especially in what concerns the actions of our Lord and Saviour. Therefore we must demonstrate with all possible care that there is no disagreement between the two accounts.

2 First of all, no one need be shocked that the Evangelist writes: *"It was supposed that He was the son of Joseph".* Such was the case. This is what people thought. Actually, by nature, He was no such thing. But this is what people believed, because Mary had given Him birth, and Mary's husband was Joseph. You will also find: *"Is not this the son of Joseph the carpenter" (Mt 13:55).* We have already said *(Bk 2:1 sq.)* why Christ was born of a Virgin; we have also explained why He was born of a married woman, and why His birth took place at the time of the Census *(Bk 2:36).* It would seem quite natural that we should also explain why He had, as father, a carpenter or artisan. By this type or figure He indicates that He has, as Father, the Artisan, the Maker, of all things, the Creator of the world. As it is written: *"In the beginning God made Heaven and Earth" (Gn 1:1).*

For even though human things cannot be compared to what is divine, nonetheless the type or figure is a sound one, since the Father of Christ works by fire and the Spirit *(cf.Mt 3:11).* Like a good artisan of souls He planes or polishes us, filing away our vices. He is ready to apply the axe to the trees that bear no fruit. He knows how to cut off what is unhealthy and to conserve what is flourishing splendidly. With the fire of the Spirit He can melt the hardness of souls and fashion every human being, making them suitable for various purposes and fit for services of every sort.

3 But why write the genealogy of Joseph rather than that of Mary, seeing that it was Mary who gave birth to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit? Joseph had no part in the conception of the Lord. We should hesitate to answer this were it not that we have Scripture to instruct us in the matter. We must understand that it is the custom in Scripture to give the line of descent through the male. See, here, what I mean: Phares was the son of Judah, head of his tribe. *"He was the father of Esrom, and Esrom was the father of Aram, and Aram was the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab was the father of Naason, and Naason was the father of Boaz, and Boaz was the*

father of Obed, and Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David" (Mt 1:3-6).

It is the male line that people look for. In the Senate, too, and in the City Councils, it is the male who upholds the dignity of the family. It would hardly be suitable if, contrary to custom, one were to omit the male line and search out instead the female line. It would look as though one was preaching and proclaiming throughout the whole world someone who did not even have a father!

4 But we can show you that elsewhere too there is variety in the order followed for genealogies. You will see then that there is no discrepancy between the Evangelists, since they are following an ancient pattern. Take this, for example: *"There was a man of Arath, named Elcana. He was the son of Jeroham, the son of Elin, the son of Ozi" (1 S 1:1).* You see, in these ancient genealogies the line is traced both from father to son, and from son to father. You will notice everywhere that in tracing a family one does so through the male. You need not be surprised if Matthew starts with Abraham and proceeds down the line to Joseph; while Luke, in his genealogy, starts with Joseph and works backwards to Adam and to God.

Please do not be disconcerted that it is Joseph's ancestry that we are given. He who was born according to the flesh had to follow the customs and conventions of the flesh. On coming into the world He had, therefore, to be registered in accordance with the custom of the world. Besides, and this is important, Joseph's genealogy was the same as Mary's. Being a just and upright man Joseph would most certainly have chosen his bride from among his own tribe and his own kin. Having respect for the Law, this just man would never have contravened the prescription of the Law. Now, it is written that the children of Israel are to keep to the heritage of their ancestral tribe and not pass from one tribe to another *(cf.Nb 1:4)*. Also, it is written: *"Every heiress from among the tribes of the children of Israel shall take for her husband a man of the tribe and family of her father" (Nb 36:6-8)*. So, too, at the time of the Census, Joseph – who was of the house and homeland of David – went up to be enrolled with Mary his wife *(cf.Lk 2:4)*. She, by declaring herself to be of the same house and homeland, clearly affirms that she is of the same tribe and land.

5 Elizabeth, too, is presented to us as a relative of Mary *(cf.Lk 1:36)*. Firstly, because all Jews are related to each other – as the Apostle teaches us in these words: *"I would gladly be anathema for my brothers and kinsfolk in the flesh, the people of Israel" (Rm 9:3-4)*. Mary and Elizabeth were related because both were Israelites. They were also related because both were of the tribe of Judah. You already know that Mary was of the tribe of Judah, now I want you to learn that Elizabeth, too, was of this tribe. I quote: *"In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the mountains*

into a city of Judah" – this is what Scripture says – *"and entered into the house of Zachary" (Lk 1:39 sq.)*.

Moses had laid it down as a rule that everyone was to dwell in their own tribe *(cf.Nb 2:2)*. So, if Elizabeth was living in a city of Judah, that means she was of the tribe of Judah. This is all the more surely the case since there were priests in Elizabeth's family, and God himself is the inheritance of priests.* But at the same time, what a lovely thing it was that these two should be kinswomen in the flesh! One was mother of Christ's Precursor, the other was the mother of Christ. One conceived by the Holy Spirit, the other was filled by the Holy Spirit and prophesied. These two who, in God, were so closely connected in spiritual kinship, would therefore appear to be cousins, too, in the flesh.

If, according to the holy Apostle, the husband is the head of the wife *(cf.Ep 5:23)*; and the two are one flesh, according to the divine Law *(cf.Gn 2:24)*, how could it be that those who were one flesh and one spirit could belong to quite different tribes and families? Add, too, that the Angel Gabriel declared this of the Lord: *"The Lord shall give Him the throne of David His father" (Lk 1:32)*. From this it is absolutely certain that Mary, too, was descended from David. At the same time we learn that it matters not which genealogical line we follow, since either line leads us where we want to go.

6 Now, I ask myself, why does Saint Matthew begin Christ's genealogy from Abraham, while Saint Luke traces it from Christ back to God? This would seem to require some explanation. But why, since Saint Matthew was beginning his tracing from Abraham, does he not say: The Book of the Genealogy of Abraham" instead of: "The Book of the Genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" *(Mt 1:1)*? And why has he picked out these two ancestors in particular? I do not think that this is of slight importance. There is every reason why the two most faithful ones should be chosen as Heads of the Family; for from this we learn that even in tracing ancestry according to the flesh account must be taken, too, of spiritual ancestry. And these were the two men on whom the Lord poured out His promises.

7 Let us begin with Abraham. Before the law of Moses, before the Jewish people, Abraham abandoned his goods and by his knowledge of God merited this glorious testimony to his Faith: *"Abraham believed God, and it was reputed to him unto justice" (Gn 15:6)*. Again, it was Abraham who received God's promise when the Lord said: *"Go out from your own country and your people and your father's house and come to the Land which I will show you. I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and will glorify your name. You shall be blessed, and I will bless those who bless you and*

* Priests have no land of their own *(cf.Dt 18:1-2)*

curse those who curse you. And in you all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed" (Gn 12:1-3). You see here how God promises Abraham, by a divine oracle, that the nations will be brought together and the Holy Church assembled. He is the first to receive this promise. He is rightly regarded as Head of the ancestral line since he was the first to merit the promise that the Church would one day be instituted.

8 And David, too, has every right to be called Head of the Family. It was to him that the Lord gave the solemn promise and assurance that the Christ or Messiah would be born of his flesh. Here are the words: *"The Lord has sworn an oath to David, and He will not make it void: 'A son the fruit of your body I will set upon the throne' " (Ps 131:11).* In another place we read: *"Once for all I have sworn by my holiness, I will not lie to David. His seed shall endure for ever and his throne, like the sun, in my presence" (Ps 88:36-37).* We also read in Chronicles: *"It shall come to pass that when you are laid to rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your seed after you. He shall be one of your sons and I will establish his Kingdom. It is he who shall build me a house and I will establish his throne for ever. I will be to him a father and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my mercy away from him, as I took it from those who were before you" (1 Ch 17:11-13).*

And in Isaiah, the same Lord God reveals to us the Lord's ancestry when he says: *"There shall come forth a rod from the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom and understanding" (Is 11:1-2).* Further down the sacred writer continues: *"In that day, the root of Jesse shall rise up to command the nations. He shall be the hope of the nations" (Is 11:10).* Then again you have: *"A child is born to us, a son is given to us. His Empire is upon his shoulders and he shall be called the Angel of Great Counsel. For I will procure peace for the princes and salvation for him. Great shall be his power and his peace shall know no end. He shall sit upon the throne of David and reign over his Kingdom" (Is 9:6-7).*

We see again, in the version of Aquilas, that the promise is not made as though for some man, but for Him who is above man. For he has translated it: *"A child is born to us, a son is given to us. His greatness is upon his shoulder, and he shall be called wonderful Counsellor, my Counsellor, strong one, powerful one, Father of the ages, Prince of peace. All authority is his, and his peace has no end, as he sits on the throne of David reigning over his Kingdom".*

9 The sacred texts make it quite evident that all these oracles point to Christ. They are by no means to be applied to David's son, Solomon. We know what his end was. We know there was an end to Solomon's kingdom and to peace. The Books of the Kings show this *(cf.1 K 11:43).* Only of Christ can it be said that his Kingdom has no end *(cf.Lk 1:33).* Add to that, Solomon never ruled over the nations, whereas Christ has gathered

his Church from among the nations. Finally, it was while David was still alive that Solomon was born and came to the throne *(cf.1 K 1:39),* but the One who is here promised in prophecy was to rise up after the death of David. This is what is written: *"When your days have been accomplished, and when you have gone to take your rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your seed after you. He shall be one of your own sons and I will establish his Kingdom. It is he who shall build a dwelling for me and I will set up his throne for ever" (1 Ch 17:11-12).*

Did Solomon reign for ever? Certainly not. He reigned for forty years. *"I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son" (1 Ch 17:13).* Who is this true Son of God if not He to whom was said: *"You are my Son. This day I have become your Father" (Ps 2:7)? "I will not take away my mercy from him; and I will keep him faithful to me in my house and in his Kingdom for ever" (1 Ch 17:13-14).* But Solomon went sadly astray. Perhaps he went so very much astray that no one could possibly make the mistake of thinking that the divine promise was addressed to him. We know this by following the divine texts. To take one example, he built a temple to the goddess Astarté – and all for love of a woman! The Lord was very angry with Solomon *(cf.1 K 11:4).*

To sum up: David was still actually alive when Solomon succeeded to the throne – for you read in Scripture that when David was told that Solomon was now king, he praised God on his bed saying: *"Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who has given me this day a son of my loins to sit upon my throne, my own eyes seeing it" (1 Ch 2:48).* Now, if this son went astray and offended God, it is quite clear that all the prophecies we have spoken of referred, in fact, to the Christ.

10 You see now why the Evangelist has singled out these two Heads of the family tree. One received the promise that the nations would be gathered together. The other was given the prophecy of the birth of Christ. And though David was born much later than Abraham, he is mentioned before him in the genealogy of Christ. The reason is that it is a greater thing to have received the promise of Christ than to have been given the prophecy of the Church. One heads the family line according to the flesh; the other according to the spirit. One is so honoured because of his Seed; the other because of the faith of the nations. He who saves is necessarily greater than he who is saved. And therefore Christ is named son of David: *"Book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David" (Mt 1:1).* It was only right that Christ should be called David's son, seeing that David had been promised that He would be given to him as his son.

It is true that the Apostle says that to Abraham, too, the Christ was promised: *"The promises were made to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say, 'and to his seeds', as though they were many, but speaks of one Seed only. And this is Christ" (Ga 3:16).* To David, fatherhood is attributed; to Abraham is attributed the source or origin. The gift received

by one is that Jesus was to be called his son; Abraham, patriarch of the entire family of nations, has the special privilege reserved for him of being the first to be named in the genealogy of our Lord *(cf.Mt 1:1)*. If Abraham is our ancestor in the faith, it is right and proper that Scripture should affirm him as ancestor of the divine genealogy.

11 It goes without saying that Saint Luke, for this reason, believed it right to trace Christ's origin back to God: for Christ's true Father is God. God is truly Christ's Father by generation; and by the re-generation of baptism he is author of the Mysterious Gift. The reason why Saint Luke does not give the genealogy at the beginning, but only after the baptism, is that he wants to show that by baptism God becomes the Father of all. He testifies that Christ comes from God by reason, too, of descent. Linking all things together he shows that Christ is Son of God by nature, by grace, and by human descent. Can any testimony of His divine sonship be more eloquent, more lucid, than the Father's own words – which precede the genealogy: *"This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17)*?

12 There are people who like to raise problems because Matthew counts forty-two generations from Abraham to Christ, and Luke fifty; and because Matthew traces a genealogy different from that given by Luke. Regarding the latter point you can verify what I have already said. I know that Matthew, in recounting the Lord's genealogy, names ancestors other than those inscribed in the genealogy according to Luke. It does not matter. Both the one and the other trace the line from Abraham and from David.

13 Matthew decided to trace the line through Solomon whereas Luke chose to trace it through Nathan. One points out the royal line from which Christ descended, and the other made choice of the priestly line.* We must not take the attitude of saying that one is telling the truth and the other is not. Both are in accord, both speak truly and honestly. For in truth Christ was, even according to the flesh, of race both royal and priestly. He was King from kings and Priest from priests. Of course it is true that the oracle touches not on what is carnal but on what is divine, for it says: *"In the strength of God the King finds joy" (Ps 20:2)*. It is to Christ that the King His Father entrusts all judgement *(cf.Jn 5:22)*.

Also it is written that he is a Priest for ever: *"You are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchisidech" (Ps 109:4)*. So both Evangelists speak truly: Matthew in establishing Christ's descent from the kings; Luke in

* Saint Ambrose seems to base his argument on a version of *2 S 8:18* that was current in his time: *filii autem David sacerdotes erant [the sons of David were priests]*.

deriving it – through the priests – from God. By doing this Luke underlines the sacred character of Christ's origin. At the same time he is justifying, here again, the emblem of the bull-calf.* Always Luke is alert to the necessity of observing the sacerdotal mystery.

14 There is no need for you to be surprised if Luke numbers more generations between Abraham and Christ, while Matthew numbers fewer. For you admit they are tracing their genealogies through different persons. Maybe in one line the people lived longer, and in the other they died prematurely. We know plenty of old people who live to see their grandchildren; while others pass away as soon as their own children have been born.

15 There is something else upon which I must remark. Saint Matthew mentions that Jacob, father of Joseph was the son of Matthan *(cf.Mt 1:15)*. But Luke writes that Joseph, spouse of Mary, was the son of Heli who was the son of Melchi. How can a man have two fathers? How can a man have two paternal grandfathers? But look into it more deeply and you will discover that following a directive of the Old Law two brothers have fathered children by the same wife *(cf.Dt 25:5)*. It is said that Matthan of the race of Solomon fathered a son, Jacob, and died leaving a widow whom later Melchi married. By this marriage Melchi had a son, Heli. Heli, in turn, married the widow of his brother and had a son, Joseph. Joseph was therefore legally called the son of Jacob. For the brother had raised up issue to his dead brother, in conformity with the Old Law *(cf.Mk 12:19)*. So he was called the son of both. This does not mean that both men were his natural fathers, but that he was the natural son of one and the son, according to law, of the other.

What the Jewish people failed to understand was that this law was a sort of prophecy that the seed of the dead would live for ever. They took the text in its literal application only. They did not know that there was another Brother who would bring to life the seed of his dead brethren. A Brother who would do this not by consanguinity but by purity of grace. Perhaps that is why Scripture says: *"The brother does not redeem; a Man shall redeem" (Ps 48:8)*. For it is not a blood brother, but the Lord, *"the Man Christ Jesus, mediator of God and men" (1 Tm 2:5)* who has spread abroad the blessings of resurrection.

There is yet another interpretation of this verse, but of that we shall speak later in its proper place *(cf.Commentary on Ps 48:13)*.

16 It seems to me not without reason that Saint Matthew, doubling a mystical number [seven], should decide to distribute, in series of

* The link with the priesthood is that the bull-calf was slain by the priests in sacrifice.

fourteen each, the generations from Abraham down to David *(cf.Mt 1:6; 11 sq.)*; from David down to the Babylonian Exile; from the Babylonian Exile down to Christ. In this way he divides up into three equal numbers of generations the successive changes. For, from Abraham to the period of David the Jews had no kings – since the true kingship began only with David. Then the Jewish people were governed by kings whose royal state remained inviolate until the Exile; but, after the Exile, the reduced nobility of this degenerate people sank downwards to obscurity.

As for the fifty generations traced by Luke from Abraham onwards, it is plain to see that he too was observing a number that has mystical significance. In the case of Matthew, he takes the number ten and the number seven, both of which are mystical, and triples them so as to signify a great mystery. Luke indicates the grace of Pentecost by preferring the number "fifty"; Matthew opts for the grace of Lent.* Both Evangelists have sufficiently and more than sufficiently produced a total number fraught with mysticism.

17 It surprises a great number of people that Matthew should judge it wise to insert in his genealogy of the Lord mention of Thamar. To them she seems a woman of dubious repute. They wonder that Ruth, too, is named. They are surprised that the woman who was wife to Uriah should be named. For David married her after murdering her husband! The most surprising thing about it is that Matthew makes no mention of the holy women: Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. Listen to what he says: *"Abraham was the father of Isaac; Isaac was the father of Jacob; Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers; Judah was the father of Phares and Zarah, Thamar being their mother" (Mt 1:2-3)*. Matthew names this woman on purpose, and I feel I should speak of her at some length.

18 Look at the matter realistically. This was not a woman of loose morals, for in fact she was a good woman. She was not trying to gratify the passion of a moment, but rather to secure for herself descendants. Not to have children was a reproach. Even the civil laws punished people for not having children.** Judah had promised her in marriage to his son *(cf.Gn 38:11 sq.)*, but he had postponed the marriage for a considerable length of time. Because of delaying the thing that he had promised, the husband died. All this took place before the coming of Christ, at a time when neither the flower of virginity nor that of widowhood was held in honour. The woman was devastated to find herself without children. The longing to be a mother caused her to tell a lie and to take advantage quite

* In Ambrose's time, Lent consisted of forty-two days.

** The allusion is to a Roman law, aimed against celibates, and cancelled by the Christian Emperors.

easily of Judah. Bejewelled and bedizened she presented herself to him, knowing that his wife was dead.

You see, it was this woman's lot to be sorely tried. She did not rob another woman's bed. She was not a courtesan, but only dressed as one. She was not out to catch any man that came. This woman had for a long time been cheated by the false promises of her father-in-law. Now she, in turn, was going to play a trick on him. Out of the very family she had chosen to be hers, she was going to pluck the fruit of posterity. What could be more chaste than that?

Of the two, which is the more chaste? The woman who had waited so long for the fulfilment of the promise, or the man who could not resist the offer of sex? The woman who remained faithful to the family of her husband, or the man who thought he was meeting a courtesan? The woman who for so long had preserved the chastity of her body against those who desired to possess her, or the man who began by satisfying his passion and ended – thanks to the chastity of this woman – by being blessed with posterity? Surely the childless woman who feared that time was running out and that, if the marriage continued to be put off, it would be too late for her to conceive, was the more chaste of the two? The man she chose was a mature man, no longer young. But he, on the other hand, was trapped by the youthful allure of the woman.

He recognised this himself and said: *"Thamar is more honest than I, for I did not give her to my son Sela" (Gn 38:26)*. It was for this reason she was putting to the test one who had imposed chastity on her. After this experience she had no intercourse with any man but wore to the end her widow's weeds *(cf.Gn 38:19)*. He, on the other hand, having forced upon this girl year after year of celibacy, forgot his mourning, changed his clothes, cut his hair, deserted his wife's tomb, and without an hour's delay climbed into bed with a lover.

19 But we do not defend one in order to accuse the other. Better that we should excuse both – rather not we, but the mystery that brought forth the fruit of this union. For the woman conceived twin sons *(cf.Gn 38:29 sq.)*, Phares and Zarah. In view of the fact that *"Phares became the father of Esrom, and Esrom became the father of Aram" (Mt 1:3)*, and so on, one might have thought it sufficient for Matthew to mention Phares only. But he had very good reason for naming both.

But why, you ask, does Scripture in other cases mention only those sons who figure directly in the Lord's line of descent? After all, Isaac had two sons and Jacob had many sons *(cf.Gn 25:25 sq.; 49:1 sq.)*. In mentioning, therefore, these twin sons, is there not here some deep mystery?

20 We have considered this from the moral viewpoint: we have shown how Thamar was not acting as a courtesan but only seeking the blessing of conceiving a child. Let us now view the matter from the

historical aspect and get more deeply into the mystery that lies beneath. For it is not without mystical significance that she took from Judah his ring, his jewel, and his staff *(cf.Gn 38:18, 25)*. It is not every and any one who merits to receive an ornament, a seal, an emblem of power: the seal that is set on deeds, the ornament that hangs on the breast, and the sceptre signifying royal freedom.

To broach the historical aspect: you have read how, at the time Thamar was in labour, one of the babies thrust out his hand from her womb and the mid-wife at once tied a scarlet thread around it, and said: *"This one will be born first" (Gn 38:28 sq.)*. But hardly had the infant withdrawn his hand when the other child made his entrance into the world. At this, the mid-wife exclaimed: *"What a breach you have opened for yourself!"* So she called him Phares, [meaning breach]. Then his brother – he of the scarlet thread – was born, and they called him Zarah. See how all these enigmas point to some mystery! We have the hand that is thrust out; the scarlet knot; the hand withdrawn; the words of the mid-wife – that one child would come out first, and that the other had made a breach.

21 Now, I ask myself why should one twin put out his hand first, and why should the other twin come out of the womb before him? The mystical significance is that these twins represent the fortunes of two different races. One represents the Old Law, the other represents the Faith. One represents the letter of the law, the other symbolises grace. Grace precedes the Law, Faith precedes the letter. That which symbolised grace thrust forth the hand, showing that the action of grace had taken precedence. Grace had already existed in Job, Melchisedech, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – all of whom lived by Faith and without the Law. For *"Abraham believed in God, and this was reputed to him unto justice" (Gn 15:6)*. And already holy Melchisedech had given evidence of grace by the figurative nature of his sacrifice *(cf.Gn 14:18)*. The holy patriarchs who lived before the Law, and were free of its bondage, shone with the grace of a liberty like to our own. I mean, the freedom of the Gospel.

22 The younger of the twins represents the second degree of sanctity. The first degree of sanctity belongs to the patriarchs, the second to the kings and pontiffs. Both lives are attuned to God. Those who, following the Law of Moses, waged warfare in the name of true religion and devotion, have their proper share of grace and honour. But the fruit of tender and loving devotion existed first in the ancestors, and then later in their heirs. In truth, the first-comer was Zarah, whose name is interpreted as Orient – for the light of *pietas* is the splendour of the true Sun in its rising. This is He who says: *"Orient is my name" (Zc 6:12)*. This is He whose brilliant light shone first in the patriarchs.

These indeed are they who despatched in advance their activity in this world. By their hand they pointed out what would be the nature of the

activity to be performed by us, who are the rest of the body. We at the time were still held in nature's womb. But a hedge grew up, forming a barrier between the observance of the Law and the way of life of our ancestors; and the latter seems, in a sense, to have been cut off. The wise mid-wife is, perhaps, a type or figure of justice, who welcomes us as we leave the womb of Mother Nature. And it is this wise mid-wife who is reported to have said: *"This one will be born first" (Gn 38:28)*. And truly it was a wonderful thing that such devotion, such true religion, should have communicated itself spontaneously; pouring itself out through the sheer kindness of Wisdom. For it came neither from Moses nor from any man, nor through any man.

23 So the first school of sanctity is the Gospel, because we believe through the Cross and Blood of Christ – whose day Abraham saw with joy *(cf.Jn 8:56)*. By mystical knowledge Noah *(cf.Gn 6:14)* fore-saw, in symbolic form, the grace that would be given us in the Church. Isaac *(cf.Gn 22:10)* willingly offered himself as a type of the sacrificial Victim that was to come. Jacob *(cf.Gn 32:25)*, in winning the wrestling match adored Him *(cf.Gn 32:25)*. Isaiah saw the scarlet robe *(cf.Is 63:2)* – for the prophets, too, lived in the spirit of the Gospel – and seeing it he saw the blood that, despite all the calamities of this world of ours, would win for us salvation. The harlot Rahab *(cf.Jos 2:1 sq.)*, too, mysteriously symbolises the Church and the salvation of all people. She does not refuse the many lovers who come to her, and the greater their number the more chaste she is; a virgin without stain or wrinkle *(cf.Ep 5:27)*; of blameless purity, and filled with love for all mankind. She is a courtesan that is chaste, a widow that is childless, a virgin that is fruitful. I say courtesan because many lovers come to her, drawn by her delights, and innocent of sin (for *"anyone who is joined to a harlot is made one body with her" (1 Co 6:16)*. I call her a childless widow *(cf.Is 54:1)*, because in the absence of her husband she bears no children. But now the Husband has come and she has borne all this great multitude. I declare that she is a fruitful virgin, because without tasting the pleasures of sex she has brought into the light of day so vast a number of people – the fruits of her love.

24 But we must get back to our narrative. What did the mid-wife mean when she said: *"This one will come out first" (Gn 38:28)*? The meaning can only be figurative: this child is a type or figure of Him who was to be born later in the flesh, but is "first" in reality and by reason of his power. This is He who would one day claim his principality over all things. This explains the words of John: *"After me comes a Man who is before me" (Jn 1:27)*.

And what is signified by the scarlet thread about the hand? Surely it is the emblem of Him who, by the sign of the Cross and the outpouring of his Blood has ennobled human activity? So, after he had withdrawn his hand, his brother appeared as if through a breach opened in a hedge. The Apostle

calls this "hedge" the middle wall of partition, separating one part of the house from another *(cf.Ep 2:14)*. The child takes his name from this breach, for Phares signifies separation – hence the word Pharisee, for these Pharisees deemed themselves separate from the common multitude. Happier it would have been had the partition not been breached. It would have been a better thing if it could have remained one and undivided. This could have been possible if the way of life that was to follow on the previous one, could have taken the direction indicated by the hand that came out first; and if the succeeding generation could have served as their forebears had done.

Yes, it would have been a far, far better thing if the people of the Circumcision could have imitated the lives of their ancestors. In this way there would have been but one wall, one partition, one building, for the ancestors and for their descendants. But the age that followed was decadent and could not live up to the standard of those that went before. So a rupture was made in this hedge or partition that had been raised by God. It is as though a gash were interposed to break the line of the hedge: that is to say, the enduring and continuous edifice of wholesome morals. For the demesne wall is what surrounds the fertile field. It prevents robbers from breaking in. It preserves land under cultivation and separates it from the barren wilderness. The wall, on the other hand, is what encloses the house. So long as the wall stands, the house is safe. That is why we read: *"I will break down the wall, and it shall be trodden down" (Is 5:5)*.

25 God grant that the wall of our house will remain intact – that spiritual house that is within us. For it cannot be built by man, but only by the living God, who said: *"I have surrounded it with a wall" (Is 5:2)*. Those who lost their wall, lost also their salvation. May the wall remain; may this enclosure remain. Do you want to know how useful it is to have an enclosure? Listen: *"Fence your ears round with a quickthorn hedge, and take care not to listen to the wicked tongue" (Si 28:28)*. Enclosure such as this protects you from sin.

26 So it follows that the Lord Jesus, later taking flesh and coming into the world, restored the ancient wall of enclosure and led us back to the ancient, simple Faith of our ancestors. This is why the Prophet says of Him: *"You shall be called repairer of fences" (Is 58:12)*. For He did away with the obstacle which broke the unity of soul and body and disturbed the pattern of a simple life. He Himself *"became our peace, making both one, and breaking down the middle wall of partition" (Ep 2:14)*. This is the expression that the Apostle uses to indicate enmities within the flesh. Our Lord has subdued these enmities so as to spread peace. He has *"abolished the law of the commandments and precepts in order to make a new man" (Ep 2:15)*. This means not only the outer and the inner man, but Jews and Greek, so that Christ may be all in all *(cf.Rm 1:16; 2:10; 1 Co 15:28)*.

The Master of the Sabbath *(cf.Mt 12:8)* has done away with the superstitious practices of the Sabbath – as understood in a material sense. He has, I might say, destroyed the partition wall of the Law which, with all its rules and regulations, turned us away from that true devotion which pleases God. Remember too that with the Law of Moses it would have been neither easy nor possible for the Gentiles to serve God. The foolish superstitions of the Jews would have put off Gentiles of good will and honest intent from observing such a Law.

What then? Was the Law useless? Far from it *(cf.Rm 3:31)*. It was useful to the incredulous, and necessary to the weak. This austere but salutary law checked those who were liable to lose their footing on the slippery slope, and held them fast by the attention it demanded to exact observance. But the Law is good, because it is spiritual *(cf.Rm 7:14)*; to those who do not think it spiritual, the Law is not good. I mean low, petty-minded people who are incapable of seeing the majesty that is above the Law – the majesty of Christ. That sublime spirit, Isaiah, was able to see it; he could, so to speak, look over the partition that divides us and contemplate the glory of God *(cf.Is 6:1)* – a glory seen not in the hills but in the mountains.

27 And so the Church teaches us in the Song of Songs that this partition has not proved an obstacle to our Lord Jesus Christ, nor to anyone who follows him. She says: *"It is my brother's voice. See how he comes, bounding over the mountains, skipping over the hills. My brother is like a roe or a young hart. See how he stands behind our wall, looking through the windows, peeping through the lattices. Listen, my beloved speaks to me: 'Rise up, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one and come. For see, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have appeared in our land; the time of pruning has come; the voice of the turtle dove is heard' " (Sg 2:8-12)*.

The flowers are the Apostles; the time of the harvest is Christ's fruit; the voice of the turtle dove is the voice of the Church. Rightly therefore did the Son of God come down to earth. He saw that humankind was dull, heavy and inert, quite unable to fly to the heights, prisoners of a narrow materialism. He saw that *"there is not one who does good. No, not one" (Ps 13:3)* and so in His kindness He came down to earth Himself to do away with this barrier of the Law, this heavy mass – so to speak, this superstition, this utterly material interpretation of the Law that in some sort weighed down and obscured the hearts of the people.

So the enclosure is better than the wall of division. Besides, that wall was not a good wall, but a whited wall – to use the epithet applied with good reason to the high priest *(cf.Ac 23:2)*. For he was conserving that wall of division that acted as a barrier, whereas the Lord Jesus had suppressed the old observance as being a crippling burden. This Jesus did to introduce a more enlightened practice of religion, so that from now on there would not

be the one Jewish race imprisoned in the material prescriptions of the Law. Instead, all the nations would be invited to the worship of God through the Good News.

28 These twins represent two ways of life, two ways of service. The first is the better of the two. And, because it is better, it has been restored. Can anyone deny that the Gospel is superior to the Law? Yet the Law, too, is good provided that it raises the soul above the literal interpretation. For, *"the letter kills" (2 Co 3:6)*. What good would this history be to us if we failed to see the light of so great a mystery? The holy Apostle has taught us to search beyond the simple history, to discover the secrets of truth, and to apply our intelligence to certain aspects which we cannot understand if we follow merely the literal meaning. He says: *"Tell me, you people who have read the Law, have you not understood the Law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons – one by a slave girl and one by a free woman. The one by the slave girl was born according to the flesh, but the child of the free woman was born of the Promise". "This,"* says Paul, *"is spoken as an allegory. For the two sons represent the two Testaments" (Ga 4:21-24)*. A little further down he says: *"Now, the Jerusalem that is above is free" (Ga 4:26)*.

29 It is towards her – the Jerusalem that is above – that we must raise up our souls. For the wall of division has not been able to separate us from her. That barrier that shut off the Old Testament – interpreted materially – has been dissolved. The slave girl is sent away, and the free woman is kept. Through this woman, herself free, we have become free. For the Church is free, and the Synagogue – the enslaved Jewish people – has been dismissed. Gone is the yoke of servitude *(cf.Ac 15:10)* that weighed in some sort on the neck of our soul, and prevented us from looking over the barrier that was built round the old way of life. Ours, now, is a yoke that is sweet and light *(cf.Mt 11:29)*. With reins of peace and bonds of grace it raises up, rather than oppresses, those who carry it.

Such is the Lord, whom already we have seen figuratively in Zarah. Being descended, according to the flesh, from the seed of Zarah,* the Lord Jesus *"was made of a woman, made under the Law" (Ga 4:4)*; this was so that He might redeem, with His own blood, those who were under the Law. In the hand of this Zarah, Christ is prefigured; it promises us the coming of one who would bring back the old way of life, and would restore in the new Adam the liberty that had once belonged to the first Adam *(cf.1 Co 15:45)*. In this manner the human race would be freed from slavery *(cf.Rm 8:15)*.

30 We have seen now that Thamar is named in the Lord's genealogy for mystical and symbolic reasons. No doubt it is for the same reason

* Saint Ambrose seems to be in error here.

that the name of Ruth was included. The holy Apostle seems to have her in mind, when he foresees in spirit that the Gentile people would be called by the teaching of the Gospel: *"The Law,"* he says, *"was not made for the just but for the unjust" (1 Tm 1:9)*. It is certainly strange, is it not, that Ruth, a foreigner, should have married a Jew *(cf.Rt 4:10)*? I ask you, too, for what reason does the Evangelist feel he must mention in the genealogy of Christ, a marriage that was contrary to the directives of the Law *(cf.Dt 7:3)*? Are we to conclude that the Saviour was to descend from a union that was not legitimate? That would appear to be a blot on one's pedigree, unless you turn back to that sentence of the Apostle that the law was not made for the just but for the unjust.

Ruth was a foreigner and a Moabitess, and the Law of Moses had prohibited marriage with the Moabites and had excluded them from the Assembly *(cf.Ex 34:16)*. Moses had most explicitly excluded them when he said: *"The Moabites must not enter the Assembly, even after the third and fourth generation. In fact, never" (Dt 23:3)*. How then did Ruth enter the Church or Assembly? It is because she was holy and pure, and above the Law. If the Law was made for sinners and dishonest people, you can be quite sure that Ruth escaped the limitations of the Law. She entered the Church and she became an Israelite. She merited to be numbered among the ancestors of the Lord. Chosen not for her physical relationship to them but for her affinity of soul, she is a great example to us: for in the person of Ruth we see our own entrance into the Lord's Church; and in her we see, pre-figured, the gathering in of the nations. Let us imitate her, then. Her beautiful character – so history teaches us – won for her the privilege of being admitted into such a company. Therefore let us, too, try by the excellence of our own conduct and behaviour to win admission on merit into the Church of Christ.

31 What happened was as follows. The Israelites, long ago during the era of the Judges, were oppressed by famine; and a certain man left Bethlehem, the city of Judah where Christ was to be born, to settle in Moab with his wife and sons *(cf.Rt 1:1 sq.)*. The man was called Elimelech, and his wife's name was Noemi. His sons married Moabite girls – one was called Orpha and the other Ruth *(cf.Rt 1:3 sq.)*. They lived about ten years in the land of Moab, then the three men died. Noemi was now a childless widow. She then heard that God had visited Israel, and got ready to return. She tried to persuade the two girls to go back to their own homes. One consented, but Ruth stayed with her mother-in-law *(cf.Rt 1:14)*.

Her mother-in-law said to her: *"Look, your sister-in-law has gone home to her own people and to her own gods. Go back as she has done."*. But Ruth replied: *"God forbid that I should leave you and go back. Wherever you go, there shall I go too. Wherever you dwell, there too shall I dwell. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Wherever you die, I shall die; wherever you are buried, I shall be buried" (Rt 1:15-17)*.

So, the two of them arrived at Bethlehem. When Boaz (great-grandfather of David) heard of this decision on the part of Ruth; of her utter devotion to her mother-in-law; of her fidelity even unto death; her profound reverence for God; he decided to marry her. This he did in conformity with the Law of Moses and in order to raise up posterity to his deceased kinsman *(cf.Dt 25:5)*.

32 It is worth considering that he met her in a corn-field, at the very height of the harvest season *(cf.Rt 2:17)*. For she had come to glean corn for her mother-in-law. Scripture tells us all this. Ruth did not glean in the field of a young man, but followed after a man of mature age. For this she merited to hear: *"You are a woman of virtue"*, or, *"Your latter kindness has surpassed the former" (Rt 3:11 and 10)*. This means that the latter kindness – the gathering together of the Church – surpasses the former. I speak only briefly of this as I have already discussed it in one of my books on the Faith.*

He who was far off has drawn near, because he who was near has gone far off. He has claimed and taken possession of his kinsman's shoe, and married this woman. For the custom was that the next-of-kin, if he did not want to marry his kinsman's widow, took off his shoe and gave it to another family member *(cf.Rt 4:7)*. This mystery is of the greatest importance. It is an allegory showing us that he who married the foreign girl has received the right to preach the Gospel.

33 The wedding, too, is an allegory. We see this from the blessing uttered by the elders. For they say: " *'May the Lord make this woman, who comes into your house, like Rachel and Lia, who built up the House of Israel! May she be an example of virtue in Ephrata, and may her name be renowned in Bethlehem! May your House be as the House of Phares, whom Thamar gave to Judah, and may the Lord give you children by this bride'. So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife" (Rt 4:11-13)*. Ruth became the mother of Obed, who was the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David *(cf.Rt 4:14; 17)*.

You can see now why Saint Matthew included foreigners in the genealogy that he drew up. He wanted, through the Church, to invite the Gentiles into the Church, and so he recalls that the Lord Himself, Author of this grand re-union of the nations, had foreign blood Himself. He wanted us to understand that the line that he was tracing was destined to produce the Author of the vocation of the nations. This is the Lord whom we were to follow – we the strangers and foreigners gathered in from among the nations. We were to leave the house of our fathers, and were to say to him who called us to the service of the Lord – whether, for example, it was Paul

* *Cf.De Fide ad gratianum, where Ruth symbolises the Church and Boaz is a figure of Christ.*

or some bishop: *"Your people will be my people, your God my God" (Rt 1:16)*. So Ruth, just as Lia and Rachel had done, forgot her own people and her father's house *(cf.Ps 44:11)*. Loosening the bonds of the Law, she entered into the Church.

34 The person who does not accept the Church, casts off his shoe. Remember how it was said to Moses: *"Take off the shoes from your feet" (Ex 3:5)*. This was to show that Moses was not to be the true husband of the Church. Only the true husband does not remove his shoes. This is why John says: *"As for Him, I am not worthy to loosen the straps of His shoe" (Lk 3:16)*. So he, too, is a type or figure, and built up the House of Israel *(cf.Rt 4:11)*.

35 There is another reason why Ruth should be commemorated in the Lord's family tree. A mystery lies here of great profundity. It is prophesied that the Christ should be born in Ephrata when the writer [of the Book of Ruth] declares: *"May the Lord grant you to produce a Virtue in Ephrata and to have a renowned name in Bethlehem" (Rt 4:11)*. What Virtue is this, if not she who, by the grace of Christ, has gathered together the Gentile people? And what name is this of great renown, if not Bethlehem which has become the birthplace of the Lord, according to the flesh? So, too, it is said in prophecy: *"And you, Bethlehem of Judah, are not the least of the cities of Judah; for out of you shall come the Prince who shall govern my people, Israel" (Mt 2:6; Mi 5:2)*.

All of this goes to show that the mention of these women is fully justified from the historical point of view, and from the mystical point of view.

36 But in defending Thamar or Ruth, I am not denying that even sinners are numbered among the ancestors of the Lord's family. It is to avoid mentioning these that Saint Luke has followed another genealogical line. He did not think it proper to name Achab,* nor Jechonias, nor – finally – the wife of Uriah. For Luke wanted to present an unblemished priestly line. But if Saint Luke is entitled to do this, Saint Matthew, too, has his own good reasons for doing the opposite. He was announcing the Good News of the Lord's birth according to the flesh. The Lord was doing this to take on Himself the sins of all *(cf.1 P 2:24)*. He submitted to injuries, submitted to the Passion. And so very great was His kindness that He even thought that He must not recoil from the shame of a flawed pedigree.

So, too, the Church does not blush at the fact that she is recruited from sinners. After all, the Lord took His descent from sinners. Indeed, these very ancestors of His were to be the first to benefit from Redemption. Let no-one,

* There is confusion here between Achab and Achaz. See also Section 40 of this book.

therefore, think that a blot on the escutcheon need be an obstacle to virtue. No-one need boast, foolishly, of the nobility of their ancestry, nor need anyone blush for shame at the wickedness of his forebears. We can all cover up our origin with the flowers of virtue!

37 Take that holy man David. Many, many mysteries were pre-figured in him, yet is he not all the greater in that he recognised himself to be but human? Is he not all the greater in that he wept bitter tears of repentance, and so washed away the crime he had committed in taking Uriah's wife *(cf.2 S 12:13 sq.; Ps 50)*. You see, we have a very powerful enemy *(cf.1 P 5:8)*. We cannot overcome him without God's help. You will often find, among the great and the good, serious faults which go to show that these people are human. And, being human, they are subject to temptation. Otherwise, their outstanding virtues would make you doubt whether these people really were human beings. Take David. When he was lifted up by confidence in his own powers, he said: *"I have certainly never returned evil for evil" (Ps 7:5)*; and somewhere else he says: *"In my abundance I have said: 'I shall never be moved' " (Ps 29:7)*. David was at once punished for his arrogance, as he recalls in the words: *"You turned your face from me and I was troubled" (Ps 29:8)*. If even an ancestor of our Lord was punished for his arrogance, how much more shall we sinners be punished? We who have no merits on which to rely should surely dread the rock of arrogance on which so many have made shipwreck. Especially so when such an outstanding man shows the way and gives us the example, for later he made his peace with the Lord by singing to Him this psalm: *"O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor haughty my eyes" (Ps 130:1)*. In another place he sings: *"The Lord is at my right, so that I shall not be moved" (Ps 15:8)*. He had learnt that the moment he had confidence in himself, he would have a tumble.

Finally, he has shown that, unless a person knows God, there is nothing in that person. As you have read: *"What is man that you are made known to him? Or the son of man that you make account of him? (Ps 143:3)*. So, if David condemns arrogance and clothes himself again in humility, it is quite right to introduce the story of Uriah's wife as a lesson in how we should love the virtue of humility.

38 And yet, seeing that she is the mother of Solomon the Peaceful *(cf.1 Ch 22:9)*, let us see whether there might lie here some deep mystery: the Church unites herself to another Husband, to the true David, once her former spouse – who claimed as his own the Gentile people – has been done away with. David! This is what Christ has been called, for so it is written: *"I have found David, my servant" (Ps 88:21)*. He has united to Himself the Church and made her pregnant by the seed of the Word and by the Spirit of God. She has given birth to the Body of Christ, that is to say, the Christian people. She, therefore, is the woman who, *"while her husband is alive, is bound by the Law" (Rm 7:2)*. This is why her husband died, so that she could marry someone else, without committing adultery. What was, historically speaking, a sin, becomes, in the figurative sense, a mystery. The sin was man's, but the sacred symbolism springs from the Word.

As I have already spoken of this story at some length *(cf.Apologia David 1 sq.)*, I am merely touching on it here. David had good reason for writing on this episode in the fiftieth psalm where he says, on account of this affair with Bethsabee: *"O wash me more and more from my sin and cleanse me from my guilt" (Ps 50:4)*. This friend of God admits that he has sinned and recognises that by his crime he has put an obstacle in the way of his merits. Why, then, my friend, need you blush to admit that you have done wrong? Shame lies in committing the sin, not in confessing it.

39 Since David has not omitted in his psalms the Bethsabee episode – whether to teach us there a deep mystery or whether to show us a perfect example of repentance, it is only reasonable that this same episode should be mentioned in the Lord's genealogy. After all, this same David, who took Bethsabee to himself as wife, is the very first ancestor to be named [by Matthew] in his genealogy. I have said that it was David's special prerogative to have seen in mystical fashion the origin of the Church, and to have received the promise that the Christ would be born of his line. As regards the Church, David says: *"Look, we have heard of it in Ephrata; we have found it in the fields of the wood" (Ps 131:6)*. As regards the Promise, he says: *"A son, the fruit of your body, I will place upon the throne" (Ps 131:11)*. Only beware of presumptuously taking this promise for granted. There are certain conditions attached. You must preserve the Covenant and obey all the commandments of the Lord – which David foretells that the Lord will give us in the Gospel *(cf.Ps 131:12)*. Do this, and to you too will be granted access to the eternal Throne.

I have said enough about the wife of Uriah.

40 As for Achab, husband of Jezabel *(cf.1 K 16:31)*, his case is sufficiently clear. The same can be said of Jechonias. We have plenty of evidence from Jeremiah that he was an absolute scoundrel. The prophet even deprives him of his name. So it is that he who in the Book of the Kings is called Joachim, is called Jechonias by Jeremiah. For he says: *"As an earthen vessel that is of no use, Jechonias is cast out. Being useless, he and his seed are cast out. O earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord. Write down that this man is a castaway, for there shall not be a man of his seed sitting on the throne of David. He shall have power no more in the land of Judah" (Jr 22:28-30)*. It was actually during his reign that the Babylonians devastated Judea *(cf.2 K 24:1 sq.)*, and thereafter no descendant of his ever attained to be King of Judah. For, once the people were set free from their captivity, they were governed by priests and tetrarchs. From that time, right

up to the birth of Christ, rule by the tetrarchs continued. And they, of course, as history teaches us, did not preserve the royal line.

41 There are those who have passed down to us a certain story *(cf.Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. 1, c. vii)*. It may simply be someone's idea, or it may be information that is being given to us, or it may be positive affirmation, but here it is. Idumean robbers broke into Ascalon, a town in Palestine, and –among other captives – they carried off, from the temple of Apollo which was situated close to the ramparts, Antipater – son of a priest by the name of Herod. Now this priest, being a poor man, could not pay the ransom money. This Antipater was well versed in the secret lore of the Jews and formed a friendship with Hyrcan, king of Judea. Hyrcan sent him as his ambassador to Pompey, and he acquitted himself very well in his mission. As a result, he was given a share in the kingdom. But people were jealous of Antipater's good fortune, so they murdered him. Later on, when Anthony was in power, Antipater's son, Herod, was appointed king of the Jews by the Senate. He became the father of Herod and the other tetrarchs.

I think it wise to tell you this story, handed down to us by the Greeks, to show that Herod had not a drop of Jewish blood and won the kingdom by fraud. He was very conscious of his lowly origins, and feared that the right of his descendants might be questioned in the name of the ancient Law. So he burnt their Scriptures. He thought that if he could destroy these writings that were his accusers, there would be no other witnesses to prove that he was not descended from the race of the patriarchs or the early converts. But, as will happen with the best laid plans of man, nothing he did could prevent people from learning the truth.

42 But we must not let this story shake our firm belief that Christ is of royal and authentic race. We need not doubt that His genealogy derives from genuine and famous kings. A bastard dynasty had taken over the throne; and the heritage of nobility belonged not to those in power, but to those who claimed it by right of descent.

But what about those words: *"A son, the fruit of your body, I will place upon the throne" (Ps 131:12)*? We are never told that in this world Christ enjoyed royal splendour. Then there are those other words, that the angel spoke of Him: *"The Lord God shall give Him the throne of David His father, and He shall reign over the House of Jacob" (Lk 1:32)*? Why was He promised royalty if we see no sign of it? Or how is it that the Prophet says that no-one of the seed of Jechonias will reign.? If, in fact, Christ reigned, and if Christ is of the race of Jechonias, then the Prophet has lied and the oracles are false. But he did not say that the race of Jechonias would have no descendants, and therefore Christ is his descendant. Nor is Christ's reign opposed to the prophecy, for He did not reign with the pomp and glory of the world. He did not sit on the throne of Jechonias, but reigned on the throne of David.

43 You will object that Jechonias himself sat on the throne of David and ask how then can we say that the descendants of Jechonias would not sit on the throne of David *(cf.Jr 22;30)*, since it would appear that both had the same throne? We cannot deny that this was the throne of David; nonetheless, Christ did not sit on the same throne of David as that on which Jechonias sat. What is more, of the race of David none but Christ could sit on his throne, because no descendant of David is eternal but Christ alone. God himself revealed this in the words: *"Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness, his throne shall endure like the sun in my presence" (Ps 88:36 sq.)*.

Of whom is he speaking? Not Solomon, you can be sure, not Roboam, not Nathan. But of Him, of whom alone he can say: *"I will set his hand over the sea, and his right hand over the rivers. He shall say to me: 'You are my Father' " (Ps 88:26-27)*. And again: *"I will make his seed to endure for evermore, and his throne as the days of heaven" (Ps 88:30)*. Now, this is not the throne of Solomon, nor of Roboam, nor of Jechonias. You wish to know who sits there? It is He of whom the angel said to Mary: *"See, you shall conceive in your womb and bring forth a son, and you shall call Him Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God shall give to Him the throne of David His Father, and He shall reign over the House of Jacob for ever, and His Kingdom shall have no end" (Lk 1:31-33)*. If you do not believe the angel, then at least believe the Lord Himself when He says: *"You have said it, I am a King" (Jn 18:37)*. Would He have lied in affirming His royalty, seeing that He did not reign on earth? How do we solve the problem that Scripture says He reigns but does not show Him reigning?

44 We come now to a perilous point in the discussion. We are like sailors who have come to grief and are tossed this way and that in what I shall call, speaking metaphorically, the shipwreck of truth. It is time that we should awaken Christ. Come, we shall ask Him. Let the Lord Himself reply.

Let us ask Scripture. There we find that the Lord's Kingdom is not of this world, for He Himself said: *"My Kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36)*. In declaring that His Kingdom is not of this world, He shows that it is above this world. So His Kingdom was, and was not. It was not in this world. Therefore there is another Kingdom of the true David, and this is the only Kingdom that Christ received. And there was another posterity of David, which lasts for ever, and of it Christ alone was born. He alone is the true Son of David, just as He alone has been given the name of David. For it is written: *"I have found David my servant, and with my holy oil I have anointed him" (Ps 88:21)*. We can be positive that these words do not apply to the prophet David but to the Lord, for it is written: *"I have helped one who is mighty, and I have exalted my chosen one among my people" (Ps 88:20)*. There is only one who is mighty, only one who is chosen. and

that is Christ. The pedigree of the saints is more a matter of their Faith than of their physical descent. That is why the Apostle says: *"Those who are of the Faith, are the children of Abraham" (Ga 3:7).*

45 There is another point which I consider important. From the time of David up to the reign of Jechonias – that is to say, up to the Captivity – Saint Matthew records fourteen generations, whereas there were actually seventeen kings of Judea. So, too, from Jechonias to Joseph, where there were actually twelve generations, he again records fourteen generations. These are the very words: *"All the generations from Abraham to David make fourteen generations, and from David to the Babylonian Exile there are fourteen generations, and from the Babylonian Exile to Christ there are fourteen generations" (Mt 1:17).*

First we must bear in mind, and I have remarked on this before, that the number of genealogical generations could be smaller than the number of kings succeeding to the throne. Some men live longer than others and have children late in life. Some men die childless. The reigns of the kings do not correspond exactly with the generations. This is why Saint Matthew omits those kings that do not belong to the genealogy. If he had really meant to make out a complete list of the kings, we should indeed be surprised that Saint Matthew has omitted the three kings Ochozias, Joas, and Amasias. For we know from the Books of the Kings *(2 K 8:24; 11:2; 12:21)* and from Chronicles *(2 Ch 22:1; 24:1; 25:1)* that the above three kings followed on immediately after Josaphat, but Saint Matthew makes out that Joram follows after Josaphat *(cf.Mt 1:8).* But remember that he is writing a genealogy rather than a succession of kings. His object is to trace the generations. Now, it is possible that Joram became a father late in life, and it is also possible that Josaphat succeeded to the throne late in life. I am suggesting that Josaphat did not succeed his father immediately as king, but as regards the genealogical line he succeeds him.

46 As for the twelve generations which the Evangelist appears to have counted after Jechonias, if you look into the matter with care you will be able to discover, even there, fourteen generations. For he names twelve generations up to Joseph, and not up to Christ. Christ, following on Joseph, is the thirteenth generation. But whether there is a miscalculation of one generation or of two, it really does not matter. But even here your ship is not going to run into some hidden rock, and truth is not going to be shipwrecked! History teaches us that there were two men of the name of Joachim or Jechonias. One born before the Exile, the other born during the Exile. They were father and son. So the father – he who succeeded Josias – was counted among the previous generations, and the son is counted among the following generations. He succeeded his father and was the grandson of Josias. The Books of the Kings show us that there were two, for it is written: *"Pharaoh was master of Israel from the time that Joachim, son of Josias, was reigning in Judea – having succeeded his father Josias. Pharaoh changed the name of Joachim when he made him king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem" (2 K 23:34, 36).* The writer continues: *"The rest of the acts of Joachim, and all that he did, are they not written in the Books of the Kings, in the days that they reigned in Jerusalem? And Joachim was laid to rest with his fathers and his son Joachim reigned in his place. Joachim was eighteen years of age and reigned as king for three months. His mother's name was Mesola. He did evil before the Lord just as his father had done. It was at this time that Nabuchodonosor, king of Babylon, came up against Jerusalem" (2 K 24:5 sq. 8-10).*

So you see, one was the son of Josias, and the other was his grandson. His son is the one whose name Jeremiah changed *(cf.Jr 37:1)*; his grandson received his father's name. Very wisely, Saint Matthew chose not to disagree with the prophet. So he calls this man not Joachim but Jechonias. At the same time, as I pointed out above, he shows in a remarkably clear light the Lord's treasures of kindness. He shows that the Lord does not exact of everyone nobility of birth, but was content to be born of captives and sinners. This was right and proper for Him who had come to announce to captives that they were free. Therefore the Evangelist has suppressed neither the one nor the other, since both men were called Jechonias. In conclusion, if you add on Jechonias the Younger, you will count fourteen generations.

I have said sufficient, now, with regard to Matthew.

47 As for Luke, his is a beautiful method. He could not include in his genealogy the many sons of Jacob. To have done so would appear as though he were wandering far from the genealogical line and introducing superfluous lists. Yet he did not want to omit absolutely the names of the patriarchs. He achieves his aim by listing ancestors of the Lord, born long after the patriarchs, who bore the same names as the patriarchs. The names he chose to include were Joseph, Judah, Simeon and Levi. These men were, of course, only the descendants of the patriarchs, but their names represent four sorts of virtue. In the original Judah *(cf.Gn 49:10 sq.)* we find a figure or symbol of the Lord's Passion. In Joseph *(cf.Gn 39:7 sq.)* we find prefigured a model of perfect chastity. In Simeon *(cf.Gn 34:25 sq.)* we have before us the figure of one who avenges outraged modesty. In Levi we see the service of the priesthood *(cf.Nb 3:6)*, and in Nathan *(cf.2 K 12:1)* we note the dignity that belongs to prophets.

As the Lord Jesus Christ is all and in all, all these virtues and powers were prefigured in His various ancestors.

48 It would never do to omit Noah *(cf.Gn 6:9, 14)*, that just man, from the Lord's genealogy. Since the future Builder of the Church was to be born, we have to be allowed see an ancestor who, in mysterious fashion, built what was to be a symbol of the Church. What shall I say of Mathusaleh

(cf.Gn 5:27) whose long life stretches beyond the Deluge?* Just as Christ is the only one who never underwent the ageing process, so too among his ancestors is one who was untouched by the Flood. In Enoch *(cf.Gn 5:24)* we see clearly a wonderful manifestation of our Lord's kindness and of His divinity. Like his ancestor Enoch, who was snatched up to Heaven *(cf.Ws 4:11)*, the Lord was not mastered by death but returned to Heaven. Obviously Christ could have avoided dying, but He chose not to do so. He knew that His death would be profitable to us. The first Enoch *"was taken away for fear that wickedness would change his heart" (Ws 4:11)*. But the Lord, whom the world's wickedness could not change, returned – by the majesty of His own nature – to the place from where He had come. Needless to say, no mention is made of the man who murdered his brother *(cf.Gn 4:8)*. It would hardly do to number among the ancestors of the Lord someone who had struck down his brother; for the Lord came to save the lives of His servants, and to raise them up to the honour of being called His brothers *(cf.Mt 12:49; Jn 15:15)*. But it is interesting to see that Seth *(cf.Gn 5:3)* is mentioned, the son given late in life to Adam. The significance here is that there are two families of peoples, the earlier and the later, and Seth symbolises the Lord Jesus who would belong to the second family.

49 And now we come to Adam himself, who is, according to the Apostle *(cf.Rm 5:14)*, a figure of Christ. Can anything be more glorious than a genealogy beginning with a son of God and ending with the Son of God? The former, who was created, precedes – and is a type or figure of – Him who is truly begotten. The man made in God's image *(cf.Gn 1:27)* came first, and it was for his sake that God's own Image *(cf.Col 1:15)* descended to earth. If we dig down deep into the mystery of how we first went astray, we see that Adam, deceived by the Devil and persuaded by Eve *(cf.Gn 3:1 sq.)*, tasted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil *(cf.Gn 2:9)*. And we see that the Other, without ever knowing evil, chose for our sake the good. Persuaded by the Church, He rendered vain the snares and stratagems of the dreadful serpent. So it is written: *"For before the Child knows good or evil, He rejects evil and chooses good" (Is 7:16)*; and, *"before the Child knows how to say father or mother, He shall receive the strength of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria" (Is 8:4)*. For this is the Child whose cradle will be filled by the Magi with the spoils of the Orient *(cf.Mt 2:11)*. Because the people who, before Christ did not believe, have changed their faith, and now offer to the Lord the spoils of their idols to adorn His triumph.

* We do not know on what source this supposition is based.

50 My friend, you are familiar with all these details regarding Christ's genealogy. But I have commented on it at some length for fear that someone, reading the Gospel a little carelessly and with insufficient attention, might find himself in troubled waters. The holy Evangelists, keen to get on to matters of greater moment, to things more wonderful and actions more divine of the Lord, wisely chose to abridge and condense the genealogy rather than develop it more abundantly. In the manner of people pointing out directions to travellers ignorant of the road, we have simply indicated a few well-known paths and ways. We have run through the paths of the spiritual way. Have we reached the truth? We shall see. At least we have pursued our path in a spirit of true religion and faith. We have aimed at plumbing the depths of mysteries, anxious lest those who would read these words might be, to quote the words of an old proverb, *"like a child with a sword"*. I mean that, because they are but children, they might not be able to manage these weapons, and are more likely to do themselves harm, than good, by reading these scriptures. For the weak are wounded by their own weapons, and one who is not capable of bearing arms is certainly not capable of using them.

Faith demands the perfect man *(cf.1 Co 14:20)*. He must not crawl like a baby in the paths of knowledge. He must not stagger like a helpless infant with no intuition of the heavenly mysteries. He must be one who still enjoys the full vigour of youth and can still enter the lists to win the crown of a glorious combat. He must not be like an ageing eagle which once could seize in its talons a hare or a goose, but now, worn out by age, is reduced to taking from their nest little unfledged chicks – hardly capable of providing him with a good meal.

BOOK FOUR

1 We have now completed our treatise on the Lord's genealogy. I do not consider it fruitless and irrelevant to have dwelt at some length on our Lord's ancestors. Take, for example, those who embark on a long sea voyage and who prefer to hug the coast. They take the long scenic route rather than make directly for the port of their destination. They, like us, are not sufficiently sure of themselves. Charmed by the beauty of what they see on land, they love to disembark, to step ashore, and visit the smiling country side and the cities of renown that they see along the coast.

There is even more reason why we should adopt such a course. For we are lost, not in the immensity of the waters but in the profundity of heavenly actions. Therefore we should be happy to stop at the nearest ports and make pleasing excursions. Otherwise total exhaustion and sea-sickness would be our lot! For the voyage is long and arduous. And if your boat is not entirely sea-worthy, and you have grounds for anxiety, you are not abandoning your voyage if, as is frequently the case, instead of going on straight to the books that represent the harbour of your destination, you furl your sails (close your ears), cast your anchor (put aside your reading), and stop and take a rest. This, I say, is not abandoning the voyage but accomplishing it.

2 Perhaps, too, in many situations, the very pleasantness of these places is an invitation to stop a while. I am thinking of Ulysses, of whom we read in stories. But I need not confine myself to Ulysses, for the prophet too has said: *"And the daughters of Sirens shall dwell there" (Is 13:21)*. And even if the prophet had not said it, no one could find fault, for Scripture speaks of giants *(cf.Gn 6:4)* and the valley of the Titans *(cf.2 S 5:22; 23:13)*. But to return to Ulysses: he was on his way home after an exile of ten years. during which he had fought in the Trojan war. The return journey likewise took ten years. For though anxious to return to his native land, he was delayed by the Lotus Eaters *(cf.Hom. Odyss. 9:84 sq.)*, for their fruit was exceedingly sweet. Then the Gardens of Alcinous detained him *(cf.Hom. Odyss. 7:112 sq.)*. Finally the Sirens lured him with their lovely voices *(cf.Hom. Odyss. 11:166 sq.)*. But they could not drag him to that infamous rock of theirs. He would have suffered shipwreck on the rock of voluptuous delights, only that he sealed the ears of his comrades with wax - Ah, if only religious people could be equally captivated by the wonders of deeds divine! Yet, in the case of Ulysses, it was only the sweetness of fruit that he tasted, while we have the Bread that comes down from Heaven *(cf.Jn 6:50 sq.)*. He had the herbs of Alcinous to contemplate, but we have the mysteries of Christ – for *"he that is weak, let him eat herbs" (Rm 14:2)*. In our case, we do not have to block our ears, on the contrary we must open

them so that we can hear the voice of Christ. Whoever hears Christ will have no fear of shipwreck. We do not, as Ulysses did, attach ourselves to the mast with material ropes *(cf.Hom Odyss. 12:198 sq.)*; but we must let ourselves be fastened with spiritual bonds to the wood of the Cross. In this way we will not be moved by the lure of pleasure, nor will we allow our craft to drift into the perils of voluptuous delight.

3 Much colour has been lent to this tale by the fictions of the poet. The story, of course, is that young maidens inhabited a shore bristling with rocks. By the charm and sweetness of their voices they drew sailors away from their course; these would approach for the pleasure of listening to the maidens' song. And so the Sirens lured them onto the fatal rocks. These wretched sailors, deceived into thinking they were finding a trusty port, perished miserably on the hidden reefs.

This fable has been embellished by specious and ostentatious representations – they depict the sea, the singing girls, the rocky shore. But what sea is more cruel than our fickle world? What sea so changeable, so deep, so swiftly stirred by the breath of impure spirits? As for this picture of the singing girls, what does it symbolise? I say that it symbolises a life of enervated luxury, a love of pleasure that captivates and unmans you. What are these hidden reefs? They are the rocks on which our faith is shipwrecked. I assure you that there is no danger more hidden than the sweet pleasures of the world. While charming and seducing the soul, they destroy you, and – so to speak – dash to pieces your mind and your intelligence on the rocks of bodily pleasures.

4 So you see, don't you, why our Lord underwent His fast in the desert *(cf.Mt 4:1 sq.)*, waging war against the enticements of the flesh? The Lord of all allowed Himself to be tempted by the Devil so that we might learn, in Him, how to overcome. Let us take note how the Evangelist points out to us three principal undertakings of the Lord. The Evangelist has a reason for doing this, for the three things are of mighty profit to our salvation. They are: the sacrament, the desert, and the fast. As Scripture says: *"No-one is crowned, unless he has first fought in accordance with the rules" (2 Tm 2:5)*. No-one is even admitted to the contest of virtue unless he has first washed away all the sins that stained him, and been consecrated by the gift of heavenly grace.

5 Therefore the Lord comes to Baptism, so that He might give us visible and tangible proof of the grace of this mystery. The Law was promulgated with Heaven and Earth as witnesses *(cf.Dt 30:12 sq.)*, to convince you that the mystery of the divinity – eternally hidden in God *(cf.Col 1:26)* – is greater than the Law. But now Heaven is no longer called, already it is a witness since from it descends the voice of God. At the same time, for fear that your mind would hesitate to accept the mystery of faith,

the invisible workings of grace are shown to you in a visible fashion *(cf.Heb 11:3)*.

6 The Lord comes to Baptism, for He has made Himself all things for you *(cf.1 Co 9:22)*. He was circumcised to win over the subjects of the Law; and to gain those who were outside the Law, He willingly sat down at table with those who were without law. For the weak, He made Himself weak *(cf.1 Co 9:22)*, to win them by the sufferings of His own body. In short, He was all things to all; He was poor for the poor *(cf.2 Co 8:9)*; rich for the rich; with those who wept, He wept *(cf.Rm 12:15)*; he was hungry for those who hungered, thirsty for those who thirsted; and for those who abounded in riches, He too abounded. With the poor He was in prison *(cf.Mt 25:36)*; with Mary He wept *(cf.Jn 11:35)*; with the Apostles He ate *(cf.Mt 26:20)*; with the Samaritan woman He thirsts *(cf.Jn 4:7)*. Our Lord was hungry in the desert *(cf.Mt 4:2)*, for by this fast He wanted to expiate the sin of the first man who ate the forbidden fruit *(cf.Gn 3:6)*. To our sad loss, Adam satisfied his hunger for the knowledge of good and evil; for our great gain, the Lord endured much hunger.

7 ***"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, to be tempted by the devil"*** *(Lk 4:1)*.

This might be the place to recall how the first Adam was expelled from Paradise *(cf.Gn 3:23)* into the desert, and to consider how the second Adam returned from the desert to Paradise. See how the very things that enchained us are used to set us free; see how the divine favours are renewed, following the same pattern as of old. Virgin soil produced Adam; a Virgin gave birth to Christ. Adam was made in the image of God *(cf.Gn 1:27)*; Christ *is* the Image of God *(cf.2 Co 4:4)*. Adam was placed above all the dumb beasts *(cf.Gn 1:28)*; Christ is raised above all that live. Madness came by a woman *(cf.Jn 3:6)*; wisdom came by a Virgin. Death came by a tree; life came by the Cross. Adam, stripped of his spiritual robe, clothed himself in leaves *(cf.Gn 3:7)*; Christ, stripped of all worldly things, had no need of bodily garments. Adam was in the desert; Christ was in the desert. Our Lord knew well where to find the lost soul, to free him of sin and bring him back to Paradise. But he could not go back there covered in the spoils of this world – for no one can dwell in Heaven unless he is despoiled of every sin – and so Adam put off the old man and reclothed himself in the new *(cf.Col 3:9 sq.)*. Heaven's decrees cannot be changed, so since the sentence could not be changed, the person had to change.

8 But if, even in Paradise, he had lost his way for want of a guide, how could he possibly retrace his way in the desert without a guide? Temptations are many in the desert; the effort to be virtuous is very trying; one slips easily into error. Virtue is like a tree. When it is but a sapling, springing up from earth towards the sky, when it first spreads out its tender

foliage, it is an easy prey to the venom of the cruel bite. It is easily cut down, easily scorched. But once it has thrust its roots deep down and lifted up its branches to a great height, no longer can the beasts harm it by their bite; peasants cannot pull it up; and howling winds cannot harm it. For now it is a mature tree.

9 What guide or leader will the Lord provide against the many temptations of this world, the many ruses of the Devil? The Lord knows that we have first to struggle *"against flesh and blood, then against the Powers, against the princes of darkness who lord it over this world, against the malevolent spirits who fill the air" (Ep 6:11-12)*. Would He offer us an angel? But the angels fell. It took legions of angels *(cf.Mt 26:53)* to save mere individuals, and then only with difficulty *(cf.2 K 6:17)*. Would He send a seraph? But when a seraph descended on earth, he found himself *"among a people that has unclean lips" (Is 6:5-6)*; and there was only one prophet whose lips he purified with a burning coal. The Lord had to look for another leader that we would all follow. What leader could be great enough to come to the assistance of each and everyone, if not He who is above all *(cf.Jn 3:31)*? Who could raise me up above the world, if not He who is greater than the world? Who would be this leader, so great as to lead in one direction both man and woman, Jew and Greek, barbarian and Scythian, slave and free *(cf.Col 3:11)*? Such a leader could be none other than the Christ, He who is all and in all.

10 The snares are many *(cf.Si 9:13(20))*, whatever way we go. The body has snares; the Law has snares; there are snares set by the Devil on the very heights of the Temple *(cf.Lk 4:9)*; in the foundations of the wall. There are the snares of philosophy, the snare of desire – for the harlot's eye is the sinner's snare *(cf.Pr 7:21)*; there is the snare of money; there is a snare in religion; there is a snare in the practice of chastity. Very little things can bend the human mind this way or that. The tempter is clever and easily sways us. The Devil catches sight of some very religious person, someone with a great veneration for God and the highest esteem for all that is sacred, a person incapable of doing wrong. The Devil will use religion to make that person fall, for he will persuade him not to believe that the Son of God really took flesh like ours. He will make that person no longer believe that the Lord took this body of ours, these frail limbs of ours. When, in fact, the Lord undoubtedly suffered in His body, even though His divinity could not be hurt or injured. So it is actually this person's religion that leads him into error, for *"Whoever denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is not of God" (1 Jn 4:3)*.

The Devil sees one who is pure, chaste, virginal and incorruptible. He persuades this person to condemn marriage *(cf.1 Tm 4:3)* in order to get him excommunicated from the Church. Thus, that person is, by his own chastity, separated from the chaste body of the Church. Another good person has

heard that *"there is one God, from whom all things come" (1 Co 8:6)*. He adores God, and venerates Him. The Devil sneaks up upon him and closes his ears so that the good man does not hear that *"there is one Lord, through whom all things were made" (1 Co 8:6)*. By being over pious he becomes impious: he separates Father from Son, and at the same time confuses Father and Son, thinking they are one person. They are not one person, but one in power. So, from want of due measure in his piety, he falls into the sin of disbelief.

11 I ask myself how we can avoid these snares, so that we too can say: *"Our soul like a sparrow has escaped from the snare of the fowler; the snare has been broken and we have escaped" (Ps 123:7)*? The Prophet does not say: "I broke the snare" – David did not dare to speak like that – but: *"Our help is in the name of the Lord" (Ps 123:8)*. In this way he showed us how the snare would be undone, and prophesied that One would come into this life who would destroy the snare so carefully laid by the crafty Devil *(cf.1 Jn 3:8)*.

12 But the best means of destroying his trap was to tempt the Devil with some prey. The Devil would then throw himself upon this prey, and would get all tied up in his own snare. I would then be able to say: *"They prepared a snare for my feet, and fell in it themselves" (Ps 56:7)*. And what could this prey be but a body? The Lord was going to play a trick on the Devil. He would take on Himself a body, a corruptible body, an infirm body, to be crucified in His infirmity. For, if the body had been a spiritual one He could never have said: *"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" (Mt 26:41)*. Now listen to each of these two voices, that of the weak flesh and that of the willing spirit. The voice of the flesh says: *"Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me"*, and at once the spirit says with vigour and devotion: *"But not what I will, but what you will" (Mt 26:39)*. Why should this make you think less of the Lord's dignity? It was noble of Him to take on my body, noble of Him to take on my wretchedness, noble of Him to take on my infirmity. True, God's nature could not feel these infirmities, which even human nature itself despises and cannot endure to suffer.

Let us, therefore, follow Christ, according to those words of Scripture: *"Follow the Lord your God, and cling to Him" (Dt 13:4)*. To whom should I attach myself if not to Christ? As Paul says: *"Whoever attaches himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Co 6:17)*. Let us follow close in His footsteps, and we shall succeed in returning to Paradise.

13 Consider the ways by which we are led back. Christ is in the desert. He leads man there, instructs him, forms him, exercises him, massages his limbs with spiritual ointment. Then, when He sees that man is more robust, He leads him through fertile fields and fruitful places. You

remember how the Jews complained because the Lord's disciples were picking ears of corn and rubbing them in their hands on the Sabbath day *(cf.Mt 12:1 sq.)*. It was at that moment that the Lord had led them into cultivated land and fruitful work. At the time of His Passion He established man in a garden, for you read in the Gospel: *"When Jesus had said these things, He and His disciples crossed the brook Cedron, where there was a garden into which He entered – He and His disciples".(Jn 18:1)*.

For the fertile field is somewhat less than the garden, as the prophet teaches us in the Song of Songs: *"A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed; your fragrance is paradise" (Sg 4:12 sq.)*. Such is the pure and immaculate virginity of a soul which does not let itself turn back from the Faith, despite terror and torture. No earthly pleasure, no love of this life, can bend it. Finally, the Evangelist guarantees us that the power of the Lord will call us back home. This Evangelist is the only one that gives us the words which our Lord spoke to the thief: *"Truly I tell you, this day you shall be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43)*.

14 So Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, is led into the desert on purpose to provoke the Devil. For had not the Devil fought with Him, the Lord would not have won the triumph for me. All this took place in mysterious fashion to deliver Adam from exile. It was permitted as proof positive that the Devil goes all out to tempt people who are striving to live holy lives. It is a lesson to us to be on our guard, lest the weakness of our soul should yield up the grace of the mystery.

15 Forty days! As you have rightly guessed, this is a mysterious number. It is the number of days during which the waters of the Flood lay over the earth *(cf.Gn 7:12)*, as you will remember. This is the same number of days that the prophet fasted, and having been sanctified arrived at the mountain of God *(cf.1 K 19:8)*. Moses, that holy man, fasted for the same number of days *(cf.Ex 34:28)* and merited to receive the Law. Forty is the number of years that our ancestors lived in the desert *(cf.Nb 14:33 sq.)*; there they ate the bread of angels *(cf.Ps 77:25)* and partook of heavenly nourishment. It was only when the mystical number was complete that they won the grace of entering into the Promised Land. It is by the Lord's forty days of fasting that we gain admittance to the Gospel.

If anyone should wish to acquire the glory of the Gospel and the fruit of the Resurrection, he should not turn his back on this mysterious fast. For Moses in the Old Testament, and Christ in His Gospel, show us – by the authority of both Testaments – that this is the authentic proof of virtue.

16 I wonder why the Evangelist should point out that our Lord was hungry, when there is no indication that Moses and Elijah suffered from hunger? Can it be that the endurance of men surpasses the courage of

God? But He who did not hunger during the forty days, showed that He hungered not for the food of the body but for the bread of salvation. In this way he harassed the enemy who had already suffered a severe blow from the Lord's fast of forty days. Our Lord's hunger was a pious stratagem to lure the Devil to his downfall. For the Devil, though sensing our Lord's superiority, was taken in by the appearance of His hunger. The Devil thought he could tempt Him as a man and come off victorious. There is something you can learn from this mystery: it is the working of the Holy Spirit and the judgement of God that Christ should lay Himself open to be tempted.

17 ***"And the Devil said to Him: 'If you are the Son of God, command that this stone be turned into bread' "*** *(Lk 4:3).*

Satan has three principal weapons that he uses to wound the human soul. They are greediness, vanity and ambition. He starts with the one with which he has already conquered. Therefore I begin to conquer, in Christ, by the same means by which I was vanquished in Adam. Provided always that Christ, Image of the Father *(cf.2 Co 4:4)*, is my model of virtue. We must learn to be on our guard against greediness and sensuality, for these are the Devil's weapon. The net of the snarer is spread when a sumptuous banquet is prepared – for rich food often bends the constancy of a soul. We must beware the snare not only when we hear Satan's words, but when we see his riches. Now that you have recognised the Devil's weapon, take up the shield of Faith *(cf.Ep 6:16)*, put on the breastplate of abstinence.

18 But what does Satan mean by beginning with the words: *"If you are the Son of God"*? It can only mean that he knew that the Son of God would come. But he did not expect that He would come in the weakness of flesh. On the one hand Satan is trying to find out, on the other hand he is tempting Him. He witnesses to a belief in God, while at the same time trying to trick the Man.

19 See the weapons of Christ, with which He has triumphed – not for His own sake but for yours. He proved that His majesty could change stones into bread when [on another occasion] He changed one substance into another.* But He is teaching you that you must do nothing at the bidding of the Devil, not even to prove your own strength and power. At the same time you can learn from this very temptation how clever and slippery Satan is. He tempts in such a way as to sound you out; he sounds you out in such a way as to tempt you. The Lord, for His part, deceives the Devil so as to conquer him; and conquers him so as to deceive him. Had He changed the nature of one thing into that of another, He would have betrayed the fact that He is the Creator. So He gives an evasive answer, saying: ***"It is written that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"*** *(Lk 4:4).*

* The reference is to the miracle at Cana.

20 You see what sort of arms Christ uses to defend man against the evil spirit, and how He defends and fortifies us against temptations to gluttony. Though He could, as God, have made use of His power – and what use would that have been to me? – He prefers, as Man, to have recourse to something of which we can all avail. It is in the power of all of us to nourish ourselves with spiritual reading, and to do so to such an extent that we forget our bodily hunger. Occupied in such a way, Moses did not need bread *(cf.Ex 24:18)*; occupied in such a way, Elijah *(cf.1 K 19:4)* did not feel any hunger throughout his long fast. One who follows the Word has no desire for the bread of earth. Sufficient for him is the substance of the Bread of Heaven *(cf.Jn 6:32)*. It cannot be doubted that the divine is preferable to the human, and the spiritual more to be desired than the physical. Whoever longs for true life, longs for this Bread which, by its invisible substance, strengthens the heart of man *(cf.Ps 103:15)*. At the same time the Lord says: *"Man does not live on bread alone"*. He stresses that it is man who is tempted, that is to say, the human nature that He has taken on Himself. But it is not His divinity that is tempted.

21 Now comes the arrow of vanity: here, we are very liable to sin. For while we long to spread abroad the fame and glory of our virtue, we come tumbling down from the lofty place and status of our merits. The passage continues: ***"And the Devil took Him to Jerusalem and set Him on the highest pinnacle of the Temple"*** *(Lk 4:9).*

22 Such is the effect of vanity. Just when you think you are at the top, you feel you want to do something really spectacular. The result? You are hurled down to the depths.

23 ***"The Devil said: 'If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down' "*** *(Lk 4:9).* Such devilish words! For their aim is to throw down a human being from the place to which his merits had raised him. Nothing could be more typical of the diabolic spirit than to advise someone to throw himself over the precipice.

24 But, my friend, learn that you too can overcome the Devil. The Spirit is leading you; follow the Spirit. Do not let yourself be led by the lures of the flesh. You, who are filled with the Spirit, must learn to despise pleasure. Fast, and then you will conquer.

Normally, the Devil will tempt you through some other person. Christ, being more powerful, was tempted face to face by Satan; but you will be tempted by means of some other. He will speak to you in the words of the Devil: "You are strong. Eat, drink, and you will remain strong." Trust not in

yourself. Blush not that you need help which Christ did not need. Yet, without needing it, He did not spurn such help; for He wanted to instruct you, and so He says: *"Take care that your heart does not grow gross from over indulgence in food or drink" (Lk 21:34).* Paul was not ashamed. He himself says: *"I do not fight like one who is beating the air"* – for the Apostle was certainly not beating the air, but beating the evil spirits of the air whose power is great – *"but I chastise my body and bring it into subjection, for fear that having preached to others I should myself become a castaway" (1 Co 9:26-27).*

25 Simultaneously, the Devil shows both his weakness and his wickedness. He can hurt no one, unless that person casts himself down. And anyone who chooses earth in preference to Heaven, deliberately throws himself down a sort of precipice.

Up to this, the Devil had all people in his power. But now he sees that his weapon is blunted. He at once begins to understand that here is Someone more than man. A second time the Lord refuses to do the Devil's bidding, even though to do so would have fulfilled a prophecy made concerning Him. He used the authority of the divinity that is His to ward off the cunning attack of His adversary. Since the Devil was ready with an example from Scripture, the Lord determined to vanquish him with other examples from Scripture. God has, of course, power to vanquish, but for my sake He chooses to triumph by means of Scripture.

26 There is a lesson for us here. We see again that Satan can transform himself into an angel of light *(cf.2 Co 11:14).* He often uses divine Scripture itself as a trap for the faithful. This is how he makes heretics; tears faith to shreds; and attacks the rights of devout people. Be not seduced by the heretic because he can quote Scripture, and because he prides himself on his specious learning. The Devil, too, can quote Scripture – not to instruct us, but to trick and trap us.

Suppose that Satan sees some person who is highly religious, has the reputation of being virtuous, works miracles and performs wonders. Satan spreads before him the snare of vanity, so that he swells up with pride. He no longer puts his trust in simple piety, but in his own vanity; and instead of attributing to God the good that he does, he sees it as something contributing to his own honour and glory. The Apostles never commanded the demons in their own name *(cf.Lk 10:17),* but always in the name of Christ. For they were careful to attribute nothing to themselves. Remember how Peter cured the paralytic by saying: *"In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Ac 3:6).* You can learn from Paul, too, to fly from vanity: *"I know,"* he says, *"a man – whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell – who was caught up to Paradise. There he heard unutterable words which man is not permitted to speak. Of him I shall boast, but of myself I shall not boast I shall glory in nothing but my own infirmities" (2 Co 12:3-5).*

27 So the Devil, recognising that here he has someone powerful to deal with, spreads his snare of vanity – for vanity deceives even the strong. But the Lord replies: ***"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test"*** *(Lk 4:12).* In this statement you recognise that Christ is Lord and God; and that Father and Son possess the one power, as it is written: *"My Father and I are ONE". (Jn 10:30).* If the Devil tries to confuse you with this "one", tell him plainly that it is written *"My Father and I are ONE".* Underline the word "one" to distinguish that their power cannot be divided. Underline the word "one" to make it plain to see that Father and Son cannot be separated.

28 ***"And the Devil led Him up a very high mountain, and he showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time"*** *(Lk 4:5).*

There is some point in showing the things of this world in a moment of time, for it shows not only the rapidity of the vision but the very ephemeral nature of power. In an instant, all passes *(cf.Ws 5:9);* and too often the honours of this world are gone even before they get to us. If even centuries go like a flash, how can anything in this world, this century, last for long? It is a lesson to us to despise the foolish winds of ambition. Have we not learnt that all worldly power is subject to Satan; and power such as that is frail and void of fruit?

29 Yet, how come that here we read that the Devil gives power, and somewhere else we read that *"all power comes from God" (Rm 13:1)*? Can one serve two masters *(cf.Mt 6:24),* or receive power from both? Is there some contradiction here? By no means. See, all things come from God; for, without God, there would be no world, since *"the world was made by Him" (Jn 1:10).* Yet, though made by God, its deeds are bad. As we read: *"the world is plunged in evil" (1 Jn 5:19).* Though the world was established by God, the works of the world are wicked. In the same way God instituted power and authority; but from the ambition to possess power arose evil. So the sacred writer says: *"There is no power but from God; and those that are ordained by God"* – note that they are not given but ordained – *"and therefore whoever resists the power, resists the ordinance of God" (Rm 13:1-2).* I grant that the Devil says that he gives power, but he does not deny that it is given to him only for a time. The One who ordained power, is the One who gave it away; power in itself is not evil, but those who make bad use of it are evil. So you read: *"Would you like not to fear power? Then do good, and you shall have praise from the same" (Rm 13:3).* My point is that it is not power that is evil, but *ambition.* In fact, the institution of power comes from God in such a way that those who use it well are God's ministers: *"He is God's minister to you, for good" (Rm 13:4),* says Scripture. The fault does not lie in the function, it lies in the way we exercise that function. It is not God's institution that can displease us, but the conduct of those in administration. To descend from things heavenly, I shall draw an example from earthly affairs. We shall suppose that the Emperor

confers high office on someone and receives glory and praise. If that person abuses the privileges of his office, it is not the Emperor that is to blame, but the judge. The guilty one is caught by his own crimes, and the cause of this is not the high office but the bad use he made of it.

30 So? Is it good to have power, good to be ambitious for important positions? It is good if one receives them, not good if one seizes them. But here again I must make a careful distinction regarding what is good. For "good" has one meaning to worldly ears, but "good" in the sense of perfect virtue is a very different matter. It is good to be able to apply one's whole mind to knowledge of the divinity, unencumbered by any occupation. For though there are many things that are good, there is only one eternal life. Now, as you know, *"eternal life is this, to know You, the one true God, and Him whom You have sent" (Jn 17:3).*

It is life eternal that gives the most fruit; and God alone can give us the reward of eternal life. We must adore only our Lord and God, and serve none but Him *(cf.Dt 6:13)*. And then He, the Lord alone, will give us in recompense the most abundant of fruit. We must fly from all that is subject to the power of the Devil. For he is a very wicked tyrant; and exercises his power most cruelly over those whom he discovers in his kingdom.

31 Power does not actually come from the Devil, but is wide open to the snares and strategies of the Devil. It does not follow that, because power is so exposed to evil, the setting up of power is in itself evil. For, consider: it is good to search for God, but in this very search a person can find himself gliding into the devious ways of error. If the searcher turns towards sacrilege by means of some twisted interpretation, the ruin of this person is greater than it would have been had he never searched! Yet, the fact remains, the fault lies not in the search but in the searcher. Nor is it the search which exposes a person to evil, but the dispositions of the searcher. Now, if someone who seeks God is often tempted by the weakness of the flesh and the limits of the human mind, how much more so is this the case when someone seeks the world! The great danger of ambition lies in the fact that it is so very pleasant, so very flattering, to receive promotion and honour. It is often the case that people whom vice could not charm, nor luxury move, nor avarice sway, have become downright criminals because of their ambition. Ambition will procure for you favours from without, and perils within. In order to dominate others, you yourself become a slave. Ambition will bend backwards in order to win honour and promotion. It wants to be on top, but falls very low indeed. For that quality in power which excels, and is superior, is foreign to the person. He is above the law, but a slave to himself.

32 Perhaps someone is going to say that only he who has done evil is afraid. Yet, anyone who sets out on a sea voyage is even more afraid.

Were he to sit still on *terra firma* he is not likely to fear shipwreck. But if he embarks on the swelling seas, he puts himself into a situation that is perilous. Flee the sea of this world, and then you will not be afraid.

Consider the trees. Often their topmost branches are driven hither and thither by the furious breath of the winds. Yet their roots, firmly planted, are not torn up, and so the trees do not fall. But on the sea it is different, there, when the storm howls furiously, all are in peril even if all do not suffer shipwreck. So too in the case of evil spirits, when they rouse up a storm no one is safe on sand *(cf.Mt 7:27)* or in the sea, and often, *"with a vehement wind the ships of Tharsis are broken" (Ps 47:8).*

I have given you here a moral lesson.

33 Now we turn to mystical considerations. See how the bonds of our ancient sin are untied one by one – stage by stage. There was first the snare of gluttony; then the snare of presumption; then the snare of ambition. One by one they are unknotted. Adam was enticed by food. With presumptuous assurance he penetrated into the place where stood the forbidden tree, and fell moreover into the sin of reckless ambition. For he thought he could be like God *(cf.Gn 3:6)*. And so the Lord tied him up in the knots of original sin, so that we – one day – might be freed from the yoke of captivity, and might learn to triumph over sin with the help of Scripture.

34 If the Lord Jesus did not claim for Himself that which was His own, why is it, my friend, that you seek possession of that which is not your own? If the Creator of all things despised the glory of this world, and courageously embraced poverty; why are you discontented to be born that which you are, and why do you aspire to be that which you have no claim to be? Why demand things that you cannot keep for ever, but for which you will suffer the punishment for ever? Avoid the snare. Avoid chicanery. To make man fall, the Devil shook the whole world with his diabolic tricks; and in his combat he is aided and abetted by the seductions of the world. Therefore beware of his caresses and flattery.

It was not food that tempted Eve, nor had she forgotten the commandments. But the dazzling prospect of glory promised her by the Devil led to her downfall. Had she wished nothing more than to adore the one and only Lord, she would not have looked for that which was not her due. Therefore a remedy is offered to us, by which we can blunt the arrows of ambition, and that remedy is that we serve the Lord alone. In the devout and reverential soul, there is no ambition.

35 ***"When all the temptation was ended, the Devil departed from Him for a time"*** *(Lk 4:13).*

We have shown that nearly every sin has its source in one or other of these three sorts of vice. Scripture would never have said that all temptation was ended, unless these three species contained between them the matter of

all sins. Let the seeds of these three sins be watched and guarded against from their very beginning. The end of temptations will also be the end of sinful desires. That which causes temptation is that which causes sinful desires. Now, these desires arise from the pleasures of the flesh, the illusion of glory, the greed for power.

It can seem a good and religious thing to hold converse with a Christian woman. Ah, beware of temptation! If the Devil sees you attentive to God, he will bring to your mind deceitful thoughts that will entrap you. My friend, no matter how sure you are, no matter how fixed in determination, be on your guard against temptation. Know your own nature.

If you remember, these are the three things that Paul, too, has warned us to avoid. Paul has clearly indicated the three species of sin of which we must rid ourselves if we are to win the crown of justice. Here are his words: *"God is our witness that we have not used flattering speech, nor yielded to avarice; and we have looked for no glory from men" (1 Th 2:5).* In this way, Paul overcame the Devil and gained the crown *(cf.2 Tm 4:8).*

36 You can see, therefore, that the Devil does not persevere, but generally gives way before solid virtue. He gives way, as a rule, to true courage. And though he does not cease to cast an envious eye, he is afraid to stand up to the person of virtue. He does not like to be beaten too often.

37 So, having heard God's name, *"he departed for a time".* He will return, not to tempt the Lord, but to fight Him in open combat.

Divine Scripture teaches you that your struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the cunning and wicked spirits of the air *(cf.Ep 6:12).* There is a magnificence about the Christian warrior who does battle against the masters of the world; and, though still on earth, fights with all his might against the evil spirits who are above. We do not fight wars for worldly gains. Such is not the reason why we enter the battle field. We fight because we are offered spiritual rewards – the Kingdom of God and the inheritance of Christ. For this, we must overcome the obstacles that the demons place in our way.

A crown is offered to us *(cf.1 Co 9:25)*; we must not draw back from the combat. No one can be crowned unless he has conquered; no one can conquer unless he goes into combat *(cf.2 Tm 2:5).* Where the labour has been more strenuous, there the crown is more fruitful: *"Narrow and strait is the way that leads to life; broad and spacious the road that leads to death" (Mt 7:13).* So, never be afraid of trials. They are the occasion of victory, they are the stuff of which triumphs are made.

38 That rich person, who underwent no temptation in this world, suffers now in Hell. Lazarus, the poor man, was afflicted and weighed down by poverty and suffering – to such an extent that the very dogs came and licked his sores. By what he suffered in this most miserable life, he has won the crown of eternal glory *(cf.Lk 16:19 sq.). "Many are the tribulations"* – not simply of anyone, but *"of the just" (Ps 33:20).* And, as you know, those whom the Lord loves He frequently chastises *(cf.Heb 12:6).* Peter was tempted so that he would deny *(cf.Lk 22:54 sq.)*; he denied so that he would weep. Of others, what shall I say? Job was certainly pleasing to God *(cf.Jb 1:8; 2:3),* but though pleasing to Him, he was not yet a victor. His devotion was well tried and tested, but he had not yet won the crown of valour. Therefore God allowed him to be tempted *(cf.Jb 1:12),* so that he might gain great glory.

39 We must turn our attention now to the various degrees to be found in this combat. Satan has more arrows than one. He multiplies his darts so as to win you either by rewards, or by wearing you down. First he wounds us with the arrow of desire, secondly with piercing darts of family affection, thirdly with the weapon of bodily sickness. For he knows how to attack both soul and body with cancer. The variety of trials corresponds with the variety of combatants. The rich are tortured by money losses; the father of a family is wounded by the loss of his little ones; people are wounded by anguish and grief; the body is wounded by open sores. What an amount of arrows! You see now why the Lord chose to come among us as a poor person *(cf.2 Co 8:9),* it meant that He had nothing that Satan could take from Him. You ask, perhaps, to what degree is this true? Listen to the Lord's own words: *"See, the prince of this world is coming, and in me he finds nothing" (Jn 14:30).* The Lord chose not to be father of a little family, because He wanted to be Father of all people. As for bodily wounds, it would have been useless to try to vanquish Him that way, for He utterly despised all physical sufferings. Besides, He who was to triumph over the enemy of the body wanted to show us that He had the right to victory without any blemish to His body.

Job is tempted in regard to his own possessions; Christ is tempted with promises of power; Job is robbed of his inheritance; but to Christ is offered the kingdom of this world. The Devil would not quite be the Devil unless he used cunning. So he very carefully avoids exasperating the Son of God. And, while he tempts Job with every possible vexation, he tempts Christ with rich rewards. Job, speaking like a good servant, says: *"The Lord has given, the Lord has taken back" (Jb 1:21).* But the Lord, conscious of His own natural dignity, simply laughs to see the Devil offering Him what is His own.

But let us return to the story of Job. Messenger after messenger arrives, piling up the wounds, but the mind of this courageous athlete is not disturbed. His wife appears (woman, as you know, tempted man in the first place). But, Christ, the Virgin-born, had no woman to lead Him into error. Job's "friends" appear, to break his resistance by their evil counsel. But, *"in all these things Job did not sin with his lips in the eyes of God" (Jb 2:10).*

40 True, he did indeed curse the day that he was born, saying: *"Let the day perish wherein I was born" (Jb 3:3)*; and further down: *"Let Him curse it, who cursed that day – He by whom shall be crushed the great monster" (Jb 3:8)*. But here he speaks in prophetic manner, meaning that the Devil – monster of this tempestuous world – has been crushed by our Lord Jesus Christ. What Job desires is that the day of his birth in the flesh should perish, to allow for the coming of his day in the resurrection. Let the day of this world perish, is what he is saying, so that the spiritual day may dawn. Even in temptation holy Job uttered mysteries; because he conquered and overcame the world, he saw Christ.

41 We must not be afraid of trials. Rather, we should glory in them and say: *"When we are weak, then we are strong" (2 Co 12:10)*. For these are the times when the garland of justice is woven. That garland was specially fitting for Paul *(cf.2 Tm 4:8)*. But there are many crowns, and we may all of us hope to gain one or other. In the world, the rewards of victory are the laurel crown and the shield or breastplate. But you are promised a crown of delights, for *"a crown of delights shall shade your head" (Pr 4:9)*. In another place we read: *"He shall surround you with the shield of His good will" (Ps 5:13)*. We know also that the Lord *"has crowned with glory and honour" (Ps 8:6)* those whom He loves. It follows that He who desires to give you a crown, supplies trials; and, if it should happen that you are tempted, know that a crown is being got ready. Take from the martyrs their contests, and you take from them their crowns; take away their torments, and you take from them their blessedness.

42 Joseph was tempted so that he might give proof of his virtue *(cf.Gn 39:7 sq.)*. His unjust imprisonment was the crown of his chastity. Joseph, unless he had been sold by his brothers, would never have been given charge of a kingdom. Am I not right? God allowed all these things so that the just might be tested and tried. This is shown clearly by the text: *"How otherwise would it have happened that a people without number should have sufficient to eat?" (Gn 50:20)*.

Let us have no doubt about the matter. The trials of this life are not to be considered as evil. A great reward awaits us. But what we should do – considering the fragility of our nature – is to ask for grace to suffer such trials as we are capable of bearing.

43 ***"And Jesus returned, in the power of the Spirit, into Galilee"*** *(Lk 4:14)*.

Here we see the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy: *"Land of Zabulon, land of Nepthali, and the other inhabitants of the shore; those who dwell on the sea coast and beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; a people that sat in the shadow of death have seen a great light" (Is 1:sq)*. This great light is none other than Christ, who *"enlightens every one who comes into this world" (Jn 1:9)*.

44 Then Jesus took up the book, to show that it was He who spoke in the person of the prophet. He wanted to cut short the blasphemies of unbelievers who say that there is one God of the Old Testament and another of the New Testament; or who declare that Christ only began to be from His conception in the Virgin's womb. But how could He have taken His origin from the Virgin when already, before the Virgin, He was speaking?

45 ***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me"*** *(Lk 4:18)*.

Here you see the Trinity, co-eternal and perfect. Scripture declares Jesus to be God and man; perfect God and perfect man; Scripture speaks also of the Father and the Holy Spirit. For we are shown the Holy Spirit co-operating when, in the form of a dove *(cf.Lk 3:22)*, He descends on Christ. This happened at the moment when the Son of God was baptised in the waters of the river, and the Father spoke from Heaven.

What witness greater than this can you seek? Christ Himself, with His own voice, affirms that He it is who spoke in the prophets *(cf.2 P 1:21)*. He receives anointing with spiritual oil and heavenly power, so as to bathe the poverty of our human nature in the eternal treasure of resurrection. He receives the anointing to free our soul from captivity and to give sight to those blind in spirit; to preach the Year of the Lord, a Sabbatical that would last for ever and never again be followed by work; a Year in which we would continuously enjoy the fruits of the harvest and know nothing but rest and repose.

This Lord of ours is so humble, so ready to perform every task, that He does not disdain the office of Reader *(cf.Lk 4:17)*. Whereas we, impious that we are, see only His body and refuse to believe His divinity. Yet, He had proved His divinity by wondrous miracles.

46 ***"Truly I say to you that no prophet is accepted in his own country"*** *(Lk 4:24)*. Envy and hatred do not show themselves in a half-hearted manner. Far from it. The very reasons that they should love only stir up their animosity, and love of one's compatriots is quite forgotten. At the same time we learn, both from this incident and from the Lord's words, that you need not expect the aid of heavenly mercy if you envy the fruits of another's virtue. The Lord despises envious people, and refuses the wonders of His miracles to those who persecute the divine gifts in others. The Lord's actions in the flesh are the visible expressions of His divinity, and by them we are shown that which is invisible *(cf.Rm 1:20)*.

47 It is not without good reason that our Lord makes excuses for not performing wonderful miracles in his own native place. It is by no means His intention that anyone should underestimate the love that we

should have for our native land. How could He, who loves all people, fail to love His own compatriots? On the contrary, it was the latter who repudiated patriotism by their hatred of Him. For, *"love is not envious, is not puffed up" (1 Co 13:4)*. Nevertheless, His native land is not cut off from Heaven's favours. For could any miracle be greater than Christ's birth there? But consider the harm that hate does. Because of its hatred for Him, His own homeland – though judged worthy to be the birthplace of God's Son – is judged unworthy of the wondrous works that He, as a citizen, was ready to perform there.

48 ***"I tell you truly, there were many widows in the days of Elijah"*** *(Lk 4:25)*.

You must not think that these days belonged to Elijah. The meaning is that they were the days in which Elijah accomplished his works. Or, you can take it to mean that Elijah made day dawn for those who were to see, in his miracles, the light of spiritual grace and so be converted to the Lord. That is why Heaven opened for those who saw the eternal and divine mysteries *(cf.Jn 1:51)*; but in time of famine it closed, for want of that fertility which springs from knowledge of God *(cf.1 K 17:1)*.

49 But of all this I have said quite enough in my work on Widows *(cf. De Viduis, 16 - 20)*.

"And there were many lepers in the time of Elisaeus the prophet; and none of them was made clean but Naaman the Syrian" *(Lk 4:27)*.

Clearly these words of our Lord and Saviour are teaching and exhorting us to zeal for the glory of God. They show us that no one is healed and delivered from the disease that makes the flesh unclean, unless he has sought, with religious zeal, to regain his health. For the divine benefits are not handed to us when we are asleep, but when we are up and ready. By this very well chosen example and comparison our Lord confounds the arrogance of His envious compatriots. At the same time He proves that His conduct accords with the writings of the Old Testament.

Notice that we read in the Books of the Kings that it was Naaman, a Gentile, who was healed of his leprosy at the word of the prophet *(cf.2 K 5:14)*. Yet there were, at that time, many Jews consumed by leprosy both of body and of soul. Take, for example, those four men who were so ravenously hungry that they were the first to go over to the king of Syria. History tells us that they were all of them lepers *(cf.2 K 7:3 sq.)*. Why, I ask you, did the prophet not look after his own brothers, his own compatriots? If he was healing foreigners, could he not have healed his own people? Could he not have healed those who were keeping the Law, seeing that he healed people who were not of the same religion as he? I think that the answer is that healing depends on good will rather than on nationality; and that Heaven's blessings are won more by desire than by right of birth. You may

learn from this example to pray earnestly for what you want to get. The fruits and blessings of Heaven do not go chasing after half-hearted people!

50 While I grant that these simple comments give instruction of a moral nature, they are nonetheless not without the charm of mystic meaning. Just as that which follows derives from that which went before, so also that which went before can be confirmed by that which follows after. I said, in another book *(cf. De Viduis 16)* that the widow to whom Elijah was sent was a type or figure of the Church. The people have to come after the Church. This people consists of strangers and foreigners. They were formerly leprous, they were formerly unclean. But that was before they were baptised in the mystic waters. This same people, now that they have been washed clean in baptism, begin to be not leprous, but a virgin without spot or wrinkle *(cf.Ep 5:27)*. I can quite see why Naaman is described as being great in the eyes of his master *(cf.2 K 5:1 sq.)* and a man that was most admirable, for in him we plainly see one who prefigures the salvation of the Gentiles. He heeded the advice of a holy little handmaid – a little girl carried off into captivity when her people were conquered in war – and acting under her advice he looked for healing from a prophet. He was healed, not by order of an earthly king, but by the overflowing mercy of God.

51 Why the order to plunge himself the mystical number of seven times? Why was the river Jordan chosen? As he said himself, *"Surely the Abanah and the Parphar, rivers of Damascus, are superior to the Jordan?" (2 K 5:12)*. He said this in a moment of anger, but upon reflection he chose the Jordan. Anger does not understand that which is mystical, but Faith recognises the mystery. He plunged in as a leper; he came out of the water as a believer. My friend, learn that we have here a picture of the spiritual sacraments. He asked for healing of the body, but he obtained healing of the soul. The flesh is made clean, and the soul is made clean. For in my opinion his leprosy of soul was purified just as much as his leprosy of body; because immediately after his plunge into the water, on seeing himself utterly free of the marks of his disease, he exclaimed that he would no longer pour out libations to foreign gods, but would offer sacrifice to none but the Lord. *(cf.2 K 5:17)*.

52 You will also find in the story interesting precepts with regard to virtue. The prophet, who refused Naaman's gifts, gave proof of his uprightness and faith. From the twin schools of precept and of action, learn what model you should follow. You have the teaching of the Lord; you have the example of the prophet: freely you have received, freely you should give *(cf.Mt 10:8)*. Do not sell your ministry or service, but offer it. God's grace should not be measured and taxed; and, in exercising his priesthood, a priest should not aim at making money, but rather he should aim at serving others.

53 At the same time, it is not enough that you should aim at seeking no profit for yourself, you should not allow your servants to be grasping. Nor is it sufficient to keep yourself chaste and immaculate. The apostle never said: *"Look after yourself only"*, instead, his words are: *"Keep yourself chaste" (1 Tm 5:22)*. Not only should you yourself be honest in regard to money matters, but your household should be honest too. As Scripture says: *"The bishop must have an impeccable character. He must know how to govern his own household and he must be able to bring up his children properly, in all chastity. Anyone who cannot govern even his own household is hardly fit to be responsible for the church" (1 Tm 3:2-5)*. So you must instruct your household staff. Encourage them, keep an eye on them, and should you catch one of them playing tricks on you – for man, after all, is but human – follow the prophet's example and send him away.

The shameful payment that the prophet's servant took was very quickly followed by leprosy. For money, when it is come by dishonestly, soils both soul and body. *"You have received your money, so he was told, and you will have lands and vineyards, olive groves and flocks; but the leprosy of Naaman will stick to you and your descendants for ever" (2 K 5:26 sq.)*. Just think how the sin of a father condemns his posterity; for the sale of the sacred mysteries is a crime that cannot be expiated. The vengeance of the heavenly grace [that was betrayed] weighs heavily on the heirs of the sinner. That is why we read: *"The Moabites"* and others *"shall not enter in until the third and fourth generation" (Dt 23:3)*. This, when you interpret it very simply and plainly, means that they will not enter in until successive generations have blotted out the crimes of their ancestors.

54 These were people who sinned against God by their idolatry of false gods. If, as we have seen, their punishment lasted for four generations, it would appear that the punishment of Giezi was more terrible. For the posterity of Giezi were condemned, by the prophet, for ever. And all because of his greediness. Certainly it seems severe, especially when you consider that our Lord, through the sacrament of baptism, has granted to all people the forgiveness of their sins *(cf.Tt 3:5)*. But, my friend, you have to consider that here "posterity" is not a matter of physical descent. What is meant is this: those who would inherit the same vices. You see, those who are children of the Promise *(cf.Rm 9:8)* are counted as being of good stock, and those who are sons of sin are considered as being of bad stock. The Jews have the devil as their father *(cf.Jn 8:44)* – not that they are his descendants according to the flesh, but on account of their sins.

So it is that all covetous people, all greedy, miserly people, inherit the leprosy of Giezi along with all their riches. By getting hold of money in a dishonest fashion, they amass not so much a treasure of riches as a "treasure" of crimes. For a momentary pleasure they receive in return an eternity of torment. For, though riches are perishable, the punishment is

without end; and neither the miser, the drunkard, nor the worshipper of idols will have any part in the Kingdom of God *(cf.1 Co 6:9)*.

55 ***"All the people in the synagogue were furiously angry on hearing this; and they rose up and cast Him out of their town"*** *(Lk 4:28-29)*.

Long before this the Lord foretold, through his prophet, the sacrilegious behaviour of the Jews. We have it in the verse of a psalm, where He tells us what He would have to suffer in His body: *"They repaid me evil for good" (Ps 34:12)*. In the Gospel the Lord shows us how this prophecy was fulfilled. He, for His part, was pouring out blessings on all the people; and they, in return, heaped insults on Him. It is hardly surprising that they lost their salvation, seeing that they chased their Saviour from their territory.

The Lord is a pattern of behaviour. By His example He taught His apostles how to make themselves all things to all people *(cf.1 Co 9:22)*. He neither discourages those who are of good will, nor does He force those who are unwilling. When chased away He offers no resistance; and to those who call Him he readily responds. It was just the same in another place, when the Gerasenes could not stand His miracles. He treats them as weak and ungrateful people, and takes His departure *(cf.Lk 8:37)*.

56 But we must always remember that the Passion He underwent in His body was voluntary and not forced. It is not as if He was seized by the Jews, but on the contrary He offered Himself. When He chooses, He is arrested *(cf.Jn 18:7 sq.)*; when He so wishes, He falls. When He wishes it, He is crucified; when He wishes it, no one can constrain Him. At Nazareth He climbed to the mountain top from where they were going to throw Him down; and then, all of a sudden, He descends into the midst of them – having either modified or stupefied their raging spirits. The hour of His Passion had not yet come *(cf.Jn 8:20)*. Besides, He did not want to lose the Jews, He wanted to heal them. Therefore He did not let them carry out the furious deed they had in mind, and their plans that day came to nothing. Here you see that it is His divinity that is at work; and when they arrested Him [at the Passion], you see that He was voluntarily arrested. For how could a handful of men have seized One whom not even a whole crowd could capture? But the Lord did not want the sacrilege to be the action of a whole crowd; He did not want to let fall on them the odious crime of crucifying their Lord. He would be crucified by a few, but He would die for the entire world.

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57 ***"In the synagogue*** [at Capharnaum] ***there was a man who had an unclean spirit"*** *(Lk 4:33);* and further down we read: ***"Leaving the synagogue, Jesus went into the house of Simon and Andrew. Now it happened that Simon's mother-in-law was lying very ill of fever"*** *(Lk 4:38).*

Now, I ask you, just look at the kindness of our Lord and Saviour. He could have been so filled with indignation, so offended by the wickedness [of the crime attempted at Nazareth], so hurt by the injustice of it all, as to abandon Judah. On the contrary, He forgot the wrongs they had done Him and thought only of how to show them kindness and forbearance. At one time He would teach them, at another time He would deliver them from demons, at another time He would heal them. Always He sought to soften the heart of these faithless people. Saint Luke has method in mentioning first the deliverance of the man possessed by a devil, and then the healing of a woman: for the Lord had come to take care of both sexes. First He had to heal the sex that was created first, and then He had to cure the woman who had sinned more through thoughtlessness then through premeditated wickedness.

58 It is on the Sabbath day that the Lord began His series of healings. By this He signifies that the new creation begins where the old creation ends. From the beginning He shows in a most marked way that the Son of God is not subject to the Law but superior to the Law. He does not destroy the Law, but He fulfils it *(cf.Mt 5:17).* The world was, obviously, not created by the Law, but by the Word. We read this in the psalm: *"By the Word of the Lord the Heavens were established" (Ps 32:6).* I repeat that the Law was not destroyed, but completed. And this was done to renew the human race that had fallen. The Apostle, too, says: *"Put off the old man, and put on the new, who has been created in the likeness of Christ" (Col 3:9 sq.).*

The Lord's point, in beginning work on the Sabbath, was to show that it is actually He who is the Creator. He would weave one series of works into another, following up the task that He had already begun. It is as though a master-builder, wishing to restore a house that he had constructed, were to begin by removing the *débris* not from the foundations but from the summit of the building; in this way he would be starting at the very point where he had left off.

59 Consider, too, that the Lord begins with the lesser miracle and then goes on to the greater miracle. For even men can exorcise the demon – by the word of God certainly – but only God's power can command the dead to rise.

60 Please do not let it trouble you that, in this book, we are shown the devil as being the first to pronounce the name of Jesus of Nazareth

(cf.Lk 4:34). It was not from the demon that Christ received His name; the angel from Heaven brought His name to the Virgin *(cf.Lk 1:31).* It is part of the devil's impudence to lay claim to have the first right to something; he is making himself out to be – so to speak – the one who first confers this new name. This is to inspire terror in people because of his power. We find the same sort of thing in Genesis. There he is the first to speak to humankind of God; for you read: *"And he said to the woman: 'why has God commanded you, that you should not eat of every tree?' " (Gn 3:1).*

61 The consequence is that both were deceived by the devil, and both were healed by Christ. But go on, continue reading, learn the mysteries of the Gospel text, and in these two cures recognise the grace of salvation granted to all. *"Just as all people died in Adam, so too all are brought to life in Christ" (1 Co 15:22).*

Who, then, is this person in the synagogue who was possessed by an unclean spirit? Does he not represent the Jewish people? The serpent had, so to speak, wound himself around these people in coils and knotted them up in diabolic snares. Outside, the body appeared to be pure; but inside, the soul was horribly unclean. Of a certainty, that man in the synagogue was possessed by an unclean spirit for the reason that he had lost the Holy Spirit. Into the place that Christ had left, the devil entered *(cf.Jn 13:27).* At one and the same time we learn that it is not the nature (in itself) of the demon that is bad; rather it is his works that are evil. His superior nature allows him to recognise the Lord; but by his evil works he denies Him. What shows his malice, and the dishonesty of the Jews, is that he has spread over the people such blindness, such feebleness of spirit, that these people deny One whom even demons can recognise. O disciples and heirs worse than their master! Satan tempts the Lord by his words, but the people do so by their deeds. Satan says: *"Throw yourself over" (Lk 4:9),* but the people actually attempt to push Him over the edge.

62 Looking into the matter more deeply, we must understand that there is question here of health of soul as well as health of body. First of all the soul is set free of the snares of the devil –for the soul would never be vanquished by the body unless it had been tempted by the demon. For when the soul is in control, when the soul rules and animates the body, how could it possibly be captured by the lures of the flesh unless the soul itself had been strangled by the bonds of some superior power? So, too, with Eve. She would never have hungered [for the fruit] if the devil had not first tempted her with his clever trick. For this reason the saving remedy must first be applied to defeat the very author of sin.

63 Perhaps, too, this woman – this mother-in-law of Simon and Andrew – is a type or figure of our own flesh. For this flesh of ours suffers from the various fevers of sin, and burns with every form of immoderate

desire. I would say that the fever of love is worse than burning heat. One burns the soul, the other burns the body. Our fever is lust which ignites desire. This is why the Apostle says: *"If they cannot contain themselves, let them marry. It is better to be married than to be burnt" (1 Co 7:9).* Our fever is luxury; our fever is anger. For although these are vices of the flesh, their fire penetrates to the bone, and affects the mind, the soul, and the senses.

Clever devil, he starts by craftily soliciting the soul. He tempts the soul with such things as a fertile field, a rich robe, a jewel or ornament. He ensnares the soul with the incense of high office, the dizzy heights of power, the intoxicating delight of banquets, the charm of a beautiful courtesan. How he seduces, how he entices, that wicked spirit of perversity! And, by seducing the flesh – which rather easily lends itself to the softening process (for the flesh has a somewhat feminine levity) – the devil then proceeds to cast down and degrade the soul. Remember that it is not the soul that is at once enthralled by woman's loveliness, but the eyes. For what you do not see, you do not love. But once the flesh has cast covetous eyes, the soul joins forces with it, and loses its constancy; the mind joins with the flesh in love of the desired object, and bends in submission (they are two in one body) *(cf.Gn 2:24)*. So, with the devil tempting us and the flesh persuading us, sin is committed and death creeps into us.

64 Yet, fever of soul is more vehement than fever of the body. For this reason it often happens that the pleasure a soul feels makes it careless of the health of its body and regardless of danger. This might be the place to tell the story of a certain Theotimus. This man was very much in love with his wife. Now it happened that he was suffering from a very severe affliction of the eyes and the doctor had warned him on no account to have conjugal intercourse. But so great was the violence of his love, so immoderate his desire to enjoy the delights of passion, that he could not restrain himself. He knew perfectly well that he was about to lose his sight and so, before entering the marriage bed and embracing his wife he cried out: "Farewell, sweet light".

What an all-consuming fire passion is, how it consumes, how it casts down! Far more so than any bodily fever.

65 But when the furious passion abates and we recover our senses, conscience opens our eyes and we repent the deed. We blush for shame at what we have done. Then the sinner begins to fear God and would willingly hide himself but cannot do it. Then he blames the weakness of his flesh, and accuses the devil. He looks on the flesh as a sort of bawd or procuress, and the devil as the machinator of the crime. The ugliness of what he has done is clearly shown – for every secret is naked before God. Neither the leaves of the fig tree – by which I mean bodily vesture – nor worldly pomp and arrogance can hide his secret vices. Each one of us, conscious of his fault, trembles before God's judgement and says: *"If only the mountains might cover me! If only I might hide myself in the crevices of the rock when the Lord comes to grind the earth to powder!" (Lk 23:30; Is 2:21).*

Then the flesh brings forth thorns and thistles *(cf.Gn 3:18)* for the soul. I mean biting cares and burning anxiety with which the mind itself, by yielding to the seductions of the flesh, has enveloped itself. Ah yes, the soul is as it were crucified by the nails hammered into it by the pleasures of the body. For once it has abandoned itself to sensual sin, it becomes plunged in what is of the earth; and it is indeed hard for such a soul – short of a miracle – to ascend once more to the heights from which it has fallen. It is knotted in the snares of its own actions, handed over as a captive to the charms and pleasures of this world, and is henceforth a prisoner.

66 Such was Adam, such was Eve; and the Lord came to set them free. One was made in the image of God *(cf.Gn 1:27)*, the other drew strength and virtue from her husband. Though one submitted to the other, they were nonetheless one in spirit and determination to please the Lord their God. He had placed them in the Garden of Paradise, and there they were content to nourish their celestial life. But once the flesh began to give them different ideas, and no longer followed the law that was meant to govern it, the pair of them were exiled from Paradise. As punishment for what they had done, they fell back down into this place of sin and abasement.

Do not let it surprise you that though Adam and Eve are looked upon as typifying soul and body, they are also regarding as representing, symbolically, Christ and His Church. For the Apostle said that they were two in one flesh, and immediately added: *"This is a great sacrament, but I speak of Christ and of the Church" (Ep 5:32).* If, as regards the most high God, this is a matter of great mystery, how much more of a mystery must it be as regards our own soul?

67 But the soul is fastened, nailed, a captive. It is consumed by the fevers of the body; it suffers with the flesh; it is sick. It needs a doctor. But who has power to minister to a wounded soul? What man is there of such stature that he can treat others, when he cannot even help himself? How is he to restore life to others, when he himself cannot avoid death? All are dead in Adam, for *"through a single person sin came into the world, and through sin came death; and so death spread through the whole human race, for all have sinned" (Rm 5:12).*

Adam's sin is the death of all. Saints and prophets were sent to pronounce the divine oracle, but they could make no impression. Well, then, let us look for a physician among the angels and archangels. But how can they help me not to sin, seeing that not even an archangel could prevent himself from sinning? How can an angel lead me back to Paradise, when even Satan and his angels failed to keep their place there?

68 ***"Going into one of the ships that belonged to Simon, He asked him to draw back a little from the land"*** *(Lk 5:3)*.

From the moment that the Lord began healing great numbers of people of every sort of malady, neither time nor place could prevent the crowd from pressing on Him for miracles. Evening was falling, yet they kept following Him. The lake was just beside Him, yet they kept pressing on Him. What could He do but climb into Peter's boat? This is the boat which, in Saint Matthew's Gospel we see shaken by tempests *(cf.Mt 8:24)*. In Saint Luke, we see it filled to overflowing with fish. In this boat you will recognise both the stormy beginnings of the Church, and its later fecundity. For the fish represent those who make their way through the sea of this life. In Saint Matthew's account, Christ still sleeps among His disciples; in the other account He commands. With those who tremble and are afraid, He sleeps; with the more perfect He is awake. In what manner does Christ sleep? You have the answer in the words of the prophet: *"I sleep, but my heart wakes" (Sg 5:2)*.

69 Saint Matthew, too, does not fail to indicate Christ's eternal power, for he shows us the Lord commanding the winds to be still *(cf.Mt 8:26)*. This is not mere human knowledge – as you hear the Jews describe it: *"with a word He commands the spirits" (Lk 4:36)*. No, it is a mark of His heavenly majesty that when He speaks to the sea its troubled water grows calm; when He commands the elements they obey the order of the voice divine; when wind and water (things that are without understanding) acquire sense to obey Him. The mystery of divine grace is revealed when the stormy waves of this world grow calm, and when by a single word an unclean spirit falls silent. Both miracles unite [in confirming Christ's divinity]. One does not take from the other; rather, it enhances the other. You have a miracle that concerns the natural elements, and you have an important lesson in the mysteries.

70 Now, since Saint Matthew chose to savour these miracles, Saint Luke has decided to speak of the boat that Peter used for fishing. The boat which holds Peter is not tossed this way and that; but that which contains Judas is violently agitated. True, there were disciples on the boat who were men of many virtues. Even so, the presence of a traitor greatly agitated them. In both boats there was Peter, a man of solid merit. Yet, even he was troubled by the treachery of another. We must be on our guard against treachery. We must beware the traitor – for even one can put us all in danger. When prudence sits at the helm, the boat is not rocked. When treachery is absent, the breath of Faith fills the sails. How could a boat be tossed about when its captain is the Rock on which the Church is founded? *(cf.Mt 16:18)*. Waters are troubled when Faith is weak; all is plain sailing where charity is perfect!

71 Although the Lord commands others to let down the nets, it is only to Peter that He says: ***"Launch out into the deep"*** *(Lk 5:4)*. By this He means, launch out into the deep waters of controversy. No depth can be compared to the sight of the profundity of the riches*(cf.Rm 11:33)* of the knowledge of God's Son, and the proclamation of His divine nature. Of course, the human mind cannot grasp this mystery nor can human intelligence plumb its depths. Faith alone, Faith in all its fullness, can embrace it. For even though it is not right that I should know in what manner He was born, it is also not right that I should fail to know that He *was born*. The "how" of His Birth I do not know, but I recognise that fact that He was generated by His Father. We were not there when the Son of God was born of the Father; but we were there when the Father proclaimed Him Son of God *(cf.Lk 3:22)*.

If we do not believe God, then whom are we to believe? Anything that we believe, we believe either because we have seen it or have heard it. Sight often plays tricks on us, but we have confidence that what we hear is true. Is it that you distrust the person who gives witness? If upright and honest people were to speak to us, we would think it extremely wrong not to believe them. But in this case it is God who gives witness, it is the Son who demonstrates the truth. The earth quakes, the light of the sun is darkened *(cf.Mt 27:45 sq.)*, in witness to the truth of what God proclaims. Into the deep waters of such controversy Peter leads the Church; and he shows us on the one hand the risen Son of God, and on the other the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

72 What nets are these that the Apostles are told to cast into the sea? I think that they are nets woven of words, the delicate folds of discourse, the profundities of discussion that do not allow those caught in them to escape. I find it appropriate that the Apostles fish with nets, for these do not kill the fish but draw them up from the depths into the light, and transport to the heights those who formerly floated down below.

73 The Apostles had another way in which they might fish, but Peter alone was commanded by the Lord to employ it: *"Cast in a hook,"* said Jesus, *"and take the first fish that comes up" (Mt 17:26)*. We have here a great and spiritual lesson, which teaches Christians the submission they ought to show to those placed above them. Let no one think that he may infringe the edicts of the emperor. If the Son of God paid His taxes, are you so high and mighty that you think you need not pay them? Even He – who possessed nothing – paid the tax. And you, who pursue hot-foot the lucre of this world, are you unwilling to recognise your obligations to the world? Why, in the arrogance of your heart, consider yourself above this world, when you, in your dreadful greed for money, have subjected yourself to this world?

74 So the double drachma is paid. It was the price both of our ransom and of our body, promised in the Law *(cf.2 K 12:4)*. Appropriately, this ransom is found in the mouth of a fish: for *"by your words you shall be justified" (Mt 12:37)*. What is the price of our immortality? It is that we should give witness. For so it is written: *"With the mouth we give witness, for our salvation" (Rm 10:10)*.

75 Perhaps, too, this first fish is the first witness. In his mouth is the double drachma, the amount due for payment of the tax. Our double drachma is Christ; and Stephen, when in his martyrdom he spoke of Christ, had this treasure in his mouth *(cf.Ac 7:55 sq.)*.

But I must go back to my text, and from it we shall learn the Apostle's humility.

76 ***"Master,"*** says Peter, ***"we have laboured all night and caught nothing; but at your word I will let down the net"*** *(Lk 5:6)*.

I, too, Lord, know that for me it is night when you do not give the word of command. No-one this season has, as yet, come forward to inscribe his name [as a candidate for baptism]. For me, it is still night. I cast forth the net of my words on the feast of Epiphany, and as yet I have caught nothing. During the day I have put it down; I await your orders; at your word I will cast the nets. O vain presumption! O fruitful humility! Till then they had caught nothing, but at the sound of the Lord's voice they netted a great multitude of fish. This is not the work of human eloquence, but the blessing of the heavenly call. People believe because of their Faith, not because of human arguments.

77 The nets break, but the fish do not escape. Simon calls his partners in the other boat to come to his help. What boat is this? Does it not perhaps represent Judah where John and James have been chosen? For *"Judah became His sanctuary" (Ps 113:2)*. These Apostles leave the synagogue and come to Peter's Bark – meaning the Church – so as to fill both ships. For all bend the knee at the name of Jesus *(cf.Ph 2:10)*, whether they be Jew or Greek: *"Christ is all, and in all" (Col 3:11)*. But I have my doubts about these great numbers of people; I fear that the boats will be too full and will sink. I fear that there will of necessity be heresies aboard *(cf.1 Co 11:19)* to test the good.

78 We can also understand it this way: the other's boat is another church. For from the one Church others derived. There you have another anxiety for Peter, already pre-occupied with his great catch. But, being perfect, he knows how to conserve what he has already gathered – seeing that he is able to capture those fish that are still at large. Those whom he captures by his word, he hands over to the Word. It is not he, says Peter, who has caught them, nor is it thanks to his labour that they are caught.

79 ***"Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man"*** *(Lk 5:8)*.

He is quite astonished by the divine bounty, and the more he receives the less he flatters himself. You, too, should say: *"Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner"*. Then the Lord will reply: ***"Do not fear"*** *(Lk 5:10)*. Do not fear to give to God even that which is your own, seeing that He has given to us that which is His own. He does not envy, He does not grab, He does not rob. Just think how kind and loving the Lord is in having granted to us the power of mediating life.

BOOK FIVE

1 ***"Jesus happened one day to be in a town when a man covered in leprosy prostrated himself before Him on the ground, and implored Him in these words: 'Sir, if it is your will, you can make me clean'. Jesus stretched out His hand, touched him and said: 'It is my will, be healed of your leprosy' "*** *(Lk 5:12-13).*

In this healing of the leper we are not told precisely where the miracle took place. I like this, because it shows that it is not simply one people nor some special city that is healed, but the whole world. To me, it is also interesting that this is the fourth miracle that Jesus works since His arrival in Capharnaum. For it was the fourth day *(cf.Gn 1:16)* that the Lord illumined with the light of the sun, making it more radiant than the days that had preceded it and shedding light on the elements of the world. So, too, this miracle should be considered more radiant than those that went before.

According to Saint Matthew, this leper was the first to be healed after the Beatitudes *(cf.Mt 8:3)*. Since our Lord had said: *"I have not come to destroy the Law but to fulfil it" (Mt 5:17)* the point would seem to be as follows: this was a man excluded from the Law, who evidently believed that he could be made clean not by the power of the Law but by the power of the Lord. The way he saw it was that grace does not come from the Law, but from a higher plane than the Law; and he recognised that only grace could wash away the stain of leprosy.

2 In this miracle we see, of course, the power and authority of the Lord; but we also see the faith and constancy of the leper. He prostrates himself on the ground. Such an attitude expresses humility and a sense of shame. He blushes, as anyone might, for the shameful things one has done. But shame does not prevent him from confessing. He uncovers his wounds, he asks to be cured. His confession is made in a wonderful spirit of faith and reverence: *"If it is your will,"* he says, *"you can make me clean" (Lk 5:12).* He attributes the Lord's healing power to His will. Regarding the Lord's kindness, he has no doubt at all. But because the leper is so deeply stained in sin, he does not like to presume on the Lord's decision. And the Lord, with His customary dignity, replies: *"It is my will, be healed of your leprosy".*

3 ***"And the leprosy left him at once"*** *(Lk 5:13.* There is not an instant's delay between God's work and God's command. God's word produces an instantaneous effect. Remember those words of Scripture: *"He spoke and it was made" (Ps 32:9)*. You see, you cannot possibly doubt that God has only to speak and what He commands is done. If, then, the Lord has but to say the word and His will is done, those who admit to there being unity of will within the Trinity, admit also that there is unity of power. And so the leprosy at once went away, that you might understand that the Lord's will to heal is immediately followed by the realisation of His will.

4 Mark adds a lovely detail: he says that the Lord had pity on him. *(cf.Mk 1:41)*. The evangelists often add touches like this. Their purpose in writing is twofold: they want to awaken our faith by describing signs of marvellous power; and they also want to set before us examples of virtue for our imitation. That is why Jesus touches the leper without disgust; and commands without hesitation. For it is a mark of His authority that He has both power to heal and authority to give orders, and so He is ready and willing to give a tangible sign that He is working a cure. Because of Photinus He says: *"It is my will"*; because of Arius He gives a command;* and because of the Manichaeans** He actually touches the leper.

5 It is not one leper only that is cured. All are cured who hear the words: *"Now you are clean, thanks to the word that I have spoken to you" (Jn 15:3)*. If the hearing of the word is the curing of leprosy, then it follows that contempt for the word is surely leprosy of mind. The physician must take care not to contract this leprosy, and should therefore take care to follow the example of our Lord's humility and avoid boasting. Why does the Lord recommend the leper not to speak to anyone, unless it is to teach us not to divulge the gift of grace that we have received? We must hide these gifts, these blessings, in such a way that not only do we receive no pecuniary reward, but we do not even receive the gratification of praise. Another reason could be this: by recommending silence, our Lord is showing a preference for those who would believe freely and spontaneously, and not in the hope of gaining some advantage.

6 In accordance with the Law *(cf.Lv 14:2)*, the leper is told to present himself to the priest. This is not in order to offer some external thing in sacrifice, but more to offer himself to God as a spiritual sacrifice. In this way the stains of his old sins would be wiped away, and he would be consecrated to God as a victim pleasing to Him: pleasing to Him because of his knowledge of the Faith and his instruction in wisdom. For *"every victim must be seasoned with salt" (Mk 9:48)*. In this context Paul says: *"I beg you, my brothers, to offer your body as a victim acceptable and agreeable to God" (Rm 12:1)*.

7 What I find wonderful is that He heals repeating the same words as those which the leper employs in beseeching Him. For the leper says:

* These two heretics denied His sovereign divinity.

** The Manichaeans believed that all matter is evil.

"If it is your will, you can make me clean", and Jesus says: *"It is my will, be healed of your leprosy"*. You see here His will; you see also His tenderness: *"Stretching out His hand, He touched him"*. The Law did not allow people to touch lepers *(cf.Lv 13:3)*, but since Jesus is Lord of the Law, He does not follow the Law, but makes the Law. He touched the man not because it was necessary that in order to cure him He must touch him, but to prove that He, Jesus, is above the Law. He did not fear contagion, as others do; for how could He be contaminated? He had come to deliver others from contagion, and at His touch leprosy fled – though ordinarily leprosy contaminated anyone who touched it – so how could He fear contagion?

8 He tells the man to show himself to the priest and offer the prescribed sacrifice for his purification. If he does this the priest will realise that the man has not been healed according to legal procedure, but by the grace of God which is superior to the Law. In recommending the man to offer the sacrifice prescribed by the Law of Moses *(cf.Lv 14)* Jesus shows that He has not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it. Even though overriding the Law by healing those whom the remedies of the Law could not help, He nonetheless observed the Law. Notice how careful He is to add: *"as Moses has prescribed"*. For we must remember that the Law is spiritual *(cf.Rm 7:14)*. This means that the sacrifice demanded by Jesus is a spiritual one.

9 Our Lord then adds: ***"so that this may be a witness for you"*** *(Lk 5:14)*. The meaning is: if you believe in God, if the leprosy of sin has vanished, if the priest knows that which is hidden, if he is a witness of the purity of your sentiments. From this emerges the image of a Greater Priest, to whom nothing that is secret lies hidden. One to whom is said: *"You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchisedech" (Ps109:4)*.

10 ***"One day some men came carrying a bed on which lay a paralytic. They tried to make their way into the house so that they could put the man down at the feet of Jesus. But to enter was quite impossible because of the crowd, so they climbed up onto the roof, removed some of the tiles, and lowered the bed right in the middle of everyone. In this way they laid the man before Jesus"*** *(Lk 5:17-20)*.

The evangelist has a very definite purpose in recounting this miracle; and it is moreover an outstanding one. For we are told in the verse that precedes it *(cf.Lk 5:16)* that the Lord prayed. (I do not mean that He prayed for help, but rather that He prayed so as to give us an example. It is not as though He required to make some special intercession). This miracle, out of so many miracles of healing, is carefully described to us because it so happened that at that moment there was a great concourse of doctors of the Law who had come from all over Galilee; from Judah; and from Jerusalem *(cf.Lk 5:17)*.

Above all, and this is something that I have said before,* every sick person should have recourse to intercessors who will plead his cause. Thanks to the prayers of these intercessors, the broken bones of our life will be put together and, and by the intervention of the heavenly word, the crippled limbs of our actions will walk straight again. May we always have spiritual counsellors to raise our human spirit – so very prone to be weighed down by the feebleness of the flesh. These intercessors know how to raise us up, and how to lower us to the ground; and it is thanks to them that we find ourselves placed at the feet of Jesus and worthy to receive a glance from His eyes. For the Lord looks upon those who are humble: *"because He has regarded the humility of His handmaid" (Lk 1:48)*.

11 ***"Seeing their faith"*** *(Lk 5:20)*, says the evangelist. Great is the Lord who, because of the merits of some, grants forgiveness to others; and while showing this approval of some, loosens the bonds of others. Why, my friend, do you have such a low opinion of your companion? Remember that, in the Lord's eyes, His servant is so highly esteemed that he is allowed to make intercession, and has the right to be heard. Judges, learn to pardon; and you who are sick, learn to implore. If your sins are so terrible that you cannot hope for pardon, have recourse to intercessors; have recourse to the Church. She will pray for you, and the Lord, out of regard for her, will grant you the pardon that He might otherwise have refused.

12 Without making little of the historical reality of the cure of the paralytic – for physically he was indeed cured – we must also recognise the healing of the inner man, and the fact that the Lord forgives him his sins. The Jews energetically declare that only God has power to forgive sins. But in so doing they are affirming, in a very forceful manner, Christ's divinity. In making this judgement, they show how false and insincere they are. They make out that to forgive sins is something very great, yet they deny the Person who performs this action. So, the Son of God receives their testimony regarding what He has done, but their confession of faith He does not ask. For how can faithlessness confess, how can faithlessness believe? The Jews have given witness, yes, to His divinity; but they lack the faith that would save them.

The fact that their testimony is altogether involuntary, makes it all the more convincing to us who believe. But for these doctors of the Law, what a disaster, what a wicked sin, to deny the truth of something they have actually affirmed! These unbelieving people have indeed gone sadly astray, and are out of their minds, for they confess that only God has power to forgive sins and yet, when he forgives sins, they do not believe Him. But the Lord, always anxious to save sinners, gives concrete proof of His divinity – both by revealing their secret thoughts and by working a

* Not extant

marvellous miracle. For He says: *"Which is easier? To say: 'Your sins are forgiven', or to say: 'Get up and walk'?" (Lk 5:23).*

13 You get here a perfect picture of the resurrection. For you see our Lord healing the wounds both of soul and of body, by forgiving the man his sins and by curing him of his infirmity. I grant that it is a great thing to forgive sins, for *"Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Lk 5:21).* And He forgives them, too, through those to whom He has given this power. Yes, I grant that this is a great thing, but at the same time I maintain that it is far more divine to raise up a body to life, seeing that the Lord is Himself the resurrection.

14 What is the significance of this bed that the man is told to lift up? I think that it signifies the human body. This is the bed that every night David bathes with his tears, as we read in the psalm: *"I wash my bed every night, I water my couch with my tears" (Ps 6:7).* It is the bed of suffering on which our soul lay, a prey to the terrible torments of conscience. But once we conduct ourselves according to Christ's precepts, it is no longer a bed of suffering, but a bed of rest. Our Lord's mercy has transformed something that was dead into a place of repose. He has changed the sleep of death into blissful pleasure.

Not only is the man told to pick up his bed, he is also told to go back home – meaning to return to Paradise. That is our real home; that was our original home. We lost it wrongfully, we lost it by a nasty trick. So it is only right that our House should be restored to us, at the coming of Him who was destined to destroy the nets and snares of fraud, and to restore to us what was ours by right.

15 The miracle takes place without a moment's delay. Words and cure are simultaneous. Those unbelieving doctors see the paralytic get up and watch him, with amazement, taking his departure. Yet they prefer to doubt the wonderful works of God than to believe. Had they believed, they certainly would not have feared but would have loved, for *"perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:18).* So, since they did not love Him, they calumniated Him. To these calumniators He replies: ***"Why do you think evil in your heart?"*** *(Lk 5:22).* Who is it that speaks these words? It is the great Priest. He could see the leprosy in the hearts of the Jews, and He shows them up as being worse than the leper. The leper was told to show himself to the priest, once he had been made clean, but these "lepers" are sent away by the Priest, for fear that their leprosy would contaminate others.

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16 Now we come to the mysterious vocation of the publican or tax-collector *(cf.Lk 5:27).* Jesus commands him to follow Him – not with the footsteps of the body, but with the movements of the soul. And so, this man who previously had been so greedy for the profit he made out of shopkeepers and out of fishermen – men who laboured so hard and who endured the perils of the sea – this man, as I was saying, is converted at a single word. He heard the Lord's call and immediately gave up everything that was his own. This man, who once grabbed and snatched what belonged to others, now quits his vile and infamous trade, and follows the Lord with all the ardour of his soul.

But he does more. He prepares a great party *(cf.Lk 5:29).* For whoever receives Christ into the dwelling of his soul, feasts with the greatest of joy on all that is delightful. Yes, the Lord very gladly enters into such a soul, and reposes in the love of those that believe in Him.

17 Once again the envy of the unbelievers blazes out, and we catch a glimpse of the punishment that lies in store for them. While the faithful will feast and take their rest in the Kingdom of Heaven, those who refused to believe will hunger and be tortured. At the same time we see the difference that exists between those zealous for the Law and those who hear the call of grace. Those who follow the Law will fast for ever and suffer eternally the pangs of hunger. But those who lovingly have received the Word in their heart of hearts will feast on heavenly food and be refreshed from the everlasting fountain. They will never again know hunger or thirst. That is why those envious people, whose soul is fasting, grumbled and said: ***"Why does He eat and drink with publicans and sinners?"*** *(Lk 5:30).*

18 This is the kind of talk used by the Serpent. Remember his very first words to Eve: *"Why did God say: 'You shall not eat of every tree'?" (Gn 3:1).* Therefore these envious people pour forth the venom of their father when they say: ***"Why does He eat and drink with publicans and sinners?"*** *(Lk 5:30).* From the moment that the Lord sits down and eats with sinners, He is giving us permission to feast even with the Gentiles. For He says: ***"It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but those who are sick"*** *(Lk 5:31).*

19 It is a new remedy that this new Master brings. Earth did not produce it. No creature on earth knows how to make it. Come, all of you who are sick with any of the various maladies of sin. Use this new remedy which clears the system of the Serpent's venom. Not only does it clear away the scar left by the wound, but it removes the actual cause of the cruel cancer. It is not a remedy that demands dieting, on the contrary it supplies the soul with good food. For, ***"The Son of Man has come eating and drinking"*** *(Lk 7:34).* So our soul is not at all hungry. The hungry are those deprived of Christ's presence and who lack the provisions supplied by good merits. Those, on the contrary, who possess the delicious food of virtue, and who receive Christ into their house, offer Him a grand feast. This is the spiritual feast of their good works. But while the poor are feasting, the rich are

deprived. That is why Christ says that the friends of the Bridegroom cannot fast while the Bridegroom is with them. ***"But the days shall come when the Bridegroom shall be taken from them"*** *(Lk5:35)*.

20 What are we to understand by those days when the Christ is to be taken from us? After all, did He not Himself say: *"I am with you until the end of time" (Mt 28:20)*? And somewhere else He says: *"I will not leave you orphans" (Jn 14:18)*. And certain it is that, should He leave us, we will not be saved. But remember that no-one can take Christ from you if you do not take yourself away from Him. Let not your vanity steal you away from Christ. And do not presume too much on the Law, for: *"He came to call not the just but the sinners" (Mt 9:13)*.

21 But then, how can we say that God loves justice *(cf.Ps 10:8)*, or that David never yet saw the just person abandoned *(cf.Ps 36:25)*? What sort of justice is it, if it abandons those who are just and welcomes the unjust? We have to understand here that the Lord is describing as "just" those who presume upon the Law, and are not bothered with seeking out the grace of the Gospel. Now, we know that no-one is justified by the Law, but that we are redeemed by grace. There is justice in the Law, but justice does not come through the Law. The Apostle himself says: *"I am a Hebrew and the son of a Hebrew. According to the Law I am a Pharisee, and according to that justice which is within the Law, I have lived a blameless life" (Ph 3:5-6)*. Once the Law had been his pride and glory, but now he says: *"These things, that once I looked upon as advantages have now become for me, as regards Christ, so much loss" (Ph 3:7)*. The point Paul makes is that the justice of the Law is empty without Christ. For Christ is the fullness of the Law. Therefore, while I grant that there is justice in the Law, I maintain that justice does not come through the Law. For *"if justice comes through the Law, then Christ's death is meaningless" (Ga 2:21)*, since Christ died to fulfil all justice. That is why, when John said to Him: *"It is I who should be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"* Jesus replied: *"Let it be. For so we must fulfil all justice" (Mt 3:14-15)*. Christ's death was not meaningless. He died for us, so that the just might shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father *(cf.Mt 13:43)*.

But the Jews are not just. Therefore Jesus says to them: *"When you shall see the just entering the Kingdom of Heaven" (Lk 13:28)*. The just are those who do not return one blow for another blow, and who love their enemy.

22 Unless we understand "just" in this sense, there would appear to be some contradiction when our Lord says: *"I have not come to call the just"*. Certainly, He is not calling those *who call themselves just*. Such people are: *"ignorant of God. Bent on proving their own justice, they have failed to submit themselves to the justice of God" (Rm 10:3)*. Therefore these people who have decided for themselves that they are just, are not called to grace. For if grace springs from repentance, then those who despise repentance clearly renounce grace. Like wounded people, they suffer thirst – those who call themselves saints; from them shall the Bridegroom be taken. But neither Caiphas nor Pilate will steal Christ from us, nor shall we ever go hungry. For we have Christ, and on Christ's flesh and blood we are nourished. How can a person who is not hungry appear to be fasting? How can a person appear to be fasting if he is not thirsty? And how can one who drinks Christ be thirsty, seeing that He Himself has said: *"Whoever drinks the water that I will give, shall never know thirst" (Jn 4:13)*?

What we are speaking of here is thirst of the soul, as can be clearly seen from the sequel. For, ***"He then tells them this parable: 'No-one puts a piece of new stuff onto an old garment' "*** *(Lk 5:36)*.

23 He had said that the children of the Bridegroom – meaning the children of the Word – could not fast so long as the Bridegroom was with them. For these children were regenerated by baptism *(cf.Tt 3:5)* and raised to the dignity of the divine race. Our Lord is certainly not condemning the practice of fasting – since fasting subdues the flesh and controls the sexual urges. Fasting such as this is pleasing to God. How could the Lord forbid His disciples to fast seeing that He fasted Himself? And considering that He had told them that the worst sort of evil spirit can be exorcised only by fasting and by prayer *(cf.Mt 17:20)*?

Briefly, He is saying here that fasting is an old garment. It is the old garment that the Apostle thought we should cast off when he said: *"Put off, then, the old man with his deeds" (Col 3:9)*, and put on the new man, who has been renewed by the sanctification of baptism. It follows that the whole series of precepts follow in logical order: we are not to confuse the deeds of the "old man" with that of the "new"*(cf.Rm 7:22)*. The former, being carnal, acts in accordance with the flesh; the other, the interior person – he who has been re-born – ought not to clothe himself in a heterogeneous collection of garments old and new, and of colours not matching, but should wear the same colour as Christ. He should apply his mind to imitating Him for whose sake he has been re-born in baptism. Far from us be those ill-matching colours and garments of the soul that so displease the Spouse. Remember that He was not pleased with the guest who did not come dressed suitably for the wedding *(cf.M.t 22:12)*. And what robe can please the Bridegroom unless it be that of peace of soul, purity of heart, and kindliness of spirit?

24 This good Spouse is the Lord Jesus. To be married to Him is to be freed from the corruptions of the flesh. For by a new birth He has inaugurated a new life. His bride does not seek to have mortal children – her delight is not in the pangs that Eve suffers *(cf.Gn 3:16)* – nor does she seek a husband subject to sin. She does not want to be the mother of children whose father is a condemned man. She now has seen the ulcers of this flesh

that once she desired *(cf.Ps 37:6)*. She has noted that that which is disfigured by vices cannot truly be called beautiful.

My sister, what would you want with a husband such as that? Use your eyes, and you will see that this body is all covered with wounds. Seek, rather, a Spouse resplendent with light *(cf.Ps 18:6)* – a Bridegroom whose beauty will never fade. Take Him to your heart; consecrate Him in your temple; carry Him in your body, as Scripture says: *"Carry the Lord in your body" (1 Co 6:20)*. Enter into His new bridal bed, and gaze upon a beauty never seen before. Clothe yourself in Him; see Him sitting at the right hand of the Father *(cf.Ac 7:55)*; and be happy to have a Husband such as this. He will re-clothe you in His blessing, and not let you be hurt or torn by sin.

25 We must, then, keep in all its freshness and purity the robes that were given us on emerging from the waters of baptism. This robe is very quickly torn if our actions do not accord with it; the moths of the flesh *(cf.Mt 6:19 sq.)* are very quick to tear holes in it; and it is very soon soiled by the sins and errors of our old self.

In this parable, therefore, we are warned not to mix the old with the new; in the Apostle we are told not even to put on the new over the old *(cf.Col 3:9 sq.)*. We are to take off the old and put on the new. We are to be despoiled, but not naked *(cf.2 Co 5:2-4)*. We take off the old, only in order to put on what is better. But if, by some horrid trick, our garment is taken from us, then – instead of having voluntarily despoiled ourselves – we are found to be naked.

26 ***"And no-one puts new wine into old wine-skins"*** *(Lk 5:37)*.

How better could one describe the fragility of our human nature than by comparing it to the skins of dead animals? God grant that we may at least be good wine-skins, and that we may deserve the Mystery that we have received! By taking a little trouble, and making new wine-skins, we can save the new wine from being lost or spilt. We must take care always to keep our wine-skins full. Left empty, moth and rust consume them; but grace preserves those that are full.

27 Precepts such as these accord nicely with this work: for it is in the sixth of a series of six works performed by the Lord* that Levi (Matthew) is utterly transfigured, and becomes a new person. Now, think back. It was on the sixth day that man was created *(cf.Gn 1:27)*. Therefore it is by His sixth work that Christ re-creates man. Not "the old man", but rather a new creation with a new and undreamt of beauty. Being a new

* The previous five "works" are: the healing of the possessed man; the healing of Simon's mother-in-law; the miraculous catch; the cure of the leper; the cure of the paralytic.

creation, Levi offers to the Lord a feast, for Christ loves him: and Levi himself merits to feast and rejoice with Christ. Christ, in giving him these three precepts or lessons, is forming him. Now he is following Jesus joyfully, readily, and quite carried out of himself. Now he can say: "I'm not a publican any more. I'm no longer Levi. I have cast off Levi, and put on Christ. I detest my race, I have a horror of my previous life. Now, I am only You, Lord Jesus. For you have healed me of my wounds. *'Who now can separate me from the love of God' (Rm 8:35)*, that love of God which is in you? Can tribulation, or anguish, or hunger?

I am nailed to you now by the nails of Faith, and tied to you by the dear bonds of love. All your commandments will be, so to speak, a cautery that I apply to my wounds. The cautery of your commandment burns: it burns whatever is malignant in the flesh, so that the cancer will not spread to what is healthy. True, the remedy stings, but it removes the infection. Therefore, Lord Jesus, by your all powerful knife, cut away the infection of my sins. Provided only that you tie me down with cords of love, cut away the corruption of my sins. Come quickly and pierce my hidden passions, those sneaking, nasty passions, and open up the wound so that the malignant cancer cannot spread. Purify me of all infection in the new waters [of baptism]. Listen to me, worldly people whose minds are drunk with sin. I, Levi, was once wounded with passions such as yours. But I found a Physician who dwelt in Heaven and who scatters His remedies on earth. He alone can heal my wounds, for He alone is without wounds. He can remove grief from the heart and pallor from the soul, for He knows our secrets".

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28 ***"Now it happened that on the second first Sabbath, He was walking through the corn fields; and His disciples were picking ears of corn and eating them, rubbing them in their hands"*** *(Lk 6:1)*.

It is not only by His words, but also by His actions and example that the Lord Jesus sets to work to free us from the observance of the Old Law, and to re-clothe us in the fresh robes of grace. And so, on this Sabbath day, He leads us through the cornfields. By this I mean that He leads us to fruitful works. What is the significance of the Sabbath, the harvest, the ears of wheat? We have here as great mystery: the field represents the whole world; the harvest of the field is the rich crop of saints that will come from the seeds of the human race; the ears of corn are the fruits of the Church, which the Apostles rub vigorously in their hands – nourishing and feeding themselves on our spiritual progress.

29 Already a fine crop of corn stood flourishing in the fields, ripe for the harvest. This fine harvest we can compare to the fruits of our merits. For our merits – like the crops of the field – can be ruined by bad weather,

or burnt up by the sun. They can be destroyed by rain, broken by storms, or they can be saved by the harvesters and happily stored away in barns. Already earth had received the word of God and, made fruitful by the heavenly seed, mother earth had produced fine harvests. The disciples were hungry for the salvation of our race, and so it seemed that they were extracting the fruit of souls from the bodily husk that encased them. Souls such as these had already been drawn to the light of Faith by the very remarkable miracles that the disciples had worked. But the Jews thought that such activity was wrong on the Sabbath. Christ, however, by a new gift of grace, made it clear that the Old Law had become obsolete and that a new law of grace was now in operation.

30 I find it most interesting and most significant that the evangelists Matthew and Mark refer simply to "the Sabbath" *(cf.Mt 12:1 and Mk 2:23)*. These are the Sabbaths of everlasting leisure that await us in the eternal resurrection. Whether in this world, where the Jewish superstitions rest and take their leisure, or whether in the other world, where we ourselves shall for ever enjoy a great and solemn festivity, we shall eat the good things of the earth. For it is written: *"They shall eat, but you shall be hungry" (Is 65:13)*.

31 But it is most remarkable and striking that Luke says: "the second first Sabbath", and not "the first second"; for what he writes is δευτερόπρωτον [second-first], and one would expect precedence to be given to what is first. It is "Second Sabbath", because "a first" had previously come by virtue of the Old Law – which punished those who worked on that day; it is "first", because this Sabbath of the Law which was first, has been abolished; and the other, instituted in the second place, has become the first. For, since it is allowed to work on the Sabbath, and to work incurs no penalty, not so much as even the name has survived of the legal Sabbath. It has become obsolete. We must, however, remember that it was "first" chronologically, whereas the other is "first" in grace. But though "second" in time, it is not on that account inferior. For Adam, too, came first; and yet he is not to be compared with the Second Adam: *"The first Adam was a living soul"*, and: *"the first man, arising from earth, is earthly; the Second Man, descending from Heaven, is heavenly" (1 Co 15:45; 47)*.

We cannot doubt that the Second precedes the first: for one was the cause of our death *(cf.Rm 5:14)*, the other the cause of our life. So, too, we speak of a Sabbath that is "second-first": second, chronologically, but first in the order of grace. Far better is the Sabbath on which free pardon is given than the Sabbath on which punishment is prescribed. The Law comes first, the Gospel comes second: but we know well that terror is inferior to grace. Or perhaps we could put it this way: one Sabbath is first in God's predetermined plan, but second in the carrying out or execution of His plan.

32 But in His wisdom the Lord, in this passage again, points out that within the Law there is a pre-figuring of the future; and accuses the very guardians of the Law of being ignorant of the things of the Law. He gives the example of how David, when he and his companions were hungry, went into the house of God and there took the holy bread. David, and those who were with him, ate this bread *(1 K 21:3-6)*.

Here we have a great and prophetic example, where for the first time we are shown that we must not attach ourselves to what is trivial in the Law, but only to what is solidly useful. As for David and his comrades escaping from King Saul, this is a passage that pre-figures Christ. For Christ and His apostles had to hide from the prince of this world.

33 But how could David, so zealous a defender of the Law, have eaten the bread, and given it to his companions when no one but priests *(cf.Lv 24:9)* were allowed to eat it? It was to show, in a figurative way, that the lay people were to eat the food of priests; or it could have meant either that we should all imitate the lives of priests, or that all the children of the Church are priests. For all of us are anointed to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God *(cf.1 P 2:5)*.

34 From now on, Christ's teaching flows over the Law. It does not destroy the Law, but fulfils it *(cf.Mt 5:17)*. Neither does it destroy the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man. If, therefore, man's urgent need demands that hungry humankind – so long deprived of the fruits of the earth – should be freed from the fasting and the hunger of long ago, there is no question here of destroying the Law but rather of fulfilling it. Why, therefore, accuse the Lord of a crime if, in the case of the Lord's servant, such an action as David's was not considered a crime?

35 What, for that matter, could be more evident than the pre-figurement that runs through the whole episode? David went into the house of Achimelech *(cf.1 S 21:1 sq.)* the priest. At the risk of his own life, this priest receives his guest and does not refuse to welcome an outlaw. The beauty, the nobility, of hospitality lies in taking voluntarily upon ourselves the dangers of our guest.

36 While the story contains a moral, there is too a prophecy contained within the mystical sense that underlines the history. Even at the risk of losing their own lives, the faithful priests would not refuse the hospitality of their souls to the true David. And we learn that not only will Christ find a resting place in the dwelling of every priest, but that also – figuratively speaking – He will take from there the arms and weapons of foul spirits

(cf.1 S 21:3 sq.). For whoever gives Christ hospitality, despoils the invisible Goliath of his armoury.

37 Nothing can be clearer than the next point that I mention. In the house of Achimelech, David asks for five loaves *(cf.1 S 21:3 sq.)* and receives but one. Here we are shown figuratively that the nourishment of the faithful was not going to depend on the Five Books [the Pentateuch], but on the Lord's Body. Christ would take on a human body so that none of His faithful ones would ever suffer hunger. Doeg, the Edomite *(cf.1 S 22:18 sq.)*, also has symbolic meaning. He had charge of the mules; and since his rôle was to symbolise the traitor Judas, it was appropriate that he should be in charge of a sterile herd.

38 The fact that the whole household of Achimelech was persecuted by Saul for having welcomed David, with the sole exception of Abiathar –at that time prince of priests *(cf.1 S 22:20)* – shows us prophetically that no-one can harm the true Prince of priests *(cf.Heb 5.10)* who is Christ alone.

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39 The Lord Jesus goes on from here to perform other works. He had resolved to save the human race in its entirety, and was therefore bent on meeting its members one by one. In this way, He could state with all truth: *"You are angry with me because I have made a man whole on the Sabbath day" (Jn 7:23)*. So, in the passage which we now reach, He heals the hand that Adam had stretched out to seize the forbidden fruit *(cf.Gn 3:6)*; He impregnates that hand with the health-giving sap of good works. Withered through Adam's own fault, it was healed through good deeds. Sharply Jesus rebukes the Jews who by their false interpretations violated the precepts of the Law. They reckoned that on the Sabbath one was to take a holiday from good works. They were wrong, for the Law prefigured future events; and, in the future, evil was to take a rest, *not* good. Secular cares will be at rest, but to repose in the praise of God is not idleness. To repose in God's praise is a good work!

40 You have heard the Lord's words. He said: ***"Stretch out your hand"*** *(Lk 6:10)*.

See, here, my friend, a remedy for all complaints; and if you imagine that your hand is healthy, take care that it is not withered by avarice or sacrilege. Stretch it out often. Stretch it out to the poor who beg for help. Stretch it out to help your neighbour, to give a helping hand to the widow. Extend it to snatch from an unjust judge some innocent person subjected to foul play. Stretch out your hand to God in sorrow for your sins. This is how one stretches out one's hand. This is how one is healed. Remember

Jeroboam. When he sacrificed to false gods, the hand that he stretched forth was withered; and when he prayed to God, it was restored *(cf.1 K 13:4; 6)*.

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41 ***"Now it happened that in those days He went out into a mountain to pray; and He passed the night in prayer to God"*** *(Lk 6:12)*.

Not everyone who prays ascends the mountain – for there is prayer that turns to sin *(cf.Ps 108:7)*. But whoever prays well, whoever lifts himself from cares of earth to thoughts of Heaven, climbs to the topmost peak *(cf.Ps 23:3)* and all his concern is things sublime. But there is no question of someone climbing to the top if he is loaded with anxious cares to get rich and to be a person of great importance. He is not going to reach the mountain-top if he is casting a covetous eye on some one else's possessions. Only the person who seeks God will make the ascent; only the one who asks God to help him on his way.

All great souls,. all sublime and elevated souls, reach the top of the mountain. It is not simply to any and every one that the prophet says: *"Get up upon a high mountain, you who bring good tidings to Sion. Lift up your voice with strength, you who bring good news to Jerusalem" (Is 40:9)*. It is not with the footsteps of your body that you must climb this mountain, but by the sublimity of your deeds. Follow Christ in such a way that you yourself can be a mountain; for: *"Mountains are all around it" (Ps 124:2)*. Take a careful look at the Gospel and you will see that only the disciples climbed the mountain with the Lord.

42 The Lord prays. It is not for Himself that He is praying, but for me. For even though the Father has entrusted everything to His Son *(cf.Jn 17:2)*, nonetheless, so that He might in all things be truly man, Jesus thinks it right that He should pray for us. Do not turn a treacherous ear; do not think that the Son prays because of weakness. Do not imagine that the very source of power prays because without prayer He could not fulfil His wishes. The very Master of Obedience is, by His own example, forming us to precepts of virtue. *"We have,"* so Scripture says, *"an advocate with the Father" (1 Jn 2:1)*. If He is our advocate, then it is right that He should intercede for me, a sinner. He prays, therefore, not because of weakness, but out of pure kindness. Do you want to know to what point He can accomplish all that He wishes? Jesus is, at the same time, our advocate and our judge *(cf.Jn 5:22)*. The one is indicative of mercy and compassion; the other is a sign of power.

43 ***"He spent all night in the prayer of God"*** *(Lk 6:12)*. He gives you an example, He puts before you a model for your imitation. Should you not make a great effort for your own salvation, seeing that Christ prays

all night for you? What ought not you to do, when you are on the point of undertaking some great act of duty and devotion, seeing that Christ – when about to send out His apostles on their mission – prayed, and prayed alone? Unless I am mistaken, there is no passage in which it is reported that Christ prayed with His apostles. Always He implores alone. You see, God's plan cannot be grasped by human thinking; and no-one can share the secret and intimate thoughts of Christ.

Perhaps you would like to know to what extent it was for me, not for Himself, that Christ prayed?

44 ***"He called His disciples to Himself, and He chose twelve of them"*** *(Lk 6:13).*

He chose them in order to send them out, as sowers of the Faith, to help the human race and to advance its salvation throughout the entire world. Notice, at the same time, Heaven's method in doing this. Christ did not choose to send the learned, the rich. Nor did he choose to send people of noble birth. But He chose to send fishermen and publicans *(cf.Mt 4:18; 10:3)*. He would not have it appear that people had been won over to Him by worldly wisdom; nor that they had been redeemed by riches; nor attracted by the fascination of power or noble titles. He wanted the victory to be won by plain truth, not by charming words.

45 Judas, too, is chosen. This is not done injudiciously, but with forethought. How great is the power of truth! Not even a treacherous minister can undermine it. What a loveable trait this is in the character of our Lord: He prefers to compromise his power of judgement, rather than compromise His love! Having taken on Himself the burden of our human weakness, He would not refuse even this particular aspect of human weakness. He wanted to be abandoned. He wanted to be betrayed. He wanted His apostle to betray Him. This was so that you, *seeing yourself deserted by a friend, and betrayed by a friend,* would bear with peace of mind your own judgement; and calmly accept the fact that your kindness was wasted.

46 The Gospel continues: ***"He came down with them and stood upon the plain"*** *(Lk 6:17).*

Now, pay very great attention to this: He ascends with the apostles, but He descends to the crowds. For how could the crowd see Christ unless he descended to them? The crowd does not follow Him to the heights, nor does it raise itself up to the summits. So, going down to them, the Lord finds those who are infirm. For the infirm cannot reach the heights. Matthew, too *(Mt 8:1)*, tells us that the sick were healed on the plain. Each one is healed, so that, progressing little by little in strength, each may climb the mountain. The Lord heals us first on the plain. Here He cures us of every disorder and

removes the dreadful affliction of blindness. He came down to meet our wounds, so that by associating with us He might make us sharers in His heavenly nature. He healed the crowds, it is true, but having healed them He left them below: *"Seeing the crowds"* – so Scripture says – *"He ascended the mountain. And when He had sat down, the disciples came up to Him" (Mt 5:1).*

47 At the moment of drawing from His divine treasures the oracles that we call the Beatitudes, Jesus becomes more solemn, more sublime. Even here, though seated on a plain, He raises His eyes. So, too, when recalling Lazarus from the dead, He groaned and sighed deeply *(cf.Jn 11:33)*. So too when He forgave the adulterous woman her sins *(cf.Jn 8:10)*, Jesus lifted His head. What is so special about "raising His eyes"? It means opening up the inner vision.

48 Saint Matthew says: *"He opened His mouth" (Mt 5:2)*, by which he means the opening up of the treasury of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God *(cf.Col 2:3)*, the un-veiling of the sanctuary of His temple. Jesus opened His mouth. You, too, should open your mouth. But first pray that it may be opened. If Paul prayed that his mouth might be opened *(cf.Ep 6:19)*, there is all the more reason why you should pray. The prophet, too, points out to you the key of knowledge by which to unlock your mouth. For he says: *"Open your mouth with the word of God" (Pr 31:9)*. God's word is the key that opens your mouth. The key of knowledge is the key of your mouth. By means of that key, the chains of silence fall away, and the barriers of ignorance come down.

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49 ***"Blessed are you who are poor, because the Kingdom of Heaven is yours. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, because they shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, because you shall laugh. Blessed shall you be when all hate you"*** *(Lk 6:21-22).*

Saint Luke gives us four only of the Lord's Beatitudes, while Saint Matthew gives us eight *(cf.Mt 5:3-10)*. But in these eight are contained the four, and in the four are found the eight. Luke chose the number four in honour of the four cardinal virtues. Matthew went for the mystical number of eight [octo], because the inscription: *"for the octave" (e.g. Ps 11:1)* is found at the head of many psalms. Also, you are recommended *(cf.Qo 11:2)* to make eight portions and to give these out, perhaps by means of the Beatitudes. The octave denotes the completion and fulfilment of our hopes; the octave is, also, the sum of all the virtues.

50 Let's begin with the greater number. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit,"* says Jesus, *"because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 5:3)*. Both evangelists start with this Beatitude. It is first in rank, and – as it were – the mother and source of all virtues. For it is only in neglecting the goods of this world that we merit the eternal good. You can be certain that no-one will attain to the rewards of the Kingdom of Heaven who is possessed by greed, covetous for the things of this world, and incapable of rising higher.

51 The second Beatitude is: *"Blessed are the gentle" (Mt 5:4)*. The third is: *"Blessed are those who weep (Mt 5:5)*. The fourth is: *"Blessed are those who hunger" (Mt 5:6)*. The fifth is: *"Blessed are the merciful" (Mt 5:7)*. The sixth is: *"Blessed are the pure" (Mt 5:8)*. The seventh is: *"Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt 5:9)*. This is most appropriately numbered, for it was on the seventh day that God rested from his work of creating the world *(cf.Gn 2:2)*; the seventh is the day of repose and of peace. The eighth Beatitude is: *"Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice" (Mt 5:10)*.

52 Come, Lord Jesus, explain to us the order of your Beatitudes. For it is not without reason that you have put them in this order: beginning with "Blessed are the poor in spirit"; putting in second place "Blessed are the gentle"; in third place "Blessed are those who weep". Though I understand to some extent, I only partly understand. For if Paul knew only in part *(cf.1 Co 13:9)*, how can I possibly know? Both as regards my way of life and my articulateness, I am greatly inferior to Paul. For it is right living that produces and acquires the word. But talk is idle if the life style does not match up, and talk such as that is not the word of God. How much wiser is Paul than I! He glories in his perils *(cf.2 Co 12:5)*; I, in my successes. He glories, because He is not exalted by His revelations *(cf.2 Co 12:7)*; I – should it ever happen that I received revelations – would glory in them. Yet, even from stones God can raise people up *(cf.Mt 3:9)*. He can draw words from mouths that are closed; and He can cause the dumb to speak. If God could open the eyes of the she-donkey so that it saw an angel *(cf.Nb 22:27)*, He surely has power to open our eyes too, so that we can contemplate the mystery of God.

53 *"Blessed,"* says Jesus *"are the poor"*. Not all poor people are happy. For in itself poverty is neither good nor evil. You can have poor people who are good, and you can have poor people who are bad. Unless of course we understand "blessed are the poor" in the same sense as did the prophet when he said: *"Better a poor man who is honest than a rich man who is a liar" (Pr 19:22)*. Blessed was the poor man who cried out, and the Lord heard him *(cf.Ps 33:7)*. As regards sin and vice he was poor [being quite without sin or vice], and there was nothing in him that the prince of this world could discover *(cf.Jn 14:30)*. In short, blessed are those who are poor in imitation of Him who, even though He was rich, made Himself poor for us *(cf.2 Co 8:9)*. Matthew puts it plainly when he says: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit"*. The poor in spirit are not puffed up, not inflated by carnal thoughts.

54 Such, then, is the first Beatitude. Having left all sin behind me, and having stripped myself of malice and wickedness, I am content with simplicity and innocent of iniquity. But that is not enough. I must work upon my character. It is not enough to be poor in the goods of this world if I am cranky and troublesome. We must take the right path, and that of course means following Him who said: *"Learn of me that I am gentle and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29)*.

So, leave all wickedness behind you; rid yourself of your vices, and in this way you will be genuinely poor. Moderate your inclination to anger, so that either you will not get angry or at least, if you do become angry, you will not commit some sin. For it is written: *"Be angry, but do not sin" (Ps 4:5)*. It is a wonderful thing to be able, by one's wisdom, to control one's feelings; and it is not less virtuous to keep one's temper and repress one's indignation than not to feel any anger at all. It is generally considered that the former indicates greater calm, and the latter [keeping one's temper] indicates greater courage.

55 The next step is to remember that you are a sinner. Weep for your sins, weep for your faults. Very appropriately the third Beatitude is to weep for your sins, because it is the Trinity that pardons sin. Weep that you may purify yourself; wash yourself in your tears. If you will weep for yourself, then others will have no need to weep for you. If only Saul had wept for his sins, then Samuel would not have had to mourn for him *(cf.1 S 15:35)*.

Each of us has his own deaths for which to weep. We are dead when we sin, when we are glutted with the bones of the dead. Dead is the malicious word that issues from our mouth – dead because it comes forth from an evil grave: *"Their mouth is a wide open grave" (Ps 5:11)*. This is why the apostle says: *"Be imitators of me" (1 Co 4:16)*. He wants us to remember our faults. From the moment that Paul found faith in Christ, he had no more sins for which to weep; but he wept for the past. *"I am not worthy,"* he said, *"to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God" (1 Co 15:9)*. Before he received the Faith, Paul was a sinner. But we, even after receiving the Faith, continue to sin. So, let the sinner weep and reproach himself, and then he will become just; for: *"The just is first accuser of himself" (Pr 18:17)*.

56 We must follow all things in order, for it is written: *"Set in order charity within me" (Sg 2:4)*. So, I have given up sin, I have learnt to restrain my passions, I have wept for my sins. I now begin to hunger and thirst for justice. When a person is sick, and very sick, he has no appetite whatsoever. His pain and his sickness exclude hunger or appetite. But what do we mean by "hunger after justice"? What is the bread for which the just person hungers? It must surely be the bread of which Scripture says: *"I have been young, and I have been old, but I have never seen the just person abandoned, nor his children begging for bread" (Ps 36:25)*. A person who is hungry looks for means of satisfying his hunger and restoring his strength. But how better can he restore his strength than by following the rule of justice?

57 Next in order we have: *"Blessed are the merciful"*. For mercy follows after justice. That is why we read: *"He has distributed, He has given to the poor; His justice endures for ever" (Ps 111:9)*. But the person who performs acts of mercy loses his reward unless his deeds are performed with a pure heart. If he is only looking for notice, his work perishes without fruit. So purify the very depths of your heart, and when you have carefully cleansed the very secrets of your soul, have compassion on those who have to struggle; realise how many people, how many of your brothers and sisters, are in need of your help.

58 First you must empty the inmost depths of every sin. Your heart must be entirely free of strife, dispute, and quarrels, otherwise you cannot bring healing to others. Let peace begin within yourself, and then, when you yourself are tranquil, bring peace to others. How can you purify the hearts of others unless you have first purified your own?

59 Well then, you have been obliging to others, you have been of service to many. Stir yourself up, hasten on to the end. There are many ways of dying, but only one of them suited our Lord. He had been born according to the flesh, and He would die according to the flesh. He chose the way of suffering, in which to die for us. You too, my friend, remembering all He has given you must say: *"I will take the chalice of salvation and I will call on the name of the Lord" (Ps 115:13)*, meaning by this "I will take suffering". This is why Jesus said to those who were ambitious to sit one on His right side and the other on His left: *"Can you drink the chalice that I must drink?" (Mt 20:22)*. He leads you right on to the end; He is your companion in martyrdom: and this martyrdom is the very palm and crown of the Beatitudes.

60 So, then, you see the order of procedure. First you must become poor in spirit, for to be humble in spirit is to be rich in virtue. Unless you

are poor, you cannot be gentle. The gentle, the lowly, can weep for things present. Being able to weep for that which is less, they can yearn for that which is greater and better. One who searches for what is higher, obviously steers clear of that which is lower and less worthy. And so it comes about that he is aided by that which is on high. And one who is compassionate purifies his heart – and what does it mean to purify the heart if not to wash out every stain of sin.? For, *"alms deliver from all sin" (Tb 4:11)*. As for patience, it is the consummation of charity. Regarding that person who suffers persecution in the ultimate degree, he indeed is tried by adversity and not found wanting. Such as this will win the crown, for *"he has striven lawfully" (2 Tm 2:5)*.

Such, in the opinion of many, are the steps that form the ladder of virtue. If we use these steps, we shall climb all the way up to the top.

61 Just as surely as we increase in virtue, so, too, our reward increases. For, to be children of God is far greater than to possess the earth, or than to be consoled. And yet, the first prize listed is the Kingdom of Heaven; and equally, the last prize listed is the Kingdom of Heaven. Can this mean that the same prize that is given to beginners, is given also to those of consummate virtue? We have to understand the matter in its mystical sense: recall the apostle's words, *"To be dissolved and to be with Christ" (Ph 1:23)*. There you have the "first" Kingdom, where the saints are snatched up into the clouds, to meet Christ in the air. For that great multitude of sleepers will arise – some to life eternal, and some to eternal shame *(cf.1 Th 4:16; Dn 12:2)*.

My reasoning is that there is a "first" Kingdom of Heaven promised to the saints when they shake off their mortal body; the "second" Kingdom of Heaven will be after the resurrection of the body, when we shall be with Christ. Once you reach the Kingdom of Heaven, there will be a progression of mansions. For though there is but one Kingdom, there is – within the kingdom of Heaven – a variety of merits. After the resurrection, when you are freed from death, you will possess the earth. But as for that person to whom the words are addressed: *"You are earth, and to earth you shall return" (Gn 3:19)*, he certainly does not possess the earth. You cannot be in possession if you do not reap the fruits.

So, freed by the Lord's Cross – provided of course that you submit to the yoke of the Lord – you will find your consolation in the actual possession of the earth. Joy follows upon consolation, and divine mercy follows upon joy. And, when the Lord has mercy on someone, He calls him. The one who is called sees Him who is calling; and he who sees God is granted the right of divine sonship. As child of God, he rejoices in the riches of the heavenly Kingdom.

In the one case, there is the beginning of the Kingdom: in the other, there is the fulfilment. For just as in this world a great many people are in

the Roman Empire, it is those who are closer to the Emperor who derive greater profit from the Empire.

62 Now we must discover how Saint Luke manages to condense the eight Beatitudes into four. There are, as we know, four cardinal virtues: temperance, justice, prudence, fortitude. Anyone who is poor in spirit is not going to be greedy or miserly; one who weeps is not arrogant or over-bearing, but gentle and peaceable; one who mourns, humbles himself. A person who is just does not refuse to give something that was intended to be given for the general good. One who is merciful gives freely of his own; and one who gives freely of his own property is not likely to covet the property of someone else or to lay snares for him.

63 All the virtues are linked together, so that in having one you find that you have several others. The saints each have their own proper virtue; but the virtue that embraces most others, will be the most richly rewarded. Just look at Abraham, such hospitality *(cf.Gn 18:2 sq.)*! Such humility! Such fidelity when he ransoms his nephew from the enemy *(cf.Gn 14:16)*! and such disinterestedness when he takes no share of the profit *(cf.Gn 14:22 sq.)*! But since what he did was done by faith, it is only right that above all others he should be considered as taking first place in faith *(cf.Gn 15:5 sq.)*. Each will have many prizes, since each has many incentives to virtue. But the one who is richest in merits is the one who is most absolutely rewarded.

64 *"Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3).* Here you have the virtue of temperance. Temperance abstains from sin, tramples the world under foot, and turns its back on seductive pleasures.

65 *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst" (Mt 5:6).* Those who are hungry themselves feel sorry for others who are hungry. Because they feel pity for them, they give to them. In giving to them, they become just, because: *"His justice remains for ever" (Ps 111:9).* This is why we can recognise in Matthew spiritual thirst and hunger; a longing for the food or drink of justice. For this virtue is, as it were, the very essence of all virtues. So much so, that the just person will put himself on the same level as his inferiors; will have nothing whatsoever to do with crooked dealing and trickery; but seeks out the truth.

66 ***"Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh"*** *(Lk 6:20).* Here you have the virtue of prudence, for prudence weeps for this transitory world, and sighs for what is eternal. She weeps for worldly things that make war on one another, and seeks the God of peace *(cf.Rm 15:33)*. She searches for God, *"Who has chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise; and things that are not, so that He can get possession of that which is" (1 Co 1:27-28).*

67 ***"Blessed shall you be when people shall hate you"*** *(Lk 6:22).* Here you have the virtue of fortitude. We speak here of fortitude that suffers persecution for the Faith. We do not speak of the hatred inspired by some crime or wicked deed. Through undergoing persecution we arrive at the crown of suffering; but this means being indifferent to the favour of others, and wanting to please God.

To prove to you that suffering is the peak and pinnacle of fortitude, hear the words of Scripture: ***"It was in this way that their fathers treated the prophets"*** *(Lk 6:23).* For the Jews persecuted the prophets even to the death. It also belongs to fortitude to conquer anger and restrain indignation. By this means, both soul and body grow strong; and are not troubled or disturbed by fear or pain. Things which, like false flatterers, can often sway us.

68 To sum up: temperance implies purity of heart and soul; justice implies mercy; prudence implies peace; fortitude implies gentleness.

69 ***"Alas for you who are rich, for you have your consolation"*** *(Lk 6:24).*

While agreeing that very rich people have many temptations to evil, one can also find – in the possession of wealth – an invitation to virtue. Undoubtedly virtue does not need the resources of the rich, and the contribution made by the poor is more worthy of praise than the liberality of the rich. At the same time, the people whom the Lord here condemns by His divine sentence are not those who have money, but those who do not know how to employ their money. The poor person is more worthy of praise when he gives with a good grace, and is not hindered by considerations of his own need of cash; he is more worthy of praise when, provided he has enough for his needs, he does not look on himself as being poor. In the same way, the rich person is more blameworthy, for he should at least have thanked God for what he has received; he should never have kept hidden and profitless goods that were meant for the use and enjoyment of all; he should not have dug a hole in the ground and there buried his treasures *(cf.Mt 25:18).*

It is not the fortune, but the heart, that is at fault. All through his life the miser jealously keeps watch and guard over his riches – alas, unhappy wretch! No torture could exceed the anxiety with which he hoards the possessions that his heirs will waste. But people such as this find an empty kind of pleasure in the pursuit and hoarding up of money. They have had their consolation in this present life. They have lost it in the life eternal.

70 On the other hand, by "the rich" we might understand the Jewish people, or the heretics, or the intellectuals of this world. These find

the greatest delight in long-winded speeches and in their pretentious eloquence, which serves them as a sort of patrimony. Leaving behind them the simplicity of the true Faith, they pile up useless treasures.

Friend, has it never occurred to you in hearing this heretic or that spouting forth, in a worldly fashion, on the Conception of the Lord, that this man is rich in vocabulary but poor in sense? He thinks that he is the man of the hour and that he is immensely rich. But in the other life he will recognise the poverty of his Faith. There, exhausted by the eternal famine of Faith, he will recognise the bad faith of the speeches that he spouted out in this present life, and he will know that this has been the cause of his suffering. The day will come when those who now smile at our words, will weep bitterly for those smiles of theirs.

71 It is to these that the words apply: ***"Alas for you when all people speak well of you"*** *(Lk 6:26)*. Does it not strike you that this reproach might be addressed to those who, at the Council of Rimini,* in their efforts to ingratiate themselves with the Emperor, lost the grace of God? Wicked twisters! Trying to please the powerful ones of this world, they have handed themselves over to a perpetual curse.

72 Saint Matthew entices the people to faith and virtue by the promise of rewards; whereas Saint Luke also deters them from sin and wickedness by threatening them with future punishment. Luke has a reason for approaching the Beatitudes by way of a whole series of wonderful miracles. This was to teach the people, now strengthened by these divine actions, to advance beyond the way pointed out by the Law, and to progress along the way of virtue. He feared to give the signal to advance while the people still hesitated and only half believed. But now the time has come to sound the trumpet and awaken their courage. This we learn from the way he handles his theme, both as regards what goes before the Beatitudes and as regards what follows. Earlier, those who are still weak in faith are, figuratively, fed on the milk of the Law *(cf.1 Co 3:2)*, and by the paths of the Law led to grace. They hear the things of the Law so that, by following the Law, they might pass beyond it. Later on the Church, now grown strong, is no longer breast fed *(cf.Heb 5:12 sq.)*, but nourished on solid food *(cf.1 Co 3:1-2)*. For love is solid food. As you know, there are three great virtues: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love.

73 Love is "set in order" when we are told: ***"Love your enemies"*** *(Lk 6:27)*. Here we see fulfilled in the Church those words

* At the Council of Rimini, A.D. 359, a compromise was effected between orthodoxy and heresy. This made Saint Jerome exclaim that the world woke up to find that it had become Arian. And it went

we quoted a little way back [par. 56]: *"Set love in order within me" (Sg 2:4)*. Love is set in order when the precepts of charity are formulated. You see how Luke begins with the higher things, and how he relegates the Law to a position lower than that of the Gospel Beatitudes. The Law commands us to avenge one injury with another *(cf.Ex 21:23 sq.)*. The Gospel invites us to return love in place of enmity, to repay hatred by good will, curses by blessings. It tells us to give assistance to our persecutors; and, if they are hungry, to lavish patience and love on them. But how perfect an athlete must be if he does not even feel the blow!

74 Our Lord does not wish to appear to be destroying the Law. Though He does not allow us to pay back in injuries, He commands us to pay back in blessings. Yet, when He says: ***"As you would that others should do to you, do you also to them in the same manner"*** *(Lk 6:31)*, the return that we make is all the more abundant. For what we are doing accords with our own sentiments and wishes. Virtue, when it gives, knows no measure. Not content to pay back what it has received, it wants to give far, far more. To restore what has been given is not enough, for virtue would not like to be outdone in generosity. Acts of kindness are not to be weighed and measured by quantity. One also has to consider the order of giving and the time. All things being equal, it is the one who is first to give who has the right to gratitude; the person who returns a kindness is really only paying a debt. The true benefactor is the one who is first to confer kindness, and the one who returns that kindness is the debtor. It is an additional kindness on the part of the person who is first to give. In repaying a sum of money, one is not paying for the other's kindness. As regards that, one remains a debtor – even though the money debt has been paid off. It is useless to think that in paying back what we owe we are quit of the debt, for in paying it back we are acknowledging that we received far more than we gave.

75 In this excellent school of thought the Christian is given his formation. Not content merely to follow the natural law, he gives the added flavour of grace. If all people – even sinners – agree to love those who love them, the Christian, whose convictions are of a more elevated order, should study how he can love more generously. He should practise this virtue even to the degree of loving one who has no love for him. For even if there is absolutely no reason for loving that person, that does not excuse us from practising the virtue of charity. Just as you would be ashamed to make no return to one who loves you, and his wish to do you a kindness enkindles in you feelings of love for one whom you previously disliked; so too you should love the opportunity of practising virtue given you for those who have no love for you. In this way, by loving the virtue of charity, you will begin to love that person whom you disliked. *The meaner*

and slighter the return we get for our love, the greater will be the eternal reward of virtue.

76 But can anything be more wonderful and extraordinary than to turn the other cheek to the person who strikes you? Surely such a reaction must check the man's fury and calm his anger? You, by your patience, are striking far harder, than the one who struck you, because you fill him with remorse. So not only do you receive amends for your injury, but you receive a big grace. Often the greatest motives for friendship spring from the patience with which we replied to insolence, or from the kindness we did in return for some injury.

A certain philosopher [Plato] has a saying that I recall; and I believe that it is the one instance where the pride and hardness of the philosophers appear to soften. It is this: justice is divided into three parts. One part is directed towards God, and it is known as *pietas* [reverence or religion]; another part is directed towards parents and the rest of the human race; while the third part is directed to the dead, and sees to it that their funeral rites are duly and properly carried out. But the Lord Jesus goes beyond the oracles of the Law and the summits of philosophy. He would have us extend our kindness even to those who have wounded us. If an enemy, struggling against you with the weapons of war were to throw down his arms, out of pity you would spare him. If, from natural feelings of kindness, or in accordance with rules of warfare, you were to spare the lives of the vanquished, how much more mercy should be expected from those who are motivated by religion! If a warrior, despite his instinct to save his own skin, can restrain himself [from killing a vanquished foe] what should we not expect from a soldier of peace?

77 So we see fulfilled in the precepts the following text from the apostle: *"Charity is patient, is kind, is not envious ... is not puffed up" (1 Co 13:4)*. If love is patient, it should show patience to him who strikes a blow. If it is kind, it ought not reply with a curse. If it does not demand what belongs to it, it ought not to resist the robber. If it is not envious, it ought not to hate its enemy. Yet the precepts of divine love surpass even those of the apostle. To give spontaneously is more than to allow something to be taken from you. To love your enemies is a better thing than not to be envious of them. All this the Lord both said and did. *"When He was reviled, He did not revile in return" (1 P 2:23)*; when He was struck, He did not strike back; when He was stripped, He offered no resistance; and when He was crucified, He begged forgiveness for those who were persecuting Him – He said: ***"Father, forgive them this sin, for they do not know what they are doing"*** *(Lk 23:34)*. He readily excused the crime of those who were incriminating Him – they gave Him the Cross, but He, in return, gave grace and salvation.

78 And yet, is it not the case that our zeal for virtue can grow dull and dim if there is no reward in sight? Therefore Jesus has given us an example, and guaranteed a rich reward in Heaven. He has promised that those who imitate Him will be children of God. Anyone keen to get this reward must not refuse to follow the Lord's example. The more excellent the recompense, the more eager should be our service. How generous the payment we shall receive for mercy! Think of it, we shall have all the rights of divine adoption. Therefore imitate Christ's mercy, so that you may win the prize.

79 God's kindness pours itself out lavishly. He causes rain to fall on ungrateful wretches *(cf.Mt 5:45)*; and fruitful mother earth does not refuse her riches to the wicked. The sun that shines on this world shines equally on sacrilegious men and on the God-fearing. But let us take it in a figurative or mystical sense. The Lord watered the Jewish people with the rain of prophesy, and made the brilliant rays of the sun shine even for those who did not merit it. But since the dew of this world softened them, the Church of God was summoned into the celestial light. Yet the Jews, too, if they believe, can enjoy the blessings of God's mercy.

80 Scripture adds that we are not to judge lightly; and since we have sins of our own – and we know it – we are not to pass sentence on others *(cf.Lk 6:37)*.

81 We are also given another great lesson in virtue *(Lk 6:44)*: we are not to expect fertility from what is barren, and not to anticipate an abundant harvest from uncultivated land. Each of us reaps the fruit of what he has cultivated. Among the thorns of this world you are not going to find the fig tree. This tree excels all others by the richness and abundance of its fruits. It is well and aptly chosen as a sign of the resurrection, for you read: *"The fig tree has put forth her green figs" (Sg 2:13)*. You see, in the Synagogue the fruit seemed at first to be unripe, useless, and without promise; this may be so because in this body our life is not mature, but in the resurrection it will reach full maturity. We must, if we wish to reap the rich fruits of careful gardening, throw away from us – so far as we can– the cares of this world which eat up the mind and cause the soul to wither. This rich fruit we cannot reap in the parched and desert places of this world, for: *"No one gathers figs from thorns nor grapes from brambles" (Lk 6:44)*. One refers to the world and the resurrection, the other refers to the soul and body. This could be because no one can acquire, by sin, the fruits of his soul. Such a person is – to take the example of the grape – too close to the earth and the fruit is spoilt. But if the cluster is at a higher level, the fruit will mature nicely. Or, it may be that no one can escape the loss of the flesh, unless he is redeemed by Christ who – like the cluster of grapes – hangs

from the Cross. Far then, from this flesh which has been condemned and doomed to bring forth thorns and thistles *(cf.Gn 3:18)*, let us lift up the eyes of our soul. Let us lift them up, and let us reach up our hands to the good wine harvest that is Christ.

82 The Lord is teaching us that the basis of all virtues is obedience to the heavenly commandments. Thanks to them this present house *(cf.Lk 6:48)* of ours cannot be demolished either by the floods of loose living, or by the attacks of wicked spirits. The rains of this world cannot destroy it, nor can the murky clouds of heretical disputation.

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83 Very appropriately and beautifully, the Lord, having concluded these precepts, gives us an example of how to put them into practice. For immediately after He had finished speaking, it is proposed to Him that He should heal the servant of a pagan centurion *(cf.Lk 7:1 sq.)*. This sick servant represents the Gentile people. They were held fast by the chains that enslaved them to this world; they were sick with lethal passions; and they were going to be healed by the goodness and kindness of our Lord. In saying that the servant was on the point of death, the evangelist makes no mistake. He would indeed have died had not the Lord cured him. So our Lord fulfilled the precept of heavenly charity – loving His enemies to the point of snatching them from death.

84 But what can I say of the Lord's divine humility? Though Lord of Heaven He does not consider it beneath His dignity to visit the little servant of a centurion *(cf.Lk 7:6)*! His wonderful miracles command our faith, but His humanity stands out more clearly in His kindness of heart. He sets out to visit the servant not because He cannot heal at a distance, but to give you a model of humility that you are to imitate. He is teaching us the courtesy we must show, not only to the great and powerful but to the little and the lowly. In another place He says to a prince: *"Go, your son lives" (Jn 4:50)*. This will show you both the power of His divinity and the graciousness of His humility. On that particular occasion – when asked to cure the prince's son – He did not choose to go, not wanting to appear to be impressed by rank and riches. But here, on the contrary, He set off to go; choosing to visit the centurion's servant, and not wanting to appear to look down in any way on a humble servant boy. For all of us, whether slave or free, are one in Christ *(cf.Ga 3:28)*.

85 But you must see, my friend, how vital a part faith plays in healing. Notice, too, how even among the Gentiles – the pagans – there was a certain penetration into the Mystery. The Lord sets out; the centurion makes

excuses, he lays aside his military pride of bearing, and clothes himself in humble respect. He is all readiness to believe. He is all anxiety to show honour to the Lord. Luke tells us that the centurion had sent his friends to meet the Lord. This was a good move on his part. By being present in person he might have felt that he was intruding, and by the weight of his office forcing – as it were – a favour from the Lord.

All this has to do with the moral aspect of the event.

86 We turn now to the mystical sense. The Jewish people crucified Jesus, but the Gentiles, on the other hand, wanted to preserve Him absolutely from every injury. So far as faith is concerned, they readily believed His words. They guessed that in Him lay a power not human but divine, and that it was by virtue of this power that Christ restored people to health. Regarding the Mystery, they recognised that Christ could not enter into hearts that were still pagan. Because Christ had not yet washed away the sinful thoughts that they had previously harboured, they thought that they would injure Him rather than help Him by availing of His very great kindness. In much the same way the widow of Sarephta *(1 K 17:18)* felt quite unworthy to receive a prophet into her house

And so, in this one centurion, the Lord praises the faith of the Gentiles.

87 If you read: ***"I tell you most solemnly, I have not found faith so great as this in anyone in Israel"*** *(Lk 7:9)*, the sense is plain and simple.

But, if you follow the Greek reading: *"Even in Israel I have not found such great faith"*, then the meaning is that the faith of this one centurion surpasses even that of the Chosen People, the people of Israel who have seen God *(cf.Gn 32:28)*.

88 See how neatly it is done: the faith of the master is proved, and the health of the servant is restored. So the merit of the master can plead for the servant too. And we have here not only the merit of his faith, but the merit of his zeal and conduct. Consider also another method used by the Lord: without making any promise, He fulfils the person's wish. For even though He had not commanded the healing of the sick servant, his fellow-servants – who had been sent to Jesus – on returning home found their colleague in perfect health.

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89 ***"When He came close to the gate of a certain city, it happened that a dead youth was being carried out. He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. A great multitude of the city was with her. When the Lord saw her He was very moved, and said to her: 'Do not weep'. Then he approached the bier and touched it"*** *(Lk 7:12-14).*

Here we have a passage very rich in meaning and that can be understood in two senses. We see how easily divine mercy is moved by the tears of the widowed mother, especially as she is doubly heart-broken because the child is her only son. The very great crowd of mourners that accompany her show, at the same time, how honoured she is in her widowed state. On the other hand, this widow surrounded by a great concourse of people, seems to me to be more than a woman. She, by her tears has merited the resurrection of the young boy who is her only son. She is, therefore, a figure of the holy Church, and by her tears she calls back to life a younger race – the Gentile people. She calls them back from their mournful funeral procession, and from the furthest depths of the tomb. She is told to weep no more, because these Gentile people have been given the promise of the resurrection.

90 This dead youth was being carried to the tomb in his coffin, carried by the four elements that constitute matter.* But his hope lay in the resurrection, because he was being carried on wood. True, wood had not always done us good service; but, after Jesus had touched it, it became the wood that gives us life. It became a sign of the salvation that would flow out to all people from the wood of the Cross. Once they learned the word of God, the mournful pall bearers stopped. What they were doing was to drag the human body along in the deadly current of the material nature of which it was formed.

What all this signifies is that we are like corpses stretched out in a coffin in readiness for the funeral rites. We are like this when the fire of a consuming passion for money and possessions take hold of us; or the ice cold humour invades us; or when a heavy indolence habitually settles itself upon us, sapping the soul of its vigour; or when our spirit, void of pure light, fills the mind with heavy darkness. These are the four elements that act as our pall bearers and carry us to the tomb.

91 And yet, even though all the symptoms of death were there, and there was no sign whatever of life; even though the bodies of the dead are laid down close to their tomb; at the word of God, those who lie dead will arise. Speech returns, the son is restored to his mother; he is recalled from

* Fire, water, earth and air were known as the four elements, and it was believed that each was represented in the human body.

the tomb and snatched from the jaws of death. What tomb is this, what is this tomb of yours, if not evil morals? Your tomb is your lack of faith; your tomb is your throat – for *"their throat is a wide open grave" (Ps 5:11).* It is a sepulchre because the words it utters are death. From this sepulchre Christ sets you free. From this tomb you will rise again, if you will only listen to the word of God.

92 And if your sins are so heinous that not even your tears can wash them away, then let Mother Church weep for you. She cries out for each of her children, just as a widowed mother would do for her only son. Her heart fills with compassion, she is overcome with a kind of spiritual sorrow that is part of her nature, when she sees her children driven to their death by deadly vices. We are the very heart of her heart – for there is, too, a spiritual heart. Paul had one, for he says: *"Yes, brother, give me this joy in the Lord. Restore to me my heart, in Christ" (Phm 20).*

We are the heart of the Church, for we are members of her body, of her flesh and of her bones. So let her weep, this tender Mother, and let the multitude surround her. Let not only one multitude, but multitudes beyond counting, weep together with this Mother. In that way you will rise, even in death, and you will be set free from your tomb. The pall bearers will stop, and you will begin to speak words of life. All will tremble with fear, for by the example of one, many will be corrected. They will then praise God, who in His kindness has given us such great remedies against death.

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93 ***"And John called to him two of his disciples, and he sent them to say to Jesus: 'Are you He who is to come, or must we look for another?' "*** *(Lk 7:19).*

The words are simple, but it is not simple to understand them. For how, I ask you, could John not recognise Him? Only a short time previously he knew Him, having heard the heavenly Father giving witness to Him. How was it that at that moment John recognised Jesus, whom up to then he had not known; and how can he now fail to recognise Jesus whom he had already met. *"And I knew Him not; but He who sent me to baptise with water said to me: 'He upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending' " (Jn 1:33).* John believed those words, and knew Jesus when He was pointed out to him. After baptising Him, John adored Him; and already he had prophesied Christ's coming. *"I have seen,"* he said, *"and given testimony that this is God's Chosen One" (Jn 1:34).*

What then? Is it possible that so great a prophet should be mistaken? Is it possible that having said of Christ: *"Look, this is He who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn 1:29),* he should cease to believe that Jesus is the Son of God? To attribute divinity to a person unknown would be imprudent; and

to have doubts regarding the Son of God would be a want of faith. No, no; so great a prophet as John cannot be suspected of such an error.

94 Since, then, the interpretation in its literal sense is fraught with contradiction, let us look for the spiritual meaning. John, as we have already said above *(cf.Bk 2:68)*, represents the Law which announces Christ. It is true that the Law was held materially as a captive in hearts without faith, in a prison deprived of the eternal light. Gripped by gnawing pains and held fast by the barriers of incomprehension, the Law could not have fulfilled the divine plan, could not have given the witness it was intended to give, unless its witness had been confirmed by the Gospel.

The Law did indeed prophesy, in the Book of Exodus *(cf.Ex 13:21; 14:21)*, the grace of baptism; it did this by the figure of the cloud and the sea *(cf.1 Co 10:2)*. By means of the paschal lamb *(cf.Ex 12:3 sq.)* it prophesied our spiritual nourishment. In the rock *(cf.Ex 17:6)* it showed us the source of eternal life. In the Book of Leviticus it revealed the remission of sins *(cf.Lv 25:10)*; and in Jesus, son of Nun, it very clearly pointed to the Promised Land.

95 All these things accord with the witness of John. Nevertheless, the wicked and demonic despots that rule this world hold the Law captive and prevent it from spreading abroad the light of the Lord's resurrection. John, therefore, sends his disciples to Christ so that *they* may be strengthened and confirmed in their knowledge that Christ is the fullness of the Law *(cf.Rm 10:4)*.

Words without deeds often lack conviction. One's faith grows stronger when, added to words and promises, one actually has the evidence of deeds. So long as the Law was a prisoner, faith wavered in the hearts of the Jews. But that faith would open wide at the sight of Christ's Cross and be fully convinced by the witness of His resurrection.

96 Perhaps, too, these disciples represent two peoples: one people, of Jewish stock, who believed; the other, of Gentile stock, who believed because they heard. The latter wanted to see, in accordance with the text: *"Blessed are your eyes because they see; and your ears because they hear" (Mt 13:16)*. We also have "seen" – in the person of John; and through the eyes of the apostles we have gazed with our eyes; and while the fingers of Thomas felt Him, we felt Him too: *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled, of the word of life, for the life was manifested" (1 Jn 1:1-2)*. When was this life made manifest? It was made manifest when we saw it. Until it was seen, it was not made manifest. Thanks be to the Lord, who was crucified so that we might believe; who was

crucified on account of my sinful desires. In Him has my soul been crucified.

97 And so it is that those who now pore over the Old Testament, (before, that is, coming to the Gospel and tracing – so to speak – the foot prints of the Lord's body) think that He is still to come, and wonder whether Christ is the Son of God who is to come. And when they read the passage where He speaks with Abraham *(cf.Gn 18:20 sq.)*, or when He shows Himself as prince of the Heavenly host *(cf.Jos 5:14)*, they then say: Are you He who is to come, or must we wait for another?

But when they arrive at the Gospel, and recognise that the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the lepers are cured, the dead are raised to life, then they can say: *"With our own eyes we have seen and gazed upon Him" (1 Jn 1:1)*. We have put our fingers into the holes left by the nails. Truly, it seems to me that we have seen Him whom we read; that we have contemplated Him who was crucified; and that when the Spirit of the Church searches His wounds, we feel them too. For if by the finger of God demons are put to flight *(cf.Lk 11:20)*, faith also can be found by the finger of the Church. Perhaps I might put it this way: in this active member of our body – the finger – it seems that we have all of us together searched the Passion of the Lord. For through a few, faith reaches to many. So the Law tells us that Christ is going to come; and the Gospel text tells us that He has come.

98 Then again, quite a few people think that the reference is to John himself. he was a prophet great enough to recognise Christ and to foretell the remission of sins; and yet – not from lack of faith but from pure affection – this prophet, though he believed in Him who was to come, did not believe that Christ was to die. If he doubted, it was not because of unbelief, but on account of love. Peter, too, doubted when he said: *"Heaven preserve you! This must not happen to you" (Mt 16:22)*. This prince of faith, even before the Lord had said that He was the Son of God, already believed in Christ. And yet, when it came to Christ telling him about His death, Peter could not believe Him. This springs from love, not from defiance. In just the same way, on another occasion, Peter did not want Jesus to wash his feet *(cf.Jn 13:8)*. He did not recognise the symbolism of what Christ was doing, and he was shocked that the Lord should perform so lowly a service. So even the saints did not believe that Christ was to die: for *"What no eye has seen nor ear heard, what has not so much as entered into the heart of man, God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Co 2:9)*. For those who fear God, to err on the side of love is no impediment to faith.

99 Besides the Lord, knowing that without the Gospel no one's faith can be complete – because if faith begins with the Old Testament it

reaches its climax in the New – replies as follows to the question put to Him regarding Himself. It was a reply in which He revealed Himself more by deeds than by words, for He said: ***"Go, tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the lepers are cured, the dead come back to life, the poor receive the Good News"*** *(Lk 7:22)*.

100 This certainly gave John his answer. This truly was testimony by which the prophet could recognise the Lord. For only of Him had it been prophesied: *"It is the Lord who gives food to the famished; the Lord lifts up the broken; the Lord gives light to the blind; the Lord loves the just; the Lord protects the stranger; the Lord takes charge of the widow and orphan, but the way of the wicked He exterminates" (Ps 145:6-9)*. The one who does these things, says Scripture, *"He, the Lord, shall reign for ever" (Ps 145:10)*. These are the marks of a power not human but divine: to dispel from the blind the darkness of an endless night, and to heal the wounds of their eyes by restoring to them the light of day; to penetrate the ears of the deaf, repairing and restoring the injured organ; to call back the dead to life, filling them again with vital energy.

101 Such miracles were rare events before the Gospel. True, Tobias recovered his sight – but that is only one example. Besides, it was an angel, not a human being, who accomplished the healing *(cf.Tb 11:15)*. Elijah raised a dead youth to life *(cf.1 K 17:20)*, but Elijah prayed and cried. Jesus gave an order. Elisaeus cleansed a leper *(cf.2 K 5:14)*. But in this case it is not an order, given with authority, that worked the miracle of cleansing. Rather it was a symbolic action [foretelling the mystery of baptism]. The widow's jug was never empty of meal. Thanks to the order of the prophet, the widow was nourished and the meal was multiplied *(cf.1 K 17:16)*. Yes, but this meal provided for one widow only – or again, you can take it to be a figure and an image of the Sacrament [of the Eucharist].

But however few and little these signs may be, they nonetheless give witness to the Lord: the fullness of faith is the Cross of the Lord, His death, His burial. And for that reason, having given His answer to John's disciples He added: ***"And blessed is the one who shall not be scandalised in me"*** *(Lk 7:23)*.

102 For the Cross could give scandal, even to chosen souls. But there is no witness greater than a Person who is divine. There is nothing more super-human than the offering of one man to save the whole world. Surely it is through His Cross that Christ is most plainly revealed? Besides, it was in this fashion that John the Baptist announced Him: *"Look, this is the Lamb of God; this is He who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn 1:29)*. However, the response we are examining at present is not addressed to those two men who were John's disciples. It is addressed to all of us. so that – if

we find that the facts fit – we may believe in Christ. For one will come who will usurp this name *(cf.Mt 24:5)*; and you, if you cannot recognise him by the name he uses, will clearly recognise him by his deeds.

103 ***"What was it you went out to the desert to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"*** *(Lk 7:25)*.

Jesus warned John's disciples that they must believe in the Cross of the Lord. Then, as they were taking their departure, He turned towards the crowds, encouraging these poor people to practise virtue. He warned them against pride of heart, vacillation of mind, and feebleness of judgement – for these are the failings that cause us to prefer the flashy display to the solidly useful, the fleeting goods of this world to those that are eternal. He exhorted them to bear the cross in humility of spirit *(cf.Mt 16:24)* rather than to carry the vain ornament of this world. Like those, happy to be poor, who have nothing to lose in this world, they should be glad and ready to exchange the life of this body of ours for immortal glory. It is very much to the purpose, then, that at this point Saint John is praised. He put love of this life behind him, trampled on the fear of death, and held to what is just and right.

104 *"What,"* asks Jesus, *"did you go into the desert to see."* Here it seems that it is the world that is compared to a desert: still uncultivated, still barren, still without fruit. In going into the desert, the Lord is by no means telling us to propose to ourselves as a model of behaviour anyone who is inflated with pride of the flesh, empty of inner strength and valour, boastful of his high office and his fame – things which are in any case liable to have a tumble. Such a person is exposed to the storms of this world and to its changes. He is shaken – like the reed to which he is so justly compared. He produces no sound fruit of justice. Such a person is full of worldly display and fine speeches: he is all tied up in knots; making a lot of empty sound, he is of no use to anyone, and often positively harmful. Inside, such people yearn after vanity; outside, they look to appearances.

We are reeds, rootless reeds lacking the nature or the strength to fix ourselves firmly. The lightest breeze of success is enough to sway us, so that we knock against other reeds, hurting our neighbours by our agitated movements. We are incapable of resistance and very swift to perish. Reeds love the running water; and we are charmed by the fleeting things of this world.

105 And yet, if you pluck this reed from its earthly habitat; if you strip it of all that is superfluous – stripping the old man of his deeds *(cf.Col 3:9)* – and put it into the hand of a rapid writer, then your reed will no longer be a reed – but a pen. And this pen will engrave in the depths of your soul the precepts of divine Scripture, and inscribe them on the tablet of your heart *(cf.2 Co 3:2)*. You will remember what was said of this pen: *"My*

tongue is the pen of a scribe that writes swiftly" (Ps 44:2). Some like to think that this image refers to Christ. Therefore we read in the same passage that He is word, pen, and scribe. He is Word, because He proceeds mysteriously from the Father: *"My heart has uttered a good word" (Ps 44:2).* He is a pen because the flesh of Christ has carried out all the wishes of His Father, and obeyed the orders of the divine tongue, by pouring out His sacred blood. He is a scribe, because by His pen He has made known to us the mysteries of the Father's plan. This pen is cleft, and yet the two parts are not separated. This pen can be taken to represent New and Old Testament, or Christ's divinity and flesh.

106 Imitate this pen by mastering your flesh. And dip your reed – by which I mean your flesh – not in ink but in the spirit of the living God, so that what you write may last for ever. Paul spoke of a reed such as this when he wrote in his letter: *"You are our letter ... it is written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" (2 Co 3:2-3).* Bathe your flesh in the blood of Christ, for it is written: *"Let your foot be dipped in blood" (Ps 67:24).* Step, with the footsteps of your soul, in the Cross of Christ; and in spirit, walk with bold assurance in confessing that Cross.

You bathe your flesh in Christ's blood if you wipe out your offences, if you wash away your sins, if you carry about in your flesh the death of Christ – as the apostle said: *"Always bearing about with us in our flesh the death of Jesus Christ" (2 Co 4:10).* Don't bend earthwards, for fear of breaking your reed. That is why it was prophesied of Christ, because He would not bend earthwards, *"He shall not break the bruised reed" (Is 42:3).* Sins had bruised our flesh, but by power of His resurrection He restored that flesh. O flesh of Christ, what a good reed you are! You have nailed the serpent's head to the Cross; and in nailing the devil, you have nailed the lusts and lecherous desires of this world.

107 ***"But what was it you went into the desert to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you go to see? A man clothed in soft garments?"*** *(Lk 7:24-25).*

Our Lord is not talking here about clothing. Though I might say that undue concern about what they wear makes many men effeminate. As though they could not bear the weight of wool, they trail about in garments woven of silk. They act as though to wear clothes was a great burden. But, if I am not mistaken, our Lord is not talking about clothes but about the human body in which our soul is clothed. So, too, Joseph's tunic was dyed deep in blood *(cf.Gn 37:31)* as an image of the Lord's body; and the apostle says: *"Despoiling Himself of the flesh, He has triumphed over the powers and principalities" (Col 2:15).* Does not this show that the Lord's Body was a type of garment of which He despoiled Himself in His Passion, leaving His

divinity free and immune to attack? So all of the passage, as we see from the prophet's example, is intended to encourage us to endure suffering bravely.

108 Jesus adds: ***"Listen: those who dress richly are to be found in the palaces of Kings"*** *(Lk 7:25).* Sumptuous clothing implies a luxurious and pleasure-seeking life style. That is why the apostle tells us to take off the old man and the old way of life and to put on the new *(cf.Col 3:9).* In our new way of life there is no enervating luxury, no lustful or unlawful pleasure, but the fruitful practice of good works. For the Court of Heaven does not in any way welcome those who have grown soft by excessive care of the body, or by over indulgence and the hot pursuit of pleasure. One climbs the steps to Heaven by the austere and laborious practice of virtue. Decadent people, and those whose limbs have melted in delights, are banished from the Kingdom of Heaven. They grow old in the dwellings of earth. And the masters of this world and of darkness –kings in their own way since they rule by a sort of temporal power – welcome such people, for by their deeds they have imitated the rulers of darkness.

109 ***"But what was it you went out to see? A prophet? Yes, indeed, I can assure you; and more than a prophet"*** *(Lk 7:26).*

How, I ask, could they want to go to the desert to see John who was already shut up in a prison? The Lord is putting John before them as a model. John has prepared the way of the Lord not only by the manner of his birth in the flesh and by his preaching of the faith, but also – in a certain kind of way – by going before the Lord in His glorious Passion. Yes, greater than a prophet, and last of the prophets. Greater than a prophet, because so many people desired to see *(cf.Mt 13:17)* Him whom John has prophesied, seen, and baptised.

110 But yet, would He be greater than He of whom Moses said: *"The Lord our God ... shall raise up for you a prophet" (Dt 18:15)?* And then he adds: *"See, He shall come; and whoever does not listen to this prophet, shall be cut off from the people" (Dt 18:19).* If, then, Christ is a prophet, how come that John is greater than all the prophets? Are we to deny that Christ is a prophet? Quite the contrary. I affirm that the Lord is a prophet, and I say that John, too, is a prophet. I furthermore say that John is greater than all prophets – that is to say, greater than all prophets born of women *(cf.Lk 7:28).* He is not greater than the Prophet born of a Virgin. John is greater than those whose equal he would have been by birth. Christ's nature is different and his manner of birth not to be compared with that of human children.

No comparison is possible between man and God. One can be compared only with one's own sort. In fact, it would be so impossible to compare John with the Son of God that John is judged inferior to the angels:

for it is said: ***"Whoever is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he"*** *(Lk 7:28)*.

111 Very properly, having called John His angel, He places him before human beings. And having declared him pre-eminent among those born of women, He adds *"Yet the least in the Kingdom of Heaven* is greater than he"*, indicating that one must yield precedence to the angels. But John is rightly preferred to his fellow-humans, since from his time onwards *"The Kingdom of Heaven is seized by force" (Mt 11:12)*. This expression is somewhat obscure, and that is why I have thought it wise to allude to it here, though it occurs in another book of the Gospel. In the literal sense, the inferior is forced by someone more powerful. Now, as we know, the Kingdom of Heaven is superior to us mortals. But if you consider that certain objects, if pressed very hard, are condensed, it is not so absurd to suppose that the Kingdom can be forced when a sufficiently large number press upon it.

112 *"And the violent bear it away" (Mt 11:12)*. Recall what was written of the Lord, namely that the Son of God said: *"The Kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:21)*. This alerts us to the fact that the Kingdom of Heaven grows stronger in us when Christ overthrows the prince of this world, puts to flight the pleasures and attractions of this life, and reigns in the intimacy of our hearts. Violence is done to the human soul, which had been the captive of many urges and disorders. It had fled from hard work, it had chased after enjoyment, but now it is constrained. Now it fears punishment, and is stimulated by the hope of a reward. It makes a violent effort to overcome itself. By really hard effort it tries to win the palm that so many adversaries want to take from it. Truly, if we are to carry off from this world the palm of salvation – if we are going to pick the fruit that is guarded by dragons – it is only by vigilant effort that we can do so. And we must act in such a way that we do not steal the fruit furtively, but win it by right of conquest.

There is another sort of conquest, and that is when we conquer something that was offered to others. It is not very hard to understand who these plunderers are. We know that the ravenous wolf is descended from the tribe of Benjamin *(cf.Gn 49:27)*. John came, first to justify the Jewish people. The Lord Himself came for the lost lambs of the House of Israel *(cf.Mt 15:24)*. He had sent out His apostles to strengthen the faith of the Jewish people by their preaching, signs, and miracles. But while the Jews disdained the blessings offered to them, the publicans and sinners began to

* Clearly, Ambrose understands here, by "The Kingdom of Heaven", the angelic spirits who inhabit Heaven.

believe in God, began to turn to the Faith. Through the preaching of the apostles, these people grew strong in belief and ardent in desire, and took the Kingdom of Heaven by force.

113 That woman took the Kingdom by force, I mean the woman with the issue of blood *(cf.Lk 8:43 sq.)*. Because, while the Lord was on His way to the daughter of the prince of the synagogue, she secretly touched Him and was cured. The Canaanite woman, coming out from her own country, seized the Kingdom when she spoke and cried out: *"Have pity on me, Jesus, Son of David. My daughter is cruelly tormented by a demon" (Mt 15:22)*. She really took the Kingdom by force – persevering in her prayers, shrewd in her replies, swift to believe His words. She calls Him back when He was passing her by; calls out to Him in prayer while He remains silent; adored Him when He pays little attention; and finally wins Him over. Does it not seem to you that this woman takes the Kingdom by force when she seizes what was refused her, snatches what was being held in reserve for others? The Lord had told her that it was wrong to give the children's food to dogs. She admits this, but even while admitting it she gets hold of what she wants by saying: *"Ah yes, Lord. But the dogs, too, eat the scraps that fall from their masters' table" (Mt 15:27)*.

114 You have learnt, now, how to seize the heavenly Kingdom. Let us, too, take it by storm. No one eats the Pasch except in haste *(cf.Ex 12:11)*. But who is this who snatches the Kingdom? Not dishonesty, not debauchery, not pleasure, but the woman of whom it is said: *"Great is your faith. Let it be done as you wish" (Mt 15:28)*. See, she took what she wanted. She got hold of it. She extorted from the Lord what she wanted.

That widow, too, seized hold of what she wanted. She did it by re-doubling her prayers, and – if not so much by her innocence as by her importunity – she got what she demanded *(cf.Lk 18:3 sq.)*.

115 So the Church has seized the Kingdom from the synagogue. My Kingdom, it is Christ. I seize hold of Him. Under the Law He was sent to the Jews; under the Law He was born and brought up – to save me who was without law. Christ has been stolen away, since He was promised to one race, but pre-destined for others. Christ is stolen, because He was born for one race, but came to the help of others. Christ is stolen, because He was slain by one race, but laid in the tomb by us.

From those who lie in wait, He is stolen; from those who sleep He is stolen. As you know, they themselves admitted that He was stolen from them while they slept. They said: *"Say that His disciples came by night and stole Him while we slept" (Mt 28:13)*. Rise up, you who sleep, for fear that from you, too, Christ might be stolen as you sleep: *"Rise, you who sleep, and rise up from the dead" (Ep 5:14)*. You see, those who sleep are dead.

So we are not wronging others, but simply looking after our own interests. For these dead people could not hold One who is living.

116 Even if late, let us hope that they will rise – those people who slept, those people who lost Christ. Even if one loses Christ, it is not as if He is never going to come back; provided, of course, that one searches for Him. To those who keep watch, He returns; and those who rise up will find Him close at hand. In truth, He is present to all. Because He fills all things, He is everywhere and He is for ever. He fails no one, but we fail Him. I repeat, the Lord fails no one; but is present to all, with superabundant graciousness. Because, *"Where sin abounded, grace did more abound" (Rm 5:20)*. Grace is Christ. Life is Christ. Resurrection is Christ. Therefore whoever rises up, finds that He is present.

117 So the Kingdom of Heaven is snatched when Christ is denied by his own people, but adored by the Gentiles. It is snatched when He is rejected by them, but honoured by us. It is snatched when it is not recognised by its heirs, but acquired by the children of adoption.

BOOK SIX

1 ***"All the people who heard Him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptised with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees, and the doctors of the Law despised God's counsel in their regard, and refused baptism"*** *(Lk 7:29-30)*.

By adding certain details, Saint Luke clarifies some aspects which Saint Matthew – speaking in a more general kind of way – had left a little obscure. What Matthew had said was: *"Wisdom has been justified by her children" (Mt 11:19)*. In the passage quoted above, Luke tells us expressly what this "wisdom" is. For he says: "They justified God". God, therefore, is wisdom, since wisdom is God's Son. Wisdom is of His nature – it is not something He acquired. Wisdom, virtue of God the Father, is one thing; wisdom, virtue of the soul, is another thing. One is innate, the other is created. The wisdom that accomplishes works is something distinct from the work accomplished. For it is God's work when the mind can discern with prudence and shine with intelligence – these are natural gifts. But the one who performs these works is not someone created, rather He is the Creator. He is not a gift given to us by nature, but the very Giver of nature.

2 And so, God Himself is "justified" by baptism, when people "justify" themselves by confessing their sins. [i.e., from having been sinners they become just]. Therefore it is written: *"Confess your iniquities and you will become just" (Is 43:26)*.

In this sense God is "justified", when – instead of being repulsed by men's obstinacy – His gracious gift is recognised by their justice. For, *"The Lord is just and loves justice" (Ps 10:8)*. God's "justification" consists in this: it is made manifest that His kind gifts have not been wasted on unworthy and guilty recipients, but on those whom baptism has rendered innocent and just. Let us, then, "justify" the Lord, so that we may be "justified" by the Lord.

3 What is the "justification" of God? Let us look again. The apostle says: *"But God is true, and every man a liar, as it is written: 'That you may be justified in your words, and may overcome when you are judged' " (Rm 3:4; cf.Ps 115:11)*. David also says: *"Against you alone have I sinned, and done evil in your sight; that you may be justified when you give judgement, and that you may overcome when you are judged" (Ps 50:6)*. You see, do you not, that the sinner who confesses his sin to God, justifies God. He admits that God is victor, and he trusts in His grace. It follows that God is justified in baptism, for by being baptised we acknowledge our sins and receive pardon.

4 We must not be like those Pharisees who despised God's plan. God's plan is accomplished in the baptism of John. Who, then, can doubt that God's designs are fulfilled in the baptism of Jesus? This is the plan that the Angel of Great Counsel *(Is 9:6)* made known, and which none before had known. For: *"Who indeed has known the mind of God" (Rm 11:34)*? One does not despise man's plans; who then could oppose God's plans? Come, then, and like true children let us justify our Mother Wisdom, let us follow our Mother. We know that the mother puts her life in danger for her children. So we must follow the counsel of Mother Wisdom, we must obey our Mother's orders.

5 ***"When we sang for you, you did not dance; when we mourned, you did not weep"*** *(Lk 7:32)*.

This kind of talk is quite typical of children. They have not yet arrived at the gravity of mature age. They love to wriggle and move about. At the same time, I incline to think that the passage has a profounder meaning. It is this. The Jews began by not believing the psalms; and later they would not heed the lamentations of the prophets. The psalms were inviting them to a reward, while the lamentations urged them to turn aside from their sins. David sang that we should hang up our harps on the willows *(cf.Ps 136:2)*. He sang and he danced before the Ark of the Lord *(cf.2 S 6:14 sq.)* – motivated not by love of pleasure but by religion. His dance was not one of histrionic movements. He was not bounding about as though on a stage. No, he was indicating the agility of a mind that is fully awakened, and of a body that is consecrated.

But neither triumphs nor disasters could move the Jews and lead them to conversion. God's blessings and divine favours had been heaped upon them, and they should have lifted up their soul. They should have raised up their body, to quit this earth and seek for Heaven. And when they were broken by the sorrow of captivity, they should have wept for their sin – because it was on account of their sin that they were suffering.

6 So, ***"Wisdom has been justified by her children"*** *(Lk 7:35)*. In a sense, wisdom is justified by all of us. I mean those who believe are made welcome, and those who decline to believe are rejected. That is why many Greek texts have: *"Wisdom has been justified by all her works"*. For it is the work of justice to measure accurately the worth of each one.

7 So it is very much to the purpose that Jesus says: *"When we sang for you, you did not dance"*. For Moses sang, when the Jews passed through the Red Sea *(cf.Ex 15:1 sq.)*, and the waves of the sea stood up and formed a wall on either side of them. But the same waves poured over the horses and riders of the Egyptians, and drowned them all,

Isaiah, too, sang a song to his beloved vineyards *(cf.Is 5:1)*. In it he foretold that his people, who had once been fertile and whose virtues had

once given excellent fruit, were now – by reason of their sins – going to become a bitter, barren wilderness. The Hebrew youths sang *(cf.Dn 3:24 sq.)* when their feet were refreshed by heavenly dew that quenched the flame. Though all else within and without the furnace burned with heat, they alone were unharmed and unhurt. For the flames caressed them and did not burn them. There was Habacuc, too. He was told to lift the downcast spirits of the people by the sweetness of a song, and so he prophesied to them that the Passion of the Lord would indeed be sweet *(cf.Hab 3:13)*.

The prophets sang. In spirited melodies they foretold the salvation of the world. The prophets wept, hoping by their plaintive laments to soften the hard hearts of the Jews.

8 Scripture teaches us to sing with gravity, to sing psalms with our understanding. She even teaches us to dance in spirit, for the Lord says to Ezechiel: *"Clap your hands and stamp with your feet" (Ez 6:11)*. We must not think that God, censor of morals, is telling the prophet to make the movement of a buffoon or to twist his body this way and that. He is not asking for the rude clapping of men nor the raucous applause of women. He is not asking so great a prophet to behave like an actor on stage nor to affect effeminate airs. There can be nothing in common between revealing the mysteries of the Resurrection and dancing like a madman. True, there is a sort of applause appropriate to good deeds and actions. Its sound goes out through all the earth *(cf.Ps 18:5)*, and the glory of deeds well done resounds throughout the world. And there is a dance that is noble and honourable, where the soul leaps for joy, and the body stretches itself up by its good works, and we hang our harps on the willows *(cf.Ps 136:2)*.

9 The prophet, we see, gets the order to clap his hands and stamp his foot. He gets the order to sing, because already he sees, with prophetic vision, the wedding feast of the Spouse – Christ, the Beloved – who will take to Himself His Bride, the Church. This is a good wedding, which unites the soul to the Word, the flesh to the Spirit. This is the wedding at which the prophet David means us to dance. To this wedding he invites us because we, his descendants, are the Bride. Happier than any other, and as though actually present at the nuptial celebrations, David urges us to hasten to the joyous festivity. He says: *"Jump for joy, for God our help; sing joyfully for the God of Jacob. Sound the psalm and strike the tambourine. On the sweet sounding harp play a psalm" (Ps 80:2-3)*.

Don't you see that the prophet is dancing? And somewhere else he says: *"I will sing to you on the harp, Holy One of Israel" (Ps 70:22-23)*. Surely you hear the voices of harpists playing on their harps? Surely you hear the steps of the dancers? Believe me, this is indeed the Wedding.

10 You, too, my friend, must take up your harp. Pluck its strings with the plectrum of the Spirit, so that your very heart-strings will ring back with the sweetness of so excellent a song. Take your harp, play it in such a way that your deeds are in tune with your words. Take your tambourine, and let your inmost spirit sing in harmony with the instrument of your body. May your outward activity be perfectly in tune with the loveableness and sweetness of your morals.

It was in this fashion that the prophet sang when he said: *"Come from Lebanon, my bride, come from Lebanon" (Sg 4:8).*

11 This is the song that the children sang, and the others did not listen. Who are these children? They are those of whom Scripture says: *"Here I am, with the children whom you have given to me" (Is 8:18).* But this is a canticle not sung in the market place, not sung in the streets, but sung in Jerusalem. For Jerusalem is the Forum of the Lord, where the heavenly commandments are established.

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12 ***"And see, here comes a woman, a sinner in the city"*** *(Lk 7:37).* This passage seems to embarrass many readers. They raise questions. Are two evangelists *(cf.Mt 26:6)* contradicting each other? Or did they, by each telling the story differently, wish to underline a different mystery? For in Matthew you read: *"When Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him bearing an alabaster box of precious perfume; and she poured it on His head as He sat at table" (Mt 26:6-7).* At that, the Pharisee says to himself: *"If He were a prophet, He would know that she is a sinner" (Lk 7:39).* He would have nothing to do with her perfume – so thinks the Pharisee. But in Matthew's account, it is the disciples who protest. We must therefore explain both accounts. But he who has pride of place among the evangelists [i.e., Saint Matthew] must also have pride of place in our interpretation.

13 The Lord Jesus came into the house of Simon the leper. You see clearly what He has in mind. He does not shrink from the leper, He does not avoid him as someone contaminated. For He came to wipe away the ugly marks on the human body. The leper's house was at Bethany, a name interpreted to mean "House of Obedience". The region all around was called Bethany, and Simon's place formed part of that region. Don't you think that Bethany stands for the world, in which we are all detained to undergo a service of obedience; and the house of Simon the leper is the earth which forms part of the world? The prince of this world is, in a manner of speaking, a kind of Simon the leper. The Lord Jesus, leaving the higher regions, came into this world and descended to earth. He was not in this world, but – with loving obedience on His part – He was sent into this

world. He says it Himself: *"Since you have sent Me into this world" (Jn 6:58).*

This woman learnt that Christ had come, and she entered into Simon's house. For this woman could never have been cured unless Christ had come on earth. And, if she entered into Simon's house, is she not perhaps a sign or figure of a very elevated soul, or of the Church itself – that has descended on earth to draw people about her by the sweetness of her perfume *(cf.2 Co 14 sq.)*?

14 So, Matthew makes this woman who enters pour perfume on Christ's head. *(cf.Mt 26:7).* Perhaps it is for that reason that he did not like to call her a sinner. Luke, on the other hand, calls her a sinner and says that she poured her perfume on the *feet* of Jesus. Possibly they are not speaking of the same woman, in which case it cannot be said that the evangelists seem to contradict each other. Or again, the problem may be resolved by consideration of timing and of progress in merit. In one case, the woman is still a sinner; in the other, she has attained a higher degree of perfection.

For though the Church, or the soul, does not change personality, it changes in the sense that it makes progress. Take, for instance, a soul that approaches God with faith. Free from shameful and frightful sins, she serves the Word of God with utmost devotion. Her chastity is without stain. You can surely see that such a soul ascends to the very head of Christ – *"And Christ's head is God" (1 Co 11:3).* There she pours out the fragrance of her merits, for: *"We are Christ's incense to God" (2 Co 2:15).* For God is indeed honoured by good people whose life breathes out a most delicious fragrance.

15 Understanding it in this sense, you will see how truly happy this woman is. Her fame will never be forgotten, because: *"Wherever this Gospel is preached" (Mt 26:13)* her story will be told. Never shall her memory be forgotten, for she poured over Christ's head the aroma of good morals, and the perfume of honest deeds. One who approaches Christ's head has no wish to exalt herself. She is not like that person *"who is vain, all puffed by the pride of his flesh, and unable to hold his head" (Col 2:18).* But if he cannot hold Christ's head, he may perhaps clasp His feet, since: *"the whole body together, with all its joints and sinews, reaches its full growth in God" (Col 2:19).*

16 Taking the other interpretation – either that she is another woman, or that she is the same woman but has progressed in virtue – we discover that this woman is very like ourselves; for neither have we, as yet, renounced all our sins. Where, I ask you, are our tears? Where are our sobs? Where are our deep groans? *"Come, let us adore, let us fall down before God, and weep before the Lord who made us" (Ps 94:6).* In this way we

shall reach the feet, at least, of Jesus. His head we cannot yet reach. Let the sinner fall at His feet, and the innocent approach His head.

17 And yet, the woman who was a sinner, carried with her the perfume. You, too, my friend, though you have sinned can do penance. Wherever you hear that the Just One has arrived – whether it is the house of someone unworthy, whether it is the house of a Pharisee – go there in all haste. Snatch from your host his privilege. Take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm. For: *"Since the days of John the Baptist, the Kingdom of Heaven is taken by force; and the violent bear it away" (Mt 11:12).* Wherever you hear tell of the name of Christ, run there as fast as you can. No matter who it is into whose inmost dwelling the Lord Jesus has entered, go there and make haste. When you have discovered that wisdom – when you have found that justice – reposes in the bosom of this person or that, hasten to his feet. By this I mean, seek at least the lowest rung of wisdom. Do not scorn the feet. Remember the woman who touched the fringe of His cloak, and was healed *(cf.Lk 8:44).* With tears admit your faults, so that Jesus may say of you, too: ***"With tears she has washed my feet, and with her hair has wiped them"*** *(Lk 7:44).*

18 Perhaps Christ did not wash His feet, because He wanted us to wash them with our tears. These are good tears. Not only do they wash away our sins, but they refresh the feet of the heavenly Word, so that He can walk within us more joyfully. Yes, they are good tears. In them we find not only the redemption of sinners, but the nourishment of the just. For it was a just person who said: *"My tears have become my bread" (Ps 41:4).*

19 And if you cannot come near to the head of Christ, let your head touch His feet. Even His fringe can heal you, even His feet can heal you. Loosen your hair. Prostrate your body unabashedly before Him. Hair that can wipe the feet of Jesus is not to be lightly thought of. We know this from the champion who, so long as he kept his hair, could not be vanquished *(cf.Jg 16:17).* We also read that no woman should pray with shorn head *(cf.1 Co 11:5).* Let her keep her tresses, to wrap them round the feet of Jesus. With her curls – her adornment and her beauty – let her wipe the feet of wisdom, so that they may be bedewed with at least some drops of divine virtue. May she cover with kisses the feet of justice. This woman is of no slight virtue, for of her Wisdom declares: ***"She, since she came in, has not ceased to kiss my feet"*** *(Lk 7:45).*

20 She could speak of nothing save wisdom; she could love nothing but justice; could find no pleasure except in chastity; could embrace nothing but purity.

21 Happy is the one who can anoint with oil the feet of Christ – note that Simon the leper had failed to anoint them – but happier still is she who anoints them with perfume. For perfume is the essence of many flowers collected into one, and it sprinkles the varied sweetnesses of many blooms. Maybe it is the Church alone who can offer this perfume; for she possesses every species of flower, every variety of scent. She takes on herself the appearance of a woman who is a sinner, because Christ, too, took on the form of a sinner.

22 That is why none can love as the Church loves, for she loves in a vast multitude. Not even Peter himself can love so much – Peter, who said: *"Lord, You know that I love You".* No, not even Peter who wept when Jesus asked him: *"Do you really love me?" (Jn 21:17).* It was clear that Peter loved Jesus, and he did not like being asked this question, as though the Lord was in some doubt about it. No, not even Peter loves more than the Church; for it is the Church, in Peter, that loves. Not even Paul, for Paul is but a portion of the Church. You, too, my friend, must love very much, and then you will be forgiven very much. Paul sinned very much. He was actually a persecutor *(cf. 1 Co 15:9).* But he loved very much, loved even to the point of martyrdom. Therefore his many, many sins were forgiven. His sins were forgiven because he loved much, willingly shedding his blood for the glory of God's name.

23 Notice the method employed. We are told that in the Pharisee's house the woman who was a sinner is glorified. In the house of the Law and the Prophet it is not the Pharisee, but the Church, who is justified. The Pharisee did not believe, but *she* believed. The Pharisee said: ***"If this man were a prophet, He would surely know what sort of woman was touching Him"*** *(Lk 7:39).*

The house of the Law [the Pharisee's house] is the House of Judah. But the Law is inscribed not on tablets of stone, but on the tablets of the human heart *(cf.2 Co 3:3).* It is for this reason that the Church is justified, and made superior to the Law. For the Law does not know the remission of sins. The Law does not possess the mystery wherein secret sins are purified. But what was wanting in the Law finds full completion in the Gospel.

24 *"A certain creditor,"* says Jesus, ***"had two debtors. One owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty"*** *(Lk 7:41).*

Who are these two debtors? I should think that they are two peoples – the Jewish and the Gentile people. Both are in debt to the Heavenly Treasurer. *"One,"* says Jesus, *"owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty".* This coin [the denarius] is no slight matter. For it is stamped with the image of the King; it bears engraven on it the victorious standard of the Emperor. The money that we owe to this creditor is not of a material kind; it is the weight of our merits, the gold and silver of our virtues. Its value is

measured by the gravity of our approach to life, by the splendour of our justice, and by the ringing sound of our praise.

Alas for me, if I no longer have the treasure that I once received! Perhaps I should say – since hardly anyone can repay all his debt – alas for me if I do not pray: *"Forgive me my debt" (Lk 11:4)*! Our Lord would never have taught us to pray that our debts might be forgiven, unless He knew well that very few people are solvent.

25 But who are these people whose debt is greater? To whom did He lend more than to others? We are those people. For to the others He gave in trust the Oracles of God *(cf.Rm 3:2)*, but to us He gave the Child of the Virgin. You have received the hundredfold of the fruit of the Faith. Emmanuel, *"God with us"*, has been confided to us. The Cross of Christ has been confided to us, His death and resurrection have been confided to us. Though Christ suffered for all, it was for us specially that He suffered, because He suffered for His Church.

It cannot be doubted that the one who receives more, owes more. Perhaps among men it is not true that the person who owes more, loves more. But God's mercy changes the situation. The result is that – given a special grace – the one who owed more loves more. The one who gives thanks, has grace; and whoever possesses grace within himself, pays his debt. In giving thanks [*gratias*], one receives grace: and in possessing grace, one returns love for love.

26 There isn't anything we can possibly give that is worthy of God. How could there be? How could we repay Him for lowering Himself, for taking on human flesh? For the blows He suffered? The cross, the tomb? It would be a sad day for me if I were not to love Him!

I do not hesitate to say this: Peter did not pay back, but on that very account he loved more. Did Paul not pay back? Yes, he returned death for death, but he did not pay back all the rest – for his debts were heavy indeed. Listen to his own words: *"Who has ever been first to give to Him, so that he should be recompensed?" (Rm 11:35)*. Even if we return cross for cross and death for death, we still cannot repay all that we have received from Him, through Him, and in Him. For from Him we have received all things *(cf.Rm 11:36)*. May we at least return love in payment of our debt, true love for such great kindness, and gratitude for the blood He poured to ransom us. For the one who has received more, loves more *(cf.Lk 7:42 sq.)*.

27 But let us return to Matthew's version. Here, even the apostles do not yet understand God's plan, for He has hidden it within Himself from all eternity *(cf.Ep 3:9)*. For, *"who has known the mind of God?" (Rm 11:34)*. The disciples grumbled because this woman had poured perfume over His head, and they complained: *"Why this waste? The perfume could have been sold for a good price, and the money given to the poor" (Mt 26:8-9)*. To understand Our Lord's displeasure, you have to be able to recognise the mystery. After all, it is only men of luxury who use perfume – in fact men do not usually use it – and even those who do use it generally rub it on. They do not pour it out. Why then is our Lord seriously displeased when the disciples object: *"This could have been sold for a good price, and the money given to the poor"*? In fact, Jesus Himself had earlier said: *"Whatever you did to one of these little ones, you did it to Me"(Mt 25:40)*. But He was offering Himself for these poor, these little ones.

28 Understand that you have to delve beneath the surface. Therefore, the Word of God replied: *"Why do you upset this woman? ... for the poor you have always with you, but Me you have not always" (Mt 26:10-11)*. Yes, the poor are always with you, and you ought to be good to them. And the fact that the poor are always with you is no reason for keeping them waiting. As the prophet said: *"Say not to the poor man: 'I'll give it to you tomorrow' " (Pr 3:28)*. But here the prophet is speaking of mercy. Jesus, on the other hand, puts Faith before mercy, for mercy has merit only if it is motivated by Faith. And He says: *"In pouring this ointment upon my body, she has done it for my burial" (Mt 26:12)*. So it was not the perfume that Jesus cared about, but her love. He welcomed her Faith, and approved her humility.

29 You, too, if you want to win favour, increase your love. Pour over the body of Jesus your Faith in His resurrection. Pour the perfume of the Church, the fragrance of love of the community.– and in doing these things you will be giving to the poor. That money will mean more if, instead of giving of your plenty, you pour out in the name of Christ, and give to the poor as an offering to Christ, money that might have been very useful to you. So do not take, in a literal sense only, this perfume poured on His head – for *"the letter kills" (2 Co 3:6)*. Take it in the spiritual sense, for the spirit gives life.

30 So, then, what is this perfume that the woman pours out? Who can tell the meaning? Who is there with ears so keenly tuned that he can grasp the depths of so great a mystery – a mystery that Jesus, the very Word of God, receives from the Father and utters to us? The disciples understand it to some degree; they do not fully understand it. Some interpreters think that the disciples were saying that, with the price of the perfume, they could purchase the faith of the Gentiles; whereas it was only with the Lord's blood that the Gentiles could be ransomed. This seems reasonable. That is why John the evangelist reports that Judas Iscariot reckoned that the price they could have got for the ointment was three hundred pence. You have read where he says: *"This could have been sold for three hundred pence, and the money given to the poor" (Jn 12:5)*. Now, the figure of three hundred

signifies the emblem of the Cross*. But the Lord is not looking for a superficial knowledge of the mystery. He prefers that the faith of believers should be buried with Him and in Him.

31 This is how we understand the matter as regards the other disciples. But as for Judas, he is condemned for his avarice, and for thinking money more important than the entombment of his Lord. Even if Judas did not think of the Passion, he was wrong in setting the price so high. Christ wanted to be valued at a cheap rate, so that everyone could buy Him, and no one – however poor – would be deterred. For He says: *"Freely you have received, freely you should give" (Mt 10:8)*. The inexhaustible Treasure requires not money but recognition. Jesus Himself, by His precious blood, has ransomed, not bought us.

I would speak at greater length of this, only that I recall having discussed it elsewhere *(cf.De Spiritu Sancto 3:125-128)*.

32 I must, therefore, work towards the burial of the Lord – this I say in accordance with the words of the Lord, *"in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom" (Col 2:3)* – treasures of which no one could have dreamt. I must work towards His burial, in such a way that it will be seen that His flesh reposes but does not decay *(cf.Ps 15:10)*. In this way, the death of His body will fill our dwelling with sweetness. It will lead us to believe that He has commended His spirit into the hands of His Father *(cf.Lk 23:46)*; and that His divinity, which knows not death, has not undergone the sufferings of His body.

33 See how the body of the Son exhales sweetest fragrance: His is a body that has been left behind, but not allowed to perish. His body is the teaching of Scripture; His body is the Church *(cf.Ep 1:23)*. It is we who are the perfume of His body. Therefore it is right that we should honour His bodily death. Even should it not need our marks of respect, the poor will always need us. I shall honour His body by my preaching, I shall honour it by unveiling to the Gentiles – so far as I can – the mystery of the Cross. Paul honoured it when he said: *"We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews indeed a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness. But to those that are called, both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Co 1:23-24)*. The Cross is honoured when, thanks to the Gospel, that which ignorance regarded as foolish is now regarded as wise. From this we learn to what extent the power of the foe has been destroyed by the Cross of the Lord. I pour the perfume of my faith over the body of the Lord, and that which one thought to be dead breathes fragrance.

* Because of its shape, Tau, the Greek letter for T, symbolises the Cross. But it also represents the figure 300. The Cross was often so written.

34 We must all try hard to purchase a precious jar of ointment. We must purchase it with our virtues. It is not to be a cheap or common jar. No, it must be costly perfume in an alabaster jar. It must be pure nard. If you pick the pure flowers of Faith, if you preach Jesus Christ crucified, then you will be spreading the perfume of Faith over all the Church. The Church is the body of Christ; it is dead to this world, but it reposes in God. The whole is filled with the fragrance of the Lord's Passion, with the perfume of His death, with the sweetness of His resurrection.

And so, anyone who belongs to the number of this holy people may say: *"God forbid that I should glory in anything but the Cross of our Lord Jesus-Christ" (Ga 6:14)*. The fragrance spreads, perfume is poured on the body, if one can confidently say – and God grant that I can say it: *"The world is crucified to me" (Ga 6:14)*. The world truly is crucified for one who cares little for worldly riches or honours, and is not attached to his possessions. It is crucified for one who loves what belongs to Jesus-Christ; who loves not the things that are seen, but the things unseen *(cf.2 Co 4:18)*; who clings not to life but longs to be dissolved and to be with Christ *(cf.Ph 1:23)*. This means taking up the cross and following Christ *(cf.Lk 9:23)*, to die and be buried with Him. Then we can exhale the perfume that this woman poured out in preparation for His burial. Do not consider this perfume a small matter. Through it Christ's name has been spread everywhere. That is why we have those prophetic words: *"Your name is as oil poured out" (Sg 1:2)*. It is poured out that Faith may all the more abundantly exhale this perfume.

35 Thaks to this woman we can understand the apostle's words: *"Where sin abounded, grace has abounded still more" (Rm 5:20)*. For if sin had not abounded in this woman, then grace would not have abounded still more. She admitted her fault, and won grace. That is why the Law is necessary: it is through the Law that I recognise my sin *(cf.Rm 3:20)*. Were there no Law, sin would remain hidden. But when I admit my fault, I ask pardon. Through the Law I learn the different kinds of sin; I see my wickedness, my prevarication. I run to do penance, I obtain forgiveness. So the Law does good, for it is an instrument of grace.

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36 ***"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 8:21)***.

Like a true teacher, Jesus offers in His own person an example to others. He gives commandments, and He Himself carries out the commandments that He gives. Before telling others that unless they are prepared to leave father and mother, they are not worthy of the Son of God *(Mt 10:37; Lk 14:26)*, He is the first to submit to this decree. It is not in

any way that He condemns due honour paid to a mother, for He Himself decreed: *"Whoever dishonours his father and mother, shall die" (cf.Ex 20:12; Dt 27:16).* No, but He believes that He owes more to the mysteries of His Father than He does to His natural affection for His Mother. In no sense is He disregarding the rights of parents. But He is teaching us that spiritual bonds are more sacred than blood relations.

37 Those who sought to see Christ should not have stayed outside, for: *"The Word is close, it is on your lips and in your heart" (Dt 30:14; Rm 10:8).* The Word is within you; the light is within you. Therefore Scripture says: *"Come close to the Lord and be radiant" (Ps 33:6).* .Standing outside, and at some distance, even the Lord's own relatives are not recognised. Maybe by not recognising them, the Lord is giving us an example. He is showing us that if even His own relations are unrecognised, we – who are not relations – have no chance at all if we stay outside!

38 No one need think that any slight is intended to the virtue of *pietas,* of tender love of one's parents. Such is not the case when we fulfil the commandment of the Law. For it is written: *"Man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh" (Gn 2:24).* This mystery is most exactly fulfilled in Christ and His Church *(cf.Ep 5:31-32).* Scripture shows here that one has to prefer one's own body to one's parents. Certain heretics, who like to spread snares, would like us to think that in this passage Jesus is denying His Mother. But it is not so. Even from the height of the Cross He recognises her *(cf.Jn 19:26).* But He has got to put the rules of the heavenly commandments before the bonds of the flesh. Another point worth mentioning is that the relations of Jesus represent the Jewish people, from whom He takes His physical descent; and that Jesus prefers the Church, who believes in Him, to His own relations.

39 Knowing that He came on earth with God's mystery in view, and to gather together the Church, Jesus left the relatives behind and boarded the boat [with His disciples]. For no one could navigate the waters of this life without Christ. In fact, even those who have Christ present with them are often troubled by the tempests and temptations of the world. If He allows such things to happen to the apostles, it is to give you the chance to observe that no one at all can take leave of this life without having undergone temptation. For temptation exercises our Faith.

40 We are, therefore, submitted to devilish tempests. But let us do as those sailors do who keep watch, let us awaken the pilot. But pilots, too, are generally in danger. What Pilot should I seek? I must seek Jesus, for He does not obey the winds but commands them. Of Him it is written: *"But He arising, rebuked the wind" (Lk 8:24).*

41 What does this mean – *"He arising"*? it means that He had been sleeping, but it was His body only that slept. His soul was intent on the divine mystery. For wherever Wisdom is, wherever the Word is, nothing is done without thought, nothing is done without prudence.

42 You read above that He passed the night in prayer. How then could He have slept through a storm? But it just goes to show how secure He was in His power. Everyone was terrified, He alone slept peacefully. Where the same danger is not shared, the same nature is not shared – for even though His body slept, His divinity is ever at work. So He says: *"Men of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt 8:26).* They deserve the reproach, for in Christ's presence they should not have been afraid. For no one who holds fast to Christ can perish.

43 Jesus re-affirmed their faith, and restored calm. He ordered the wind to cease. This was not the North wind, nor was it the wind from Africa; rather, it was the spirit to which the Archangel Michael says, in the Epistle of Jude: *"May the Lord command you" (Jude 9)*! That is why Saint Matthew says: *"He commanded the winds and the sea" (8:26).* May it please God, in His kindness, to restrain in us our virulent hurricanes; to bring back peace; and to end our fear of suffering shipwreck in this life of ours! True, He no longer sleeps the sleep of the body, but we have to be careful not to be overcome by sleep, for fear that the Lord would – so far as we are concerned – go asleep and take His rest.

44 It suffices to have touched on a subject that we have already discussed *(cf.Book 4:68-70).* I think I should now turn my attention to an apparent disagreement between the evangelists, Matthew and Luke, and see can I dig out a solution. We know from the Gospel, according to Matthew *(cf.Mt 8:26 sq.)*, that in the land of the Gerasenes there were two men possessed by demons, who presented themselves before Christ. Luke, on the other hand, speaks of one man only *(cf.Lk 8:27)* and describes him as naked (he was naked because he had lost both the garment of his nature and that of his virtue). This seeming disagreement regarding the number is of interest. But indeed, even if the numbers disagree, the mystery is one and the same.

This man, possessed by a devil, is a figure of the Gentile people. He was covered in vices, naked to sin, open to every crime. The two men [in the other narrative] are equally a figure of the Gentile people. For Noah was the father of three sons, Sem, Cham, and Japhet *(cf.Gn 9:18).* Only the family of Sem was taken by God to be His own possession. The other two are the ancestors of all the Gentile races. One of them was cursed for not covering his father's nakedness *(cf.Gn 9:22 sq.)*: the other was blessed because he turned his face so as not to see his father's shame. With tender respect he

covered his father, and so escaped the curse that fell upon his brother and his descendants.

45 ***"For a long time he had been possessed"*** *(Lk 8:27).*
Yes, indeed, for he had been troubled by the demon from the time of the Deluge up to the coming of the Lord. He was a tormented man, breaking – in his fury and his madness – the bonds of nature. Saint Matthew has good reason for telling us that the demoniacs lived in tombs *(cf.Mt 8:28)*. For such souls seem immured in tombs or sepulchres. That is what the body of unbelievers is, it is a sepulchre for the dead. It is a tomb, for the words of God do not dwell in it. The possessed one is driven towards desert places, I mean that the souls of such people are entirely barren of any virtue. They are fugitives from the Law, separated from the prophets, and excluded from grace.

46 The demoniac [in Luke] did not suffer from merely one devil. No, he had a whole legion of them *(cf.Lk 8:30 sq.)*. This satanic legion saw Jesus. They knew and foresaw that at the Lord's coming they would be hurled back into the abyss, so they earnestly begged Him to let them enter into the swine. Remark here the kindness of the Lord. He is never the first to condemn anyone, but each one of us fashions his own punishment. The demons are not chased into the swine, but they freely ask to be allowed enter them. This was because they could not endure the radiance of His heavenly light.

People who have trouble with their eyes cannot bear too bright sunshine. They prefer darkness and avoid light. So let the demons fly from the splendour of eternal light. Let them dread to suffer, before the time, the torment that they deserve. They do not know in advance what the future holds, but they know what the prophets have written; for Zachariah has said: *"When that day comes, I am going to root out the names of the idols from the country, and they shall never be mentioned again; and I will also rid the country of the spirit of impurity" (Ze 13:2)*. From this we learn that the demons will not always live here, and we will not always suffer their malice. But now, fearing their punishment, they say: *"You have come to destroy us" (Mt 8:29)*. They do not want to be destroyed, and so they draw back from the men whom they had possessed, and on account of whom they knew that they would be punished, and they ask to be sent into the swine.

47 Who are these swine? I think they are those of whom we read: *"Do not throw what is holy to dogs, and do not cast your pearls before swine. For they will trample them under their feet" (Mt 7:6)*. Such people are like unclean animals, they are like dumb and irrational beasts who soil the beauty of the natural virtues by their disgraceful actions and their disgusting way of life. Their conduct carries them to the precipice, for they are unrestrained by any consideration of the heavenly reward. No, they prefer to be hurled by their own perversity from the height down into the abyss, there to be drowned in the treacherous waters of this world, and to perish from suffocation. They suffocate, they cannot breathe; for those who are driven this way and that by the currents of pleasure cannot draw the vivifying breath of the Spirit.

48 Man, as I have said, fashions his own instrument of torment. For had he not lived as a pig, the devil would not have got power over him. Or, if the devil did get such power it would have been not to destroy but to try him. Perhaps, too, after the Lord's coming the devil found that he could no longer pervert the good, and so from that time on he tried – not to destroy all people but the waverers. Take, for example, the highwayman. He does not attack men armed to the teeth, but only those who are unarmed. He eats up only the weak; knowing well that the strong and the powerful would crush and condemn him.

49 Someone will surely ask: "But *why* does God permit the devil?" I say that He does it to try the good and to punish the wicked. It is the punishment for sin. You can read somewhere else how God sends fever, palsy, evil spirits, blindness, and all manner of scourges, according as sinners deserve them *(cf.Dt 28:59; Ps 31:10)*.

We had better get back to our text.

50 ***"When the swineherds saw this, they fled"*** *(Lk 8:34).*
Neither professors of philosophy, nor heads of the Synagogue, can offer help to a lost people. Only Christ can take away sin. Provided, of course, that they not refuse to suffer the remedy. Jesus does not heal us by force – it would be beneath His dignity. If the sick resent His presence and His help, He promptly leaves them. Such were the Gerasenes. They came out from their city – which seems to symbolise the Synagogue – and begged Him to go, ***"for they were seized with great fear"*** *(Lk 8:37)*.

51 It is because the sick soul cannot bear the Word of God, cannot sustain the burden of His wisdom. It bends. It goes to pieces.

52 So they did not have to beg Him long, for ***"He re-embarked, and turned back"*** *(Lk 8:37)*. He mounted, and ascended to the heights. He left the Synagogue, and ascended to the Church. He returned by the lake, or by the sea, according to Matthew *(cf.Mt 9:1)*. For, *"between us and them there is a great gulf" (Lk 16:26)*, and no one can pass from the Church to the Synagogue without risking his salvation. Even those who want to pass from the Synagogue to the Church must carry their cross *(cf.Lk 9:23)*, to escape danger.

53 I wonder why Jesus did not receive as a disciple the man whom He had exorcised? Instead, He tells him to go back to his own home. I think the reason is that Jesus avoids any appearance of boasting, and also that He is teaching the infidels, by example, that one's own home or house is man's normal and natural dwelling. Once the possessed man has been healed he is, therefore, told to leave the tombs and the sepulchres, where he had dwelt, and return to his own proper home. For his body, which had been the sepulchre of his soul, has now become the temple of God.

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54 ***"Now, there came a man called Jairus, who was ruler of the Synagogue. He fell at the feet of Jesus and begged Him to come to his house. For he had an only daughter, almost twelve years old, who was dying"*** *(Lk 8:41-42).*

Christ, as I was saying, had left the Synagogue – symbolised by the Gerasenes. And He, whose own had not received Him *(cf.Jn 1:11)*, was welcomed by us. We were waiting for Him, and we welcomed Him. We waited for Him, and He did not fail us. As for the others, if they beseech Him, He will not disdain to hear them and to come back. This man, this ruler of the Synagogue who had an only daughter, begged Jesus to come and heal the Synagogue. For having abandoned Christ it was on the point of death. Who, I ask, is this ruler of the Synagogue? I suggest that it is the Law. Out of regard for the Law, the Lord does not completely abandon the Synagogue, but has reserved a saving remedy for those who believe.

Now, it is while the Word of God is hurrying to the ruler's daughter to save the children of Israel, that the holy Church – assembled from the Gentile people– snatches, by her Faith, the salvation prepared for others. For she is in desperate need, because of her ugly and degrading sins.

55 As regards the moral aspect, I think we have dwelt sufficiently long on this passage *(cf.Book 5:113 sq.)*, so we shall not go back on what has already been said. But I should like to touch briefly on the mystical sense.

Is it not in this manner that things came to pass? The Word of God, though He had come for the Jews, was grasped by the Gentiles; and those who had not believed in Him through the Law were the first to believe in Him through grace.

56 For, after the example of the woman who had spent her last farthing on the doctors *(cf.Lk 8:43)*, so too these pagan nations had wasted all their natural gifts and squandered their patrimony. This woman was devout, discreet, religious, prompt to believe, and had a becoming modesty. For it shows both modesty and faith that she recognised her infirmity and yet did not despair of pardon. So, very discreetly, she touches just the fringe of His

cloak. Faith makes her draw near, religion causes her to believe, wisdom teaches her that she has been healed.

It is the same with the holy people of the Gentile nations. They believed in God. They blushed for their sins, and so were freed of them. They brought their faith, their readiness to believe, their prayer and devotion. They clothed themselves in wisdom so that they, too, could feel that they were healed. And they confessed that they had snatched what belonged to others.

57 ***"She came behind Him"*** *(Lk 8:44).* Why does she come behind Christ? Is it because Scripture says: *"You shall walk behind the Lord your God" (Dt 13:4)*? I also ask what is the significance of the fact that the ruler's child was dying at the age of twelve years, and that the woman with the haemorrhage was suffering for twelve years? Does it not symbolise that so long as the Synagogue was sound and well, the Church was suffering? The weakness of one becomes the strength of the other, because *"by their offence, salvation has come to the Gentiles" (Rm 11:11)*. The end of one is the beginning of the other. I do not mean the natural beginning, but the beginning as regards salvation, for: *"blindness has happened in part of Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles shall have come in" (Rm 11:25)*.

The Synagogue is more ancient than the Church – not in time, but from the point of view of health and well being. For while the Synagogue believed, the Gentiles were without belief and languished, a prey to every variety of malady whether of soul or body. They had no remedy that could heal them. Then they learnt that the Jewish people were sick, and they plucked up hope that they might get the saving remedy. They knew the time in which the Doctor from Heaven would come. In the person of this sick woman they rise up to meet the Word. The woman sees that there is a great crowd all round Him. Those who push up against Him do not believe, but those who touch Him believe. It is Faith that touches Christ, Faith that sees Him. The body does not touch Him, the eyes cannot perceive Him. For to see without seeing, is not to see at all; to hear without hearing is not to hear at all; and to touch without faith is not to touch as all. Jesus wanted to make public the faith of this woman, and so He said:

58 ***"Someone has touched Me, for virtue has gone out from Me"*** *(Lk 8:45-46).*

We have here clear proof that wisdom cannot be locked up and divinity cannot be kept behind bolts and bars. The limitations of human nature and the enclosure of the body cannot hold them in. Eternal power is not a prisoner, it is not confined by the narrow limits of the body, but bursts the banks of our mediocrity. It is no mere human help that liberates the Gentiles, rather it is God's gift. Thanks to this the Assembly of the Nations – though its faith is of recent date – draws down on itself the eternal mercy.

If, now, we consider the measure of our faith, and if we grasp the grandeur of the Son of God, we soon see that the disparity is so great that all we can do is touch the fringe. We cannot reach to the top of the robe. If we want to be healed, we have got to touch the fringe of Christ.

59 It is no secret to Jesus who has touched His hem; no secret to Him who touches Him when His back is turned. God can see without eyes. God does not have corporal senses, but possesses in Himself knowledge of all things. Happy the one who touches even the fringe, the furthest tip, of the Word; for who could fully grasp Him?

But we must return now to the sick child; for if we delay Christ any longer, her death will be attributed not to Christ's delay, but to us.

60 So we read: ***"The servants of the ruler came to him and said: 'Do not trouble Him further. Your daughter is dead' "*** *(Lk 8:49).*

First let us consider the following point. Before raising the dead girl to life, the Lord – to rouse up their faith – heals the woman suffering from the haemorrhage. And to show you that it is for our instruction that the haemorrhage is stopped, it is at the very moment that He makes His way towards the one, that the other is healed. So, too, we celebrate the Resurrection, as an event in history, at the same time as we celebrate the Lord's Passion. This is so that we may move from faith in His Resurrection in time to faith in the eternal Resurrection.

In somewhat the same way, Mary is told the barren woman is to give birth *(cf.Lk 1:36)*, in order to help her to believe the Virgin shall conceive. Once Mary heard that Elizabeth had conceived, she did not doubt that she herself would become a Mother.

61 ***"The servants of the ruler came to Him and said: 'Do not trouble Him further'"*** *(Lk 8:49).* You see, they lacked faith in the resurrection that Jesus had foretold in the Law *(cf.Ps 15:10)*, and would accomplish in the Gospel. That is why, once Jesus arrived at the house, He took with Him only a few companions to be witnesses of the miracle that He was about to work by raising to life the dead child. For the crowd in general had not at once believed in the resurrection. Also, when the Lord said: ***" 'The child is not dead, but sleeping'. They laughed Him to scorn"*** *(Lk 8:52-53).*

62 Those who do not believe, simply laugh. So let them weep for their dead, since they believe they are dead. But if one believes in the resurrection, it is not death that one sees but sleep and repose.

One might add here that Matthew *(cf.Mt 9:23)* says that in the ruler's house there were minstrels and a multitude making a great deal of noise. Seemingly it was the custom to call in flute players to stir up great howling and lamentation. This may have been the case because the Synagogue had

failed to capture, in the canticles of the Law and the letter, the joyfulness of the Spirit.

63 Taking the little girl's hand *(cf.Lk 8:54 sq.)*, Jesus healed her, and saw to it that she was given something to eat. This proves that the child is alive. She is not a ghost. Happy those whose hand is held by Wisdom! Please God, Wisdom will hold my hand, too; that justice will hold it; that the Word of God will hold it and will lead me to His inmost dwelling. And may His hand turn away the spirit of error and bring back the spirit that saves! May He see to it that I am given food to eat: the heavenly bread, which is the Word of God. Therefore this wisdom, that has spread the holy altars with the divine Body and Blood, says: *"Come, eat my bread and drink the wine that I have prepared for you" (Pr 9:5).*

64 But why such a difference between one miracle and another? I mean, further back we read that the widow's son was publicly raised to life *(cf.Lk 7:12)*. Here there are as few witnesses as possible. But I think that we have here, once again, the kindness of the Lord. The widow, mother of an only son, could not wait. So the Lord acted very quickly, not wanting to try her a moment longer. Also, we see wisdom at work: for the widow's son represents the Church, who will believe at once. The daughter of the ruler of the Synagogue represents the Jewish people who will believe. But those who believe will be very few in comparison to the great numbers who will not believe .

65 ***"And any time they refuse to receive you, go out from that town and shake even the dust from your feet, for a testimony against them"*** *(Lk 9:5).*

The Gospel precepts plainly tell us what sort of person one should be in order to announce the Kingdom of God. We are to be without staff, without wallet, without shoes, without bread, without money *(cf.Lk 9:3)*. In other words, we are not to count on the aid of worldly resources. We are to abandon ourselves to the Faith, believing that the less we seek after such things the more abundantly they will be supplied to us. If you like, you can understand it in this sense: the aim of this passage is to form a state of mind that is totally spiritual; to form a soul that seems to have laid aside the body as though it were a garment – not only by renouncing power and despising wealth, but also by rejecting the cravings of the flesh.

66 Above all, the apostles are recommended to observe peace and to remain constant. They are to carry peace *(cf.Lk 9:4)*, observe constancy; and, in receiving hospitality, to respect the rules and conventions. It would ill become a herald of the Kingdom of Heaven, says the Lord, to go from house to house and to abuse the inviolable laws of hospitality.

It is understood that they will be received kindly and hospitably, but, should this not be the case, they must shake off the dust from their feet on leaving the town.

There is a lesson that we learn here. It is that hospitality is abundantly rewarded. Not only do we bring peace to our hosts, but if they are covered in the light dust of little faults, this dust is shaken off if they welcome the feet of the apostle preachers.

Another point: it is not without reason in the Gospel according to Matthew that we read that the apostles are told to choose the house where they are to stay *(cf.Mt 10:11)*. In this way they will have no cause to change house and transgress against the rights of hospitality. On the other hand, a like recommendation is not given to the host. The host is not told to choose his guest, for were it so, the gloss would be taken off the virtue of hospitality.

67 I have spoken here in a literal sense of the venerable and religious virtue of hospitality; but there is also a mysterious and mystical sense that beams upon us. In choosing a house, one is really looking for a worthy host. Does it not seem that it is the Church that is being pointed out to us for our preference, and Christ as our host? Is any house more worthy of apostolic preachers than the holy Church? Has anyone greater claims to be chosen as host than Christ? He washes His guests' feet *(cf.Jn 13:5)*, and from the moment that He receives them into His house He lets no one stay if their feet are dirty. If they are soiled from their previous life, Christ in His kindness bathes them so that they will be clean for the rest of the way. It is He, and He alone, that no one should leave. He is the Host that no one should change. How wisely Peter said to Him: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have learnt to believe" (Jn 6:69-70)*. See how well Peter carries out the heavenly precepts! By not abandoning his Host, he merited to take his place at the celestial Consecration [of the Mass].

68 You must first of all make careful enquiry as to whether a church is of the true Faith. If Christ dwells in it, you need have no hesitation in choosing it. But if the congregation there are of bad faith, or if an heretical teacher disfigures the place, you must not have communion with these heretics, and should shun their gatherings. You must shake the dust from your feet. Otherwise the dry and sterile dust of their unbelief would – like an arid and sandy desert – soil the steps of your spirit.

The Gospel preacher must take on himself the physical infirmities of the faithful; he should carry off and get rid of their foolish behaviour, as though shaking dust from his feet – for it is written: *"Who is weak and I am not weak?" (2 Co 11:29)*. If this is so, then he must also abandon every church that rejects the Faith and does not possess the foundations of the apostolic preaching, for fear of being spattered and stained by an erroneous faith. The

apostle says this quite plainly: *"After a single warning, avoid the heretic" (Tt 3:10)*.

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69 ***"Jesus said to them: 'Give them to eat'. But they replied: 'We have only five loaves' "*** *(Lk 10:13)*.

Why is it that further back the Passion of John the Baptist is recounted, and here *(Lk 10:9)* we are told in the words of Herod that John is already dead? Perhaps because after the end of the Law [symbolised by John], the food of the Gospel begins to nourish the famished hearts of the people? You will remember that it is after the Church has, figuratively, been healed of the haemorrhage, and after the apostles were sent out on their mission to preach the Kingdom of God, that the food of heavenly grace is distributed. But notice to whom it is distributed. Not to the nonchalant, not to the city-dwellers – not to those in the Synagogue or in grand and worldly places – but to those who search for Christ in the desert. It is these people, and not the high and mighty, that Christ welcomes. With these Christ discourses, not on worldly affairs but on the Kingdom of Heaven *(cf.Lk 9:11)*. And if any are ill with cancer or covered with sores, He liberally applies His healing remedy.

70 It was quite in order that, having healed their painful wounds, He should satisfy their hunger with food for the spirit. For no one can receive the Bread of Christ unless he has first been cured. The very invitation to the Feast is itself an indication that one is healed. If someone was lame, he is able to walk again so that he can get up and come. If someone was blind, they recover their sight so that they can find their way into the House of the Lord.

71 You see, there is observed throughout a mysterious order: first the remission of sins brings healing to our wounds; then we have the multiplication of the bread of the heavenly table. Yet, this crowd has still not been fed with the more substantial dishes. Hearts which keep fast from solid faith cannot feed on Christ's Body and Blood. *"I gave you milk"*, says Saint Paul, *"not solid food. For as yet you were not able" (1 Co 3:2)*. The five loaves correspond to the milk; the solid food is the Body of Christ; and the strong drink is the Lord's Blood. We do not at first or immediately eat all things, drink all things. First we must drink the milk. That means that there is a first thing to drink, and then a second. In the same way there is a first thing to eat, and there is also a second thing, and there is a third. First you have the five loaves, secondly the seven loaves *(cf.Mt 15:34)*, and thirdly the very Body of Christ.

72 We must on no account abandon such a Master – who so kindly distributes food according to the capacity of each. He does not want the weak to be choked by food that is too solid; and He does not want the healthy and hearty to get food that is light and unsatisfying. As Scripture says: *"Let those who are weak eat vegetables" (Rm 14:2)*. Let those who have appeared to have escaped the nets of infirmity eat of the five loaves and two fishes. But if anyone is afraid to ask for food, let him give up all that he has and hasten to hear the word of God. Once he begins to hear, he will hunger. The apostles begin to see that these people are hungry, but do not as yet understand for what they hunger. But Christ understands. He knows that they hunger not for material nourishment but for the nourishment of Christ. He says: *"I do not want to send them away fasting, for fear they would faint on the way" (Mt 15:32)*. What a good Master we have! He demands zeal, but He provides the necessary force.

73 Please, Lord Jesus, do not send away these people fasting with me, but feed them with the food that You distribute. Strengthen them with Your nourishment so that they need have no fear of falling faint from fasting. I wish that of us too You would say: *"I do not want to send them away fasting"*. Tell me once again why it is that You do not want to dismiss them fasting. And yet, You have already said it. One whom You send away fasting will faint on the way. He will faint either in the course of this life, or before he reaches the end of the road. He will faint before he reaches the Father and understands that Christ comes from the Father; and before he grasps that Christ comes down from Heaven, and that having descended He ascends again *(cf.Ep 4:10)*. Nourish him well , for fear that, having accepted that Christ was born of a Virgin, he might doubt that Christ is God, and might reckon Him to be not divine but human.

74 So, not wanting the people to faint, Jesus says: ***"Give them to eat"***. But the apostles said: ***"We have only five loaves and two fishes, unless we go and buy food for all this crowd"*** *(Lk 9:13)*. The apostles have not quite grasped that the food of believers is not something that can be bought. But Christ knew it. He knew that it is we who have to be bought and ransomed, and that the banquet is given free. The disciples did not yet have the nourishment that could ransom us. What they did have was bread that could sustain and fortify us: for *"bread strengthens man's heart" (Ps 103:15)*. So the Lord took pity on us, not wanting anyone to faint on the way. But should anyone faint, it is not the fault of the Lord Jesus, but the person's own fault. You cannot blame the Lord, who *"triumphs when He is judged" (Ps 50:6)*.

What will you have to say to Him who did so much to strengthen and affirm you? Did He not create you? Did He not nourish you? His nourishment is strength, His nourishment is courage. But if you have, by your negligence, squandered the resources He gave you, you cannot

complain that heavenly nourishment was wanting to you. What you lacked were the resources of your own soul. For remember, the Lord causes the rain to fall alike on just and unjust *(cf.Mt 5:45)*.

75 Was it not thanks to the nourishment given him that holy Elijah – already getting very faint – was able to continue his journey and to walk for forty days *(cf.1 K 19:6 sq.)*? And this was food brought to him by an angel. But it was Christ Himself who brought *you* food; and you, if you preserve the food that He has given you, will walk – not just for forty days and forty nights – but for forty years. I dare to say this, for I am supported by examples given in Scripture. These forty years are from the time you leave the borders of Egypt until the time you arrive in the Land of Plenty. This is the land where milk and honey flows, the land that the Lord swore to give to our ancestors *(cf.Ex 3:8; 13:5)*. This is the land whose resources you must acquire, this is the land that belongs to the lowly and the gentle. It is not a land all dried up and desolate, but one that is greatly enriched by the nourishing gift of Christ. This land, which has wholly submitted to the authority of the eternal King, is inhabited by saints beyond all counting.

76 So Christ shares out the loaves. There is no doubt that He wants to give to all, and to refuse nobody – for He is the general Provider. But when He breaks the bread and gives it to His disciples, you have to stretch out your hands to receive this bread. Otherwise you will faint by the wayside. Do not put the blame on Him. Our Lord is kind and distributes, but He distributes to those who remain with Him in the desert; to those who do not take off on the first or on the second or on the third day. For you read in the Gospel: *"I have pity on this multitude, because it is now three days that they have stayed with Me" (Mt 15:32)*. What an inspiration this is for us, what a lesson in consideration and humanity! Christ does not want the people to go from Him fasting. He fears that they would faint on the way.

77 Do not fall faint because the Lord corrects you. Do not get tired of being found fault with. Do not get tired either now or later. What reply will you make to Him, or what excuses will you make, if you have lost that strength and nourishment that He gives? You cannot complain that He gave you no food, for He gives to all. You cannot say that He did not want to do you good, seeing that He put before you both good and evil so that your choice of the good would be entirely voluntary. He did not want it to be forced *(cf.Phm 14)*.

There is a very great difference between one who is forced to act in spite of himself, and one who freely and spontaneously chooses what is good: *"If I had not chosen this work myself, then it is a responsibility put into my hands" (1 Co 9:17)*. Imagine for a moment that we are appearing before Christ's Tribunal, and that, if our work burns *(cf.1 Co 3:15)* we shall have no excuse. For He shall say to us what the prophet said long ago: *"My*

people, what have I done? In what way have I been a burden on you? Answer Me" (Mi 6:3). He will say to the one who fell by the wayside: "Why did you fall? Didn't I give you bread? Didn't I bless the bread? Didn't I tell you to share it? Why then did you refuse to receive it?"

78 Among you who are here present, how many will fall by the wayside? Yes, you will fall even after hearing my sermons – and though the words are mine, nonetheless they must be considered as bread, since *"no one can name the Lord Jesus except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Co 12:3)*! How many, I repeat, will fall, and will fornicate in the by-ways of the pagans. I pray God that there will be but one such person, and not a whole crowd! But, supposing that someone were to fall, it is not the fault of Jesus that they fall. He distributes bread to all who follow Him – whether they be five thousand, whether they be four thousand.

79 The number is not without significance, nor is the order of events, nor are the scraps left over by those who eat. Why, I wonder, is the bigger multitude – the five thousand – fed with five loaves *(cf.Mt 14:17 sq.)*; and the smaller multitude – the four thousand – fed with seven loaves (a greater number than five)? If we were to consider just the fact of the miracle, we would think it would be more divine, more wonderful, if the greater number of people were fed by the smaller number of loaves. Why then is that which is less added to that which is greater? For we read first that five thousand were fed with five loaves, then we hear that four thousand were fed with seven loaves. We must look for the mystical sense hidden in the miracle.

80 It would seem that the five thousand – representing the five bodily senses – were fed by Christ after a bodily fashion. But the four thousand, though still in the body, and in this world composed as it is of four elements, received the nourishment of mystical repose – and this was done for God's own good reasons. These people are already able for the world, being destined to be in future above the world. For though they are still in this world, they are not shut in by the world. They are given the food, as I said above, of mystical repose. The world, you know, was made in six days, and the seventh was a day of rest, sanctified by the Lord *(cf.Gn 2)*. Repose lies, therefore, beyond this world, so too the fruit of repose. *"Happy,"* says the Lord, *"are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Mt 5:9)*. Since God is above this world, it is certain that no one can see Him unless, with eyes of the spirit, you pass beyond and above this world.

So, the seventh beatitude is for those who are at peace. Note, too, that seven baskets *(cf.Mt 15:37)* are filled with the scraps left over by the four thousand. This is the Sabbath bread, the holy bread, the bread of repose, and it is not to be considered of slight significance. Perhaps, if you begin by eating the five loaves with your senses, I might dare to say that after the five

loaves and the seven loaves, the third occasion that you eat the bread will not be on this earth, but above and beyond this earth. There, like those who are in Heaven, you will eat the eight loaves. For just as the seven loaves stand for repose, so too the eight loaves represent resurrection. So those who were nourished with bread had persevered three full days, and perhaps obtained fullness of faith and the assurance of the resurrection that was to come. Such are the saints who say: *"We will go three days journey, to keep the festival of our God" (Ex 5:3)*. But let us speak of that in its place *(cf.Book 10:150 sq.)*.

81 Regarding these five loaves, Saint John teaches me something that I did not know. It is something I had not learnt from Saint Matthew, something I had not learnt from Saint Luke – for each evangelist has his own gift and grace. Saint John – as I was about to say – tells me that they were *barley* loaves. So it is not unreasonable to say that this nourishment was on the bodily level. Why *barley* loaves? Because you must begin by giving milk, and then go on to give more solid food, that which is conducive to faith; for we were not yet able for it *(cf.1 Co 3:2-3)*. Perhaps even now many of us are not able for it. When we start quarrelling and being disagreeable it is a sure sign that we are carnal and behave as people of this world tend to behave. Diet is adapted to the strength of each one. So it is barley first, then wheat. While the strongest of all – like Elijah *(cf.1 K 17:12)* – are given bread made of meal, from the very marrow of the ear of corn. This is bread that sinners cannot eat.

82 It is not only as regards the kind of bread, the number of loaves, that the miracles differ. There is even a difference as regards the seating arrangements. Some sit on the grass; others on the ground. The five thousand are on the green grass, the four thousand are on the ground *(cf.Mk 6:39, Mt 15:35; Jn 6:10)*. It is harder to be seated on the ground than to be stretched out on the grass. Those whose senses are still carnal love softness, therefore they prefer to sit on the grass – for *"all flesh is grass" (Is 40:6)*. The others choose the earth that brings forth corn, grapes and olives. For these people seek the nourishment of grace. Some sit, the others are stretched out – the better to relax and take their repose. In one miracle there are two fish *(cf.Mt 14:17)*, in the other the fish are not counted. Many people have considered that the grace of the Holy Spirit, together with His seven gifts, were pre-figured in the seven loaves; and that the two fish stand for the grace of the two Testaments.

83 We can readily believe that the four thousand, gathered from the four corners of the earth, represent the Church. They therefore receive the nourishment of a greater grace, for so it is written: *"Many shall come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 8:11)*. For this,

Christ thanks the Father. For there is significance in the fact that in one text there is simply a blessing, but here there is also thanksgiving *(cf.Jn 6:11)*. Yes, it is our Lord's custom to thank His Father for the Church; and for revealing to the little ones what He has hidden from the wise *(cf.Mt 11:25)*. The blessing is, therefore, for those of us who are less advanced; the thanksgiving is for those who have triumphed over bodily weakness and have given the witness of holy martyrdom. I touched on this point earlier on.*

In one case the people are made to sit down in groups of fifty *(cf.Mk 6:40, Lk 9:15)*. This, I grant, is a sacred number. Nonetheless, it sets a limit. But here, in this other miracle *(cf.Mt 15:35 sq.)*, where the people do not sit down in pre-determined numbers, one sees foreshadowed a better and greater Church whose numbers are without limit.

84 The people eat and are satisfied; the apostles do the serving *(cf.Mt 14:19 sq.)*. Here, too, lies a mystery. Satisfaction, full satisfaction, indicates that hunger is banished for good and all; for after having once received the nourishment of Christ, one cannot be hungry again. As regards the serving done by the apostles, this foreshadows the distribution of the Body and Blood of Christ. But what is divine is that the five loaves satisfied – and more than satisfied – five thousand persons. Clearly it was not this tiny amount, but the multiplication of this tiny amount, that filled the people.

85 You would have seen the bread multiply in the hands of the apostles, flourishing like a crop irrigated by a ceaseless rush of water. The apostles did not break the morsels they received, and scarcely touched them with their fingers, but the bread leaped spontaneously from their hands. Reading of such things, we need not be astonished by the perpetual motion of the waters of the sea; we need not be surprised that one wave unceasingly succeeds another. Even bread can "flow". Even a solid, material substance can "pour out". These events took place so that, from the things that we can see, we might manage to discern those things not visible to the eye. By these happenings the Lord shows manifestly that He is equally the Author of those other things, and Creator of all material creation. Nature was not (as the philosophers would have us think) discovered, but created, and she continually lends her support to the production of all things.

86 Now, here is something remarkable: no matter how much water you take from the sea, there is no sign or indication that less water is left. No matter how much you drink from a fountain, the water taken from it seems to be at once restored. – as though someone were re-paying it. But while the waters of a river never seem to lose anything, neither do they seem

* Ambrose's comments on this point are not extant.

to gain. As for fountains, even as fresh water bubbles up and flows in, before your very eyes it flows out again. But this bread that Jesus breaks is, figuratively, the Word of God and the teaching of Christ. Distributed, it increases; for with even a few words He has given the people abundance, and more than abundance. He gives His discourses like loaves, and even as we touch them they multiply in our mouths. In the same way, and in an incredible manner, this bread –when broken, when distributed, when eaten – is stacked up and piled up all over again!

87 Have no doubt about it, my friend. This bread increases, whether in the hands of those who distribute it or whether in the mouths that eat it, when the testimony of our action accords with the witness of our faith. It was in this way that the water at the wedding took on the colour of wine even as the waiters poured it out. The very men who had filled the jars with water drew it out as wine – wine that they had never put in *(cf.Jn 2:6 sq.)*. Try to understand such miraculous happenings. In one miracle, while the multitude eats, the morsels are multiplied even as they are given out; and from the original five loaves there remains a vast amount that is left over. In the other miracle [that at Cana], it is the elements themselves that are changed; nature suffers no diminution; does not know from where these products have arisen; but recognises that this is good wine. What is more, this water that has been turned into wine is of a quality far superior to that of natural wine. It has been willed by the Creator, who is able to use the elements as He chooses, and to assign any nature He wishes to that which is yet to be. You see by what miracles he proves that He is at work: even as the waiter is pouring out the water, it is transformed into most delicious wine; its colour changes – we cannot but believe – and the fragrance of the wine adds the finishing touch to our faith.

88 Now, pagans, if you please, compare Christ's acts of mercy to the fictions (for I cannot call them *actions*) of your so-called gods! Your fables tell us of a king [Midas] who could turn to gold anything he touched. But his banquets turned to funeral feasts; even the table napkins, at the touch of his fingers, grew hard and rigid. The food crackled in his mouth, wounding him instead of feeding him. As for the drink, it stuck in his throat, and could neither flow down nor flow back.

Blessings worthy of such foolish wishes! Presents suitable to such a petitioner! Liberality worthy of the giver! Such are the "blessings" of false gods. They seem to be doing you a service, but they destroy you. Christ's blessings, on the other hand, might seem slight and yet they are very, very great. Also, they are conferred not merely on an individual but on whole multitudes. The food multiplied in the mouths of those who ate. It seemed to be food for the body, but really it was bread of which they partook for eternal salvation.

89 But why was there more left over for the five thousand, and less for the four thousand? Because the four thousand spent three full days with Christ, and so received a greater amount of the heavenly nourishment.

90 You will find there is also a reason why it is the disciples who collect the remnants; for the things of God are more easily to be found among the elect of God than among the crowd. May it please God to give me grace to understand those words: *"Gather up what remains"*! If I understand, and if I do as I am told, I shall have a great many remnants that the crowds, that the women, that the children, were not able to eat. Happy those who can collect what even the learned overlook!

91 Now let us see how they collect the fragments. The Law said: *"You shall not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14)*. Christ broke the bread, He shared out this Word, He added nothing to it, but distributed it from out His own self. He says: *"Whoever looks at a woman in such a way as to lust after her has committed adultery" (Mt 5:28)*. There you have a morsel from Him. Then He adds: *"If your right eye causes you to sin, take it out" (Mt 5:29)*. There you have another morsel. And here is yet another: *"If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off" (Mt 5:30)*. He also says: *"Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Mt 5:32)*. Just look at the amount of fragments He has collected from one single statement!

Moses said that Abraham had two sons, one the child of the slave girl and the other the child of the free woman *(cf.Gn 21:2; 9)*. Paul said: *"These represent the two Testaments" (Ga 4:24)*. He divided the word and found the mystery. Happy, therefore, is the one who carefully gathers up what Christ has distributed.

92 But why does Christ fill twelve baskets? Surely it is to mark the end of the trial undergone by the Jewish people, of whom, as the psalm says: *"Their hands had served in baskets" (Ps 80:7)*? In other words, the people who had previously collected mud and mire in baskets now gain, through the Cross of Christ, the food of celestial life. They gather up the nourishment of the faith with those baskets that once contained the filth of pagan unbelief. This generous gift is not for just a few, but for all. For the twelve baskets seem to indicate that each of the twelve tribes is being strengthened and confirmed in that faith which overflows, for: *"Bread strengthens the heart of man" (Ps 103:15)*.

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93 ***"Jesus asked His disciples: 'Whom do you say I am?' Simon Peter replied: 'The Christ of God' "*** *(Lk 9:18-20)*.

I find the opinion of the crowd interesting. Some believed that Elijah *(cf.Lk 9:19)* had come back to life – for they were expecting him to return

Some thought Jesus was John (who had been beheaded), others took Him to be one of the prophets of old. But to go beyond that transcends our human thinking. To reach higher belongs to the understanding and the wisdom of another. If the apostle Paul was content to know *"Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Co 2:2)*, who am I that I should presume to know more than that of Christ? In this name alone is expressed His divinity, the Incarnation, and the reality of the Passion. So, even though the other apostles know the answer, it is Peter who replies before anyone else: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Lk 9:10)*. In expressing the nature and the name of Christ – that name which sums up all virtues – Peter has said it all. Are we to raise questions regarding the generation of God, when even Paul says that he knows nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified; and Peter believes that he ought to confess nothing beyond the fact that Jesus is the Son of God?

We poor humans with our weak eyes try to peer into the mystery of when and how He was begotten, and what is the extent of His greatness. Paul knew that questioning of this sort leads nowhere, and certainly does nothing to build up our faith. So he decided to know nothing except Christ Jesus. Peter knew that in the Son of God all things exist, for *"the Father has given all things to the Son" (Jn 3:35)*. If He has given ALL, then He has given the same eternity and majesty that He, the Father, possesses. In what manner the Father generates the Son is beyond my comprehension; but what I do know is that He really and truly is the Son begotten by the Father.

94 I would advise you, then, to believe in the way that Peter believed. If you do, you will have the great happiness of hearing those words addressed to you: *"It is not flesh and blood that has revealed this to you, but my Father who is in Heaven" (Mt 16:17)*. You see, flesh and blood can reveal only that which is terrestrial. But one who speaks of mysteries of the spirit is not depending on the lessons of flesh and blood, but on divine inspiration. Do not rest satisfied with flesh and blood. Do not drink in the precepts and directives of flesh and blood, for fear that you yourself should become flesh and blood. Those who attach themselves to the flesh are flesh, and *"those who are joined to the Lord are one spirit with Him" 1 Co 6:17)*. *"My Spirit,"* God declares, *"shall not remain for ever with humankind. For they are carnal" (Gn 6:3)*.

95 But I trust, I hope in God, that those who hear me are not flesh and blood. I pray that they are free of the lusts of flesh and blood, and that each of my hearers can say: *"I will not fear what flesh can do against me" (Ps 55:5)*! One who overcomes the flesh is a foundation stone of the Church. And if he cannot equal Peter, he can imitate him. God's gifts are great. Not only has He restored what once was ours, but He has even made over to us that which was His.

96 But it is an interesting question why the crowd saw nothing more in Jesus than Elijah, or Jeremiah, or John the Baptist. Elijah, perhaps because he was lifted up to Heaven *(cf.2 K 2:11)*; but Christ was not Elijah. The one was lifted up to Heaven, but the Other came down from Heaven. Elijah, as I said, was lifted up, the Other *"did not think it robbery to be equal with God" (Ph 2:6)*. One is vindicated by the fire that he calls down *(cf.1 K 18:38)*, the Other prefers to heal, rather than destroy, His persecutors.

But why did the crowd think that Jesus was Jeremiah? Perhaps because he was consecrated in his mother's womb *(cf.Jr 1:5)*. But Jesus is not Jeremiah. One is consecrated, the Other consecrates. The consecration of Jeremiah began when he already had his body. The Other is the Holy of Holies.

Why did they think Jesus was John? Was it not because even in his mother's womb he sensed the Lord's presence *(cf.Lk 1:41)*? But Jesus was not John. John adored Him while yet in the womb. The Other was adored. One baptised with water, but Christ baptised with the Holy Spirit *(cf.Mt 3:11)*. One counselled others to do penance, but Jesus forgave sin.

97 Peter did not care what the people might think. He expressed his own opinion when he said: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"*. You are He who is, always is, and knew no beginning; You are He who never ceases to be.

Christ's kindness is immense. He granted to His disciples almost all His names and titles: *"I am,"* He said, *"the light of the world" (Jn 8:12)*; and yet, though He glories in this name, He does not mind giving it, and readily giving it, to His disciples. For He says to them: *"You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14)*. He says: *"I am the living bread" (Jn 6:51)*; and Paul says: *"We, being many, are one bread" (1 Co 10:17)*. *"I am the true vine" (Jn 15:1)*, says Jesus. But you, He says: *"I have planted you as a fruitful vineyard, all true seed" (Jr 2:21)*. Christ is the rock – *"they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and the rock was Christ" (1 Co 10:4)*, yet He does not refuse this title to Peter. He, too, is rock because he has the solid constancy of rock, and his faith will be strong as a rock.

98 Try, my friend to be a rock. You will find this rock not outside you but inside. Your rock is your action; your rock is your spirit. Your house is built on this rock, so that no hurricane of evil spirits can topple it over. Your rock is the faith; faith is the foundation of the Church. If you are a rock you will be within the Church, for the Church rests on the rock. If you are in the Church the gates of Hell shall not prevail against you *(cf.Mt 16:18)*. The gates of Hell are death's gates; and death's gates cannot be the entrance to the Church.

99 What exactly are these gates, these gates of Hell? I declare that they are the various sorts of sin. If you fornicate, you have passed through the gates of death. If you dishonour your word, you have passed through the gates of Hell. If you have committed a mortal sin, you have passed through the gates of death. But God has power to raise you from death's gates, so that you can proclaim His praises at the gates of the daughter of Sion *(cf.Ps 9:15)*.

As for the gates of the Church, they are the gates of chastity, they are the gates of justice, and through them the just person freely enters: *"Open to me,"* he says, *"you gates of justice; I will enter in and give praise to the Lord" (Ps 117:19)*.

Just as the gate of death is the gate of Hell, so too the gate of justice is the gate of God; for: *"This is the gate of the Lord; the just shall enter into it" (Ps 117:20)*. Do not remain, obstinate and obdurate, in your sins, for fear that the gates of Hell will triumph over you. For if sin is the master of your house, the gate of death has surely triumphed. Avoid quarrels and dissension. Avoid angry words and heated clashes, for through things such as these one can walk right into the gates of death. The Lord did not wish, at first, to be publicly known, because He wanted to avoid riots. He was very strict in telling His disciples to tell no one that ***"The Son of Man must suffer much, must be rejected by the elders and the scribes; He must be put to death, but on the third day He shall rise again"*** *(Lk 9:22)*.

100 Maybe the Lord added that even His apostles would have the greatest difficulty in believing in His Passion and Resurrection. He wished to state most clearly and distinctly that He was to suffer and rise again, so that the facts themselves would give rise to faith, and His words would not lead to discord. Christ did not want to glorify Himself. Quite the contrary, He was prepared to lay aside His glory and submit to suffering. Yet you, my friend, you who were born without a particle of glory, boast and throw your weight about? You must advance by the way that Christ went. This means recognising Him. This means the imitation of Christ, both *"in honour and in disgrace" (2 Co 6:8)*. You must glory in the Cross, even as He did. This was the way Paul went, and gloried in it: *"As for me,"* he says, *"may it please God that I should never glory in anything, except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ga 6:14)*.

101 But we must see why, according to Matthew *(cf.Mt 16:20)*, the disciples are warned not to tell anyone that Jesus is the Christ; while here *(cf.Lk 9:22)* we are told that they are not to tell anyone that Christ must suffer and rise again. The answer is that in the one name Christ there is all. It is Christ who was born of a Virgin; Christ who did marvellous things before the people; Christ who died for our sins and rose from the dead. If you subtract so much as one element, you lose your salvation. For even the heretics, apparently, have Christ with them. No one denies the name of

Christ, But these people deny Christ Himself when they refuse Him any of the attributes that belong to Christ. For a number of reasons He told the disciples to keep quiet: to trick the prince of this world; to avoid ostentation; to teach humility; and also so that His disciples –still at a very rudimentary stage of their discipleship – would not be crushed by the burden of such a stupendous announcement.

102 Now let us see what was His reason for telling the unclean spirits to be silent. Here Scripture comes to our help, for it declares: *"God says to the sinner: 'Why do you recount my justices?' " (Ps 49:16).* The Lord does not wish that people, hearing the sinner preach, would follow his evil ways. The devil is a wicked teacher; often he mixes the false with the true. He likes to cover up his fraudulent witness with an appearance of truth.

103 Here's something else to consider: is this the first time that Jesus recommends His disciples to tell no one that He is the Christ, the Messiah? Or had He already given this recommendation to the twelve apostles when He sent them off on their mission? For He said: *"Do not take the road to the Gentiles, and do not enter into the city of the Samaritans. Instead, go to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, exorcise the demons"*; and then He goes on to say: *"Enquire who is worthy, and stay with that person" (Mt 10:5 sq.).* Notice how, in this passage, Jesus never says that they are to preach that He is Christ, the Son of God.

104 There has to be a certain order in a discussion; points have to be set out in the right order. We, too, when pagans feel that they are called to the Church, must observe a certain rule and order regarding the precepts that we put to them.

We have to begin by telling them that there is only one God, Creator of the world and of all things; that in Him we live and move and have our being *(cf Ac 17:28).* He is the Author of our race, and we ought to love Him. We should love Him not only for the good things He gives us in giving us light and life, but also because He is, in a manner of speaking, our Parent.

Next we have to root out of their minds the ideas that they have regarding idols. For, anything made of gold, silver, or wood cannot possibly be possessed of divine energy. Once you have convinced these pagans of the existence of one God then – with God's help – you can begin telling them of the salvation that Christ has given us. Start by showing what He accomplished in His body, then point out those marks of divinity that indicate that He is more than man. Show how death has been vanquished by the strength of Him alone, and how the dead are raised to life.

It is only little by little that Faith grows. When they see that Jesus is more than man, they begin to believe that He is God. By proving that Jesus

could not have done the things that He did without divine power, you can prove that He possessed within Him an energy that was divine.

105 Perhaps you think I do not speak with authority, perhaps you do not believe me. Well, then, read the speech made by the apostle to the Athenians. If he had started with the desire of destroying their idolatrous ceremonies, the pagans would have utterly and indignantly refused to listen. So Paul begins by saying that there is only one God, Maker of this world. He says: *"God who made this world and all things in it" (Ac 17:24).* They could not deny that there is only one Maker of the world, one God, one Creator of all things. Paul added that the Master of Heaven and earth does not consent to dwell in works made by our hands. Human art cannot possibly imprison in such vain material as gold or silver the power of the Divinity. To think so would be unreasonable. But, says Paul, we can find a remedy for our fault by doing penance from the heart. Then he comes to Christ – but as yet he prefers to call Him man rather than God: *"The man,"* says Paul, *"whom God has appointed, giving faith to all by raising Him from the dead" (Ac 27:31).*

In giving a sermon, you have to take your hearers into consideration. Otherwise you might be jeered at before you have even begun to be heard. How could the Athenians have believed that the Word was made flesh, and that a Virgin had conceived by the Spirit? How could they have believed, seeing that they laughed and jeered when Paul spoke of the resurrection of the dead. And yet Denis the Areopagite, and some others, believed in the man, and so came to believe in God. The order in which one comes to believe is not the thing that matters. Perfection is not demanded at the beginning, but from a beginning one arrives at perfection. In accordance with the guidelines I have indicated, Paul instructed the Athenians. We, too, should follow such guidelines with the pagans.

106 When the apostles were speaking to the Jews they said that Christ was He who had been promised by the oracles. They did not immediately and of their own authority call Him Son of God. They said He was a man approved [by God], a just man, a man risen from the dead. They declared He was the man of whom the prophets said: *"You are My Son. This day I have begotten You" (Ps 2:7).* This is what you must do too. When things are very difficult to believe, produce the evidence of the divine word, and demonstrate that Christ's coming was foretold by the prophets. Teach these people that His resurrection, too, was clearly foretold, long in advance, by the witness of Scripture. When I say resurrection, I do not mean that which is normal and common to us [at the end of the world]. Establish our Lord's bodily Resurrection, and you have a sure proof of His divinity. Our Lord was quite the exception to human frailty, for – as you know – the bodies of all others decay after death. But of Jesus Scripture says: *"You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (Ps 15:10).* Having established

the resurrection, you prove that Jesus transcends the characteristics of our human nature, and must be compared to God rather than to man.

107 If you are instructing a catechumen who is hoping to receive the Sacraments of the faithful, you must tell him that there is *"only one God, of whom are all things" (1 Co 8:6)*. You must tell your catechumen not to speak of two Lords: for the Father is perfect, the Son equally perfect and both Father and Son share the same substance. You must tell him that the eternal word is of God. It is not a word that is uttered, but a Word that is active; this is the Word begotten by the Father, not spoken by His voice.

The apostles are not allowed announce Jesus as Son of God. This is so that later they can announce Him as the Crucified. The splendour of Faith is to have a thorough understanding of the Cross. Other crosses are no use to me. Only Christ's Cross is of use to me – and how true, how very true that is. Through it *"the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Ga 6:14)*. If the world is crucified to me, then surely I am dead and I know it. I do not care for it. I know that it passes away. I know that corruption will eat up this world. I avoid it like a bad smell. I fly from it as though it were the plague. I abandon it, knowing that it could do me great harm.

108 Not everyone can readily believe that salvation has been given through the Cross. So establish from the history of the Greeks that salvation through sacrifice is a thing that is possible. The apostle himself, on occasion, persuades unbelievers in such a way, and to destroy the fables of the poets does not disdain to quote from the very verses of the poets. If you recall, it has often happened that whole legions and great nations have been delivered by the sacrifice and death of someone* – as we learn from Greek History. Remember, too, the daughter** of a great leader who was sacrificed so that the Greek armies might cross the sea in safety. Recall that among ourselves, *"the blood of goats and bulls, and the ashes of an heifer, being sprinkles, purify the flesh" (Heb 9:13)*, as we find written in the letter to the Hebrews. It is said, too, that where whole regions have been struck down by plague on account of the sins of men, the death of one person can save all the others. By arguments such as these or by the orderly presentation of precedents that were perhaps planned by God, you can more easily prevail on people to believe, or help them to believe, in the Cross of Christ. For they will be more inclined to agree with us when they find that to do otherwise would be to deny their own history.

109 But there was no one among humankind great enough to take away the sins of the entire world *(cf.Jn 1:29)*. Enoch *(cf.Gn 5:24)* was

* One example is Codrus, King of Athens.

** Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon.

not great enough, nor was Abraham, nor was Isaac *(cf.Gn 22:9 sq.)*. True, Isaac was offered up to death, but he was spared, for he could not wipe out all our sins. What man could be great enough to effect, by his death, the end of all sin? So it was not one of the people, one selected out of a number of others, but the Son of God who was chosen by God the Father. Because He was above all, He could offer Himself for all. He had to die. Being stronger than death, He had to die to deliver everyone else. He became *"a man without help, free among the dead" (Ps 87:5)*. Without the help of man, or any creature, He became free of death, and truly free, for He had shaken off the slavery of lustful desires, and snapped the bonds of death.

BOOK SEVEN

1 ***"I tell you truly that there are people standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God"*** *(Lk 9:27).*

Generally the Lord, in His teaching, raises our thoughts to the reward laid up for those who practise virtue, and encourages us to have a low esteem of earthly rewards. At the same time, the Lord remembers the weakness of the human spirit, and likes to cheer us up with a certain amount of compensation in this life. It is definitely hard to carry the cross; to put one's life at risk; to yield up one's body to death; to be counted for nothing when you would like to be counted for much (even though you aren't). Even people of outstanding virtue are rarely prepared to exchange things present for future bliss.

Yes, for us humans it seems indeed difficult to purchase hope at the cost of such perils, and by giving up the good things of life to make a fine profit in a future existence. So the Master, with kindness and humanity, promises His faithful friends a life that will never end. He would not wish to see anyone broken by despair or losing heart – for, after all, this life is sweet, and its many attractions can soften a person's resolution. In face of death, consolation turns cold. Great is our love of life; and this love, when it sees that our life is menaced, finds little consolation in the caresses offered to it by hope.

But you are going to have no cause for complaint, and you are going to have no excuses. He who is Master of all things has given virtue its reward, and for our weakness He has provided a remedy. He bolsters up our weakness with good things here and now, and sustains our virtue with the hope of future rewards. If you are brave, despise death. If you are timid, run from it. But no one need run away from death – unless it is to follow life. Your life is Christ. It is a life that cannot die.

2 So, if we want to rid ourselves of fear of death, let us stand where Christ is, so that of us, too, He can say those words: *"Truly, there are people standing here who shall not taste death" (Lk 9:27).* It is not enough just to be present; you have to be present where Christ is. Only those who stand firmly by Christ will escape the taste of death. The very choice of the verb leads us to conclude that those who visibly stand in the society of Jesus won't have the slightest sensation of death. Of course, to die in the body means to have some slight flavour of death, but the life of the soul is safeguarded.

3 What does it actually mean, "to taste death"? Is it that because life is, in a sense, bread, so too death is, in a sense, bread? For there are people

who eat *"a bread of sorrow" (Ps 126:2).* And of course we know that the Ethiopians had to eat dragon meat *(Ps 73:14).* God forbid we should have to swallow dragon venom!

But as for us, we have the true bread, the bread that came down from Heaven *(cf.Jn 6:51).* Those who keep faithfully to what is written, will eat that bread.

So there are those who will not taste death until they have seen the Kingdom of God *(cf.Mt 16:28).* There are also those who will not see death at all, according to the psalm that says: *"Who is he that shall live and not see death?" (Ps 88:49).*

4 Who is this person who will not die? After all, resurrection can take place only after death. I know that neither Enoch *(cf.Gn 5:24)* nor Elijah *(cf.2 K 2:11)* died in the body; and I know that our Lord said of John the Evangelist: *"I want him to remain until I come" (Jn 21:22).* But, generally speaking, I think the question here regards not the death of the body but the death of the soul. The statement means that the soul will not die.

There are dead people who live, just as there are living people who are dead – such as *"she that is dead while she is living" (1 Tm 5:6).* We also read: *"Let death come upon them, and let them go down alive into hell" (Ps 54:16).* If a person can go down alive into hell – since by sin one goes down to hell which is the abode of death – it is certain that the continuity of the state of being alive is not interrupted even by the death of the body. Look at Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We have it on divine authority that they are living. *"God is not God of the dead but of the living" (Mt 22:32),* and so God is God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

5 Our Lord is not speaking of one single person, but of many people. For Peter is not dead, seeing that – according to the Lord's own words – the gates of hell shall not prevail against Him. James and John, the Sons of Thunder, are not dead either; for they have been admitted [at the Transfiguration] to the glory of Heaven. Earth means nothing to them, rather flies at their feet.

You, too, can be a Peter. You can be devoted, faithful, a person of peace, and in that way you will open the gates of the Church and escape the gates of hell. You can be a Son of Thunder *(cf.Mk 3:17).* I hear you saying to me: "But how can I be a son of Thunder?" I reply, you can do it by refusing to rest on this earth; you can do it by reposing on the breast of Christ *(cf.Jn 13:25).* You can be a Son of Thunder if the things of this world do not move you; while you, on the contrary, shake up the things of earth by the violence of your soul. Make the earth tremble before you, do not be held back by it. Make the flesh fear the might of your soul. Make it shudder and be vanquished.

Be a Son of the Church, and you will be a Son of Thunder. To you too Christ will say from His Cross: *"Look, this is your Mother,"* and to the Church He will say: *"Look, this is your son" (Jn 19:26)*. When you have contemplated Christ triumphant on the Cross, then you will begin to be a son of the Church. One who regards the Cross as a scandal, is a Jew. He is not a son of the Church. One who sees the Cross as madness is a Greek *(cf.1 Co 1:23)*. The true child of the Church is one who recognises in the Cross a great triumph, and hears in Christ's voice the ring of triumph.

6 To prove to you that Peter, James and John did not taste death, they were given the grace of witnessing the glory of the resurrection. These were the only three whom Jesus, about eight days after speaking these words, took with Him as His companions on the mountain.

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In what sense does Scripture say: ***"Eight days after these words"*** *(Lk 9:28)*? I think it surely means that anyone who hears and believes Christ's words will see Christ's glory at the resurrection. For the resurrection took place on the eighth day – which is why many of the Psalms have the heading: *"For the eighth" (cf.Ps 6)*. Another explanation could be that to give up one's life for the sake of God's word is to save it. Our Lord wants to show that at the resurrection He will fulfil all of His promises.

7 Yet Matthew and Mark mention that the disciples were led up the mountain six days later *(cf.Mt 17:1; Mk 9:1)*. We could say: "after six thousand years", for a thousand years *"are but a day in the sight of God" (Ps 89:4)*. But more than six thousand years are calculated, and I prefer to look on these "six days" as a symbol. The work of creating the world was accomplished in six days *(cf.Gn 2:1)*, let us therefore understand the time by the work, the work by the time. In this way our mind is drawn to the resurrection, which will take place when the world will have completed its course. Or again, whoever lifts himself above this world and has passed above and beyond the transitory things of this age, will await – like someone standing on a great height – the eternal fruit of the resurrection that is to come.

8 We must transcend the works of this world, and so be able to contemplate God face to face. *"Climb onto a high mountain, you who bring glad tidings to Sion" (Is 40:9)*. If you climb a mountain to bring the good news to Sion, you should be all the more eager to do so to herald Christ – and above all the Christ risen in glory! There are, perhaps, many who see Him in the body, for many *"have known Christ according to the flesh; but now we know Him so no longer" (2 Co 5:16)*.

9 Yes, many of us have known Him, because many of us have seen Him – *"We saw Him, and He had no beauty, no comeliness" (Is 53:2)* – but three people, only three specially chosen people, were led up the mountain. I would think that in these three persons the whole human race is mysteriously gathered, seeing that the human race descends from the three sons of Noah *(cf.Gn 9:19)*, but I have to stop and consider that these three were specially chosen. Does it mean that only those who confess Christ will merit to reach the happiness of the resurrection? For *"the wicked do not rise again for judgement" (Ps 1:5)*. They are already judged and punished.

So, these three are chosen to climb the mountain; just as two persons are also chosen to be seen, by the disciples, with the Lord. Either number is sacred. The reason is, perhaps, this: no one can see the glory of the resurrection unless he has treasured in his heart, with pure and utter faith, the mystery of the Trinity. Peter, the one who received the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven *(cf.Mt 16:19)*, goes up the mountain. John was entrusted with the Mother of Jesus *(cf.Jn 19:27)*, and he goes up. James was the first to take his place on the sacerdotal throne *(cf.Euseb. Hist. Eccl. 2:1)*, and he goes up.

10 Then Moses and Elijah appear. These represent the Law and the Prophets, and they appear together with the Word. For the Law cannot exist without the Word, and one cannot prophesy without prophesying the Son of God. Undoubtedly the Sons of Thunder contemplated Moses and Elijah in their bodily splendour, but we too can see Moses every day with the Son of God. After all, we see the Law in the Gospel when we read: *"You shall love the Lord your God" (Mt 22:37; Dt 6:5)*. We see Elijah with the Word of God when we read: *"See, a Virgin shall conceive in her womb" (Is 7:14)*[*].

11 Very much to the point is Luke's comment: ***"And they spoke of the death that He was to accomplish in Jerusalem"*** *(Lk 9:31)*. They were teaching you, my friend, the mysteries of His death. To-day, Moses is still teaching. To-day Elijah still speaks. To-day we still see Moses, but in greater splendour. How could we fail to see him when even the Jewish people were able to see him, and what is more actually saw him? They saw the face of Moses shining in glory *(cf.Ex 34:29)*; but they put on a veil, did not climb the mountain, and so went astray. One who sees only Moses, cannot at the same time see the Word of God.

12 So let us uncover our face, and then, *"beholding the glory of the Lord with open face, we shall be transformed into the same image" (2 Co 3:18)*. Let us climb the mountain, beseeching the Word of God to appear to us in His splendour and beauty; *"with His comeliness and beauty*

[*] Elijah is perceived as representing all prophets.

may He set out, proceed prosperously, and reign" (Ps 44:5). All this is mysterious, all this contains a hidden and deep meaning. According to your capacity the Word grows or diminishes for you; and unless you ascend to the heights of wisdom, Wisdom cannot appear to you. You will fail to grasp the knowledge of the mysteries; and the splendour, the beauty of the Word of God will be lost to you. The Word of God will simply appear to you without loveliness, without glory *(cf.Is 53:2 sq.).* You will simply see Him as a murdered man, subject to our own suffering and weakness. He will seem to you as a word spoken by man; as a letter covered in an envelope. There will be no glow, no splendour of the Spirit.

But if, on considering the Man, you believe that He was conceived of a Virgin; and if little by little, Faith breathes upon you and you believe Him born from the Spirit, then you start to climb the mountain. When Jesus is on the Cross, and you see Him triumphing over death – not annihilated by it, then you have climbed the mountain. You climb the mountain when you recognise how the earth trembled [at His death] *(cf.Mt 27:51-53),* how the sun grew dark, how stygian gloom enveloped the eyes of unbelievers, how tombs were thrown open and the dead walked. Yes, the dead rose to foretell that the Gentile people, dead to God, rose as though from the sealed tomb of the body and came to life bathed in the light of the Cross. If you, my friend, can see this mystery, then you have climbed a high mountain from whose heights it is given you to contemplate another glory of the Word.

13 Different are the garments that He wears in Heaven from those He wears on earth, Perhaps the garments of the Word are discourses on Scripture, because in a certain sense they clothe in speech the divine thoughts. He appeared to Peter, John and James in quite a different aspect, with raiment white and glittering *(cf.Lk 9:24).* So, too, to the eyes of your spirit, the meaning of the sacred writings can shine clearly. Then the divine words dazzle like snow, and the robes of the Word become marvellously white – whiter than any earthly fuller could make them *(cf.Mk 9:2).*

14 We must seek this fuller, we must find this snow. We read that Isaiah went up to the Fuller's Field *(cf.Is 7:3).* Who is this fuller, if not He who washes away our sin? This is the very One who says: *"If your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow"(Is 1:18).* Who is this fuller, if not He who washes off our bodily stains so as to expose to the divine sun the garments of our spirit, the raiment of our virtues?

15 At this point I am going to borrow an illustration from my adversaries in order to refute them. It is as follows: the eloquence of two wise men *[Ulysses and Nestor, cf.Iliad 1:249]* has been compared to snow and bees. I also find that David says: *"How sweet are your words to my palate! They are sweeter to my mouth than honey dripping from the comb" (Ps 118:103).* A little further down I read: *"Your word is a lamp to my*

steps, and a light to my path" (Ps 118:105). God's word is light, God's word is snow. God's word means more than honey and the honeycomb *(cf.Ps 18:11).* Divine lips pour out discourse far sweeter than honey; and the pure speech of Jesus, falling more gently than snow flakes, utters transparent truths.

But really nothing can be compared to the divine Snow, the Word sent from Heaven to earth, that softens the fields of our hearts and makes them fruitful. I do not speak presumptuously, for every word I say can be proved from Scripture. God Himself gives witness when He says: *"May My speech be longed for as the rain and My words fall as the dew; as a shower upon the herb and as rain drops upon the grass" (Dt 32:2).*

16 Lord Jesus, I should like my soul to be watered by your rain. I should like the fields of my soul to be fresh and green. In your kindness, spread over my earth the whiteness of this snow, so that when the spring comes and the early heat, my fields will not be parched and burnt. Rather, may the seed of your heavenly word, covered and protected by the snow, make them truly fertile. When the snow falls the birds have no where to live, and so the harvest is richer than in other years and the corn more abundant.

17 Peter saw this grace. Those with him also saw it, though they were quite overcome by slumber *(cf.Lk 9:32).* Such is the incomprehensible splendour of the divinity that it wipes out the bodily senses. If our eyes of flesh cannot bear to look into the radiance of the sun, how can our corrupt and human members support the glory of God? That is why our body, at the resurrection, will take on a purer and more subtle form. It will be freed from the heaviness and grossness of the flesh.

Perhaps they were overcome by sleep so that, after their repose, they might see the image of the resurrection. It was when they awoke that they saw His majesty, because we have to be awake to see the glory of Christ. Peter was beside himself. No longer could the charms of this world hold him captive. He was conquered by the charm of resurrection.

18 *"It is good for us to be here" (Lk 9:33).* These were his words. Similar were the words of Paul: *"To be with Christ is far better" (Ph 1:23).* But Peter was not content simply to praise. He would excel not only in sentiment but in giving effective proof of his devotion. So this zealous worker promises to render obedient service and to build three tabernacles. Even though he did not understand what he was saying, he was at any rate promising to work. This was not thoughtless enthusiasm, but eager readiness to pile up the fruits of sincere love.

His lack of understanding sprang from his human condition; his promise sprang from true devotion. But human nature is not capable of constructing within this corruptible body, this body doomed to death, a tabernacle fit for God. Whether in the soul, whether in the body, whether

anywhere else, avoid seeking that which you are not permitted to know. If Peter did not understand, did not know, how can you, my friend, know? If Peter, who made such a promise, did not know, if Peter's great soul did not understand the limits of the body, how can we understand? Yes, how can we understand, we who are weighed down by torpor and locked behind the barriers of the flesh? At any rate, be sure that Peter's devotion was pleasing to God.

19 ***"And as He spoke these words a cloud came and overshadowed them"*** *(Lk 9:34).*

This cloud came from the Holy Spirit. It is a cloud that does not darken the heart, but reveals to it things that are hidden. We find it in another text, where the angel says: *"And the power of the Most High shall overshadow you" (Lk 1:35).* The outcome of this appears clearly when they hear the voice of God saying:

20 ***"This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him"*** *(Lk 9:35).* Elijah is not the Son. Moses is not the Son. But this is the Son. You see Him now alone, for the others withdrew as soon as the Lord was named Son. You see, perfect faith is to know the Son of God *(cf.Jn 17:3)*, and this applies not only to beginners, not only to the perfect, but even to those in Heaven. But – since I have already pointed this out further back *(1:27)* – we must learn now that this cloud is not formed by the nebulous vapours of misty mountains – *"mountains that smoke" (Ps 103:32).* Nor is it formed by the dark vapours of condensed air that obscure the heavens with their frightful darkness. No, it is a luminous cloud that does not soak us with torrential and disastrous rain. It is a cloud whose dew, sent by the voice of the all powerful God, softens the human heart and impregnates it with faith.

21 ***"And once the voice had been heard, Jesus was found alone"*** *(Lk 9:36).*

There had been three, now there was but One. At first the apostles saw three, in the end they see only One. Because, for perfect faith, there is but One. So, too, the Lord asks this very thing of the Father, that we might all be one *(cf.Jn 17:22).* Not only are Moses and Elijah one in Christ, but we are too, because we are the one body of Christ *(cf.Rm 12:5).* These two prophets were, so to speak, absorbed into the body of Christ; and we too shall be but one with Christ Jesus. Or put it this way: the Law and the prophets come from the Word. Now, whatever commences from the Word, ends in the Word; for *"the end of the Law is Christ, for the justification of all who believe" (Rm 10:4).*

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22 ***"Foxes have their holes, and the birds of the air have their nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"*** *(Lk 9:58).*

It would be unreasonable to consider that someone rejected by the Lord and looked on by Him as unsuitable, could possibly be simple and sincere, even if he did promise obedience and faithful service. Our Lord is not looking for an ostentatious display of service, but for purity and sincerity of heart. This is why He said earlier: ***"Anyone who receives this child in my name ..."*** *(Lk 9:48).*

23 In this passage our Lord teaches us that simplicity should be without pretentiousness; charity should be without envy; devotedness should be without fuss and show. He counsels us to carry, in an adult heart, the spirit of a child. Provided, of course, that the child attributes nothing to itself and is a good child; a child that has not reached the use of reason; a child that has not sinned. However, since many consider simplicity without reason to be not virtue but weakness, we are recommended to strive deliberately and knowingly to acquire this gift of nature.

24 This is why Jesus says: ***"Whoever welcomes this child in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me welcomes Him who sent Me"*** *(Lk 9:48).* The fact is that whoever receives the imitator of Christ receives Christ, and whoever embraces the image of God, embraces God. But since we were unable to see the image of God, the Incarnation made the Word present to us. In this way the divinity, that so far surpassed us, drew close to us.

25 Ardent zeal and burning charity somewhat ran away with John. He loved Jesus greatly and in return was greatly loved. He thought it right to exclude from their good work a man who did not belong to their party *(cf.Lk 9:49).* So it was right that instead of finding fault with John, Jesus instructed him. Because he was motivated by love, Jesus could not correct him. But He taught him, so that he would learn the difference between weak and brave. For the Lord rewards the brave, yet at the same time He does not shut out the weak.

26 ***"Let them be, and do not stop them. For whoever is not against you is for you"*** *(Lk 9:50).*

It is true, Lord. For even Joseph and Nicodemus, who were disciples in secret out of fear, never refused You their services when the moment came *(cf.Jn 19:38 sq.).* Yet You say elsewhere: *"One who is not with Me is against Me, and whoever gathers not with Me, scatters" (Lk 11:23).* Can You please explain this? For there would appear to be some contradiction. I incline to look on it this way: He who sounds the depths of the soul is well able to distinguish the motive underlying the action of each one. So to one He can say: *"Follow Me"*, to another, *"Foxes have their holes"*. One He

draws, the other He dismisses. From this you can learn that devotedness is rewarded, and lack of it is not.

27 If Jesus reproached His disciples for wanting to bring down fire on those who would not welcome Christ *(cf.Lk 9:54 sq.)*, it is to show us that we must not always punish those who have sinned. Sometimes kindness is more advantageous. It is for you a chance to practise patience, and it can bring about the reformation of the sinner. Besides, those Samaritans whose place wasn't burnt down, were very quick to believe. Another point is this: Jesus does not want to be received by people who have failed to be converted by a simple soul. Had He wished it, He could have turned these non-welcoming folk into a thoroughly welcoming community. Why did they not welcome the messenger? The Evangelist himself tells us the reason when he says: ***"Because His face was set towards Jerusalem"*** *(Lk 9:53)*.

For the disciples' sake, Jesus would have liked to have been welcomed in Samaria. But God calls those whom He chooses to call, and makes religious those whom He wishes to make religious. The disciples are not at fault. They hold to the Law. They know that Phineas was looked on as a remarkably good man for putting to death those who committed sacrilege *(cf.Nb 25:7 sq.; Ps 105:30 sq.)*. They also knew that at the prayer of Elijah fire fell from Heaven to avenge the prophet *(cf.1 K 18:38)*. Vengeance is all very well for one who fears, but those who are utterly fearless do not need to take revenge. The incident shows us too that the apostles had the privileges of prophets, since they simply take it for granted that they have the same powers that the great prophet merited to obtain. They never doubt that at their mere word fire will come down from Heaven. After all, they are the "Sons of Thunder".

28 Everything the Lord does, He does to perfection. He does not receive the presumptuous man who puts himself forward *(cf.Lk 9:61)*. At the same time He does not get angry with those who refuse to welcome their own Master. He shows that perfect virtue does not thirst for revenge; He shows that where charity abounds, there is no angst, and that we must not reject those who are weak but help them. Anger should be far from religious souls; thirst for vengeance should be far from the great of heart; and far from those who are wise should be imprudent friendships or foolish simplicity. Therefore He says to this man: *"Foxes have holes" (Lk 9:58)* and with that He refuses the proffered services of one who is insincere. Our Faith must be circumspect. We must not too readily receive everyone. There is the danger in opening to unbelievers the inmost recesses of our dwelling, we might have a fall. By foolish credulity we could tumble into the nets of unbelief.

29 I do not want it to appear that I have shied away from the question why, in this passage does Jesus tell His disciples not to hinder those

who, by laying their hands on the possessed can command the unclean spirits, in the name of Jesus, to come out of them. For after all, in Matthew He says: *"I do not know you. Depart from Me, workers of iniquity" (Mt 7:23)*. We have to note that the thought is not different nor the words discordant. But the lesson is that a cleric is required not only to fulfil his ministry, but also to act virtuously. You might, by invoking the name of Christ, be able to exercise a gift; but that does not mean that the chosen ones, simply by invoking His name, can be saved, [their lives have to measure up to their calling]. So no one need boast nor think himself great because he has this gift of working wonders by invoking the eternal name. What he did was not performed by his own human weakness. The devil is vanquished not by your merit, but by the hatred of which he is the object.

30 What we can and should do is to be sincere in our faith, and to keep the commandments devoutly; then it cannot be said to us: *"Foxes have holes"*. The fox is a cunning fellow, full of tricks, always intent on what he can steal and plunder. He can't let anything alone, can't let anything be at peace. Nothing is safe with the fox about, for it is actually round your house and yard that he comes seeking his prey.

31 The Lord is comparing heretics to foxes. So, when He calls the Gentiles, He excludes the heretics. What a cunning creature the fox is! Making holes in the earth for himself; and always wanting to lie concealed in his hole. Such are the heretics. They know not how to construct for themselves a dwelling-place, and are always trying to trick those who dwell around them. Jacob lives in a house *(cf.Gn 25:27)*; the heretic has his hole. Like a clever fox he never ceases to lie in wait for that hen of which the Gospel speaks when it says: *"How often I have longed to gather together your children, as the mother hen gathers her chicks, and you would not! Look, your house shall be left to you desolate" (Mt 23:37-38)*.

It is right that they should have holes, seeing that they lost the house that was theirs. This animal can never be tamed, which is why the apostle warns us: *"After one warning, avoid the heretic" (Tt 3:10)*.The fox is of no use, and is not even edible. Christ did not have the fox in mind when He said: *"My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me" (Jn 4:34)*. What is more, He banishes him from His vineyards; *"Catch the foxes for Me,"* He says, *"the little foxes that make havoc of the vine" (Sg 2:15)*. Notice that it is the little vines that the fox attacks, not the full grown ones. The reason why Samson attached firebrands to the foxes' tails and let them loose among the cornfields of the Philistines *(cf.Jg 15:4)*, was to indicate to us that heretics will always try to burn other people's crops. They bark and yelp. For how could they have refinement of speech, how could they even have a language, those heretics who deny the Word of God? At the moment they go about unmuzzled, but they will be muzzled when the end comes; and the torches attached to their tails are a sign that they will burn in eternity.

32 Turning, now, to" the birds of the air", I would say that the interpretation often given is that they symbolise evil spirits who build their nests in evil hearts. That is why the Son of Man, seeing wickedness all around Him, says He has nowhere to lay His head. When knavery and dishonesty rule the world, there is no room for innocence and simplicity; and divinity cannot take possession of the human breast. Christ's head is God *(cf.1 Co 11:3)*; and when God recognises a soul's innocence, His power and His majesty recline – so to speak – in that soul. From all of which we can learn that grace falls in greater abundance on the hearts of the good.

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33 You see, then, that God is far from disdaining our homage. It is fraud that He disdains, So, having dismissed the trickster, He chooses the innocent:

"Follow Me" *(Lk 9:59)*, he says. But He says it to someone knowing that the person's father is dead – no doubt the father regarding whom Scripture says: *"Forget your own home and your father" (Ps 44:11)*. Here you see in what manner the Lord calls those whom He pities. He says when the man asks leave to bury his father: ***"Let the dead bury their dead. As for you, you must go and announce the Kingdom of God"*** *(Lk 9:60)*.

34 It is an act of religion to bury the dead, as we know, why then is the candidate told not to bury his own father? Is it not to make you understand that the divine must take precedence over what is human? To care for the dead is good, but in this instance it is not *à propos*. To divide one's attention is to take from one's affection. To divide one's solicitude is to hinder one's progress. The more important command must be obeyed first. The apostles, not to interfere with their work of preaching, appointed deacons to look after the poor *(cf.Ac 6:2 sq.)*.

35 They themselves, when the Lord sent them out on their mission, were told not to greet anyone they might meet on the road *(cf.Lk 10:4)*. It is not that there is anything wrong with such little acts of goodwill and courtesy, but because the Lord preferred that his apostles should get on with their task.

But how, I hear you asking, can the dead bury the dead? I think we have to understand "dead" in a double sense. There is natural death, and there is mortal sin. There is even a third death, by which we die to sin and live to God – like Christ, who is dead to sin: *"For in dying to sin He died once for all; and living He lives for God" (Rm 6:10)*.

36 So, there is a death that separates body from soul. We must not fear it, we must not dread it. For us it is not a punishment, but a departure. For the courageous, it holds no terror; for the wise, it is a thing to be

desired; for the unfortunate it is something to be longed for. Of death Scripture declares: *"People shall search for death, and not find it" (Rv 9:6)*.

37 There is another death which puts an end to the cravings of this world, where it is not our nature that dies but our faults. We undergo this death when, at our baptism, we die and are buried with Christ *(cf.Rm 6:4)*. We die to all that constitutes this world when we learn to forget our previous activity. This was the death that Balaam wished to die, so that he could live to God. Speaking in prophecy he said: *"Let my soul die the death of the just, and my seed be like to their seed" (Nb 23:10)*!

38 There is a third death. This occurs when one refuses to recognise Christ who is our life. For life eternal is this: to know Christ *(cf.Jn 17:3)*. The just see Him now, but only in a shadow. In eternity they will see Him face to face. For, *"the spirit before our face is Christ the Lord" (Lm 4:20)*. Scripture says of Him: *"Under His shadow we shall live among the nations" (Lm 4:20)*. Under the shadow of His wings, David hoped *(cf.Ps 56:2)*; the Church has sat down under the shadow of Him for whom she longed *(cf.Sg 2:3)*.

39 Lord Jesus, if even your shadow is so desirable, what must the reality be? What will it be when we shall truly live, no longer in the shadow, but in Life itself? At present *"our life is hidden with Christ in God; but when Christ our life appears, then we also will appear with Him in glory" (Col 3:3 sq.)*. Sweet is that life that knows not death; for this present life is by its nature destined to death, and often one actually desires death. Often, too, the soul undergoes death by being soiled by sin – for *"the soul that sins shall die" (Ez 18:4)* – but when it has become robust and strong, by the blessed gift of grace, it will no longer be mortal but will reap the fruit of eternal life.

40 My friends, we must hurry towards true life. In this life we are sad, because we are exiled from the Lord *(cf.2 Co 5:6)*. Let us become exiles from the body so as not to be exiles from the Lord. We too long to be one with almighty God and to look upon the only Son of God. Through the glory of the resurrection we shall be lifted up into the radiant light of the Lord. There, in an unspeakable harmony of souls, and joined by a bond that will never be dissolved, we shall be copies of the Unity of Eternal Peace. In this way will be fulfilled what the Son of God promised when He prayed to the Father: *"May they be one, as we are one" (Jn 17:21)*.

41 Our Lord is not forbidding us to weep for a father, to bury a father; but reverence and duty to God surpasses the bonds of family affection. Those whose calling is in this world have their obligations; those chosen to belong specially to the Lord have other obligations. One may also

look at it in another way: *"The throat of the wicked is an open grave" (Ps 5:11)*. We are being recommended to consign to oblivion those whose value will decay with their corpse. The son is not being asked to dishonour his father, but the believer is being separated from communion with the unbeliever.

42 Good people have, if I may put it this way, their own place of burial. Take for instance the woman of whom Jesus said: *"In pouring this perfume over My body, she has done it for My burial" (Mt 26:12)*. Anyone who, by true and genuine faith, buries Christ within him so as to rise again with Christ, ought never to bury inside himself the bad faith of the devil.

43 Then there is the prophetic sense to be considered. There is a "laying to rest" which consists of placing on the tombs of our ancestors something that you, reader of these lines, understand. It is something of which infidels ought to know nothing.* I am not speaking of dishes of food and vessels of drink, but of the most holy Communion of the sacred Offering. Our Lord is not forbidding us to fulfil a duty; but He is indicating a religious mystery, namely that we are not to hold communion with dead pagans. The Sacraments are not for the dead. But it is equally true that those who possess [eternal] life are not to be seen as dead.

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44 ***"See, I send you out as lambs among wolves"*** *(Lk 10:3)*.

This He says to the seventy chosen disciples whom He sent, two by two, before Him. Why two by two? Because the animals entered the Ark two by two, male and female; not pure as regards number,** but purified by the mystery of the Church. all this is later made clear in the oracle spoken to Saint Peter by the Holy Spirit when He said: *"What God has made clean, you must not call unclean" (Ac 10:15)*. Peter understood this to refer to the Gentiles, who up to that time had been more interested in natural procreation than in supernatural grace. These Gentiles the Lord has now purified and made heirs of His Passion.

45 Jesus was sending the disciples into this harvest field – where the seeds had already been well sown by the Word of God; but they needed to be worked on, cultivated and cared for with the greatest love by the farmer. Otherwise the birds of the air would come along and gobble up

* The mystery of the Eucharist was meant to be kept secret from unbelievers. There may also be an allusion here to Mass offered on the tombs of martyrs.

** i.e. not having the purity, simplicity, and unity of the number "one"

the seed that had been sown *(cf.Lk 8:5)*. He says to His disciples: ***"See, I send you out as lambs among wolves"*** *(Lk 10:3)*.

46 These animals are completely opposite to each other. The wolves devour the lambs. But the Good Shepherd has no fears for His flock. He sends out His disciples, not to be the prey of the wolves, but to spread among them His grace. The Good Shepherd takes the greatest care of His lambs and does not let the wolves do anything to harm them. He sends out His lambs among the wolves to fulfil the word of Scripture: *"In those days, wolves and lambs will feed together" (Is 65:25)*.

47 I believe that you rather liked my recent remarks on the fox. I believe that you followed and agreed with me when I gave you the symbolism of this little animal. This makes me hope that I shall still hold your interest when I unveil the profound mysteries hidden behind the symbol of the wolf. Foxes, as I said earlier, symbolise heretics. By calling themselves Christians they profess to follow Christ, but they deny Him by their deplorable tricks and falseness. The Lord does not welcome them. He dismisses them and banishes them from His nest. We must now consider what is symbolised by the wolves.

48 Wolves are beasts who lie in wait for lambs. They prowl round the sheepfolds; they dare not enter into dwelling-places; if they catch the dogs asleep and the shepherds careless, or if the shepherds are away, they spring at the throats of the lambs and strangle them. Savage and rapacious beasts, their bodies are so rigid by nature that they have difficulty in turning round. They are carried along by a sort of impetus, and on that account are often tricked.

It is said [e.g. by Pliny] that if wolves are first to see someone, they have a natural power of striking that person dumb. But if the person should happen to see them first, he can put them to flight. Therefore I must exercise extreme caution. For if in to-day's discourse, the grace of the heavenly mysteries fails to spring with *éclat* from my lips, you will think that the wolves have seen me first and have robbed me of my speech!

49 Surely we may compare these wolves to heretics who lie in wait for Christ's lambs? They prefer to prowl round the sheepfold by night rather than by day. Always, with these faithless ones, it is night. By their false interpretations, by the obscurity and cloudiness of their reasoning, they hide the light of Christ and, in so far as they can, they obscure it.

So they roam round the sheepfolds, not daring to enter into the dwellings of Christ. Therefore they cannot be cured, because Christ does not want to lead them into His own Inn – that Inn where the man was brought when, on his journey down from Jerusalem, he fell among thieves *(Lk 10:30 sq.)*. To that Inn he was brought and taken proper care of. The

good Samaritan bound up his wounds after pouring into them wine and oil. He then placed him on his own mule and brought him to an inn. There he entrusted him to the care of the innkeeper. No one can be cured unless he goes to the doctor. If the sick would only seek the Physician, they would not belittle Him.

50 They lie in wait for the shepherd to be absent. They also try to kill the pastors of the Church or to send them into exile, because when the shepherds are there, they cannot attack Christ's lambs. These bandits try to ravage our Lord's flock; and their spirit is hard and inflexible – like a body that has gone rigid – so that they never turn back from their error. This is why the apostle says: *"After one warning, avoid the heretic" (Tt 3:10)*. He knew that people of that type are lost. Christ, true Interpreter of Scripture, plays tricks on them, so that they will pour out in vain their barking noise. They will bark into a void and harm nobody.

51 If they get round someone by the specious cleverness of their arguments, they will rob him of the power of speech; they will make him dumb – for when we no longer proclaim the glory of the Word of God in all its truth then indeed we are dumb. Be careful that the heretic does not rob you of that Word. See the heretic before he sees you. He slithers and glides so long as his bad faith remains hidden. But if you recognise his wicked inventions, you need have no fear of losing the good Word. Be on your guard against the venom of false and specious discussions. These wolves want your soul, they leap at your throat, they sink their teeth into your vital parts and hang on. The bites of the heretics are cruel. More cruel, more savage, than the bites of wolves; and their greed and impiety are without limits.

52 It need not at all surprise you that they put on a human appearance. On the outside you see a human being, but inside it is a beast that grinds its teeth. Make no mistake, these are most certainly the wolves spoken of in the Divine words of the Lord Jesus when He said: *"Be on your guard against false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing; but inside they are ravening wolves. You will recognise them by their fruits" (Mt 7:15 sq.)*.

If, then, you are favourably impressed by their looks, verify them by their fruits. You hear someone called a bishop,* but you know that he is only out for what he can get. Clothed as a lamb, he is in fact a beast of prey. A lamb without, a wolf within. His acts of robbery and plunder are beyond all telling. His limbs are frozen in a sort of night of Scythian gloom. He steals here, he robs there. With blood dripping from his jowls he seeks whom he

* Apparently Auxentius, Arian bishop of Milan.

may devour *(cf.1 P 5:8)*. He's a wolf, isn't he? His thirst to kill is insatiable; and he longs only to satisfy his rage by the death of the faithful.

53 He howls rather than preaches. For he denies the Author of the word, and mingles his sacrilegious speech with beastly snarls. He pays no homage to the Lord Jesus, our Guide to eternal life. We heard his howlings when the sword was let loose in the world. He showed his ferocious fangs, his swollen lips, and believed he had robbed us all of speech when, in fact, he alone was lost.

54 The Lord tells us how to avoid this wolf, and the precautions that we ought to take. He says: ***"Do not carry either purse, or wallet, or shoes"*** *(Lk 10:)*. Why may we not have a wallet? Matthew puts it more explicitly when he says: *"Have neither gold nor silver" (Mt 10:9)*. If you are not allowed to possess gold, how can anyone take it from you, how can anyone steal it from you? If you are told that you must give what you have, how can you pile up and multiply that which you do not have? *"You, who teach others, fail to teach yourself! You, who preach that we are not to steal, steal from others! You say we must not commit adultery, but you commit adultery yourself! You, who abhor idols, commit sacrilege yourself! You boast of the Law, but by violating it you dishonour it! For the name of God is, through you, being blasphemed" (Rm 2:21-24)*.

55 Peter was not that sort of person. He was the first to follow out the divine counsel. Anxious to demonstrate that the Lord's command had not been given in vain, Peter said to the beggar that was asking him for money: *"I have neither silver nor gold" (Ac 3:6)*. He is delighted to have neither silver nor gold, but for you it is an embarrassment to have less money than you want. There is such a thing as glorious poverty, because there is also such a thing as happy poverty. For Scripture says: *"Happy are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3)*.

But what really makes Peter so delighted is not the fact that he is without silver or gold, but the fact that he is obeying our Lord's express wishes: *"Do not possess gold" (Mt 10:9)*. What Peter is saying is this: Do you not see that I am Christ's disciple, and yet you ask me for gold? We disciples have something different, something much more precious than gold. We can work miracles in His name. So, I do not have what Jesus has not given me; but I certainly have that which He has given me: *"In the name of the Lord Jesus, get up and walk" (Ac 3:6)*.

56 It follows that the Lord finds fault with the man who wanted to build bigger barns to house his great heaps of corn *(cf.Lk 12:16 sq.)*. For that man is acting contrary to the Lord's counsels. So, too, anyone who wants to make a bag into which to stuff his gold, incurs the most serious displeasure.

57 *"Nor wallet nor shoes"*. These articles are usually made from leather, that is to say from the skin of a dead animal. Now, the Lord does not want anything mortal in us! Remember how He said to Moses: *"Take off your shoes, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Ex 3:5)*. He has to remove shoes that are mortal and terrestrial before he can be sent to set his people free. The officer in charge of so great an undertaking must not be afraid of anything. Fear of death should not deter him from his mission. For this same Moses, when he had freely and voluntarily come to the defence of his own people – the Jews – later lost his nerve, feared that he would be reported, and fled from Egypt.

The Lord recognised his good intentions while at the same time being aware of his weakness. Therefore He judged it best that Moses should shake off those shoes that with their mortal thongs held fast the footsteps of his mind and soul.

58 Now, someone is going to ask why is it that in Egypt they were told to have their feet shod while eating the paschal lamb *(cf.Ex 12:11)*, and yet the apostles were sent without shoes to preach the Gospel. I reply that we must consider that in Egypt one has to be on one's guard against snake bites. There is much venom in Egypt; and while celebrating the Pasch figuratively, one could be exposed to the serpent's bite. But the preachers of truth can render ineffective the serpent's poison and need not fear it.

On the island of Malta a viper bit Paul *(cf.Ac 28:3 sq.)*. The natives, seeing the viper hanging from his hand expected that he would die; but when they saw him quite unharmed they declared that he was God, for the poison did him no harm. To convince you that what I say is true, listen to the Lord's own words: *"**See, I have given you power to trample on serpents and scorpions, and on all the enemy forces; and they will do you no harm**" (Lk 10:19)*.

59 The apostles are given orders not to carry a staff in their hand – this is a detail added by Matthew *(cf.Mt 10:10)*. What is the significance of the staff? The staff stands for power, and it can also be used to beat people. The Lord is humble – for *"in humility His judgement has been raised high" (Is 53:8)* – and, being humble, the Lord has instructed His disciples to carry out their mission in a spirit of humility.

To humility, it has pleased the Lord to join patience. We have Peter's testimony to this patience: *"When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He was struck, He did not strike back" (1 P 2:23)*. What He is saying is: "Be imitators of me; drop your desire for revenge. When arrogant people strike you, do not strike back with your fists, but reply to their blows with patience and greatness of heart."

You should never imitate actions that you abhor in others. Your very gentleness towards insolent fellows will strike them much harder than any blows. Such was the blow that the Lord returned to the man who struck

Him, when He said: *"If anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other one as well" (Mt 5:39)*. It is a kind of judgement on a person, a dagger thrust in the heart, when that person perceives that in return for the wrong he has done, he receives only kindness..

60 On the other hand, there were also certain apostles sent out with a rod, as Paul indicates when he says: *"What would you have? Do you want me to come with rod in hand, or lovingly and in a spirit of mildness?" (1 Co 4:21)*. Paul also gave this rod to Timothy: *"Reprove, entreat, rebuke" (2 Tm 4:2)*. Perhaps, too, before the Lord's Passion, when the minds of the people were swaying this way and that, gentleness was the one thing necessary. But after the Passion, reprimands became necessary. Yes indeed, let the Lord soothe the heart, and let Paul administer correction. Let Him who can touch even the hardest hearts, use persuasion; and let Paul, who cannot always succeed in persuasion, make use of correction. Paul, well versed in the teaching of the Law, drew from it his rod. For he had read: *"Whoever spares the rod, loves not his child" (Pr 13:24)*. He had also read that to eat the paschal meal the Jews were commanded to have a staff in their hand *(cf.Ex 12:11)*. The Old Testament also quotes the Lord as saying: *"I will visit their iniquities with a rod" (Ps 88:33)*.

In the New Testament, however, the Lord offers Himself so as to spare the world. *"If it is I,"* He says, *"whom you seek, let these others go" (Jn 18:8)*. In another place you read that when the apostles wanted to ask Heaven to send down fire on the Samaritans who would not welcome the Lord Jesus to their city, He turned and reprimanded them: *"You do not know,"* He said, *"of what spirit you are. The Son of Man did not come to destroy souls, but to save them" (Lk 9:55 sq.)*.

61 It follows, then, that the more perfect are sent out without a staff; and the weaker eat with staff in hand. Yet even Paul, though he may threaten to use the rod, visits sinners in *a spirit of mildness*. As well as that, just to show you how gentle a doctor he is, he consults the wishes of those whom he is going to reprimand. *"What would you have?"* he asks, *"That I come to you rod in hand, or lovingly and in a spirit of mildness?" (1 Co 4:21)*. He mentions the rod only once, but twice he adds amendments of a kinder nature; for he joins mildness to love. True, he began by threatening; but he also used kindness, for in his second letter to the Corinthians he says: *"I call God to witness upon my soul that, to spare you, I did not come to Corinth" (2 Co 1:23)*. Now see why he thought he must spare them: *"So as not to come to you again in sorrow" (2 Co 2:1)*. He has thrown away the rod, and what he uses now is gentleness.

62 ***"Salute no one on the way"** (Lk 10:4)*.

This could strike you as somewhat harsh and arrogant, and not at all in keeping with the precepts of a Lord who is gentle and humble. He had

told His disciples that they must even give up their place at table *(cf.Lk 14:7 sq.)*, and now He is telling them: *"Salute no one on the way"*. It is a custom everywhere, and a very pleasant custom, to exchange polite greetings. It is in this manner that those of lower station win favour with those of higher station; it is a practice held in honour even among the pagans. It is a custom observed by Gentiles and Christians alike. How, then, could our Lord tear from us this pleasant mark of courtesy?

63 But, my friend, you must think a moment. He does not simply say: *"Salute no one"*, but adds: *"on the way"*. Remember that Elisaeus, too, when despatching his servant to lay his staff on the dead body of the little boy, told him to salute no one on the way *(cf.2 K 4:29)*. He told him to hurry up, to lose no time in carrying out his mission, but to hasten on towards resurrection. No chat with people he might meet on the road was to delay his carrying out of this important mission.

Here, too, it is not the pleasant custom of greeting people that the Lord forbids, but rather the failure to carry out at once the task imposed, and the placing of obstacles in the way. When divine commands are issued, human customs may have to be put to one side for the present. It is a lovely thing to greet people; but the accomplishment of divine works is lovelier still – especially if done promptly. A delay in carrying out a commission often gives offence. That is why even politeness is sometimes forbidden, for fear that civility – excellent though it be – should get in the way of duty. That is, if it is a duty that *must* be performed at once.

64 Now we must look at another virtue: not to pass from one house to another like vagabonds *(cf.Lk 10:7 sq.)*; but to be faithful to those who initially showed us hospitality and to persevere in love. Once bonds of hospitality have been forged, we must not wilfully break them. We must arrive bearing peace, and our very first entry into the house must be solemnly marked by the blessing of peace. We are to be pleased by what we get to eat and drink. The Gospel of the heavenly Kingdom is to be preached, and the royal standards of the Faith are not to be lowered. If people are not prepared to give us the hospitality of their town, then we are to shake the dust from our feet.

65 The Lord also teaches us that there will be a more severe punishment for those unwilling to follow the Gospel than for those judged to have broken the Law. For even Tyre and Sidon *(cf.Lk 10:13)* – had they seen such wonders and such heavenly works – would not have despised the remedy of repentance. The world, with all its riches and fastidiousness, is not to be compared to the heavenly gift; but neither is it to be abandoned without remedy. The chance of repentance is offered to each and all.

Then Jesus makes known a heavenly secret: it has pleased God to reveal Himself more to the little ones of this world than to the wise *(cf.Mt 11:25;*

Paul expresses this in greater detail, he says: *"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world with its wisdom failed to recognise God, it has pleased God – by the foolishness of our preaching – to save those who believe" (1 Co 1:20 sq.)*.

66 By "little one" we have to understand those who do not push themselves forward; those who do not seek to impress by a great display of cleverness and stuntsmanship; those who do not deck out their knowledge in false eloquence – as do many philosophers. It was a "little one" who said: *"Lord, my heart is not proud, nor haughty my eyes. I have not gone after marvels and wonders that are beyond me" (Ps 130:1)*. And to show you that this "little" one is not a child who hasn't reached the use of reason, but a person of profound humility with a horror of boasting, the psalmist goes on to say: *"But I have lifted up my soul" (Ps 130:2)*. Surely you can see that this "little one" was in fact great, and that he had reached the very heights of virtue? This is the kind of "little one" that the apostle wants us to be when he says: *"If any among you should seem to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, so that he may be wise; for the wisdom of this world is stupidity in the eyes of God" (1 Co 3:18 sq.)*.

67 Then there follows a very fine passage on the faith, where Jesus says that all things have been surrendered to Him by His Father *(cf.Lk 10:22)*. When you read "all things" you can take this to mean that Jesus is all powerful. He is not of a different colour, of a different race, from His Father. When you read "surrendered", you confess that Jesus is Son, and that all that belongs to His Father belongs also to Him by right of nature; by right of unity of substance; and is not given to Him simply as a gift or favour. He goes on to say: *"No one knows the Son, except the Father; and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom it pleases Him to reveal Himself" (Lk 10:22)*.

68 I recall making reference to this passage in books that I wrote on the faith *(cf.De Fide 4:6)*. But now I shall show you that just as the Son reveals the Father to those whom He pleases, so too the Father reveals the Son to those whom He pleases. Listen to these words spoken by the Lord Jesus Himself when He praises Peter for having recognised the Son of God: *"You are happy, Simon, Son of Jonah, for it is not flesh or blood that has revealed this to you, but My Father who is in Heaven" (Mt 16:17)*.

69 Then follows the text where those who think they are great experts in the Law are unmasked *(cf.Lk 10:25 sq.)*. They stick to the letter of the Law, but miss the whole point of the Law. From the very first chapter of the Law, Jesus proves that, right from the beginning, the Law preached the Father and the Son; and even foretold the mystery of the Lord's Incarnation.

Here are the words: ***"You shall love the Lord your God, and you shall love your neighbour* as yourself"*** *(Lk 10:27)*.

70 Then the Lord says to the legal expert: ***"Do this, and you shall live"*** *(Lk 10:28)*. But the expert, not being a believer in Christ, did not know who was his neighbour. So he replied: ***"Who is my neighbour?"*** *(Lk 10:29)*. You see, if you fail to recognise Christ, you cannot understand the Law. How could anyone know the Law, if they do not know the truth? For the Law is herald of the truth.

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71 ***"A certain man was on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho"*** *(Lk 10:30)*.

Before setting out to explain this text, I think it *á propos* to say a few words on Jericho – a city with a very ancient history. In the Book entitled "Jesus [Joshua], Son of Nun", you will remember having read that it was a very considerable city, surrounded with walls and ramparts. Neither sword nor battering-ram could force its way through those bulwarks. Now it so happened that there lived in that city a prostitute named Rahab *(cf.Jos 2:1 sq.)*. This woman gave hospitality to the scouts, who were sent ahead by Jesus, and helped them with her advice. Also, she assured her fellow-citizens that the men had gone. Actually, she had hidden them on her roof. Wanting to save herself and her family from the destruction about to fall on Jericho, she hung a scarlet cord from her window as a sign that this was the house of Rahab. As for the "impregnable" walls of Jericho, they all came tumbling down at the seven trumpet sounds of the priests, and the great and jubilant shouts of the people. *(cf.Jos 6:20)*.

72 Do you not see how everyone has their proper rôle? The scout stands for vigilance; the prostitute for mystery; the conqueror for trust in God; the priest for religion. The scouts, eager for glory, put their lives at risk and feared no peril. Rahab, herself in danger, did not betray the man that she had taken into her house. The conqueror, more concerned about keeping his word of honour than about winning a victory, ordered that the life of the harlot was to be saved before the city was destroyed. Finally, the sacred trumpets are the weapons of the priests.

No one, I am sure, will disagree with me when I say that it is a very wonderful and remarkable thing that not a soul in that city was saved except for the household of Rahab the harlot.

* Through the mystery of the Incarnation. Christ made Himself our "neighbour".

73 These are the plain and simple facts of history. But if you look into the matter more deeply you will discover wonderful mysteries. Jericho, you see, stands for the world. Adam, when, because of his sin, he was chased out of paradise – the heavenly Jerusalem – descended to Jericho. That is to say, he left life behind him and went down into an inferno. But his exile was not so much a matter of moving from place to place; rather it was an exile of the soul, for his morals and his nature had undergone a change.

Ah, how changed he was from the Adam whose life was joyous and free from care. But once man plunged into the sins of this world he met up with the thieves. He would not have met them if he had not put himself in their way by straying from the heavenly commandments. And who are these thieves? They are the dark spirits of the night and of the shadows, demons who sometimes transform themselves into angels of light. *(cf.2 Co 11:14)*, but cannot play the part for long. First they tear off from us the clothing we were given of spiritual grace, and that is how they are able to inflict such blows upon us. If we could keep intact the clothing that is ours, we would not feel the buffeting of the thieves. Take care not to be stripped, as Adam was; for Adam found, after abandoning the heavenly precepts, that he was naked *(cf.Gn 3:7)*. Stripped of the garment of faith, he received a deadly wound. It was a wound that would have killed the whole human race only that the Samaritan came down to heal Adam of the cruel injuries inflicted on him.

74 As a matter of fact, the Samaritan was not the first to pass by *(cf.Lk 10:31 sq.)*. The priest and the Levite were before him, and passed the poor man with disdain. But the Samaritan did not disdain him. Nor need you disdain the Samaritan because of his name and sect. For "Samaritan" is interpreted to mean a guard or a keeper. Such is the translation. Who is this guard or keeper? Listen, it is Christ of whom is said: *"The Lord is the keeper of little ones" (Ps 114:6)*. Just as you can have one person who is a Jew in the literal sense, and another person who is a Jew in spirit; so, too, you can have someone who outwardly is a Samaritan, and another person who is a hidden Samaritan.

This Samaritan was on his way down – *"Who has come down from heaven if not He, the Son of man, who is in Heaven" (Jn 3:13)*? He saw this man lying half dead, a wounded person whom no one had tried to cure. He was somewhat like the woman with the haemorrhage, who had spent her entire inheritance on doctors. The good Samaritan approaches, comes near to him. By this I mean that He accepts to suffer with us, He makes Himself so close to us. By showing mercy, He shows Himself to be a true neighbour".

75 ***"He poured in wine and oil, and bound up the wounds"*** *(Lk 10:34)*. This Physician has many remedies that He employs to heal us. His words are a remedy: there is discourse that binds up the wound; and there is

discourse that binds up the wound with oil; and there is discourse where He pours in wine. By somewhat stern speech He ties up the wound, and by forgiveness of sin He soothes us. When He speaks of the judgement that is to come, He is pouring in wine that makes the wound smart.

76 ***"And he placed him upon his own mount"*** *(Lk 10:34)*. Listen, I shall tell you how Jesus places us there: *"He has borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows" (Is 53:4)*. Also, the good Shepherd placed the weary sheep upon His own shoulders *(cf.Lk 15:5)*. For we had become like a beast, and therefore He placed us upon His own beast. He did not want us becoming *"like horse and mule" (Ps 31:9)*; and, in taking upon Himself our body, He healed us of our infirmities.

77 Then He took us to the inn or stable *[ad stabulum]*, for we were beasts of burden. Weary travellers usually like to go to an inn *[in stabulum]** to take a break on a long journey. So the Lord took us into the stable. This is the same Lord *"who raises up the needy from the earth, and lifts the poor out of the dung heap" (Ps 112:7)*.

78 ***"And he took care of him"*** *(Lk 10:34)*, for fear that, being a sick man, he would not be able to carry out the instructions that he had received.

But this good Samaritan could not linger long on this earth. He had to return to the place from which He had descended.

79 ***"The following day"*** *(Lk 10:35)* – what is this *"following day"*? It is surely the day of the Resurrection, the day of which Scripture says: *"This is the day that the Lord has made" (Ps 117:24)*.

"He took two coins and gave them to the innkeeper. He said: 'Take care of him' " *(Lk 10:35*.

80 What is the significance of these two coins? Maybe they stand for the two Testaments, both of which are stamped with the imprint of the eternal Father. They are the price paid for the healing of our wounds. For we were ransomed with the precious Blood *(cf.1 P 1:19)*, and so escaped the fatal wounds of the supreme death.

81 So the innkeeper takes these two coins – mind you, it would not be wrong to interpret the coins as also representing the four books of the Gospel. As I was saying, the innkeeper takes them. Who is this man? Perhaps it is he who said: *"I consider all that as so much dung, provided only that I can gain Christ" (Ph 3:8)*. He takes the coins and looks after the

* Up to the beginning of the last century inns had to provide accommodation for man and beast alike

wounded person. We can understand, then, that the inn-keeper is he who said: *"Christ sent me to preach the Gospel" (1 Co 1:17)*. It is to the "innkeepers" that Christ says: *"Go out into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature ... whoever believes and is baptised shall be saved" (Mk 16:15-16)*. Yes, they will be saved from death, saved from the wounds inflicted on them by the robbers.

82 Happy the host who can heal the wounds of others! Happy those to whom the Lord can say: ***"And whatever you spend over and above, I on my return, will repay it"*** *(Lk 10:35)*! He is a good spender, who spends over and above what is necessary. Paul was a good spender. By his sermons and his epistles he went way beyond what he had received! He carried out the Lord's instructions by a labour of mind and body that was almost beyond moderation, so anxious was he to relieve people of their maladies, so eager to preach to them the word that heals. He was the good innkeeper, in whose stable *"the she-ass recognised the Crib of her Master" (Is 1:3)*. In his sheepfold are kept the flocks of lambs, for fear that the rapacious wolves would devour them. These are the wolves that slink around, looking for any easy way into the sheepfold.

83 So the Lord promises to repay. When Lord will You come back? He will come back on Judgement Day. I know that You are everywhere always; standing unseen in the midst of us. Yet there will come a moment when all flesh will see You. Then You will repay what You owe. Happy those to whom God is in debt! Ah, may it please God that we will not be found to be insolvent debtors. May we be in a position to pay back what we have received. I hope that none of us will be found to be arrogant and full of vanity because he is an ordained priest or minister.

In what way, Lord Jesus, will You pay back? You promised that in Heaven good people will be abundantly rewarded; nevertheless You will repay them still more, for You will say to them: *"Well done, good servant. Since you have been faithful in little things, I will put you in charge of great things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25:21)*.

84 Since, then, we have no better neighbour than He who has healed our wounds, let us love Him both as our Lord and as our nearest and dearest. For what can be nearer to its members than the head? We should also love those who imitate Christ; we should love those who bond with the poor and have compassion on their poverty. It is not relationship of blood that makes a person close, but mercy. For mercy is like nature. Nothing is more natural than to come to the help of those who have our nature.

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85 We have spoken now of mercy. But there are other virtues too. This we should see in the story of Martha and Mary. One of them is all activity and devotedness. The other lovingly fixes her whole attention on the word of God. In conformity with faith, she will even pass over active works. That is why Scripture says: ***"Mary has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken from her"*** *(Lk 10:42)*.

We, too, must look for those things that will not be taken from us. We must give our attention to the word, and not listen in a half distracted way. For the seeds of the celestial Word can be lost along the way if they are scattered on the path *(cf.Lk 8:5-12)*. Be like Mary, on fire with longing for wisdom. There you have a greater, a more perfect work. No matter how busy you are in your service of others, do not let your worries prevent you from getting acquainted with the word of God. Don't be sharp and judgmental with people who *seem* to you to be inactive, when actually they are very occupied with wisdom. Remember how Solomon, that man of peace, wanted to have wisdom come and dwell with him *(cf.Ws 9:10)*.

86 Martha, of course, is not being scolded for her good works. It is just that Mary is given preference, because she has chosen the better part. Jesus has piles of riches, and knows how to make riches multiply. The wiser of the two women has chosen what she regards to be the principal jewel. For that matter, neither did the apostles think it right to neglect the word of God in order to serve at table *(cf.Ac 6:2)*. Both are works of wisdom; for Stephen, chosen to be a deacon or server, was also full of wisdom.

Those, therefore, who serve should obey those who teach; and those who teach should stimulate and encourage those who serve. For the Church is one body, even if composed of very different members. These members need each other: *"The eye does not say to the hand: 'I do not require your services', nor does the head speak in this fashion to the feet" (1 Co 12:12 sq.)*. And the ear would never deny that it forms part of the body. For though some members are of more importance, the others too are necessary. Wisdom dwells in the head, activity in the hands; for *"the eyes of the wise are in their head" (Qo 2:14)*. You see, the mind of one who is truly wise is in Christ, and his interior eye is directed to the heights. Therefore, *"the eyes of the wise are in their head"*, but those of the fool are in his foot.

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87 ***"Suppose that one of you has a friend and he goes to that friend at midnight and says: 'Friend, lend me three loaves' "*** *(Lk 11:5)*.

Here we have another passage that teaches us a lesson: we have got to pray at every moment, not only by day but also by night. You see this for yourself. The person who went at midnight *(cf.Lk 11:5 sq.)* to ask his friend for three loaves, and kept insisting, was not denied his request. What is the meaning of these three loaves? Surely they stand for the nourishment of the

heavenly mystery? This you will be able to obtain – not only for yourself but for others as well – if you love the Lord your God. And who is more our friend than He who delivered up His body for us? It was from Him that David asked for bread in the middle of the night, and got it. For he was asking for it when he said: *"At midnight I rose to praise you" (Ps 118:62)*. In this way he obtained the bread that he gave us to eat. He asked for it when he said: *"Each night I bathe my couch with my tears" (Ps 6:7)*. David was not afraid of waking from sleep One who is always awake, always alert and active.

88 We must remember Scripture, and day and night should persevere in prayer, begging forgiveness for our sins. A great king like David, with all his pre-occupations concerning the kingdom, praised the Lord seven times a day *(cf.Ps 118:164)*; intent both morning and evening on offering sacrifice to the Lord. Surely we, too, should make an effort, we who have more need to pray than he had. For we have failed more frequently through weakness of flesh and mind. Yes, we ought to pray. For we are tired from the journey, worn out and weary from travelling the roads of this world, and from the circuitous ways of this life. We need, to cheer and refresh us, the bread *"that strengthens the heart of man" (Ps 103:15)*.

89 It is not only at midnight that the Lord advises us to keep alert, but at almost every instant of the day. For He comes at evening, and at the second and third watch. It is His custom to knock. *"Happy those servants whom the Lord at His coming shall find awake" (Lk 12:37)*. If you want the all-powerful God to gird Himself and serve you *(cf.Lk 12:37)* then you must stay awake at all times. Many enemies lie in ambush around us, and the body is a heavy sleeper. If the soul allows itself to sleep it loses the vigour of its strength. Stir yourself, therefore, from sleep, and knock at Christ's door. Paul, too, asks that this door should be opened to him, so that he might be able to speak of the mystery of Christ *(cf.Col 4:3)*.

I wonder can this have been the door that John saw open? For he saw such a door and said: *"After this I looked, and a door was opened in heaven. The first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking to me and it said: 'Come up here, and I will show you what must come to pass in the future' " (Rv 4:1)*. You see how the door was opened for John. The door is opened for Paul, too, so that he will receive loaves for us to eat. The door is open because he persisted in knocking on it – in season and out of season *(cf.2 Tm 4:2)*. He kept on knocking so as to animate and feed with abundance of heavenly food the Gentiles – who were tired and weary from walking along the roads of this world.

90 This passage, therefore, teaches us to pray often, to pray with confidence. It teaches us the art of persuasion. It does this first by precept, and then by example. If someone promises a thing, they should give

you good reason to believe that the promise will be kept. In this way you willingly obey the precept and believe in the promise. To receive marks of human kindness gives one all the more reason to believe in eternal kindness.

But the prayers we make must be good prayers. Otherwise the prayer could be sinful *(cf.Ps 108:7)*. Paul did not blush to be asking so often for something. He never appeared to be doubtful of God's mercy. Nor did he ever take offence in an arrogant way if his prayer was not immediately answered. But he says: *"On this account I asked the Lord three times" (2 Co 12:8)*. Paul lets us see that God often does not give us the things we ask for, because what we would consider to be highly advantageous He judges to be useless.

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91 ***"Every kingdom divided against itself shall be made desolate"*** *(Lk 11:17)*.

The context in which Jesus said this was as follows: He was being accused of expelling devils by the power of Beelzebub, prince of devils, so He wanted to show the enemy that His Kingdom is indivisible and everlasting. Remember, too, how He said to Pilate: *"My Kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36)*. Anyone who does not believe in Christ and believes that He expels devils by the prince of devils, is therefore denied a place in Christ's eternal Kingdom. This applies to the Jewish people who in the case of diabolic possession, invoke the aid of the demon to chase the demon.

How, I ask you, when loyalty is torn in two, can a kingdom remain undivided? Since the Jewish people are under the Law, and since Christ also – according to the flesh – is born under the Law, how can the kingdom of the Jews, the kingdom of the Law, endure, when these same people divide the Law? They divide it because they deny this very Jesus whom the Law promises. So the law of the Jewish people is at war with itself – so to speak – and, by being at war with itself, it is divided. By being divided, it disintegrates. If the kingdom of the Church lasts for ever, it is because the Church is one body, and is undivided. *"For there is but one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all; who is above all and in all" (Ep 4:5 sq.)*.

92 But what a shocking blasphemy it was, what madness! The very reason why the Son of God took flesh was to crush the impure spirits and snatch the booty from the prince of this world. At the same time He equally gave power to men to destroy the wicked spirits, and so shared with them the spoils. This is the mark of a conqueror. Even so, there are certain people who say that it is by invoking the power of the devil that He casts out devils. It is, of course, *"by the finger of God"* – or, as Matthew puts it: *"by the Spirit of God" (Mt 12:28)* that the demons are cast out.

The Kingdom of Divinity is, we must understand, like an indivisible body. For Christ is the right hand of God, and the Spirit suggests the image of a finger, so that we are given the picture, so to speak, of a single body within the divinity. And if it is an indivisible body, how could its Kingdom not be indivisible? As Scripture says: *"In Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead" (Col 2:9)*. This you cannot deny, whether as regards the Father or whether as regards the Spirit. Now, while making this comparison with the members of a human body, you must not think that there are grounds for believing that there is some sort of sharing out of Power. Certainly not. An indivisible thing cannot be divided. We are using a figure of speech not in order to distinguish the power of One Person from Another, but to indicate their unity. By mentioning "finger" I do not suggest division of power, since the right hand of God declares: *"My Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30)*. Yes, the divinity is indivisible, but the Person is distinct.

93 However, when the Spirit is called "finger", it does point to His activity and His power – but only in so far as He works the works divine together with the Father and the Son. For David says: *"When I see the heavens, the work of your fingers" (Ps 8:4)*; and in the thirty-second psalm he says: *"and by the spirit of His mouth is all their power" (Ps 32:6)*. Paul also says: *"All that is the work of one and the same Spirit, dividing to each one according to His will" (1 Co 12:11)*.

94 When Jesus says: *"If by the spirit of God I expel devils, then surely the Kingdom of God has come among you" (Mt 12:28)*, He is showing us that the Holy Spirit has a sort of imperial power, wherein lies the Kingdom of God. He also shows that we, too, in whom the Spirit lives, are a royal residence. As He says later: *"The Kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:21)*. It follows, doesn't it, that we should consider ourselves, too, as associates of the sovereignty and imperial majesty of the Holy Spirit's divinity? For *"the Lord is a Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Co 3:17)*.

95 ***"When the unclean spirit leaves a person, he wanders about in waterless places; seeking rest and not finding it"*** *(Lk 11:24)*.

Without doubt this refers to the Jewish people whom, further back, the Lord excludes from His Kingdom. You can take it, too, that the heretics and schismatics are separated from the kingdom of God and His Church. It is as clear as the day that no assembly of schismatics and heretics belong to God, it is the property of the unclean spirit. And so, in one single person the whole Jewish people is symbolised. From him the Law had driven out the demon. But the demon could find no rest among the nations or the Gentiles because of their faith in Christ. Because, so far as the demons are concerned, Christ is a burning fire. This burning fire overcame the fiery darts aimed by the enemy *(cf.Ep 6:16)* at the hearts of the Gentiles. They

had, up to this time, been parched and arid, but now – thanks to the waters of Baptism – they were refreshed with the dew of the Spirit.

After that, the demon returned to the Jewish people, and found them outwardly and superficially, and to all appearances, in beautiful condition. But inside they were unclean. They had not washed themselves from the stream of the sacred fountain. They had not quenched the heat that burned within them. .For that reason the unclean spirit returned to them, bringing with him seven demons worse even than himself. This he intended as a devilish sacrilege against the seven day Week of the Law and the mystery of the holy octave. In our case, the grace of the Holy Spirit is multiplied by seven; in their case, the harassment by wicked spirits is multiplied by seven. Seven, as you know, is a number symbolising fullness or completion. For it was on the seventh day that God took His rest, having completed His work of making the world *(cf.Gn 2:7)*. So, too, we read: *"The barren woman bears sevenfold, but the mother of many is desolate" (1 S 2:5)*.

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96 Then Jesus says: ***"This generation is a wicked generation. It demands a sign, and a sign shall not be given to it, but the sign of Jonah the prophet. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of man also be to this generation"*** *(Lk 11:29-30)*. This He adds to show you that at the very moment that the Church is praised for her blessedness, the people of the Synagogue lose the beauty that once was theirs.

Here we see again that, once the Jewish people had been condemned, the mystery of the Church shines out more clearly. For it is the Church who, together with the Ninevites *(cf.Jon 3:5)*, does penance; and it is the Church who, together with the Queen of the South, welcomes with zeal the gift of wisdom *(cf.1 K 10:1)*. It is the Church, gathered from the very ends of all the world, who comes to listen to the words of Solomon the Peaceful.

She is a queen indeed, a queen whose Kingdom is undivided, and who creates out of many and distant nations one single body. Truly, *"That is a great sacrament; but I speak in Christ and in the Church" (Ep 5:32)*, but this is a greater mystery still: for the former was a figure or symbol, but here in very truth we have the mystery in full. Solomon was, as it were, a figure of Christ, but here we have Christ bodily present. The Church is made up of two categories. There are those who are innocent of sin, and there are those who repent of their sins. Penance puts an end to sin, and wisdom avoids it altogether.

These things are to be understood in the mystical sense.

97 The "sign of Jonah" – if we take it to stand for the Passion of the Lord – attests, too, to the gravity of the sins committed by the Jews. We can, at the same time, take note of the prophecy of majesty and the

proof of loving kindness. For the example of the Ninevites foretells punishment, but it also points out the remedy. This makes it quite clear to the Jews that they must not despair of pardon, provided always that they agree to do penance.

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98 ***"No one lights a lamp to put it in a hidden place or under a tub. No, it is placed on a lampstand"*** *(Lk 11:33)*.

So, having placed the Church on a higher level than the Synagogue, Jesus invites us to transfer our faith from the Synagogue to the Church. For this lamp is the Faith. As it is written: *"Your word, Lord, is a lamp to my steps" (Ps 118:105)*. God's word is our faith; God's word is the light; the lamp is faith. *"He was the true light that enlightens each one who comes into the world" (Jn 1:9)*. But the lamp cannot shine unless it is provided with light. This is the lamp – meaning our vigour of mind and heart – that is lit so that the lost coin may be found *(cf.Lk 15:8)*.

I hope that none of you will ever hide your faith under the Law. The Law is contained in a tub or measure, but grace overflows all measure. The Law casts a shadow, grace gives light. May no one ever shut up their faith in the measuring tub of the Law. No, they should carry it to the Church, where shines the sevenfold grace of the Spirit. The Prince of priests lights up the Church with the splendour of His sovereign divinity, so that the darkness of the Law cannot stifle it.

99 In former times the High Priest, following the ancient rites of the Jews, used light this lamp regularly morning and evening *(cf.Ex 27:20 sq.)*. But then they put it under the tub of the Law, and so quenched its light. And the city of the earthly Jerusalem – she who kills the prophets *(cf.Mt 23:37)* – disappears into the valley of tears. But there is the Jerusalem that is situated in Heaven. In it our Faith fights the heavenly warfare. There we are placed on the highest of mountains, that is to say we are placed on Christ. The Church, I assure you, cannot be hidden by the darkness and ruins of this world. No, it for ever shines with the dazzling, the glorious light of the eternal Sun. It enlightens us with the brightness of the grace of the Spirit.

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100 ***"Oh, you Pharisees! You clean the outside of the cup and dish"*** *(Lk 11:39)*. You see, the Lord speaks of our body under the symbolism of fragile articles. These very easily fall and are broken; and, what is more, the most intimate desires of our soul easily betray themselves through the movements and gestures of the body – just as one can clearly see through a glass the liquid that it holds.

Later the cup or chalice clearly denotes physical suffering, when the Lord says: *"You do not want me to drink the chalice that my Father has given me?" (Jn 18:11)*. To "drink" one's body means to absorb, by means of the spirit, the weakness of the body. In this way one causes it to pass, so to speak, into the soul and spirit and thus the powerlessness of the outer person is absorbed into the inner person. So you can see that it is not the exterior of this cup or plate that soils us, but the interior.

Like a good teacher, Jesus shows us how to wash away these marks or stains:

101 ***"Give alms,"*** He says, ***"and all things will be clean"*** *(Lk 11:41)*. What a number of remedies there are! Mercy purifies us; God's word purifies us – as Scripture says: *"Now you are clean, because of the word I have spoken to you" (Jn 15:3)*. You will find not only in this passage but in others as well, how graciously we are told: *"Almsgiving delivers the soul from death" (Tb 12:9)*; and there are those other words: *"Shut up alms in the heart of the poor; and it shall obtain help for you on the day of evil" (Si 29:15)*.

102 This leads on to a very fine passage indeed. First the Lord has invited us to a life of simplicity, next He condemns the superfluity and earthiness of the Jews. They understand matters of the Law in a material sense; It is little wonder that, being so earthy, they are compared to goblet and plate. They hold rigidly to what is useless, and neglect to hope in those precepts which can bear fruit. Disdaining in this manner the better things, they are making a big mistake. In spite of all I have said, their sins would be forgotten if only they could practise mercy.

103 Briefly, Jesus sums up the many deficiencies of these people, who apply their whole attention to paying the tenth part of the humblest herbs *(cf.Lk 11:42)* and yet have no fear of the judgement to come, and no love of God. They forget that works without faith are useless. They leave to one side judgement and the love of God: judgement, because in all that they do they never reckon with the judgement to come; love, because they do not love God from the heart.

104 At the same time Jesus does not mean us to develop faith while neglecting good works. So He sums up the perfection expected of those who have the faith, and who are meant to prove their faith by their deeds: ***"They ought,"*** He says, ***"to have performed these without neglecting the others"*** *(Lk 11:42)*.

105 He also rebukes the Jews for their vanity – wanting to have the best places at feasts. What is more, He severely condemns even the experts in the Law. He says they are like splendid sepulchres, whose

appearance deceives people and takes them in *(cf.Lk 11:44)*. On the outside they are grand and beautiful, but inside they are full of decaying corpses. These "experts" are themselves decaying tombs, for as Scripture says somewhere else: *"Their throat is an open sepulchre" (Ps 5:11)*.

106 There is another splendid passage aimed at the foolish, play-acting religion of the Jews. They used to build monuments to the prophets *(cf.Lk 11:47)* so as to condemn the actions of their ancestors. But in fact they imitated these same crimes, and so were condemning themselves. When you consider the matter, to build monuments to the prophets means that you accuse of crime the people who killed the prophets; and by resembling their ancestors in the crimes they committed they declare themselves the true heirs of their fathers' iniquity!

Our Lord does not find fault with them for building. No, their fault is that they imitate their fathers and so lay themselves open to accusation. In fact they did what was worse, they crucified the Son of God and so perfected the work of crime begun by their ancestors. Who can forgive these wicked heirs so foul a crime? The Lord, therefore, has good reason to add in another passage: *"Finish off the work that your fathers have begun!" (Mt 23:32)*. Having so insulted God, there is no greater horror that they can perpetrate.

107 That is why Wisdom sends them apostles and prophets. Who but Christ is Wisdom? As you have read in Matthew: *"See, I send you prophets and wise people" (Mt 23:34)*.

108 Also found blameworthy, in the person of the Jews, and liable to punishment yet to come, are those whose duty it is to instruct others in the knowledge of God. These "teachers" are, instead, a scandal to others, and ignorant of the subject they profess to teach *(cf.Lk 11:52)*.

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109 ***"Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? Yes, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Have no fear, you are of more value than many sparrows"*** *(Lk 12:6-7)*.

The Saviour has introduced a very beautiful piece on the importance of sincerity and zeal for the faith. He would not have us be like those faithless Jews, hiding one thing in our heart and professing something else on our lips. For, at the end of time, our most secret thoughts will be clearly revealed; and in that final hour they will either accuse or defend us *(cf.Rm 2:15)*. Then shall the very depths of our hearts be laid bare. I find here vast encouragement for all of us to practise sincerity. Knowing that in the end we can deceive no one.

110 There are two causes that engender bad faith or insincerity: it springs either from natural malice or from some unforeseen fear that suddenly arises. Jesus knows that the fright and terror induced in us by those in Power can force someone to deny the God that they recognise in their heart. He therefore adds that the thing that we should really dread is the soul's punishment, and that we need not fear the sufferings of the body. Death is not a punishment, it is merely an end to our natural life. Consequently, death puts an end to the suffering of the body; but the punishment of the soul endures for ever. Therefore one should fear God alone. Our human nature is always subject to Him and cannot in any way limit His power. As for death, it is not such a terrible thing, seeing that immortality compensates – and more than compensates – for it.

111 With these words the Lord had inspired in His hearers a love of sincerity, an inclination to sincerity. He had raised up and energised their souls. But still their confidence wavered a little. So He strengthened them by some simple examples: if God does not forget the sparrows, how could He forget humankind? If the majesty of God is so great and so eternal that neither a single sparrow nor the number of our hairs escapes His notice, how mean and unworthy it would be to think that the Lord ignores or despises the hearts of His faithful people. Far from it, God takes notice of even the humblest things.

112 Maybe someone is going to object: why then does the apostle say: *"Surely God is not concerned with oxen?" (1 Co 9:9)*. After all, an ox is much more valuable than a sparrow. I reply that recognition is one thing, and concern is another. Besides, knowing the number of our hairs does not mean that God counts them, it simply means that He knows everything. God does not have to worry about counting. God does not have to keep anxious vigil about such calculations, but, seeing that He knows all things, all things are counted. And there is a certain fittingness about the word "counted", for we count those things that we intend keeping.

113 And there is a spiritual sense, as well, to all this. It might otherwise appear absurd to compare human beings to sparrows rather than to their fellow-humans. These "five sparrows" seem, in fact, to represent the five senses of the body – touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing. If, in the manner of sparrows, they forage about in dirt and manure; seeking their food in stinking and derelict places; tied by the strings of their faults, they cannot spread their wings and fly to loftier fruits. There, in the trees, they would find feasts for their souls.

That seductress – love of pleasure – holds a kind of snare in which to trap and net the footsteps of our soul. If material and voluptuous delights quench the flame, the vigour, and the purity of our nature, that seductress

will buy our soul at the price of this world's luxury, putting it up for sale in the Auction of Sin.

114 There is also a kind of "Sin Market". Once we are caught by the enticements to pleasure and our appetite for delights, we are either sold to sin or bought back from sin. Christ buys us back. The enemy sells us. One puts us up for sale to death; the other redeems us by His own death.

This is why Matthew has good reason for speaking of "two" sparrows *(cf.Mt 10:29)*. By this number he signifies soul and body. For even the flesh, if it were obedient to the Law of God and if it freed itself from sin, would – by the purity of its senses – wing its way, on wings of the spirit, towards God. From this we learn that nature has equipped us to fly, but that this faculty was snatched from us. pleasure stole it from us; pleasure, and the appetite for evil, weighed down our soul and made its nature heavy like that of the body.

115 With excellent reason Jesus says that not a sparrow falls without God's will. For that which falls, falls earthwards; and that which flies is lifted to the loftiest peak of immortality. In case anyone might not be perfectly clear as to what Matthew is saying, Luke puts it very explicitly: the "will of God" is His knowledge. No one falls because God *wants* him to fall; on the other hand, no one dragged down by the weight of his faults can hide from God. Consider Job *(cf.Jb 1:12)*. It was by God's will that He was tempted. God gave you an enemy, but He also holds out to you a prize. Don't make frailty an excuse. You carry the image [of Christ], you have ramparts and bulwarks. And it is good that you should know that without God's permission the devil cannot harm you. Never, never be more afraid of the devil's power than of an offence against God.

116 Now, there is no doubt whatever that the soul has been compared to a sparrow, for you have read: *"Our soul, like a sparrow, has escaped from the snare of the hunter" (Ps 123:7)*. In another text you have: *"How can you say to my soul: 'Fly like a sparrow to the mountains'?" (Ps 10:2)*. Man himself is compared to a sparrow, for we read: *"As for me, I am solitary as a sparrow on the housetop" (Ps 101:8)*. The fact is that the human person is made up of two sparrows in one; I mean, by the fitting together of two wings, the two parts working together in perfect harmony by reason of the spiritual nature of each.

So you have the good sparrow, capable by its own nature of flying. There is also the bad sparrow who has lost the habit of flying and has sunk in the mire of this world. Such are the sparrows that are sold for two farthings.

117 Sometimes they are sold for one farthing, and sometimes for double that *(cf.Mt 10:29; Lk 12:6)*. How cheap sins are! Death is

common to all, but virtue is of great price. The enemy puts us up for sale like captive slaves, and sells us cheap. But the Lord treats us as honoured servants made in His own image and likeness. He appreciates the work that He has fashioned and redeems us at a high price. As the holy apostle says: *"You are bought with a great price" (1 Co 6:20)*. Ah, yes, you are dear indeed, my friend, for you were purchased not with money but with blood. Christ died for us; He set us free by His precious Blood – as Saint Peter reminds us when he says in his epistle: *"You were not redeemed with corruptible things such as gold or silver. This did not redeem you from the vain existence passed on to you by your ancestors. No, you were ransomed by the precious Blood, the Blood of the pure and innocent Lamb" (1 P 1:18 sq.)*. Precious indeed, for it is the Blood of a Body without stain. It is the Blood of the Son of God that has redeemed us not only from the curse of the Law *(cf.Ga 3:13)*, but from the unending death of sin.

118 To sum up, the sense is this: the Lord provides for the humblest birds and the most faithless men. He causes the sun to shine on them and He renders the earth fruitful. The Lord gives heartily to all His blessings and His mercy. Can one, then, doubt that He takes into consideration the merits of His faithful ones On the contrary, such merit is very precious in His sight. He has wonderfully constructed and sensitised our faith, and has furnished our faith with firm foundations. For, if faith stimulates virtue, virtue gives to faith a sort of solidity.

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119 ***"Whoever speaks a word against the Son of man shall be forgiven. But those that blaspheme against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven" (Lk 12:10).***

By "Son of man" we of course understand Christ, who was conceived by the Virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ had only one human parent, and that was the Virgin. Are we to understand that the Holy Spirit is greater than Christ, seeing that those who blaspheme against Christ are forgiven, but those who sin against the Holy Spirit do not obtain forgiveness? But where there is perfect unity of power, there is no question of comparison. There is no dispute about greatness. The Lord is great, and His greatness is without end *(cf.Ps 144:3)*. If, as is our belief, unity exists within the Trinity, there is no distinction regarding greatness, no distinction regarding power. The following will demonstrate this: for, having said somewhere else, *"The Father shall give you what you must say" (Mt 10:19)*, He immediately adds:

120 *"In that same hour the Holy Spirit shall give you what you must say" (Mt 10:19-20)*. If then their activity is one, the offence given is one. But let us get back to our subject. Some people think that what we

should understand here is that "Son of man" and "Holy Spirit" indicate the same Christ (while allowing for distinction of Persons and unity of substance). For the one and only Christ is also spirit, as it is written: *"The spirit that goes before us, Christ the Lord" (Lm 4:20)*. He is equally holy: for just as the Father is God and the Son is Lord; and the Father is Lord and the Son is God; so too the Father is holy, the Son is holy, and the Spirit is holy.

That is why the cherubim and seraphim never weary of singing: *"Holy, holy, holy" (Is 6:3)*, and by repeating the invocation three times they never cease to signify the Trinity. If, therefore, Christ is both, wherein lies the difference? I reply that the point being made is that we are not allowed blaspheme against the *divinity* of Christ. And in times of persecution that is precisely what we are asked to do, we are asked to deny that Christ is God. Am I not correct? So anyone who does not admit that God is in Christ, and that Christ is in God, cannot be forgiven. It is equally true that *"every spirit that does not confess that Christ came in the flesh, is not of God" (1 Jn 4:2 sq.)*. For to deny His humanity is to deny His divinity, since Christ is God in man, and man in God.

121 But many scholars prefer to think that the unforgivable blasphemy consists in saying that Christ expelled demons by the power of Beelzebub, and not by virtue of divine power.

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122 ***"Someone in the crowd said: 'Master, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me'. But He replied, 'Man, who has set me up as judge or arbitrator among you?' " (Lk 12:13-14).***

This whole passage has to do with putting up with suffering for the name of the Lord. This one does either by despising death, or by looking forward to the reward, or by fear of perpetual torment in that place where no pardon is given. And, since it often happens that it is greed for money that puts our virtue to the test, our Lord tells us to suppress this avariciousness and actually gives us an example, for He says: *"Who has set Me up as judge or arbitrator among you?"* No wonder He waves away terrestrial matters, seeing that He came down from Heaven to teach us things divine. He is not going to be judge of lawsuits or arbitrator of riches; no, He is going to judge the living and the dead according to their merits.

So you have to consider carefully not what you are asking, but Whom you are asking. And you must not think that a mind intent on heavenly and higher things is to be troubled by trifles. The brother is rightly refuted for troubling with transient possessions the Dispenser of heavenly treasure. Furthermore, brothers and sisters should not need a judge or arbitrator to decide how the money is to be divided. They should be able to do that

themselves in a spirit of affection. Anyhow, what we should be keen to get is not a legacy of money but an eternal inheritance.

It is senseless to pile up riches not knowing who will inherit them. Remember that man *(cf.Lk 12:17 sq.)* whose barns were bursting with such an abundance of newly harvested corn that he was getting ready to put up more buildings for storing grain – not knowing for whom he was gathering this wealth *(cf.Ps 38:7)*. For we leave behind us in this world all that is of the world. And we see falling into the hands of new heirs all that we have gathered. We cannot take anything with us. Virtue is the sole companion of the dead. Mercy alone accompanies us, it goes before us to the heavenly mansions. The mercy we have shown in giving away vile lucre, purchases for us eternal dwellings. The Lord's own precepts tell us this, for He says: *"Make for yourselves friends with the riches of iniquity, so that they will welcome you into everlasting dwellings" (Lk 16:9)*. There you have a sound precept, a most salutary one; even misers would be encouraged by it to exchange what is perishable for what is eternal, what is earthly for that which is divine. But zeal is often crippled by weakness of faith, and just when we are about to give away our inheritance we draw back for fear of not having enough to live on, therefore the Lord adds these words:

123 ***"Do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat; nor for your body, what you shall wear. Life is of more value than food, and the body of more value than clothing"*** *(Lk 12:22-23)*.

Nothing could build up greater confidence than this, nothing could better persuade us that to those who believe God is able to give all that they need. It is God who provides us with the vital breath of life that holds body and soul together; this He does without any labour on our part. Neither does He fail to give us life giving food right up to the day of our death. The soul is enveloped by the body – which acts as a sort of clothing – and the body is animated by the soul's energy. It would be quite ridiculous to think we could lack the means of living when we already possess the permanent reality of life.

124 *"Consider,"* says Jesus, ***"the birds of heaven"*** *(Lk 12:24)*.

Here we are given an excellent example, one that we should follow with faith. The birds of heaven, who engage in no agricultural work whatever, who do no harvesting, unfailingly receive their share of food. This being the case, we are bound to se that greed and avarice are the true causes of poverty. If the birds get plenty from this earth – which they do not even work – it is because they look on earth's nourishment as the common property of all, and not the private property of individuals. But we have done just the opposite, and regard common property as personal property But nothing is personal property since nothing can be ours for ever. Provisions cannot be guaranteed when the outcome of events is uncertain. Why do you value your wealth so much? Remember that God meant you to

share the fruits of the earth with the rest of the animals. The birds of heaven make no special claims for themselves. Because they are never envious of others, they always have enough.

125 ***"Consider the lilies, how they grow"*** *(Lk 12:27)*. Further on He adds: ***"Now, if the grass which is today and tomorrow is cast into the fire, is thus clothed by God ... "****(Lk 12:28)*.

These are good words, with a good moral: by comparing us to the flowers and to the grass, the Lord invites us to trust that God will be merciful to us. You can take the text literally, because it is indeed true that we can add nothing to our height *(cf.Lk 12:25)*; or you can take it in its spiritual sense, which is that we can add nothing to our stature without God's grace.

What could be more apt for persuading us to trust in providence than to consider the beauty, the elegance, of flowers that are without the faculty of reason? For if God so clothes beings such as these, how much more will He do to provide for us? We can surely believe that human beings, with the use of reason, will want for nothing if they hand over their cares to God, and never let go of their trust in Him. Never shall we want for anything provided that we do not doubt God's goodness. For we have every reason to count on His divine favour.

126 However, all this calls for a deeper examination. It is not without significance that God compares the lily flower not only to humankind, but to one who in a sense surpassed humankind. I mean Solomon *(cf.Lk 12:27)*. Solomon had the privilege of building a temple to the Lord *(cf.1 K 6:1 sq.)*. This temple we can look on as either a building visible to the eye, or as a figure of the Church of Christ. To me it appears quite appropriate to think that the dazzling colour of the lily flower represents the glory of the heavenly angels. For it is the angels who truly are the flowers of this world. By their brightness is the world made fair, and they spread abroad the sweet perfume of their holiness.

Strengthened by these angels we can say: *"We are the fragrant perfume of Christ among those who are saved" (2 Co 2:16)*. Untrammelled by cares, engaged in no task or labour, they preserve within themselves the divine gifts of heavenly nature so lavishly poured on them. It is therefore with good reason that Solomon is here shown us "clothed" in his glory *(cf.Lk 12:27)*, and in another Gospel *(cf.Mt 6:29)*, he is said to be "covered". The meaning is that he covered, in some fashion, the weakness of his physical nature with the strength and virtue of his soul; and he clothed it with the splendour of his works.

But the angels have a nature more akin to God's than ours. They are quite incapable of physical pain or suffering. Naturally they are held to be greater than even the greatest of humankind, for we are frail and weak. But at the resurrection our kind will become like the angels of Heaven

(cf.Mt 22:30). The Lord, in quoting the example of the angels, tells us that we, too, must hope to be raised to heavenly glory. He who has granted this glory to the angels has commanded us to wait for it in hope, till that time when our mortal vesture will be swallowed up by life. For: *"This corruption must be clothed again in incorruptibility, and this mortality must be clothed anew in immortality" (1 Co 15:53)*.

127 It is generally agreed that this comparison is indeed a very happy one. Think both of the beauty of the flower and of its way of growing. Lilies have no need to be annually cultivated and cared for. The way this flower springs up bears no resemblance to the laborious production of other plants. Farmers do not have to toil every season to make it grow. No matter how dry the land may be, the lily is able to flower by virtue of a juice that is special to it and remains always in it. So when you see the full grown leaves wither on the stem, know that the plant is still alive. The freshness of its green is hidden, not dead. But once it is awoken by the kisses of Spring, it will dress itself again in its lovely verdure, and put on once more its crown of lily-flowers.

It strikes me that I spoke of this before at some length. *(cf.De Virginitate, 51 sq.)*, so there is no need to do more now than touch lightly on the matter. It would not do to go back over the same things.

128 But it is pleasant to remark that the lily does not grow on harsh mountains or in wild forests. Its delight is to grow in pleasant gardens. For there are certain gardens that abound in the fruits of every sort of virtue. As it is written: *"A garden enclosed is my sister, my bride; a fountain sealed" (Sg 4:12)*. Where there is purity, chastity, religion, and dear silence that loves the hidden places; where too there is the transparent radiance of angels, there also you will find the violets of those who confess the Faith, the lilies of virgins, and the roses of martyrs.

Let no one find it strange that Christ compares the lilies to angels, seeing that He calls Himself a lily when He says: *"I am the flower of the field and the lily of the valley" (Sg 2:1)*. Truly Christ is a lily, for wherever you find the blood of martyrs, there too you find Christ. He is the sublime, immaculate, innocent flower, in which there are no sharp and piercing thorns, symbolising the anguish suffered by the martyrs. But untouchable divinity is without thorns, for it cannot feel torment.

129 If, then, the lilies – or the angels – are clothed in a manner surpassing all human beauty, we must not despair that God will be merciful to us, too. For the Lord promises us, by grace of the resurrection, a loveliness like to that of the angels. The Lord seems, in this passage, to touch upon a question regarding which Saint Paul also has something to say: the people of this world wonder how can the dead rise, and with what manner of body will they come back *(cf.1 Co 15:35)*.

130 For when the Lord says: ***"Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all else shall be given you in abundance"*** *(Lk 12:31)*, He shows that grace will not be wanting to those who believe. Neither now nor in the future will they be in want, provided that their hearts are set on things divine and they do not seek for what is transient and terrestrial. To worry about food and clothes is highly unworthy of people who serve the Kingdom. The King knows how to care for, feed, and clothe His household. That is why He says: *"Cast your care on God, and He shall sustain you" (Ps 54:23)*.

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131 ***"I have come to cast fire on the earth, and what would I if not that it should be kindled? I have a baptism with which I am to be baptised and how grievously I suffer until it is accomplished!"*** *(Lk 12:49-50)*.

Further back, He wanted to have us vigilant, waiting every moment for the coming of our Lord and Saviour. For if we were to be negligent and remiss, putting off from day to day the good deeds that we should be doing, then death or judgement Day would take us by surprise and we would have lost all merit and praise. Those words of the Lord were addressed to all by way of a general warning.

Here, however, in the text we are now considering, the comparison or illustration seems to be aimed at stewards, people in charge – that is to say, the bishops. They are being solemnly warned of severe chastisement lying in wait for them if, busy enjoying life and all its pleasures, they neglect to govern the household of God and the flock entrusted to them.

132 But when it is only fear of punishment to come that keeps us from going astray, then our profit is slight and our riches meagre. Far, far superior is the worth of charity and love. Therefore the Lord sharpens our desire to merit His grace and enflames us with divine longing by saying: *"I have come to cast fire on the earth" (Lk 12:49)*. He is not speaking of the kind of fire that burns down our buildings, but of the flame that produces ardent desire, and embellishes the vessels of gold that stand in the House of the Lord. This is the fire that burns up the useless chaff and stubble *(cf.1 Co 3:12 sq.)*. This is that divine fire that devours the useless stuff of this world, built up of worldly pleasure; the works of the flesh that must perish. This is the divine fire that enflamed the bones of the prophets, as holy Jeremiah says: *"And there came in my heart as a burning fire, shut up in my bones" (Jr 20:9)*. It is a fire sent by the Lord, and of it these words were said: *"A fire shall burn before Him" (Ps 96:3)*.

The Lord Himself is fire, for He says: *"I am the fire that burns without consuming" (cf.Ex 3:2; 24:17, Dt 4:24; Heb 12:29)*. The fire of the Lord is light eternal. It is the fire that lights the lamps of which He says above: ***"Let***

your loins be girt and your lamps alight" *(Lk 12:35)*. We need to have our lamps alight for the days in this world are indeed night. Ammaus and Cleophas *(cf.Book 10:173)* witness to this fire that the Lord sends into their heart when they exclaim: *"Was not our heart burning within us, while He spoke to us in the way and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32)*. Here they show us very clearly what the action of that fire is and how it illumines the heart.

Maybe our Lord will come in fire *(cf.Is 66:15)* so that at the moment of our resurrection He will consume all our vices; fulfil by His presence the desires of each one; and cast light both on merits and on mysteries.

133 So lovingly does our Lord bend down to us that He allows us to see His ardent desire to set devotion alight among us; to achieve our perfection; and, for our sakes, to hasten His Passion. In Himself He has nothing to cause Him grief, but nonetheless He suffered, because of the loss that we suffered. At the moment of dying He let us see an anguish which was caused not by fear of death but by the delay in accomplishing our redemption: ***"How grievously I suffer until it be accomplished!"*** *(Lk 12:50)*. Surely someone who suffered so grievously till redemption should be accomplished, did, in fact, accomplish it? But somewhere else He says: *"My soul is sorrowful, even to death" (Mt 26:38)*. It is not *because* of death but *even to* death, that the Lord is sorrowful. He is affected not by death's terrors but by His human condition and the sensibility of His physical body. Our Lord took on a human body and with it He assumed all that belongs to the human condition – hunger, thirst, anguish and sorrow. Yet His divinity is in no way lessened by these feelings. At the same time He shows us that, in the struggle with suffering, physical death is a deliverance from torture rather than a heaping together of all possible pain.

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134 ***"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? I tell you, no, but division. For from now on there shall be five in one house divided: three against two and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son and the son against his father; the mother against the daughter and the daughter against her mother; the mother-in-law against the daughter-in-law and the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law"*** *(Lk 12:51-53)*.

As is generally the case in passages from the Gospel, there is a spiritual meaning at work. But in this passage, above all, we must strive to grasp the spiritual sense. To take it literally or in a simplistic sense would bring upon ourselves an accusation of harshness. But when you look deeply into the figurative and mystical sense, the seeming harshness is tempered. This is important because our holy religion has always shown humanity in its teaching, and has shown by example with what affection we must treat each

other. By its kindness and humanity it inclines even those who are exiled from the Faith to treat religion with respect. By dissipating deep-rooted prejudices it always disposes and educates to the Faith minds that were held captive in error; finally, by kindness winning them over completely to the practice of the Faith. And when, because of our weakness and our limitations, we cannot grasp the deeper mysteries of our Faith, the commandments put before us by religion teach us what we must adore. Justice flowing from the just, holiness flowing from the holy, bear witness to the goodness of the good Author from whom such good things come.

135 The Lord gathered up in one grand precept reverence towards God and the practice of kindness when He said: *"You shall love the Lord your God ... and you shall love your neighbour" (Lk 10:27)*. Are we, then, to believe that He has changed this precept, abolished the basis of good relationships, and commanded us to do away with natural ties of affection? Are we to believe that He demands disunion among His dear children? How, in that case, can He be *"our peace, who has made both one" (Ep 2:14)*? How is it that He Himself said: *"My peace I give you, My peace I leave you" (Jn 14:27)*? How can He say these words if He has come to divide parents from their children, children from their parents, and so dissolve the bonds that bind a family together? Or again, how can Scripture say: *"Cursed is he who does not honour his parents" (Dt 27:16)*? Or how can it be religious to abandon one's parents?

136 The thing to remember is that reverence for God comes before natural affection. If we do this, light will be shed upon the matter. Briefly, we have to put that which is human in second place to that which is divine. For if we have duties to our parents, we have still greater duties to the Father of all parents. Without Him, you would in fact have no parents. Now, if parents refuse to recognise Him who is the Father of all, how are you to recognise your parents.? Christ is not saying that we are to renounce our beloved parents, but that we are to prefer God to all other beings. And besides, you will find in another Book of the Gospel: *"Whoever loves father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me" (Mt 10:37)*. You are not forbidden to love your parents, but you are forbidden to prefer them to God. The bonds of nature are blessings given to us by God, but no one should love the gift more than he loves God. For it is God who preserves and safeguards the blessing that He has given.

Returning, then, to the literal sense, if you are thinking in terms of family ties you will see that there is also present an explanation from the religious point of view. Yet it seems to me that we should seek in the passage a profounder meaning.

137 *"From now on there shall be five in one house divided: three against two and two against three."* What is the meaning of these

"five"? And why are six persons immediately named. For there is father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. True, mother and mother-in-law can be one and the same person. For the son's mother is the mother-in-law of the son's wife, so that even in a literal sense the number given is not inexact. At the same time it is clearly evident that Faith is not held captive by the bonds of nature; for even though we are bound by duties of family affection, Faith makes us free.

138 I think it profitable to look, too, at the figurative or mystical sense. One household represents the human person in his oneness. For each of us is a house, a dwelling, either for God or for the devil. The spiritual dwelling is the spiritual person, as we read in Peter's epistle: *"You also are as living stones built up, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood" (1 P 2:5)*. In this house , two are opposed to three; and three are opposed to two. "Two" we can take to mean body and soul – it is something we have often read; and if two agree on earth *(cf.Mt 18:19)*, out of these two is made one *(cf.Ep 2:14)*. Somewhere else we read: *"I punish my body and make it obey me" (1 Co 9:27)*. We have here a distinction between one who commands and one who serves.

139 Now that we have seen who are the "two", we must equally recognise who are the "three". This is something we can reason out from the premises already established. The soul, you see, has three modes of being: it can be rational; it can be covetous; it can be passionate, that is to say [in Greek]: λογιστικόν, επιθυμητικόν, θυμικόν *(cf.Plato, Timaeus 89)*. There is not opposition of two against two, but of two against three and three against two. For, thanks to Christ's coming, mankind, who was deprived of reason, has become rational. Before that we were like senseless brutes. We were carnal, terrestrial. We were what Scripture says: *"You are earth, and to earth you shall return" (Gn 3:19)*. Then the Son of God came. He sent His Spirit into our hearts *(cf.Ga 4:6)* and we became children of the Spirit.

140 We can say that in this house there are five others: smell, touch. taste, hearing and sight. If then we were to set apart – according to what we have heard or read – the senses of sight and hearing, we would be cutting off the superfluous pleasures of the flesh. These are produced by the other three senses: taste, touch and smell. If, as I say, we were to do this, we would have an opposition of two against three. For the mind or spirit is not made in order to be caught by the enticements of vice. Its nature is to tend towards virtue and to free itself from the caresses of sensual delight.

From this we see that not all members of the house are agreed that they must throw themselves into sin, but there is opposition there and division between the desires of the heart and the duties of virtue. Or, if we accept the five bodily senses. the sins and vices of the body form an opposition against

them. Another suggestion is that the "five" are those "five brothers" mentioned in the Gospel *(cf.Lk 16:23 sq.)*. I mean the brothers of the rich man who lived luxuriously, and who is now tortured in Hell. This rich man begs that his brothers be warned to renounce the pleasures of this world, and so, by striving after virtue, find true rest after life here on earth..

141 One might also consider body and soul separately from the senses of smell, touch, and the taste of luxury. We can imagine them in the same house and opposed to the vices that assail them. We can imagine body and soul submitting to God's law and separating themselves from the law of sin. Because of the sin and error of the first man, discord arose within us and became part of our nature, so that the forces within us could never agree to aim together at virtue. However, the Cross of Christ broke down the enmities when it made void the ancient law *(cf.Ep 2:14-16)*. Our senses drew together and formed an alliance of peace once Christ, who is our peace, descended from Heaven. *"He broke down the middle wall of partition, making both one. He made void the law of commandments so that He might make the two into one new person; and so He reconciled both to God in one body by the Cross" (Ep 2:14-16)*.

What are these "two", if not the interior part and the exterior part? One has to do with the power and vigour of the soul; the other has to do with the sensibility of the body. When the flesh submits to the higher faculties, and obeys the orders intended for its good, there subsists between the two parts an inseparable union. It is not that the flesh takes on the nature of the soul by a subtle infusion of soul into matter. Rather it is that the body gives up delicacies and delights, and purifies itself of the filth of vice. Through love of obedience it enters upon the heavenly path of love. It no longer resists, as it used to, the rule of the soul. Delivered, now, by the law of the soul and the Spirit of life, it is forced from the law of sin, and becomes the true complement of the soul. No longer enticing the soul to vice, it becomes the imitator of the soul and its follower in the way of virtue.

142 The soul, too, no longer lends itself to the appetites of the body. It no longer succumbs to the pleasures of the flesh. Now it is pure. Now it is detached from the bonds of this world. Now it can win over and draw to its own delights the senses of the body. Gradually the bodily senses acquire the habit of hearing and reading the sort of nourishment that gives increase to virtue; and they feast and never know hunger because they are fed with the spiritual banquets of interior delight.

Truly, wisdom is the soul's food. It is a sweet, a wonderful banquet which never lies heavy on the stomach; it never ends in debauchery but on the contrary transforms one's nature into an ornament of delight. Then will the wallowing-place of passion change into the Temple of God; and the lair of vices will begin to be the sanctuary of virtues. May it indeed come to pass that the flesh, returning to its original innocence, will recognise the food that

nourishes its growth; and may it renounce rash anger and pride, and espouse the judgement of the soul that is the ruling principle within us. Such was our state when we received as our dwelling place the bowers and groves of Paradise – before all was spoilt by the venom of the cursed snake. In that happy state the flesh did not hunger after sacrilegious feasts, and in its desire to eat did not transgress the divine precepts innate in the faculties of the soul.

143 It was from that transgression, revelation tells us, that sin first came. Body and soul were, in a manner of speaking, its parents. For while the nature of the body was tempted, the soul felt for it a morbid compassion. If only it had restrained the greed of the body, the sources of sin would have been stopped at their fountainhead. But the body allowed itself to be raped by the source of sin; the soul was impregnated; its vigour was corrupted; and, weighed down by this alien progeny, it brought forth a child. The body, representing the more forceful and violent of the two sexes, is carried away by the powerful impulse of virile passion; the soul, on the other hand, tends more to an attitude that is gentle and yielding.*

144 So, through these "parents", began the urge towards every sort of desire. But when the soul returns to itself, it is disgusted with itself and thoroughly ashamed of its hideous offspring. Then it renounces passion and is seized with a horror of sin. The flesh, too, feels crushed under the burden of its horrible depravity, and is weary of the lamentable state in which it finds itself. It groans to find itself tormented by evil desires piercing it like the cruel thorns of this world – and yet these lusts are begotten by its own self! How it would love to throw off the "old man"; how it longs to control itself, and to save itself from being destroyed by the ruinous posterity that it so unwisely conceived. But again the irrational urges of lust draw the soul, enticing it to intercourse like a painted seductress whose beauty is altogether false. And so the love of pleasure, acting as a sort of mother-in-law of body and soul, espouses the urge of lascivious passion.

145 So long as a household is united in vice and living harmoniously, you can see no division. But then Christ came on earth. He cast fire to consume the sins of the flesh; or He brought the sword, which signifies His power to cut sin away and to pierce, for this is a sword *"that penetrates the hidden places of the spirit and the marrow" (Heb 4:12)*. Flesh and soul, renewed by the mysteries of re-birth, forget what they used to be and begin to be that which they were not. They separate themselves from their ancient sin – so dear to them up to this time – and break off all relations with their monstrous progeny.

* In the procreation of sin. Ambrose sees the body as the male principle and the soul as the female principle.

So "parents" are divided against their "children". The body now spurns the unrestrained licence of passion, and the soul desires no intercourse with sin. There is now no place for that alien, that stranger from without, voluptuousness.

146 The "children" too are divided against their parents. Vice, long accustomed to being an inmate of the house, rebels against the reproofs of its parent who has now become a person renewed. The "child" that is voluptuousness rebels against the discipline of a household that has grown serious, and seeks to escape its control.

Another way of understanding it is to consider that there actually are children who wish to be better people than their parents and so cut themselves off from home. This fits in with the words that later occur: *"No one can be my disciple unless they hate father, mother, children, brothers and sisters, and even their own life" (Lk 14:26)*. And so, to take it in its simple, obvious meaning: the child who follows Christ has an advantage over parents who are pagan; for the virtue of religion takes precedence even over the love we owe our parents.

147 But there is a more profound sense. Sin is born of the flesh and operates, as it were, in the womb of the flesh. That is why the apostle says: *"If I do what I do not want to do, it is not I who accomplish it, but sin dwelling in me" (Rm 7:20)*. The Lord shed His blood for the life of this world and rooted out vice, He made it possible for us to pass from sin to grace, and where sin had abounded He made grace to abound even more *(cf.Rm 5:20)*. And now true sorrow for our sinfulness impels us to change our way of life and to thirst for spiritual grace: and so it came to pass that that which had been my death turned to a life-giving principle *(cf.Rm 7:10)*.

So sin, washed by the waters of the Font, is separated from the flesh that engendered it. Anxious, now, to make reparation for our sin, that which was sinful in us turns to zeal for discipline and self-control.

148 Raging desire for wicked things, with every sort of evil passion, is turned by the word of God to a burning desire for divine love. Our nature remains, but our conduct changes. This desire of soul and body procures a delightfulness far superior to the pleasure previously felt – it is the delightfulness of the heavenly mysteries.

The spirit nourishes itself on the knowledge of things; it gets carried away with longing for the joys promised us in the future. It feels utter disgust for the sins it once committed; *"the sensual man perceives not those things that are of the Spirit of God. To him it is foolishness. But the spiritual man judges everything, and can himself be judged by no one" (Co 2:14 sq.)*.

149 ***"While you and your adversary are on your way to the magistrate, try – while you are still on the way – to come to terms with him. Otherwise, you might find yourself condemned by the judge. The judge will then hand you over to the executioner, and the executioner will put you into prison. I tell you solemnly, you shall not get out of that place till you have paid the last farthing"*** *(Lk 12:58-59).*

We find this in Matthew, too *(cf.Mt 5:25 sq.)*. But while one evangelist speaks of it in general terms, the other is more specific. One thinks that it is a question of restoring peace between brothers who have had some dispute; the other sees it as repentance and amendment for sin of every sort.

Who is the adversary Who is the magistrate? Who is the judge? And what, I ask. is that last farthing that we have to pay if we do not want to be put in prison?

150 According to Matthew, the adversary is someone with whom you did not get on very well in this life. This person is going to accuse you before the Judge of the living and of the dead. He is going to accuse you of having persistently kept up a quarrel.

But according to Luke, our adversary is specifically he who tempts us to commit sin, wanting to share his torment with those whom he has made associates. He searches for companions in sin. so as to denounce them as worthy of punishment. This is the one that Peter warns us to be on guard against when he says: *"Our adversary is the devil, who goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour" (1 P 5:8).*

151 According to Matthew our adversary is the whole practice of virtue, and the teaching of the apostles and prophets. These bind us by stern commandments and the lessons of an austere way of life. It would be a good thing for us to come to an understanding with this "adversary" and to imitate him by our life and conduct. Otherwise our falling out might be reported and we might be had up before the court for breaking with him.

According to Luke, however, we have no worse enemy than our own downfall. It is our own fall from grace that will accuse us, giving proofs from the way we have lived. It is not that the future judge has any need of anyone to accuse us. He is witness of all things, nonetheless our own activities will stand up and accuse us in His presence. Our own way of acting will plainly show that the practice of virtue was foreign to us, and that we were alien to the apostolic precepts.

152 So our adversary is every vicious habit; our adversary is everything that is perverse; our adversary is every evil thought. It is, in short, a bad conscience. This bad conscience troubles us now and will at a future date accuse and denounce us, like a witness in court. As the apostle says: *"Their own thoughts either accuse or defend them" (Rm 2:15).* If the conscience of each one accuses them, how much more conscious God must

be of the deeds that we have done! What we did while in the body will be evaluated on the last day. And the secret thoughts inscribed on our hearts will all be read aloud. Let us take care, while still on the journey of this life, to free ourselves of our perverse activities – as though they were a cruel adversary. Otherwise, when we get to the magistrate, He will condemn us for our sinful conduct on the way.

153 And so, according to Matthew, He says: *"Make it up with your adversary while you are still with him on the way" (Mt 5:25).* The Greek has: ευνοων, which means "well disposed" or "kindly". For if, while still on the way we disengage ourselves from the bonds of the devil, he will not be condemned on our account, and neither will we be dragged down on his account. This is the reasoning behind the title of the seventy-ninth psalm: *"For the Assyrian" (Ps 79:1, Septuagint).* It is wise to act cautiously with your adversary, with this "Assyrian" (whose other name is "Vanity"). This you will do if you can manage to disengage yourself from his bonds. For by freeing yourself from him you do him a service. And the service is that he will not be punished for your loss and for your death. But if you stay in his chains, he will drag you like some criminal to the magistrate and act both as your betrayer and your accuser.

154 Who is this magistrate? It can only be He in whom dwells all power. He it is who claims for Himself the supreme privilege of ending time and bringing it to the most perfect completion. Towards Him the holy prophet hastens; he has lived a good life, his conscience is clear, and so he has no fear of the adversary: *"My soul,"* he says, *"thirsts for the living God. When shall I appear before the face of God?" (Ps 41:3).* This is the magistrate who will send those who are guilty to the judge, that is to say, to Him who has power over living and dead. This right belongs to Him not by gift but by nature. He did not receive it the way one receives something one did not previously have. No. He drew it from the Father at His conception. Here you have the magistrate and the judge, shown by Him who has pointed out your accuser. He shows you, too, when it is that He will be revealed: *"On the day,"* so Scripture says, *"when God shall judge the secrets of men, by Jesus Christ, according to my Gospel" (Rm 2:16).*

So the judge is Jesus Christ; through Him will come to light our secret sins, and He will punish those who have done wicked deeds.

155 Do you want certainty that Christ is that judge who hands over the guilty to the executioner and casts them into prison? Ask Him yourself. Or, rather, read what He says in the Gospel: *"Take him and hurl him into outer darkness" (Mt 22:13).* Who the executioners are He reveals in another passage, where He says: *"At the end of time the angels shall come and separate the wicked from the just. They shall throw the wicked*

into the fiery furnace, where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:49 sq.).

156 But now we must see what is meant by the farthing. The object itself is a common and ordinary one, but the significance of it is mysterious. You see, when we pay a debt, we pay it in money. Now, this debt is not paid unless all the interest accruing to the capital is paid together with the total sum of the capital. This has to be paid to the last farthing, whatever way we pay it – whether by making compensation by acts of charity and other good works, or whether by making satisfaction of some sort so that the penalty due to sin is remitted.

157 It is of set purpose that our Lord makes no mention here of the two small coins of brass *(cf.Lk 21:2)*, nor of an *as* [a copper coin] *(cf.Mt 10:29)*, nor of a *denarius* [a silver coin] *(cf.Mt 20:2)*. Instead He speaks of a *quadrans* [the fourth part of a coin, e.g. a farthing]. For the handing over of a *quadrans* signified some kind of exchange or compensation.* And here in this case some debt or wrong is remitted by a payment made in charity, in consideration of which the punishment due to us for our offence is diminished.

158 If you remember, the *quadrans* is the sum usually paid for admission to the public baths. If you present this coin, you are given facilities for washing yourself. It is the same here. You have your chance of purifying yourself, for sin is washed away by good deeds such as almsgiving. But the guilty, on the other hand, are tortured and tormented until they have purified themselves of the last stain of sin.

159 Think of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices *(cf.Lk 13:1)*. It would seem that there we have an image of those who, under the influence of the devil, offer a sacrifice that is not pure. Their prayer turns to sin *(cf.Ps 108:7)*. The same applies to Judas the traitor *(cf.Ac 1:20)*, who plotted to sell his Lord's Blood in the very midst of the paschal sacrifices.

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160 ***"A certain person had a fig tree planted in his vineyard"*** *(Lk 13:6).*

Why is it that the Lord makes such frequent mention of the fig tree? In another place you find that at the Lord's command the green and lovely foliage of this tree is utterly dried up *(cf .Mt 21:19)*. In this, you recognise

* The *quadrans* seems to have been used as some kind of ticket.

that He is the creator of all things and can command trees to wither or to clothe themselves in green, and they immediately obey. In another passage He recalls how the coming of Summer is foretold when the branches of this tree become tender and put forth leaves *(cf.Mt 24:32)*.

These two examples symbolise two things: first the vain and foolish glory of the Jewish people, which falls like a flower at the coming of the Lord, for they remained stubbornly sterile of good works; secondly they symbolise the Day of Judgement; this can be compared to the coming of Summer, and to harvest time, when the ripe fruit and grain of all the earth will be gathered in from the full and complete Church, in which the Jews themselves will have come to believe.,

161 Here again we must look for the underlying mystery. The fig tree is in the vineyard. Remember the prophet's words: *"The Lord of hosts has delivered up His vineyard to be pillaged by the nations" (Is 5:7)*. He that permitted His vineyard to be ravaged is the same as He who gives orders for the fig tree to be cut down. Now, there is an apt comparison between this tree and the Synagogue. The fig tree, with its magnificent exuberance of foliage, cheats the hopes of its owner, who waited in vain for the expected fruit. It is the same with the Synagogue: the theologians and the scholars proved to be barren of good works. Intoxicated as they were with their empty eloquence, they were like the fig tree displaying its foliage. The empty shadow of the Law was all spread out about them, but the harvest was a phantom harvest, and it disappointed the hopes of believers.

162 The specific nature of this tree is ideal for convincing you that a comparison is intended between it and the specious beauty of the Synagogue. Take a close look at the fig tree and you will remark that this species of tree differs from others. Others burst into blossom before they bear fruit, and their flowers are the promise of fruit that is to come. This tree alone bears fruit without blossoming. Other trees let fall their petals, and then the fruit begins to show. But the fig tree lets fall its fruits, to replace them with other fruits. So, these first attempts at fruit emerge in place of flowers. Born before their time, in defiance of the law of nature, it follows that they are useless for conferring those blessings that nature intended them to give.

The tiny, premature figs appear at just the very point where, in other trees, the blossom bursts forth from the gnarled and knotty bark. here we have the explanation of those words in the Song of Songs: *"The fig tree has put forth its first fruits" (Sg 2:13)*. So, at the beginning of Spring, while all the other trees put on their dresses of white, the fig tree alone wears no blossoms of white. Perhaps it puts out these untimely fruits first, knowing that they will perish. Other fruits will come on, and these earlier ones of poor quality will be rejected as though degenerate. Their feeble stem

withers, and they make way for figs which can profit more from the life-giving sap.

It can however happen that – very rarely – these early fruits remain on the tree without falling. They have had the good luck to grow on a short stem between two branches. In this way they are doubly protected and well covered. As though in the womb of mother nature, they are fed, nourished, and developed by the most abundant sap. There they grow, helped by the mildness of the breezes and the warmth of the air. Having more leisure to grow, they develop beautifully. Once they are detached from their native place and the sap that fed them, they are finer in shape and colour, and more delightful to the taste than all the other figs, because of their greater maturity.

163 Now consider the disposition and the way of life of the Jews. They are like the first fruits of the infertile Synagogue. Just as the first fig falls, so too they fall, to make room for the fruit of our race which will last for ever. The original people that belonged to the Synagogue were not firmly rooted and their works withered. They proved unable to draw in the rich sap of natural wisdom. So they fell, like useless fruit; so that on those same branches of the fruitful tree, the sap of the ancient religion might produce a new race – the people of the Church. That which once had been, ceased to be; to allow that, which had not been, to begin to be.

And yet, the better people in Israel, those held more firmly by a vigorous branch, those more conformed to the shadow of the Law and of the Cross, came – like the first fig – to full maturity. These conformed in their very hearts to this shadow of the Law and of the Cross and so they were coloured by a dual sap and, like that first fig, they bore fruit of such magnificence, such beauty, as to surpass all the others. To these Jesus said: *"You shall sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt 19:28).*

164 I find it to the point to mention here that Adam and Eve, first parents of our race as well as first authors of our sin, clothed themselves in fig leaves *(cf.Gn 3:7)*. They were exiled, and rightly so, from Paradise when – conscious of their guilt – they fled from the presence of the Lord as He walked in the garden. In this way they foretold that at the end of time, when our Lord and Saviour would come to call them, the Jewish people would realise that the devil's temptations had stripped them of every virtue. Terrified at seeing themselves naked and deprived of the robe of an innocent conscience, they would hide from the Lord. They would know that they had left the path of true religion. They would blush for shame, and would endeavour to cover by an abundance of eloquence – as though with a veil of foliage – the ignominy of their behaviour.

165 Therefore those who gathered leaves, not fruit, from the fig tree are expelled from the Kingdom of God. Such as these were made *"into a living soul" (1 Co 15:45)*. Then came the second Adam, and He did not look for leaves but for fruit; because He was *"a life-giving spirit" (1 Co 15:45)*. It is by the spirit that the fruit of virtue is gained and the Lord is adored.

The Lord searched. It was not that He did not know that the fig tree had no fruit, but He wanted to show us by this symbolic action that it was time that the Synagogue bore fruit. The words that follow show that He did not come searching before the time, for He had been coming for three years: ***"Look, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and finding none. Cut it down. Why should it encumber the earth?"*** *(Lk 13:7)*.

166 He came to Abraham, He came to Moses, He came to Mary. In other words He came under the sign [of circumcision] *(cf.Rm 4:11)*; He came in the Law, He came in a human body. His coming we recognise by the blessings He brought: at one time He purifies, at another time He sanctifies, at another time He justifies. Circumcision purified, the Law sanctified, grace justified. He is in all these things, and all these things are one. For no one can be purified if he does not fear God. No one can merit to receive the Law unless he is purified of his sins. No one attains to grace unless he knows the Law. For this reason the Jewish people could not be purified, for they were circumcised not in heart but in the body only. They were not sanctified for they ignored the true value of the Law, reading it in a literal and material sense rather than in the spiritual and symbolic sense: *"For the Law is spiritual" (Rm 7:14)*. And they were not justified, for they did no penance for their sins. The result of all this is that they were without grace.

167 So it is quite true that no fruit was found in the Synagogue, and it was therefore ordered to be knocked down. But the good gardener – perhaps he on whom the Church is founded? – sensing that another would be sent to the Gentiles, while he himself was destined for those of the circumcision – intervened with great kindness. He begged that the tree should not be cut down. He was convinced that the Jewish people, too, could be saved through the Church. He therefore said: ***"Let it alone for this year, that I can dig about it and spread a basket of manure around its roots"*** *(Lk 13:8)*.

168 How quick he was to spot that the harshness and pride of the Jews was the cause of their barrenness! And just as he was clever in diagnosing their vices, so too he was clever in treating them. He promises to break up the hard ground of their heart with his apostolic mattock and hoe: *"For the word of God is more piercing than a two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12)*. In this way he would renew the soil of their spirit. Too long it

had been neglected and encumbered. Now he would tear open their heart and restore it by the vivifying breezes of fresh air. No longer would the root of wisdom be suffocated and covered up by debris.

This good gardener adds that he will bring along a basket of manure. We all know how efficacious manure is. So efficacious is it, that it can actually turn that which was barren into something that is fertile. Thanks to it, land that was parched and dry becomes green and delightful; and the barren places become fruitful. You will remember how Job, at the time of his temptations, sat on a dung heap *(cf.Jb 2:8)*. He sat on a dung heap and the temptations did not overcome him. And Paul considers himself so much dung, for the sake of winning Christ *(cf.Ph 3:8)*. Job, who began by loving so much, sat on the dung heap where he had nothing more that the devil could take from him. Good is the earth that one digs; good is the dung that is scattered. Therefore *"the Lord raises up the needy from the earth; and lifts up the poor from the dunghill" (Ps 112:7)*.

169 By exercising his spiritual faculties, the good gardener, filled with sentiments of humble affection, comes to be of the opinion that even the Jews will be able to bear fruit for the Gospel. He remembers what the Lord said through Haggai. It was on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, counting from the day on which God's temple began to be built *(cf.Hg 2:19 sq.)*, and the Lord said: *"From this day I will bless the vines and the fig trees, and the pomegranates and the olive trees that have not yet produced fruit" (Hg 2:20)*. This goes to show that towards the end of this world, when its day begins to decline, God's Temple – the Church –will be founded. Thanks to that Church, Jews and Gentiles alike will, by the grace of baptism, produce the fruits of their merits.

170 You see, do you not, that the very nature of this tree indicates the character of the Synagogue? It will be fruitful when it comes to the second crop – for we too are of the seed of the patriarchs. And the Jews are justly compared to figs that fall, for their heart had grown fat, and their head had grown hard so that they were incapable of holding on to the tree. But if they die and fall, as it were, from this world; and if, by baptism, they are born again as regards the inner man, then they will be fruit-bearing. But the bad faith of these stubborn ones has rendered the Synagogue useless. Therefore, because it was barren, orders were given that the tree be cut down.

171 All this that I have been saying in a general way of the Jews can also be applied to ourselves. So we had better take care. It could be found that we too are encumbering the fertile soil of the Church even though we are worthless and without merit. We, who have been blessed, like the pomegranates *(cf.Hg 2:19 sq.)* should produce fruit in our hearts. These fruits are: chastity, unity, mutual charity and love – all enfolded together in

the one womb of our Mother the Church. Protected by her womb, we cannot be spoilt by rough winds, nor harmed by hail-stones, nor burnt up by the heat of lust, nor detached from our tree by heavy showers of rain.

172 There are, however, quite a few people who think that this allegory of the fig tree applies not to the Synagogue but to malice and perversity. But these are considering the tree simply as a tree without distinguishing its particular species. They claim that what strikes them is what our Lord says to the fig tree: *"May you never bear fruit any more" (Mt 21:19)*. Now, we know well that numbers of Jews have believed and will believe. But these Jews who believe are the fruit of the Church; they are not the fruit of the Synagogue. They are not born of the Synagogue, they are re-born of the Church. At the same time, there are those who *"went out from us, but were not of us. For if they had been of us, they would no doubt have remained with us" (1 Jn 2:19)*. We can say the same of the Jews who believe: if they had indeed been of the Synagogue, they would have remained in the Synagogue; if they have left the Synagogue, they no doubt never belonged to the Synagogue. Besides, in the other interpretation it is for malice that the gardener would intercede, and offer to cultivate the tree, so that it would bear fruit; whereas the Lord came to destroy the very seed of wickedness.

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173 ***"He was teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath, and there was a woman there almost bent in two. For eighteen years a spirit of infirmity had had hold of her" (Lk 13:10-11).***

How soon we see that it was of the Synagogue that Jesus was speaking! By preaching in a synagogue He shows clearly that she is the tree for which He came. But also this infirm woman represents the Church: for when she will have fulfilled the measure of the Law and the Resurrection* she will no longer suffer the infirmity of being bent in two. She will have gained eternal rest, and will have reached the full measure of her stature. This woman could not be healed but by the Law and by grace: the Law by its precepts, in the baptism of grace by which – dead to the world – we rise again with Christ. For in the ten commandments are found the fullness of the Law; and in the number eight we find the fullness of the Resurrection. Therefore this miracle, worked on a sabbath, signifies that which is to come: anyone who has followed both Law and grace will, by Christ's mercy, shuffle off the miseries of this bent body of ours.

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*The woman was infirm for eighteen years. The figure ten represents the Ten Commandments, and the figure eight represents Resurrection and the life to come. The two, of course, eighteen.

This is why sanctification was given us first of all, figuratively, in Moses; for the practice of the sanctification that was to come, and the spiritual observance of the Law, was to consist of abstaining from the works of this world. So God Himself took a rest from the works of the world *(cf.Gn 2:2)*. I do not mean that He rested from all activity, because actually His activity is perpetual and continual. As His Son says: *"My Father works even until now, and I too work" (Jn 5:17)* – He says this intending that, after God's example, we should rest not from works of religion but from works of this world.

174 The ruler of the synagogue could not understand this at all. He wanted no one to be cured on the sabbath for he failed to see that the sabbath is the image of the leisure that is to come. It is not from good works, but from bad works, that we should take a rest. With this in view we are forbidden, on the sabbath, to carry any burden – but the burden we are not to carry is sin. And we are not to fast – that is to say, we are not to fast from good works. This is the way to celebrate the sabbaths that are to come, the sabbaths of the life after death. To His critics, the Lord seems therefore to respond in a spiritual or symbolic sense when He says: ***"Hypocrites, is there one of you who on the sabbath day, does not loose his ox or his ass from the manger and lead them to water?"*** *(Lk 13:15)*.

175 I wonder why He mentions these, and not any other animal. Perhaps it is to show that, despite the rulers of the Synagogue, the Jews and Gentiles will come and quench their thirst at the fountain of the Lord; and there at that fountain they will cast off the burning heat of this world. For: *"The ox recognises its owner, and the ass knows its master's manger" (Is 1:3)*.

So the people who previously had nothing but wretched hay that was dried up even before it was cut *(cf.Ps 128:6)*, now feast on Bread that has come down from Heaven *(cf.Jn 6:33)*.

So what He says is that the Church of the future will be made secure through the call or vocation of two peoples. This will happen when the time allotted to the Law will have been fulfilled. Then, at the Resurrection of the Lord, the Church will recognise with joy that the time of her deliverance has come.

The Lord is all goodness, all kindness. Whatever He does, whether in pardoning or in punishing, is done in goodness. The tree that symbolised the Synagogue is cut down at His command; the woman that symbolised the Church is healed at His word. How sweet a parable, and how delightful the unfolding of the mystery! Jesus compares one bondage with another bondage. He shows His critics that by their own way of life they belie the accusation that they make. For on the sabbath they loosen the bonds of their animals, yet they are quick to attack the Lord for loosening, on the sabbath, the bonds of a man held fast in sin.

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176 ***"What is the Kingdom of God like? To what should I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his garden. It grew and became a great tree, and the birds of the air settled in its branches"*** *(Lk 13:18-19)*.

What we have just read teaches us that we must study the nature of comparisons and not only their appearance. Let us see, now, why the Kingdom – so lofty, so majestic in the heavens – is compared to *a grain of mustard seed*. I recall meeting this "mustard seed" in another passage, where it is compared to faith: the Lord says, *"If you have faith as much as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain: 'Go, cast yourself into the sea' " (Mt 17:19)*. That faith is not slight, no it is mighty faith if it can command a mountain to move away. And indeed it is no little faith that the Lord requires of His apostles, knowing that they will have to tackle the heights and the arrogance of the spirit of evil.

You wonder what I mean? You want to know what great faith is? Read the apostle: *"If I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains ... " (1 Co 13:2)*.

177 If, then, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, and if faith is like a grain of mustard seed, it follows that faith is definitely the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Kingdom of Heaven is faith. Therefore if you have faith, you have the Kingdom of Heaven. It is also true that the Kingdom is within us, and faith is within us. For we read: *"The Kingdom of Heaven is within you" (Lk 17:21)*. In another place He says: *"Have faith within yourselves" (Mk 11:22)*. Peter had "all faith" and therefore he was given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven so that he could open the Kingdom to others.

178 Let us now judge, from the nature of the mustard seed, the force of this comparison. The grain is, admittedly, very simple and ordinary. But grind it, and you will see what vigour it has. So, too, faith appears at first to be simple and ordinary, but if crushed by its enemies it spreads everywhere the virtue and grace that it contains, and its pungent odour fills all those who hear or read it.

Our martyrs, Felix, Nabor and Victor* were a grain of mustard seed. They guarded within their hearts the perfume of the faith, but no one was aware of this. Then the persecutions came. These martyrs laid down their

* was in the basilica of Saints Felix and Nabor at [illegible] that Saint Ambrose made his famous discovery [illegible] of two other martyrs, Saints Gervasius and [illegible] Of Saint Victor less is known.

arms, stretched out their neck, were beheaded by the sword, and so spread to the ends of the earth the beauty of their martyrdom. Rightly I may say of them: *"Their sound has gone forth through all the earth" (Ps 18:5).*

179 But faith is crushed in another way, ground in another way, sown in another way. The Lord Himself is a grain of mustard seed. He was not subject to loss and injury, but the people refused to have anything to do with Him, ignoring Him as though He were but a grain of mustard seed. He chose to be crushed and ground so that we might say: *"We are the good fragrance of Christ before God" (2 Co 2:15).* He wanted to be crushed and ground, for remember how Peter said to Him: *"The crowds press all about you" (Lk 8:45).* He wanted to be sown, like the seed that someone takes and sows in his garden. For it was in a garden that He was arrested *(cf.Jn 18:1 sq.),* and in a garden He was buried *(cf.Jn 19:41).* In a garden He grew to a great height, for it was in a garden that He rose from the dead. And He became a tree, for so it is written: *"As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, such is my brother, my beloved among the sons" (Sg 2:3).*

180 And you, my friend, you too must "sow" Christ in your garden. Make it a garden of delight, a place made beautiful by every variety of flower and fruit. May the beauty of your virtues flourish there, and may the multiple perfumes of every sort of virtue fill the air with their sweetness. There, where the fruit is, let Christ be found. When they arrest Him, He is a grain of seed. When He rises from the dead, He is a tree – a tree that gives shade to all the world. Buried in the ground, He is a seed; stretching up to Heaven, He is a tree.

181 And you, too, must press hard with Christ and sow the seed. The faith is ground, is pressed, when we believe in Jesus crucified. Paul pressed the faith hard when he said: *"As for me, brothers, when I came to you it was not in loftiness of speech or of wisdom. That was not how I declared the testimony of Christ. For I judged myself not to know anything among you, but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Co 2:1-2).*

Having learnt to press and grind the faith, he also learnt how to lift it on high. For he says: If we have known Christ [crucified] according to the flesh, *"we know Him now no longer" (2 Co 5:16).*

We sow the faith when, after the Gospel and the readings from the apostles and prophets, we believe in the Passion of our Lord. We sow the faith when we cover it, in some sort, with soil sifted and softened and drawn from the flesh of the Lord. In this way, warmed and wrapped by the sacred Body, the faith sprouts and spreads. Anyone who believes that the Son of God was made man, believes that He died for us; and believes that He rose again for us. I sow the faith when I plant it in the midst of His sepulchre.

182 It might interest you to know how Christ is the grain, and how Christ is sown: *"Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remains alone. But if it die, it brings forth much fruit" (Jn 12:24-25).* I have not been mistaken, you see, in what I have been telling you. For the Lord Himself has declared it. He is the grain of wheat, because *"He makes strong the heart of man" (Ps 103:15);* He is also a grain of mustard seed, because He warms the heart of man. Both metaphors are good, but I think the grain of wheat is better when we are discussing the Resurrection – for He is the Bread of God that came down from Heaven *(cf.Jn 6:33)* – because God's word and the miracle of the Resurrection nourish souls, excite us to greater hope, and strengthen our love. At the same time, "grain of mustard seed" is more appropriate when we speak of the bitterness and cruelty of the Lord's Passion. Its bitterness gives rise to tears, its cruelty moves us to keener love.

So when we hear and read that the Lord fasted, the Lord wept, the Lord was scourged, that the Lord said at the moment of His Passion: *"Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation" (Mt 26:41),* we are – so to speak – sized by the bitter savour of these words. We are moved, for His sake, to rt back on the voluptuous pleasures and enjoyments of the body. From this follows that whoever sows the grain of mustard seed, sows the Kingdom Heaven.

183 You must not despise this little mustard seed. *"It is the smallest of all seeds, yet, when it is full grown it is the tallest of all the plants" (Mt 13:32).*

If Christ is a grain of mustard seed, in what way can He be the smallest, in what way can He be said to grow? I reply that it is not in His nature He grows, but in His appearance. Shall I show you how He is the least? sten: *"We saw no beauty in Him, nor comeliness" (Is 53:2).* And now all I show you how He is greater? Hear these words: *"He is the most utiful of the children of men" (Ps 44:3).* Truly, He who was without meliness or beauty has become higher than the angels *(cf.Heb 1:4);* He surpassed all the glory of the prophets – those prophets whom Israel, in nfirmity, ate like herbs *(cf.Rm 14:2).* But the Bread by which the heart of grows strong, this they refused, this they rejected.

184 Christ is the seed, because He is the seed of Abraham: *"For the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say 'and to seeds', as though speaking of a multitude, but 'to his seed', speaking ce: 'and to your seed' – who is the Christ" (Ga 3:16).* Not only is a seed, but He is the smallest of all the seeds, for He came without without riches, and without the wisdom of this world. Then He spread out like a tree whose lofty peak reaches to the heavens, ow we can say: *"I have sat in the shadow of Him whom I desired"*

I often think that He appears at one and the same time both as seed and as tree. He is a seed when people say: *"But isn't this the son of Joseph the carpenter?" (Mt 13:55)*. But in the very same passage He grows great when the Jews, even though they cannot grasp the branches of this spreading tree, testify to Him and say: *"How did this man come by such wisdom?" (Mt 13:54)*.

185 In appearance, He is a grain; in wisdom, He is a great tree. In the foliage of His branches the bird of night has its dwelling, *"and the sparrow, all alone, sits on the roof-top" (Ps 101:7)*. He who was lifted up to Paradise *(cf.2 Co 12:4)*, those who will be lifted up into the air and into the clouds *(cf.1 Th 4:16)*, have, from now on, an assured place of repose. There, too, the powers and the angels of Heaven find rest, and all whose spiritual actions have made it possible for them to fly away. There Saint John reposed, when he laid his head on the bosom of Jesus: I shall go further than that, I shall say that John was like a branch that sprouted from the sap of that tree. Peter is a branch; Paul is a branch – *"forgetting the past and forging ahead to what lies beyond" (Ph 3:13)*.

Once we were far away. Now we have been gathered together from all the nations, now we have come to rest in the winding branches and hidden nooks of their teachings and dissertations. For a long, long time we had been driven through the emptiness of this world by the tempests and the turmoil of spirits of wickedness. But now we spread out the wings of our virtues and take flight to where the shadow of the saints can shelter us from the heat of this world. Now the Spring has come and we are renewed. Now we have found for ourselves a sure place of rest.

186 There was a time when our soul was bent in two like that woman under the weight of its sins. But now, *"Our soul, like a sparrow, has been set free from the snare of the hunter" (Ps 123:7)*. It has been set free, and has flown away into the branches and the mountains of the Lord *(cf.Ps 10:1)*. Up to then we had vainly observed a clutter and accumulation of empty regulations, and in this void we had fluttered this way and that. But now our hands have been untied by Christ for good works. We are free from the shackles of the sabbath. Even in our feasts we preserve our freedom; we avoid intemperance for fear that, though freed from the Law, we might become the slaves of base desires. The Law bound itself up to be freed from such desires. Grace, in suppressing a lesser form of slavery, forbids us to take on a heavier form of slavery: *"Everything is permitted, but not everything does good" (1 Co 6:12)*. It would be sad to use your liberty to return again to slavery. Cease, therefore, to be under the Law so that, by virtue, you can be above the Law.

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187 ***"To what shall I compare the Kingdom of Heaven? What is it like. It is like the yeast that a woman takes and mixes into a measure of flour, till the whole is leavened" (Lk 13:20-21)***.

Many and varied are the interpretations of this comparison. It is of such complexity that it gives rise to a great many questions.

We can see why it is mentioned earlier on that Christ is a grain of wheat, because later on the spiritual yeast was awaiting us. Many think that the yeast is Christ, because He causes the virtue implanted in us to rise. And because the yeast is more powerful than the flour – not by reason of its size and appearance but by reason of its energy – so too Christ, equal in body to His ancestors, far surpassed them by His divinity. Let us then see the holy church as symbolised by this woman in the Gospel, and ourselves as the flour into the heart of which this woman buries the yeast that is our Lord Jesus. She mixes in this yeast until the colour of heavenly wisdom reaches to the deepest and most secret depths of our soul.

188 In Matthew we read that the yeast was plunged into three measures of flour. This would make us suppose that the Son of God was hidden in the Law, veiled in the prophets, and fulfilled in the teachings of the Gospel. This was that we might acquire by every means a faith that is perfect. Formed in us, who are His body, by the *ensemble* of all the sacred writings, He would be all and in all. For He truly was the Word of God, *"the mystery that has been hidden from age to age" (Col 1:26)*.

More than this cannot be said to attest clearly and to full advantage His divine eternity. Yes, truly, He was: for He was in such a fashion that – hidden to the sacrilegious, manifested to the saints, predestined before the ages – He was destined and preserved for glory.

Now glory, my brothers and sisters, consists in this: that we should climb the depths of the mystery hidden before all ages in God. Whatever is in God is assuredly of God; for God cannot absorb something foreign to His nature.

189 And yet I know – and am quite sure – that certain people apply the above parable to this world: that [the yeast] must rise through the Law, the prophets, the Gospel, until every tongue gives praise to the Lord. But let us look carefully into the whole matter. Let us search very diligently. You cannot find a thing unless you first search for it. Let us build a tower, let us count up the cost of the Scriptures, let us calculate the total expense, for fear that one day it would be said of us, too, *"He wanted to put up a building, and was unable to finish it" (Lk 14:28)*.

If you are putting up a building, you must first have a good foundation. The good foundation is faith; the good foundation is that of the apostles and prophets *(cf.Ep 2:20)*. On these two Testaments all our faith is constructed. I think it no exaggeration to say that these two Testaments contain an equal measure of perfect faith. For the Lord Himself said: *"If you had had faith in*

Moses, you would have had faith in me" (Jn 5:46). Of course, it was actually our Lord who spoke in Moses. So it is true that both the one and the other contain a perfect measure, because in both Testaments Christ is fulfilled; and in both Testaments is perfect faith. For both the oracle and the response to the oracle have the same force and the same meaning.

190 Personally, I prefer to hold by the teaching of our Lord Himself: the yeast is the spiritual doctrine of the Church. We know that "yeast" stands for doctrine, we know it from the moment that we read: *"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees" (Mt 16:6)*; we know it because the apostle says: *"not with the yeast of malice and wickedness" (1 Co 5:8).* But there are different sorts of yeast: there is yeast that intoxicates and there is yeast that causes the bread to rise. So I fully agree with those good authors who say that the Church sanctifies, by the spiritual yeast, man who is made up of body, soul and spirit.

For body and soul are sanctified, and even spiritual grace itself receives an increase when, through the ministry of the Church – intoxicated with joy – and through the teaching of Scripture, the whole person becomes so to speak one single yeast: for the whole person rises and grows by the mingling together of the heavenly words and by their richness. These riches are so thoroughly mixed into us, body and soul, that they penetrate our entire being. This indeed is what happens when these three "measures" accord with one another by an equal balance of desires, and are animated as though by one mind and one heart.

191 This work of the Church is not something improvised nor is it left to chance, but is the end result of a long and elaborate system. Only in this way can the three measures or elements become one without any one of the three being corrupted by the law of sin. I find evidence of this in the words of the apostle: *"May the God of peace Himself sanctify you in all things; so that your whole spirit, soul and body may be preserved blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Th 5:23).* Such a thing would be impossible, amidst all the temptations of this world, unless that woman in the Gospel mixed the yeast into the three measures of flour, till the whole was leavened. This is the yeast that the Lord compares to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Yes, there are, as I have said, three elements or measures. Namely, the flesh, the soul, and the spirit. I speak of the spirit by which we live so long as we are in this body. This spirit is true and sincere so long as the flesh does not get the upper hand; so long as the soul does not get moulded into the twists and turns of the body; and so long as due measure in all things is faultlessly preserved by the whole person. But without the help of the Church and its doctrine it is very difficult to maintain the right balance among these measures. Therefore this woman – who is a figure of the Church – mingles together virtue and spiritual doctrine until the whole

interior person, the whole heart, the invisible person within, is leavened by the yeast and rises to the dignity of heavenly bread. We may legitimately say that the yeast is the doctrine of Christ, because Christ is bread, and the apostle says: *"We, although we are many, are one bread, one body" (1 Co 10:17).*

192 There is only one leaven, *"when the flesh no longer lusts against the spirit, nor the spirit against the flesh" (Ga 5:17)*; and when we put to death the deeds of the flesh *(cf.Rm 8:13).* Then the soul, aware that she has received from God's breath the spirit of life, avoids contact with what is earthly and shuns the world. Therefore the apostle warns us not to behave according to the flesh, but in accordance with the spirit *(cf.Rm 8:4).* We are to be made holy by the font that regenerates; we are to be divested of the old man with his desires, and clothed with the new man who is created according to the image of Christ *(cf.Col 3:9 sq.).*

Now we must walk, not as we did of old when we followed the letter of the Law, but in newness of spirit *(cf.Rm 7:6).* If we do this we shall find, at the moment of our resurrection, that we shall preserve uncorrupted the unity of body, soul and spirit. And we shall discover that even now, in this life, all that we ask will be given us. Many people think that this is what the Lord means when He says: *"I tell you most solemnly, if two of you on earth are in agreement, you may ask whatever you wish, and it will be granted to you by my Father in Heaven" (Mt 18:19).*

193 In these "two" that are mentioned, some people see the soul and the body; others see the soul and the spirit. What I mean is: that so long as we are on this earth, the soul and the spirit are in harmony and not torn apart by conflicting desires. This being the case – so it would seem – all that they ask will be granted. This happens when the two become one; when their hostility is suppressed and their discord is resolved. Then they form a single "new man" – soul and spirit, I mean – so that they can pray with the spirit and pray with the soul *(cf.1 Co 14:15).*

But there are many others, I must admit, who think that these "two" are the people of Israel and the Gentile people. They believe that at the time of the resurrection these two groups will become one, and so bring to eternal completion that which was begun, while at the same time doing away with that which was incomplete. Others again understand these "two" to represent a married couple, completely united heart and soul.

194 So long as the three measures can remain, in this life, leavened by the one yeast; so long as they all rise together so as to form one loaf, there will be – in the life to come, incorruptible union for those who love Christ. The three measures must become so perfectly one that there will be perfect equality. And when incorruptible union is attained, we shall no longer be three elements that are put together – as we now are – but we shall

be one, we shall be transformed into one unique substance. At the resurrection, one part will not be inferior to the others, as it is today. For at present the frailty and weakness of the flesh make themselves felt. The body, by its very nature, is subject to blows, to loss; it is fixed to the earth by its heaviness and cannot raise itself up and walk on air.

But in Heaven we shall be changed into a being that is simple, gracious, and lovely in its nature. We shall be made whole. Then those words John spoke will be fulfilled: *"Dear friends, we are at present God's children, but what we shall be in the future has not yet been revealed. But we are certain that, once this has been revealed, we shall be like to Him" (1 Jn 3:2)*. So, since God's nature is simple – for God is spirit *(cf.Jn 4:24)* – we shall take on the same likeness, so that: *"such as is the heavenly, so also shall be they that are heavenly. And to the extent that we have borne the image of the earthly, so also let us bear the image of the Heavenly One" (1 Co 15:48-49)*. It is in the image of Him, the Heavenly One, that our soul will be clothed.

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195 That is why the next episode tells of the healing of the man with dropsy *(cf.Lk 14:2 sq.)*. This is a disease in which a watery fluid collects in the tissues of the body; it oppresses the person's mind and soul, interferes with the natural functions, and extinguishes the flame of the spirit. Then follows a lesson in humility, where Jesus cautions us against insisting on getting the best place at the wedding feast *(cf.Lk 14:7-11)*. But He gives the lesson in a kindly way, so that by sweetness and persuasion He may avoid anything that could be hurtful, and that by a gentle hint He may correct our tendency to take the best for ourselves. With this parable there is immediately linked a lesson in kindness. Our Lord's words define and distinguish this quality as being above all else concern for the poor and the disadvantaged; and He makes it abundantly clear that to entertain people whom you expect to entertain you in return is nothing short of calculating greed *(cf.Lk 14:12-14)*.

196 Then, as though to a veteran who has completed his military service, the Lord proposes this splendid prize: utter contempt for riches. For one who is absorbed by earthly cares and who buys up land and property *(cf.Lk 14:18)* cannot obtain the Kingdom of Heaven. This we know because the Lord Himself said: *"Go, sell all you have and follow Me" (Mt 19:21)*. Neither can the one who bought the oxen *(cf.Lk 14:19)*; for Elisaeus slaughtered his oxen, and divided them up among his people *(cf.1 K 19:21)*. As for the man who took a wife *(cf.Lk 14:20)*, he is taken up with the things of this world and does not care about God.

It is not my intention to condemn marriage, but I consider that virginity is the higher and more honourable state. For: *"the woman who is*

unmarried, and the widow, think of the things that pertain to the Lord in such a way as to be holy both in body and in soul. But the married woman is pre-occupied by the concerns of this world, and how she can please her husband" (1 Co 7:34).

197 But in case I may have offended the married women I shall make it up with them – as I did earlier on with the widows *(cf.Bk 5:89 sq.)* – by pointing out that many people think that the three classes of people excluded from the great wedding feast *(cf.Lk 14:24)* are the pagans, the Jews, and the heretics.

198 That is why the apostle warns us to run from avarice *(cf.Rm 1:29)*. For if we got trapped, as pagans do, by dishonesty, impurity and avarice, we could never reach the Kingdom of Christ and of God *(Ep 5:5)*.

199 As for the Jews, by their servile and literal interpretation, they imposed upon themselves the yoke of the Law – as the prophet said: *"Let us break their bonds and shake off their yoke" (Ps 2:3)*. But we have received Christ, who has placed on our heads His sweet and merciful yoke. As for the five yokes [or the five pairs of oxen], these can stand for the Ten Commandments, or for the five Books of the Law. It is with reference to these last named that the Lord, so it would seem, says to the Samaritan woman in the Gospel: *"You have had five husbands" (Jn 4:18)*.

200 Heresy, *à la* Eve, tempts us with its feminine wiles and guiles to unbend the rigour of our faith. So we step on the slippery slope, lured on by the courtesan's specious charm. And we turn away from the genuine beauty of truth. The wedding guests make excuses not to come. It is their own decision, for no one is excluded from the Kingdom, as we know from our Lord's own words. In His kindness Jesus invites all the world, it is our own laziness and tendency to stray that keep us out of the Kingdom.

201 So, the one who bought the farm became a stranger to the Kingdom: for, in the days of Noah – as you have read – both buyer and seller were swallowed up in the flood *(cf.Lk 17:27)*. Also excluded is the one who preferred the yoke of the Law to the blessing of grace; so too the one who took a wife. For Jesus said: *"If anyone comes to Me not hating his father, his mother, and his wife, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk 17:27)*. The Lord, for our sake, detached Himself from His own Mother when He said: *"Who is My Mother? Who are My brothers and My sisters?" (Mt 12:48)*. Why then would you prefer your family to our Master? But what our Lord commands us is that we should neither ignore our human nature nor, on the other hand, be its slave. No, we must make certain allowances for nature while at the same time venerating the Author of

nature. And, while loving our parents and family, we are not to fail in loving God.

202 So the Lord, finding Himself despised and disdained by the rich, turned to the Gentiles. He made good and bad alike come in, to increase the goodness of the good, and to change for the better the dispositions of the bad. So we find fulfilled that text we read today*: *"Then shall the wolves and the lambs feed together" (Is 65:25)*. He invites the poor, the infirm, and the blind. This shows us that physical infirmity excludes no one from the Kingdom. The very infirmity of these people lessens their temptation to sin, and so their sins are fewer. Or we can interpret the text to mean that the infirmity of sin is forgiven by the mercy of the Lord. And so, having been redeemed from sin, not by works but by faith, one can glory only in the Lord *(cf.Rm 9:32; 1 Co 1:31)*.

203 So the King sends out His servants into the streets to fetch the poor and the lame, *"for wisdom preaches abroad, and utters her voice in the streets" (Pr 1:20)*. He sends His servants out into the broad streets and places, for He is sending them to call sinners from the broad and easy way into the narrow way that leads to life *(cf.Mt 7:13 sq.)*. He sends them along the highways and hedges. These people are ready for the Kingdom of Heaven. They are not detained by insatiable desires for riches. They hasten towards those riches that belong to the next world. These are people hastening along the road, so to speak, of virtue and good will. And, just as a hedge separates the cultivated fields from land that is uncultivated, and wards off from those fields the incursions of wild animals, so too these people know how to differentiate between good and evil. They know how to protect themselves, by the ramparts of faith, against the assaults of the evil spirits.

That is why the Lord, wishing to show how carefully He protected His vineyard, says: *"I surrounded it with a hedge and a ditch" (Mt 21:33)*. And the apostle speaks of the wall running through the hedge and breaking the continuity of the enclosure, and tells us that that dividing wall was removed *(cf.Ep 2:14)*. So faith and reason seek each other out, and they are found in the streets – that is to say in the wandering passages of our heart and mind For as it is written: *"May water flow abundantly in your streets" (Pr 5:16)*.

204 It is not enough, however, simply to come when invited to the wedding feast. You have to have clothes suitable for a wedding. that is to say, you must have faith and charity. Those who approach the altars of God without wearing faith and charity will be seized, hand and

* Here we have proof that these sermons were preached in the context of the liturgy.

foot, and thrown out into exterior darkness: *"Where there shall be weeping and grinding of teeth" (Mt 22:13)*.

What darkness is this? Does it mean that in that other world there will be dungeons and quarries? No, no. But whoever is shut out from the promises of the heavenly commandments is in outer darkness, because God's commandments are light *(cf.Jn 12:35)*. Whoever is without Christ is in the dark, because Christ is the light of the soul.

205 We are not speaking, either, of a material grinding of teeth, nor of a material fire burning for ever, nor of a material worm. But just as excess of food brings on fevers and worms, so too with our sins: if we do not in some way cut them back by moderation in food and drink, and if we pile up sin upon sin, one suffers from a kind of indigestion. The system is loaded down with sins old and new. Then one is set on fire by one's own fever and devoured by one's own worms. This is why Isaiah says: *"Walk in the light of your fire and in the flames that you have enkindled" (Is 50:11)*.

The fire is enkindled by the deep sadness our sins cause us. The worm proceeds from the fleshy part of our soul, and represents those sins that attack the spirit of the guilty one and devour the entrails of his conscience *(cf.Ws 12:5)*. Like worms they are born, if I may say so, from the body of the sinner. It is as the Lord said when speaking through Isaiah: *"And they will see the limbs and members of those who sinned against me; and their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched" (Is 66:24)*.

206 The grinding of the teeth symbolises hopeless rage. Too late one has repented; too late one groans and sighs; too late one rages against oneself for having sinned so long and so obstinately.

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207 ***"Is there anyone among you who, if he had a hundred sheep and one of them went astray, would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go in search of the lost one?" (Lk 15:4)***.

You learnt further back *(cf.paragraph 195)* how to steer clear of negligence, how to avoid arrogance, and how to acquire devotedness. You learnt how not to be a captive to the affairs of this world, and how not to prefer that which perishes to that which endures. But the world is a slippery place. It is hard for human nature to keep its footsteps firm. So the Good Physician has His remedies for those who go astray and once again He shows these to you. This merciful Judge holds out to you the hope of pardon. Saint Luke has a very deliberate purpose in proposing to you these three parables that follow one after the other: the sheep that went astray and was found; the drachma that was lost and recovered; the son that was dead and was restored to life. By this triple remedy He undertakes to cure you of your wounds: for, *"a threefold cord cannot perish" (Qo 4:12)*.

208 Who are they, this father, this shepherd, this woman? I would say that the father is God, the shepherd is Christ, and the woman is the Church. Christ carries you on His own shoulder, having taken on Himself your sins; the Church goes looking for you; the Father welcomes you. As a shepherd He carries you, as a mother He searches for you, as a father He clothes you. In the first place comes mercy, then follows assistance, and thirdly there is reconciliation. Every detail fits perfectly into place: the Redeemer comes to our help, the Church assists us, the Father is reconciled with us. All is the same mercy, all is the same divine work, but grace varies according to the merits of each.

The weary sheep is carried home by the shepherd; the lost coin is found; the son, truly sorry for what he has done, turns back and goes home to his father. So Scripture puts it very aptly when it says: *"To both man and beast you give protection" (Ps 35:7)*. What beasts are these? The prophet has told us that the seed of Israel is a seed of men, and that of Judah is a seed of beasts. *(cf.Jr 31:27)*. So Israel is saved as a man, and Judah is gathered home as a sheep. I would prefer to be a son rather than a sheep, for the sheep is carried home by the shepherd, but the son is welcomed by his father with feasting and rejoicing.

209 We ought to be happy, very happy, that the sheep which was lost in Adam is recovered in Christ. Christ's shoulders are the arms of the Cross. It is there that I lay down my burden of sins. On the noble neck of Christ's gibbet I rest my head. Though one sheep is spoken of, it represents our race, for *"we all form one body" (1 Co 10:17)*. It is, of course, a body made up of many members, for as Scripture says: *"You are the body of Christ, and members of His members" (1 Co 12:27)*. For *"the Son of man came to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10)*, that is to say, since *"all died in Adam, so too all come to life in Christ" (1 Co 15:22)*.

210 He must be a very rich shepherd, if we form only one percentage of His inheritance. He possesses innumerable flocks of angels, archangels, dominations, powers, thrones *(cf.Col 1:16)*, and many others. All these He leaves on the heights. Since these are rational beings they think it right to rejoice over the redemption of the human race. Is it not a further incentive to be good, when you consider that your conversion gives joy to troops of angels? Indeed, we should – each one of us – try to obtain their patronage, and we should dread giving them offence.

Friend, be a joy to the angels, and then they will surely rejoice when you come Home.

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211 Nor is it of small importance that this woman should be so delighted at finding her lost drachma. Do not consider this drachma

to be a small thing, but remember that it bears the likeness of the august emperor. This likeness to the King is the tribute that the Church pays.

We are sheep, let us ask Him to be so kind as to lead us to the waters that revive the spirit *(cf.Ps 22:2)*. I repeat it, we are sheep; let us beg Him to give us pastures green. We are drachmas, let us keep our value. We are children, let us run to the Father.

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212 Even if we have wasted our spiritual inheritance in chasing after earthly pleasures we must not be afraid. For the Father has restored to the Son the treasure that He had, that wealth of faith which never is exhausted. Even if He has already given all, all is still His; for He does not lose what He gives. Never worry that He will not want you back: *"for God takes no pleasure in the loss of the living" (Ws 1:13)*. Just see how He comes running to welcome us. He will fall on your neck – for *"the Lord lifts up those that are broken" (Ps 145:8)* – and He will kiss you. This kiss is the pledge of tender love. He will give you a robe, a ring, and shoes. Maybe you dreaded some affront, instead He restores your dignity; maybe you feared punishment, instead He gives you a kiss. Maybe you feared reproaches, instead He prepares feasts and merry-making.

But it is time now that I explain the actual parable.

213 ***"A man had two sons; and the younger one said to him: 'Give me my share of the fortune'"*** *(Lk 15:11-12)*.

See the way that the divine inheritance is given to those who ask for it! And do not think it wrong of the father to have given the inheritance to the younger son. No one is under age in the Kingdom of Heaven, and faith does not feel the weight of years. Anyway, the boy who asked thought he was capable of receiving his inheritance. Alas, if only he had not distanced himself from his father he would have suffered no inconvenience from his youthfulness! But he went into a foreign country, and really it served him right that he began to waste his money, for he had, after all, distanced himself from the Church. As I was saying, he left home and went into a foreign country, far, far away.

214 Can any exile be greater than the exile from one's own self? He was separated not only territorially, but by his very manner of life. He not only went into a strange country, but he left behind him the pursuits and interests that had once been his. Not only did the wide world and the vast sea separate him, but his own conduct made an exile of him.

Whoever separates himself from Christ becomes an exile from his native land and a citizen of this world. But we others *"are not strangers and guests of passage, but citizens of the Sanctuary and House of God" (Ep 2:19)*. For *"we who had once been afar off, have now drawn near by*

the Blood of Christ" (Ep 2:13). Let us not be unkind towards those who return from a distant country, seeing that we too were once dwellers in a distant land – as Isaiah reminds us. Listen: *"For those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, light has dawned" (Is 9:2)*. So the far off land is that of the shadow of death. But we, who have the Lord Christ as the breath of our face *(cf.Lm 4:20)*, live in the shadow of Christ. This is why the Church says: *"I have sat in the shade of Him for whom I longed" (Sg 2:3)*.

But that young man, living a life of debauchery, wasted all the lovely qualities of his nature. My friend, you have been given the likeness of God; you are made in His image. Take care not to destroy that likeness. Do not be so insane as to disfigure it. You are God's work. Do not say to a block of wood: *"You are my father" (Jr 2:27)*. And do not become like a block, for Scripture warns us: *"May those who make idols [of wood] become like them" (Ps 113:8)*!

215 ***"There came a mighty famine in that country"*** *(Lk 15:14)*.
This was not a scarcity of food, but a collapse of good works and of virtues. Can any famine be sadder than that? Truly, anyone who deserts the word of God, is gnawed by hunger. For *"we do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Lk 4:4)*. If you cut yourself off from the fountain, you are thirsty; if you cut yourself off from the treasure, you are poor; if you cut yourself off from wisdom you are stupid; and if you cut yourself off from virtue you are destroyed. This youth had left behind him the treasures of wisdom and of the knowledge of God *(cf.Col 2:3)*, and it is scarcely surprising that he began to suffer want. He had made himself a stranger to the depths of the heavenly riches. He suffered want and was hungry because insatiable thirst for pleasure never has enough. Those who are unwilling to fill themselves with the food that is eternal, will always suffer hunger.

216 ***"He then went and attached himself to one of the citizens"*** *(Lk 15:15)*.
A person who attaches himself, puts himself into a snare, and it would appear that this "citizen" was the prince of this world. Briefly, he was sent to work on the farm – the very farm that was bought by the person who excused himself from the wedding feast *(cf.Lk 14:18)* – and he was made to feed the pigs. No doubt these were the pigs into which the devil begged to be allowed enter, and having entered them they were driven headlong into the sea of this world *(cf.Mt 8:32)*. This was their fate because they chose to live in muck and mire.

217 ***"And he longed to fill his belly with husks"*** *(Lk 15:16)*.
Debauched people care only to fill their belly, for *"their belly is their god" (Ph 3:19)*. Husks are most suitable for people of this sort, for husks are soft on the outside, containing nothing on the inside. They fill the

body, but do not nourish it. They weigh down the system without being of any use to it.

218 Some people see the swine as representing troops of demons; they see the husks as the puny virtue of speakers intoxicated by their vain, empty and useless verbosity. By the foolish seduction of clever talk, by their fine flow of fancy eloquence, by the noise they make, these "philosophers" tickle the ear rather than produce anything of real use and lasting worth.

219 ***"But no one would give him any"*** *(Lk 15:16)*.
"No one would give him any" because this was a region empty of people. he was in the region of him who possesses no one, because those whom he possesses are not. For *"all the nations are counted as nothing"(Is 40:17)*. None but God can *"bring the dead to life, and call those things that are not, as those that are" (Rm 4:17)*.

220 ***"And returning to himself he said: 'How many hired servants in my father's house abound in bread!' "*** *(Lk 15:17)*.
It is very well put: *"returning to himself"*, for he had become an exile from himself, but now he returns to the Lord. On returning to Him we find ourselves again; and in denying Christ we distance ourselves from ourselves. Who are the *"hired servants"*? Surely they are those who work for pay; they are the Israelites. They follow the right course not through any zeal for what is right and good; it is not the charm of virtue that attracts them, for they are solely interested in making profit. But the son, who has in his heart the pledge of the Holy Spirit *(cf.2 Co 1:22)*, is not meanly seeking an earthly salary. No, the son has his hereditary rights.

There are also workers engaged to look after the vineyard. These are good servants – Peter, John and James. Our Lord says to them: *"Come, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:19)*. These have a great abundance, not of husks but of bread. They were even able to fill twelve huge baskets with the scraps left over. Lord Jesus, please, I beg you, take away the empty husks and give us true bread! For in your Father's House you are the dispenser and the steward. Oh, if you would only engage us as workers, even if we come rather late! For You take on workers at the eleventh hour, and you give them the same wages. You give the same wages of life, though not of glory. For it is not for everyone to receive the crown of justice. Only those may receive it who are able to say: *"I have fought the good fight" (2 Tm 4:7)*.

221 I could not be silent about that because certain people – as I well know – say that they are going to put off till death the grace of baptism or repentance. In the first place, how do you know that you are not going to die this very night? *(cf.Lk 12:20)*. And then, seeing that you have

done nothing, how can you expect everything to be given to you? Let us agree that there is one grace, one payment; but the prize of victory is something else – and that was the prize after which Paul was striving, and with good reason. After receiving the payment of grace, he wanted the prize as well *(cf.Ph 3:14)*. He knew that there was to be the same payment for all, but that few – very few – would win the palm.

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222 Seeing that we have reached the Lord's vineyard, let us not leave it empty handed. For it is good to gather the grapes, and good to observe those working there. What is the significance of these workers engaged at different hours of the same day, if not that *"a thousand years in the Lord's sight are as yesterday past and gone; and as a watch in the night" (Ps 89:4)*? What night is this, if not the night that precedes the coming of day? And truly it is an hour in the night, since a thousand years are but a day. The sacred writer knew the importance of this day when he said: *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever" (Heb 13:8)*. Well he knew that it was a many faceted day, he who wrote: *"This is the day of the generation of heaven and earth, the day when they were made. In that day the Lord made heaven and earth, and every plant of the field" (Gn 2:4)*.

Having already described the previous seven days, he then sums up in one day all the work of creation; and so shows that in the Lord's sight the whole duration of the world is as a single day; a day that emerged, from a world plunged in chaos and darkness, into God's marvellous light.

If, then, the whole duration of the world is as but a single day, then we may reckon the centuries as though they were hours. In other words, the centuries are so many hours. Now, as we know, *"there are twelve hours in the day" (Jn 11:9)*. In a mystical sense, the "day" is Christ. He has His twelve apostles, shining with heavenly light, one following on the other in due and harmonious order.

223 So, to continue the parable, the father of the family comes out first thing in the morning to hire workers. Perhaps these workers represent those who from the commencement of the world to the time of the flood lived lives of innocence, those of whom God could say: *"I have spoken to you before the rising of the day, and I have sent you my prophets" (Jr 25:3)*. The "third hour" begins after the deluge; this period comprises Noah and other good workers sent into the vineyard. Remember how Noah became, as it were, inebriated after his midday meal *(cf Gn 9:21)*. The sixth and the following hours are highlighted by the merits of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At the ninth hour the world was already sinking into a decline, and the light of virtue was growing dim; both the Law and the prophets denounced the decadence of the prevailing morals. There came the eleventh hour, and then it was that the sacred advent produced the last light

of the day. This is why Jesus says in the Gospel: *"Walk while you have the light" (Jn 12:35)*.

224 But now we must go back to the [prodigal's] father. it is not that. in bringing to your attention the example of this young man's repentance, I have any fear that we have been for a long time absent from our Father. We were never absent; in fact we were all the time in the vineyard. If he, too, had stayed there he would not have become estranged from the father. But I must get on with the story, for fear of delaying the reconciliation between them! The father, you see, made no delay in being reconciled. Our heavenly Father is only too willing to be reconciled, when we ask Him in earnest. So let us learn by what approach we should seek pardon from the Father. Listen to the son's words: *"'Father', he says" (Lk 15:21)*. What forgiveness, what tenderness we see in one who, no matter how hurt he had been by his child, does not forbid him to call him "father"!

"'Father', he says, 'I have sinned against Heaven and before you'" (Lk 15:21).

225 Such is his first avowal to him who is the author of his life, the master of mercy, the judge of his sin. True, God knows all things, but all the same He likes to hear the expression of our sorrow and regret. For *"with the mouth confession is made for our justification" (Rm 10:10)*. By confessing one lightens the weight of one's sin; and by owning up in advance one takes the sting out of the accusation; for *"the just person begins by accusing himself" (Pr 18:17)*. Anyway, it would be very foolish to attempt deceiving One who cannot be deceived; and you risk nothing in telling something which is already known. Confess, and then Christ will intervene for you, and you will have Him as your advocate with the Father *(cf.1 Jn 2:1)*. Confess, and the Church will intercede for you, the congregation will weep with you.

Have no fear of not being heard. The advocate guarantees your pardon; the patron promises you forgiveness; your defender assures you, with fatherly kindness, that you are reconciled. Believe, for He is all truth; be at peace, for He is your strength. It is in the interests of Christ to intercede for you, because for your sake He died. He does not want His death to be in vain. The Father also has reason to forgive, for whatever the Son wants, He wants too.

226 ***"I have sinned against Heaven and before you" (Lk 15:21)***. He does not mention some particular sin; but signifies that his soul, by sinning, has diminished the heavenly gifts of the Spirit. Or he could mean that he never should have left the bosom of his mother, the heavenly Jerusalem.

227 ***"I am no longer worthy to be called your son"*** *(Lk 15:21).* This he says because sin should not be boastful. The sinner, by humbling himself, gets grace to be lifted up.

228 ***"Treat me as one of your hired servants"*** *(Lk 15:19).* He knows that there is a difference between sons and hired servants, between friends and slaves. By baptism one becomes a son; by virtue one becomes a friend; by work one becomes a hired servant; by fear one becomes a slave. But even the slaves and hired servants become friends, for as Jesus says: *"You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you servants" (Jn 15:14 sq.).*

229 This is the way He talked. But talking is not enough. One has to come back to the Father. Where are we to seek Him? Where are we to find Him? Begin by rising up. I refer to those of you who up to now have remained sitting and sleeping. This is why the apostle says: *"Get up, you who are sleeping, and rise from the dead" (Ep 5:14).* Iniquity sits on a heap of lead *(cf.Zc 5:7)*; but to Moses the Lord says: *"Stand here with me" (Dt 5:31).* Christ chooses those who stand upright. So rise up and run to the Church. There you will find the Father, there you will find the Son, there you will find the Holy Spirit.

230 He who heard you conversing in the secret depths of your heart will come to meet you. And while you are still a long way off, He will run to welcome you. He sees into your soul. He runs, so that you will on no account delay. And then He kisses you. His running to meet you is His foreknowledge; His kiss is His tenderness, and the expression of a father's love. He throws Himself upon your neck in order to lift you up from where you lay. There you lay loaded with sins, your face turned earthwards, and He lifts you so that you can return to Heaven where you will find the true Author of your life. Christ throws Himself on your neck to free it from the yoke of slavery and to replace it with His sweet and gentle yoke *(cf.Mt 11:30).* Don't you think He fell on John's neck, that time that John rested in the bosom of Jesus, with his head laid back? It was in this way that John perceived how the Word was one with the Father, for truly this apostle was raised up to the heights. The Lord throws Himself on your neck when He says: *"Come to me, you who labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you" (Mt 11:28 sq.).* This is how He will embrace you, if you will only turn to Him.

231 Then the robe, the ring, and the shoes are brought out. The robe represents wisdom; with this robe the apostles cover the body's nakedness: each one is wrapped in it. They receive the robe to clothe the frailty of their body with the force of spiritual wisdom. Concerning wisdom. Scripture says: *"He shall wash his robe in wine"(Gn 49:11).*

It is a spiritual garment, it is the wedding garment. The ring is the seal of sincere faith and the stamp of truth. The shoes have reference to the preaching of the Gospel *(cf.Ep 6:15).* Notice that the son received the "first robe", the first wisdom – for there is another sort of wisdom that is ignorant of the mystery; he received the seal in words and in acts. And he received a guarantee that he would continue in his good intentions and along the right course, so that he would not trip up on a stone and injure himself *(cf.Ps 90:12).* For, were the devil to cause him to tumble, he would leave off preaching the Gospel of the Lord. These shoes he was given are *"the preparation of the Gospel" (cf.Ep 6:15)* that send people out on the course directed towards heavenly goods; with such shoes we do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the spirit *(cf.Rm 8:4).*

232 They kill the fatted calf. This means that we are graciously given to partake in the Communion of the sacred mysteries, nourishing ourselves on the Lord's flesh and becoming strong in spiritual virtue. No one can do this unless he fears God – for fear of God is the beginning of wisdom *(cf.Ps 110:10; Pr 9:10).* No one can take part in the heavenly mysteries unless he has kept or recovered the seal of the Spirit, and confessed the Lord. Those who have the ring have the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – for on them God has made His mark. God, of whom Christ is the Image *(cf.2 Co 4:4)* has stamped this mark upon us; He has sealed us and given us the pledge of the Spirit in our hearts *(cf.2 Co 1:22)*; that we might know that such is the seal of this ring which is given into our hand, and which is imprinted on our hearts, our actions, and our ministry. So, we have been stamped and sealed. It is as we have read: *"You who believe have been signed with the Holy Spirit" (Ep 1:13).*

233 It is, too, appropriate that the Son describes the father in the parable hurrying along with the flesh of the calf, for this is a sacrificial offering that is made for sin. He wanted to show us that the feast provided by the heavenly Father is our salvation; and that the joy of the Father is our redemption from sin. Here, if you attribute to the Father the fact that the Son became a victim for our sins, you can see that the Father finds His joy in recovering the lost sheep. From this it is apparent that Father and Son share one and the same joy, and share one and the same activity in founding the Church.

234 The father rejoices that the son who was lost is found, and that the son who was dead is restored to life. Had he not existed, he could not have died. For no one can die unless they first exist. Therefore the Gentiles do not exist, but the Christian does. As was said further back (*paragraph 219*): *"God has chosen that which is not, to destroy that which is" (1 Co 1:28).* But you can see here one single image of the whole human race. Adam was, and in him we have all been; Adam died and in him we

have all died. Humankind is, therefore, restored and renewed in the very man in whom it had perished. He who was made in the image and likeness of God is patiently mended by the excessive kindness of God. What is the meaning of that text: *"God has chosen that which is not, to destroy that which is"*? It means this: He chose the Gentiles, who "were not", to destroy the Jewish people.

235 One can also apply these words to those who do penance. That is to say, no one dies unless he has already lived. So the Gentiles do not die, and yet they are dead. For anyone who does not believe in Christ is always dead. But once the Gentiles began to believe, grace brought them to life; so, too, the penitent, once he has done penance, is restored to life.

236 The passage that follows disposes us to look with a kindly eye on those who do penance for their sins and receive pardon. If we were ungracious towards those who are pardoned, we would be in grave danger of not obtaining pardon from the Lord for ourselves. Who are you to dare question the Lord regarding His right to forgive whom He wishes? Do not you yourselves forgive those whom you wish to forgive? He likes to be asked. He likes to be asked most insistently. If everyone were to be innocent, what chance would God have to show mercy? Who are you to envy God His rights?

237 That is why the father finds fault with the elder brother when he comes back from his work in the farm *(cf.Lk 15:25 sq.)*. This man was, you see, occupied in working on the land; and ignorant of that which pertains to the Spirit of God *(cf.1 Co 2:11)*. He complained that no one ever killed so much as a kid for him; for it is not through envy, but to take away the sins of the world, that the Lamb is slain. The envious fellow demands a kid; the innocent person desires only that the Lamb be immolated for him. We know that this brother was the elder of the two. Envy makes people grow old more quickly. If he insists on staying outside, it is because his own malice and spite exclude him from the family. He cannot bear the singing and the dancing – this was not the sort of theatrical music that excites the passions, nor was it the sound of flute playing. No, it was the sweet harmony of people who sing with resounding joy at the sight of a sinner who has been saved.

238 Just show me one person who thinks himself just. I can assure you that that person is looking at the speck in the other fellow's eye *(cf.Lk 6:41 sq.)* and is unaware of the plank in his own eye. How indignant he is when someone, who has long regretted his sin and implored pardon, is finally received back into grace! His ears cannot bear the glad singing, the joy, the harmony of these people! For within the Church there is a symphony. People of every age and versed in every sort of virtue sing

together in perfect harmony, like so many strings of the harp. Like choirs, they sing the psalms – one choir alternating with the other – and utter the great Amen. Paul knew well this symphony, for he says: *"I will sing with my spirit, I will sing with my soul" (1 Co 14:15)*.

This is, at any rate, my way of explaining the present parable.

239 Of course, it is quite all right if someone wishes to see these two brothers as representing two different peoples: the younger being the Gentile people and the elder brother being Israel, who envies his brother for getting their father's blessing *(cf.Gn 27:34)*. This is what the Jews did. They complained that Christ sat down at table with the Gentiles *(cf.Lk 5:30)*. Therefore they claim for themselves a kid, a foul-smelling sacrifice. The Jew asks for a kid; the Christian asks for the Lamb. So the Jews are given Barabbas *(cf.Lk 23:18)*, while for us the Lamb is immolated. Theirs is the stench of crime, ours is the remission of sin – sweet the hope it offers, and luscious its fruit. To demand a kid is to await the antichrist; for Christ is a victim fragrant to the nostrils.

240 This complaint about the kid would indicate that the Jews have lost the rites of their ancient sacrifices. They have not profited from the blood of anyone; but the Church has profited from the Blood of Christ. The blood of the prophets was not enough to ransom the Jews. This elder brother is cheeky. He is like the Pharisee who justified himself in that presumptuous prayer which he made; who imagined that he had never broken any commandment of God, whereas in fact all he had done was to observe the *letter* of the Law *(cf.Lk 18:11)*. It was heartless of him to accuse his brother of wasting his fortune on harlots. He should have remembered that it was with regard to such as him that those words were spoken: *"The harlots and publicans shall enter before you into the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 21:31)*.

241 He stands outside the door. He is not shut out, but he simply does not want to enter in. He cannot grasp that it is God's will to call the Gentiles; and that the servant has now become a son; for *"the servant does not know what the Lord does" (Jn 15:15)*. When he finds out he is jealous, tortured by the happiness of the Church, and so he stays outside. So it is from outside that Israel hears the singing and the symphony. He is exceedingly angry to hear the people singing in harmony – a harmony that only grace can effect – and he hates the joyful concord of the crowd.

242 But the father, ever kind, would like to save him. He says: ***"You are always with me"*** *(Lk 15:31)*. Yes, you are always with Me, whether as a Jew faithful to the Law, or whether as a just person in communion with the faithful. But chiefly you are with Me if you cease to be envious.

243 ***"All that I have is yours"*** *(Lk 15:31).*
As a Jew you possess the mysteries of the Old Testament, as a baptised person you possess equally the mysteries of the New Testament.

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244 ***"No servant can serve two masters"*** *(Lk 16:13).*
Not that there are two masters. There is only one Master. For even though there are people who serve the god of money, the latter is unaware of any rights of lordship over them. It is these people themselves who put their necks under the yoke of slavery.

245 So the Lord says: ***"Make for yourselves friends with that iniquitous thing which is money"*** *(Lk 16:9).* He means, give generously to the poor and then you will secure for yourselves the friendship of the angels and the other saints. He does not find fault with the steward (by the way, we can learn from this parable that we are not owners, but merely stewards of another's wealth). Though he had done wrong, the steward is nonetheless praised for having looked after his own interests by remitting debts in the name of his Master. Money is aptly described as iniquitous, for avarice – by the various enticements of riches – stirs up our desires and makes us the willing slaves of wealth.

246 Therefore He says: ***"If you have not been trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will trust you with that which is rightfully yours?"*** *(Lk 16:12).*
Riches are not truly ours, they are alien to us. They exist outside our own nature. They are not born with you, neither do they sin with you. But Christ really is ours, because He is the Life. Also, *"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (Jn 1:11).* No one, therefore, will give you what is your own since you would not believe in Him who is your true good and belongs to you. You gave no welcome to that which was your own.

247 It looks as though the Jews are being accused of fraud and avarice. In this matter of riches, they were not found trustworthy, even though they knew that these riches did not belong to them – for the goods of Earth are given to be enjoyed by all – and knew, too, that they should have shared them with the poor. Therefore they did not deserve to receive Christ. But Zachaeus, to receive Christ, gave up half his goods *(cf.Lk 19:8).*

248 We must not be slaves of exterior possessions. We should recognise no Master other than the Lord Christ. For: *"There is but one God, the Father from whom all things come and in whom we exist; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things" (1 Co 8:6).* What

then? Is the Father not Lord, and is the Son not God? But the Father is also Lord, since *"by the word of the Lord the heavens were firmly established" (Ps 32:6).* And the Son is God, since He *"is above all things, God who is blessed for ever" (Rm 9:5).*

How, then, can we say that no one is able to serve two masters? The answer is that there is but one Lord, one God. That is why Scripture says: *"You shall adore the Lord your God, and you shall serve none but Him (Mt 4:10).* From this it is perfectly clear that the Father and the Son share one dominion. This dominion is so perfectly one that, instead of being divided, it exists totally and entirely in the Father; and totally and entirely in the Son. So, in affirming one single dominion in the Trinity, we declare that there is only one God and one Lord. But to think that the Father has one power and the Son another, and the Spirit another, would mean introducing into the Church a number of gods and a number of lords. Such is the error of the pagans.

BOOK EIGHT

1 ***"The Law and the prophets lasted until John"*** *(Lk 16:16).*
This does not mean that the Law then ended, but rather that the preaching of the Gospel began *(cf.Rm 8:1 sq.)*. When that which seems greater arrives, that which is lesser seems to have completed its work. So let us take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm. Those who take a place by storm rush upon their object with great vehemence, They don't dawdle along like people half asleep. In the realm of faith, to take by storm means fervour in religion; and to be lackadaisical would be a grave fault.

In many ways the Law followed nature; it made some allowances for natural desires, so as to encourage us to love what is just and good. Christ, on the other hand, pruned our nature, and cut back on our natural pleasures. We now have to do violence to our nature, so that it will not drown once more in earthly things, but will lift itself up to the heights.

2 ***"Whoever dismisses his wife and takes another, commits adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman is guilty of adultery"*** *(Lk 16:18).*
I think we should begin by speaking of the institution of marriage, and then we can go on to the question of divorce. There are people who think that every marriage is from God, seeing that Scripture says: *"What God has joined together, let no one put asunder" (Mt 19:6)*. If, then, every marriage is of God, it is never lawful to dissolve a marriage. Yet the apostle says: *"if the unbeliever chooses to depart let him depart" (1 Co 7:16)*. But this is actually a marvellous answer: for he does not give the Christian spouse permission to divorce, and at the same time he demonstrates that not every marriage is of God. For God does not give Christians the right to marry pagans; in fact, God's Law forbids it *(cf.Ex 34:16; Dt 7:3)*.

3 But someone will remind me of those words of Solomon: *"House and riches are given by parents; but a prudent wife is prepared by God"(Pr 19:14)*. Read this in Greek and you will find no contradiction. For the Greek has aptly put αρμόζεται [tuned, harmonised]. Harmony is, as you know, a fitting together of notes, a sweet-sounding union. There is harmony when the pipes of an organ are so grouped together as to produce melodious sound, and when the strings of a musical instrument ring out in sweet accord. But there cannot be sweet accord in a marriage where a Christian spouse is unlawfully joined to a pagan. So, when there is a marriage, there is harmony. When there is harmony, it is God who unites the couple. Where there is disharmony, there is strife and squabbling. Dissension can never be of God, for *"God is love" (1 Jn 4:8)*.

4 Take care not to cast off your spouse, for in doing that you deny God who is the Author of your union. Besides, if you are meant to tolerate and bear with the faults of others, there is all the more reason why you should tolerate those of your spouse. Hear what the Lord says: *"To cast off your wife, is to make her an adulteress" (Mt 3:32)*. Since she is not allowed to marry again in the lifetime of her husband *(cf.1 Co 7:39)* the danger is that she will yield to the pleasure of sin. It is the man who drove her out who is responsible for this sin. This man drives out a woman who was his wife, sends her away with her little children; or else, when she is an old woman with tottering footsteps, puts her out and closes the door on her.

It is cruel to send away the mother and to keep the children – adding to the insult that pierces her heart by depriving her of the affection of the little ones. It is still more cruel to send away the children on account of their mother, for the children might manage to win back the father's favour for the wife he had dismissed. What a risk it is to send away a woman who is still young and vulnerable! And what cruelty it is to let go an old woman deflowered of her youth and bloom! It would be as if a general were to dismiss a veteran soldier without a pension, without rewarding him for his services, without honour or dignity, and stripped of his rank. It would be like a strong farmer giving the sack to a poor old labourer worn out by years of toil! Are we to consider that conduct which would be shameful towards an inferior is permissible towards one who is your equal?

5 So, you cast off your wife as though by right and without remorse. You cast her off and think it lawful? Yes, civil law allows it, I know, but divine law *does not*. You observe man-made laws, but I would caution you to fear God. Listen to the law of God to which even our own law-makers defer: *"What God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Mt 19:6)*.

6 But, in allowing divorce, it is not only a precept of Heaven that you destroy, but a divine work. I ask you, friend, are you going to allow your children, during your own lifetime, to have to depend on a step-father? Or, while their own mother is still alive, are you going to place them under a step-mother? But supposing that the wife you have repudiated does not remarry, ought she really to have lost your regard while you were her husband, seeing that she keeps the vows she made to you even though you are an adulterer? And if she does marry, the extremity to which you drove her will be your accuser. As for your own new marriage, it is, in fact, adultery. What difference does it make whether you openly publish your adultery, thinking in this way to cover up your sin, or whether you secretly commit adultery as a married man? The only difference is that it is worse to state openly that sin is lawful than it is to sin secretly.

7 You may perhaps object: *"Why did Moses order us to give a writ of dismissal in dismissing one's wife" (Mt 19:7)*? This is how a Jew would speak. And should he make this same objection that was made to the Lord, the Lord will reply: *"It was because of the hardness of your hearts that Moses permitted you to give a writ of dismissal in dismissing one's wife. But in the beginning it was not so" (Mt 19:8).*

8 Moses, He tells us, permitted it. God did not ordain it. But in the beginning there was the law of God. What is the law of God? *"A man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be joined to his wife; and the two shall be one body" (Gn 2:24; Mt 19:5).* So, in sending away your wife, you tear your own flesh asunder and split your body in two.

We can see from this passage that what was written by Moses was due to human weakness. It was not written by God. So the apostle says: *"To married couples it is not I, but the Lord, who commands that the wife should not leave her husband" (1 Co 7:10).* Further down he says: *"To the rest I, and not the Lord, say this: if a Christian man has a wife who is not a believer etc." (1 Co 7:12).* Therefore, in the case of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, the apostle adds: *"If the unbeliever chooses to go, let them go" (1 Co 7:15).* At one and the same time the apostle denies that divorce is allowed by divine law. He neither prescribes divorce not does he give anyone permission to desert his spouse. But he lays no blame on the partner who is abandoned.

9 I have, up to now, been giving you moral teachings. There is however the mystical understanding that concerns Christ and the Church *(cf.Ep 5:32).* Further back Jesus had announced the Kingdom of God, and He had also said that not a jot of the Law can be dropped. Then He adds: *"Whoever leaves his wife and takes another, is guilty of adultery"*. This is where the great mystery is: concerning Christ and the Church no one can doubt that God has united them, seeing that Jesus Himself says: *"No one can come to me unless the Father, who sent me, draws him" (Jn 6:44).* In truth, none but God could tie a nuptial knot such as this: and that is why Solomon, speaking mystically, says: *"It is God who prepares for man his spouse" (Pr 19:14).* The Bridegroom is Christ; the Bride is the Church: bride through love, virgin through chastity. Let anyone, therefore, that God has drawn to Christ not be separated from Him by persecution or turned away from Him by debauchery. May he not be seduced from Him by philosophy; nor corrupted by the Manichaeans. May he not be misled by the Arians, nor infected by the Sabellians. God has united him, let not the Jew separate him. All are adulterers who wish to adulterate the truth of faith and wisdom.

10 *"What writ of divorce is this,"* asks the Lord, *"whereby I have dismissed your mother?" (Is 50:1).* You have heard that there was repudiation; believe, too, that there was marriage. You have heard how the passage continues, in words addressed to the Jews: *"You were sold on account of your iniquities; and it was because of your sins that I sent your mother away" (Is 50:1).* Stay, friend, in your Father's house; stay with your Husband; make every effort to please your Spouse. Thanks to your intelligence you have come to believe in God, now let that intelligence, that mind, be like a valiant woman. Let it be like the soul of the Church – let it be like the Church – of which Solomon says: *"A valiant woman, who shall find her? Such a woman is more precious than jewels. Her husband puts his trust in her" (Pr 31:10 sq.).*

We shall look now at what this woman does for her Spouse; we shall see what is the work, what is the submission, of this woman in whom Christ puts His trust.

11 A good wife clothes her husband. May our faith clothe Jesus with His own Body; let the glory of His divinity clothe His flesh. It was in this way that the woman provided "double garments" for her husband *(cf.Pr 31:21 sq.).* She made double garments to honour him both now and in time to come. A woman who wove cloth such as this was no ordinary woman. Her husband did not find her plucking the lighter strands of wool, but with anxious care drawing out the precious strands of virtue. This woman lifted her hands at night *(cf.Ps 133:2)* and took up her task, working her way through the appointed measure of wool. By this she showed her dedication, her gravity, which knows always how to observe the right measure in one's conduct of oneself. And so the garment she wove was a work of glory, a labour of love. Always on the look out for the return of her Husband, always eager to see him, she sighed for him – she longed to be already with him and said: My Husband is late returning, I shall hurry out to meet Him. I shall see Him face to face, when He comes in His glory.

12 Come, Lord Jesus. Come and find your bride at her task. She waits without stain, without any slur on her fair name. She has kept your home innocent and pure, and has not neglected your commandments. Let her say to you: *"I have found Him whom my soul loves" (Sg 3:4).* Let her welcome you into her cellar of wine – *"for wine cheers the heart" (Ps 103:15).* Let her drink deep of the Spirit, let her recognise the Mystery, let her speak oracles.

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13 ***"There was a certain rich man clothed in purple" (Lk 16:19).***
I think that this is a true story more than a parable, especially from the moment that a proper name [Lazarus] is given. This rich man had drunk to the dregs every species of worldly luxury and delight, and it is right that the Lord should show him now in Hell, consumed by a burning thirst (no

wonder there is mention of his five brothers – that is to say the five bodily senses. These five senses, united by a sort of fraternity of nature, burned with lusts immeasurable and beyond count). But Lazarus, on the contrary, is placed in the bosom of Abraham. There he rests in a tranquil haven, in a place of rest whose peace nothing can disturb. In such a haven no enticements to earthly pleasures can disturb us; no vices can find place there. In this haven, weariness will not weigh us down, and we shall be safe from the demands of harsh and exacting labour. While we can apply all this to Lazarus – poor in this world but rich in God's eyes – we can also apply it to one who, according to the apostle, is poor in eloquence but rich in faith *(cf.Jm 2:5 sq.)*. I say "rich in faith" because not all poverty is holy, nor are all riches reprehensible. But, just as debauchery dishonours wealth, so too holiness makes poverty honourable.

Or it could refer to the apostolic person who keeps the true faith, who dares not strive after the crown of eloquence, is not burdened by a weight of arguments, has no need to clothe his thoughts in empty, flowery phrases. He will receive his recompense with interest. He will be well rewarded for doing battle with the heretics: Manichaeus, Marcio, Sabellinus, Arius and Photinus – for what else are these than the [five] brothers of the Jews? Are they not bonded to them in a fraternity of false belief? But the apostolic person controls the appetites of the flesh – which are kindled by the five senses. He will receive his recompense with interest; riches will be given to him pressed down and flowing over. And his reward will be everlasting.

14 I think, too, that the whole passage has to do with faith. Lazarus, who is not given a place at the rich man's table, gathers up the gift of faith. His sores, taken in a literal sense, would certainly make him an object of horror to the rich glutton. In the midst of his lavish feasts, and surrounded by his fine perfumed friends, the stench from the poor man's sores (those sores that the dogs had licked) would have been quite unbearable. For this rich man was easily wearied even by a breath of natural air. And yet the swollen pride and cancerous growth of the rich have their own way of revealing themselves. These people forget their human condition and think that they are superior to nature. In the wretched state of the poor they actually find something to season their pleasures. They laugh at the poor, insult the disadvantaged, and diminish the very ones on whom any decent person would have pity.

15 Let each of us, like Lazarus, gather up whichever we choose of the two. For my part, I find a resemblance between Lazarus and the apostle who was three times scourged by the Jews *(cf.2 Co 11:24)*, to give to the believers an example of patience, and to call the Gentiles. For their sake he offered, so to speak, the sores of his body to be licked by dogs. For, as it is written: *"They shall return at evening and shall hunger like dogs" (Ps 58:15)*. The Canaanite woman recognised this mystery, when the Lord

said to her: *"No one takes the children's bread and throws it to dogs" (Mt 15:22 sq.)*. She was quick to see that the bread referred to was not visible bread, but the bread of understanding, and so she replied: *"But yes, Lord, for the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table"*. These crumbs come from the bread; and since the bread is the word, these crumbs are – in a manner of speaking – dogmas of faith. Then the Lord, showing that the woman had spoken with faith, replied: *"Woman, great is your faith"*.

16 Happy sores, which preserve us from eternal suffering! Rich crumbs, that put to flight perpetual fast, and which fill with eternal nourishment the poor who receive you! The ruler of the Synagogue rejected you from his table when he brushed aside the sacred mysteries of the prophetic writings and the Law. For these "crumbs" are the words of Scripture, and of them is written: *"You have cast my words behind your back" (Ps 49:17)*.

The scribe rejected You, but Paul gathered Your words with the greatest care, and by his sufferings drew people to You. Those people licked the sores of him whom they saw, when, though bitten by the serpent, Paul shook off the snake and had no fear. Those people saw, and they believed *(cf.Ac 28:3 sq.)*. The gaoler licked his wounds: he washed Paul's wounds, and he believed *(Ac 16:33)*. Happy the dogs that lick such sores, drawing from them their liquid to fill their hearts and to enrich their throats. With throats enriched they will be well able to bark and so guard the house; they will defend the flock; and they will strike fear into the wolves!

17 Just take a look, now, at the Arians. They are totally taken up with the cares of this world. They go all out to win the emperor's favour and support. Why? So that, with the imperial arms, they can attack the Church. Does it not seem to you that they are stretched out on beds of purple and fine linen? Falsehood they defend as though it were the truth. Oh yes, they can pour out words in torrents. They can assure you that earth trembled under the Body of Jesus, that the heavens were veiled in darkness; that by His word He stirred or pacified the seas. And yet, they deny that He truly is Son of God.

Now make a comparison between them and this poor person who understands that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of virtue *(cf.1 Co 4:20)*. Such a person expresses his thoughts in few words: *"You are the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16)*. Does it not seem to you that the riches of the former are poverty, and the poverty of the latter is truly wealth? Heresy, being rich, has composed a quantity of gospels. Faith, being poor, has preserved the one Gospel that it received. Philosophy, being rich, has made itself a number of gods. The Church, being poor, knows only one God.

18 So, between this rich person and this poor person there is a *"vast abyss" (Lk 16:26)* because after our death our merits remain unalterable. Therefore, we see the rich man in Hell, longing to get a drop of water from the poor man. For water is very refreshing to the soul that suffers; as Isaiah says: *"You shall draw waters with joy from the Saviour's fountain" (Is 12:3)*. But why is he tortured before the Judgement? Because, for a debauchee, to be deprived of one's pleasure: is a severe punishment. And again, the Lord says: *"There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you shall see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Lk 13:28)*.

19 Too late this rich man begins to be a teacher. The time, whether for learning or for teaching, has passed him by. In this passage the Lord makes clear that the Old Testament is the foundation of faith. He rebukes the Jews for their unbelief, and makes short work of the tricks of the heretics – those heretics who do such harm to the weak minded. For the latter are little ones whose virtue has not yet grown to its full height and vigour.

20 I might remark here that further back, in the parable of the steward *(cf.Lk 16:1 sq.)*, and here again in the parable of the rich man, we find an appeal to be merciful. In the former, perhaps, we are being urged to give freely to the saints, whom the Lord calls friends and to whom He attributes dwellings *(cf. Lk 16:9)*. Whereas in this parable we are recommended to give to the poor.

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21 ***"If your brother sins against you, reprove him"*** *(Lk 17:3)*.
After the parable of the rich man tormented by excruciating sufferings, our Lord wisely recommends us to forgive – I mean, of course, to forgive those who have turned from their wrong-doing. This He does so that no one need feel discouraged, no one need despair of his conversion from sin. Our Lord expresses this with much kindness and moderation, balancing all that He says so that pardon does not become difficult, nor is forgiveness given too lightly. He wants no one to be put off by a harsh reprimand, nor – on the other hand – to be encouraged, by a casual sort of attitude on our part, to continue sinning. He says much the same in another place: *"If your brother has sinned against you, go and rebuke him between you and him alone" (Mt 18:15)*. For a friendly remonstrance is far better than an angry accusation. The friendly approach inspires shame; the angry attack provokes fury. Hold back your indignation. It is better that the man you are warning should fear it rather than feel it.

I assure you that it is a far better thing that the person whom you are reproaching should consider you more a friend than an enemy. One is readier to listen to advice than to yield to force. This is why the apostle says:

"Admonish him as a brother" – so that he will blush – *"and do not look on him as an enemy" (2 Th 3:15)*. Fear is, in the long run, a poor sort of guardian; but a sense of shame is a good teacher of what is right and what is wrong. The person who fears is reprimanded, not corrected or improved; but one in whom a sense of shame is awoken, will return to the right path.

22 But note the Lord's exact words: *"If he sins against you"*. For there is a difference between sinning against God and sinning against a fellow human being. So the apostle, who is an authentic interpreter of the divine oracle says: *"Give the heretic one warning, and then avoid him" (Tt 3:10)*. To be false to the Faith is not to be forgiven the way a fault is forgiven, yet we have to remember that often it is through our ignorance that error creeps in. That is why the apostle says we are to give the heretic a warning; either such a warning may prevent him from growing hardened in heresy, or it may help him to correct his error.

23 But then why does our Lord say: ***"Even if he comes back seven times, you must still forgive him"*** *(Lk 17:4)*?
Is there a fixed number of times that we are to forgive? Or does it mean that God, who rested on the seventh day from all His works, is promising us that after the week of this world there will be lasting rest? In that repose, the evil of this world will go on holiday and work no more; and the rigour of revenge will take a rest. Now, there is a sabbath not only among days but also among months, and that is why the tenth day of the seventh month is the sabbath of sabbaths *(cf.Lv 23:15 sq.; 25:8 and 10 sq.)*; there is also a sabbath among years; and not only among years, but among all the generations to the end of the world.

This is the image of the great sabbath, just as in the Law there is the seventh week, after which is celebrated the jubilee year. It is the mystery that our Lord has chosen to reveal to us, saying: *"Not only seven times, but seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22)*. It was in the seventh generation – as you will find in Luke *(cf.Lk 3:37)* – that Enoch *"was snatched away, for fear that evil would change his heart" (Ws 4:11)*, and he no longer knew sorrow's remorseless sting. So, too, it was in the seventy-seventh generation *(cf.Lk 3:23 sq.)* that the Lord was born of Mary; and taking upon Himself the sins of the human race, granted us pardon for all our faults.

24 So if – in the literal sense – you learn to pardon often, and not to harbour resentment (for once accustomed to forgiving, you will no longer get worked up about anything), try to learn the mystical sense of it as well. It is not without cause that it was on the sabbath that our Lord said to the woman: *"You are freed of your infirmity" (Lk 13:12)*. He is showing His people who – like that woman – ought to have followed His call, that by His coming He has remitted our sins.

Consider Lamech. He was seventy-seven times condemned *(cf.Gn 4:24)*, for it is a graver sin to take vengeance on a crime by committing a crime. But the mysteries of baptism cancel out the most outrageous sins. Learn to forgive those who injure you, seeing that Christ forgave His persecutors *(cf.Lk 23:34)*.

25 Not without reason did he suffer on the great sabbath *(cf.Mt 27:62; Lk 23:54)*. He did this to symbolise the sabbath on which death would be destroyed by Christ. If the Jews celebrate the sabbath in such a way that they can consider a month or even an entire year as a sabbath, how much more ought we to celebrate the Lord's Resurrection! So our ancestors taught us to celebrate the fifty days of Pentecost as all part of one continuous Pasch, because the beginning of the eighth week [after Easter] is Pentecost. This is why the apostle, being a disciple of Christ who understood the niceties of numbers, times and seasons, wrote as follows to the Corinthians: *"I shall perhaps stay with you for the winter" (1 Co 16:6)*; and further down: *"I shall remain at Ephesus until Pentecost, for a great door has been opened to me" (1 Co 16:8 sq.)*. And so he spends winter with the Corinthians, in anguish over their errors, for he was sadly affected by the coldness of their zeal for the cult of God. Pentecost he spends with the Ephesians, opening the mysteries to them and finding rest for his heart. For he could see that they were burning with love of the faith. So, during these fifty days [of Pentecost] the Church allows no fasting. It is like a continual Sunday – a continual day of the Lord's Resurrection; and these fifty days are all of them like Sunday.

26 There is yet to be another Day of the Lord, another Sunday, on which the body of the Lord shall arise. Paul knew this, and he said: *"You are Christ's body, members of His members" (1 Co 12:27)*. This body, these bones of His bones, will be one day united to their Head, since *"the Head of the Church is Christ" (Ep 5:23)*. Fasting will come to an end, and endless joy will put to flight fatigue, anxiety, boredom. *"And in that day death shall be destroyed" (1 Co 15:26)*.

For even if death failed to take Enoch captive and could find no place in him, yet it cannot be said that it had been destroyed. For Enoch was lifted up so as to escape it. But Christ was immolated to destroy it. That is why He says: *"Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" (1 Co 15:55)*. Therefore at this resurrection, Christ will arise again – so to speak – in His body. *"Happy those who will have a share in the first resurrection" (Rv 20:6)*. Just as Christ is the firstfruits of the dead *(cf.1 Co 15:20)*, so too the saints will be the firstfruits of this resurrection.

27 Peter could not have known this mystery. He could, perhaps, have known of Enoch, but what human could understand with his limited mental powers the mystery that lay hidden in God? Therefore, may the Lord

enter into my mind, and may He subject it to Himself. Then, with a mind submissive to Him I can say: *"I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps 22:4)*.

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28 ***"If you had faith like to a grain of mustard seed, you might say to this mulberry tree: 'Be rooted up and transplanted into the sea'. And it would obey you"*** *(Lk 17:6)*.

We have already spoken of the grain of mustard seed *(cf.Book 7:176 sq.)*. Now I shall speak of the mulberry tree. I read:"a tree", and yet I do not really think that it is a tree. For why, and what profit would it be to us, if a tree were to be uprooted and thrown into the sea? After all, a tree bears fruit for the weary labourers. Doubtless we believe it possible that, by virtue of faith, an irrational being would yield to orders of rational beings. But still, why should question arise of this particular tree? True, I have read those words: *"I was a shepherd and looked after mulberry trees" (Am 7:14)*. But my belief is that the prophet was from a flock of sinners, and was himself a sinner. Then he was converted. As a future prophet of the nations, it was suitable that he should appear to have sought for fruit among the brambles, and from them drawn his nourishment. He was going to introduce the dark, malodorous herds of Gentiles, the peoples of foreign nations, into the pastures of his prophetic writings. There they would grow fat on spiritual nourishment, while he, for his part, would draw spiritual milk from the converted sinner.

29 In another book of the Gospel *(cf.Mt 17:19)* the image given is that of a mountain. If you think of the stark outline of a mountain, you will see it denuded of trees, deprived of fruitful vines and olives, and without hope or expectation of harvest. You will see it as a place proper for the lairs of wild beasts, and rendered terrible by the incursions of wolves. Does not this "mountain" seem to you to be the lofty heights of the spirit of wickedness? It is as Scripture says: *"See, I come against you, you destroying mountain, which corrupts the whole world" (Jr 51:25)*. We may well believe that in this passage, too, we have an instance of faith putting to flight the unclean spirit.

Returning to the mulberry, the very nature of that tree concurs with the idea of chasing away the evil one. You see, when first the fruit is in flower, it is white; then, when the fruit is formed, it is red; finally, on becoming fully ripe, it is black. Now consider the devil: from the white flower of his angelic nature, and the scarlet of his power, he fell because of sin. Then he took on a horrible black and a foul odour.

And now, behold Him who says to the mulberry: *"Be rooted up and throw yourself into the sea" (Lk 17:6)*. For when Jesus casts the legion of

devils from the possessed man, and allows them to pass into the swine, the herd – driven mad by the diabolic spirit – plunged themselves into the sea *(cf.Lk 8:30 sq.)*.

30 This passage encourages and exhorts us to have faith. In the moral or literal sense it teaches us that even the most solid of things can fade away if our faith is strong enough. From faith, there follows love; from love springs hope. And then the cycle begins all over again and goes round like a sacred circle.

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31 The following passage shows that no one should boast of his works, because any service we do for the Lord is merely our duty. You do not say to a servant who has being working in the fields or minding the flock: ***"Go immediately [transi] and sit down at table"*** *(Lk 17:7)*. Incidentally, we can learn from this that no one can sit down [at the heavenly table] without first passing from this world. You will remember that Moses had to "go across" before he could see the great vision *(cf.Ex 3:3)*. Well, then, you do not say to your servant: *"sit down at table"*. On the contrary, you give him another job to do, and you do not even thank him for it.

In the same way the Lord does not hold Himself obliged to you because you do some job or perform some duty. For, as long as we live, we should always be working.

32 Admit then that you are a servant with a number of duties to perform. Do not pride yourself on being a child of God. You are, and you have to recognise the grace, but at the same time you have to recognise your own nature. Do not boast that you have served God well. You have merely done what you had to do. The Sun obeys, the Moon bows down, the angels serve. That instrument of God, chosen by Him to be the preacher to the Gentiles, says: *"I am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God" (1 Co 15:9)*. In another place, having admitted that he was not conscious of any fault, he adds: *"But not on this account am I justified" (1 Co 4:4)*. Neither should we exact any praise for ourselves, nor take from God the prerogative of passing judgement. We must not anticipate the sentence of the judge. That sentence must await its time, must await its judge.

After that, those who are ungrateful *(cf.Lk 17:11 sq.)* are taken to task: and from there we arrive at the passage on the last days.

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33 ***"In that hour, anyone who is on the housetop and has his goods in the house, must not go down to fetch them. In the same way, anyone who is in the fields must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife"*** *(Lk 17:31-32)*.

Questioned by His disciples as to when the Kingdom of God was to come, the Lord replied: ***"The Kingdom of God is within you"*** *(Lk 17:21)*. He did not choose to say at what time it would come; but He did tell us that a day of judgement was coming. This He told us so as to inspire in every human breast fear of imminent judgement. Any hint of delay might have lulled us to a sense of security.

34 Not to disappoint His disciples, by declining to tell them something that they had wished to know, Jesus says in another book: *"As for the day and the hour, no one knows that. Not even the angels in Heaven; not even the Son" (Mt 24:36)*. Wisely, He says "the Son" in a general sense, and without specifying whether He speaks as the Son of man or the Son of God (for He is both). He lets it sound as though He spoke as the Son of man.

Of course He knew when would be the end of time; but it was not by His human nature He knew it, but by His divine nature. But if you wish to understand it as Son of God, there is nothing wrong in that, nothing contrary to the Faith. A good Father will hold nothing from a Son to whom He has given His all *(cf.Jn 3:35)*. In no way could He have refused to tell His Son the time of judgement, seeing that He had given Him the power of judgement *(cf.Jn 5:22)*. How could the Son not know what the Father knows, seeing that the Son is in the Father and the Spirit discerns the very depths of God *(cf.1 Co 2:10)*, and that the Son is Himself the height and the depth of the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge *(cf.Rm 11:33)*?
But in another passage He shows why He did not *want* to tell them: *"It is not for you to know the times and the years that the Father has put in His own power" (Ac 1:7)*.

35 Do you see what you are heading for if you deny that the Trinity is a Trinity of one single power? It is tantamount to saying that there is something the Son does not know. Why would the Father hide anything from His own Son? When we hide things that we know, we do it out of jealousy, or out of fear of being betrayed. But no one could imagine the Father being jealous of the Son; nor could anyone imagine the Son betraying the Father. It follows that they possess one and the same knowledge, since they have one and the some power. If Jesus knows the signs of the Judgement that is to come, He also knows when the end will be.

36 What can be hidden from Him who shines as brilliantly as the lightening that lights up the sky *(cf.Lk 17:24)*? For the Son of God is light, and He illumines the very depths of the heavenly mystery. Here are His words: *"In that hour" (Lk 17:31)*. This shows that He knows the very

hour. But He knew it for Himself, He did not know it for me. And He makes it very clear that it is our sins that are the cause of the deluge, the fire, and the Judgement. God did not create evil; but any good, any merit that lies in us, must be attributed to Him.

37 ***For "they ate and drank, they married and were given in marriage" (Lk 17:27).***

Our Lord is not condemning marriage, nor is He condemning food and drink. The former ensures the continuation of the species and the latter nourishes and sustains us – otherwise there would be nothing for us but to leave this world *(cf.1 Co 5:10)*. But there must be measure in all things. Anything beyond due measure only leads to evil *(cf.Mt 5:37)*. Let the spouses, by mutual agreement, allow each other freedom, from time to time, for prayer *(cf.1 Co 7:5)*. Among the cares and vexations of this world, and in the midst of its orgies and over indulgence, let there be space for religion and a time set apart for chastity.

38 In this world good people suffer because of the wicked. Heart and soul they are broken. And this has to be, so that in the next world their reward might be all the more abundant. Meanwhile they are provided with remedies: *"Let those who are in Judah fly to the mountains" (Mt 24:16)*. What Judah is this? For I know that there is another Judah – not a literal one but a spiritual one: *"God is known in Judah" (Ps 75:2)*.

And what mountains are these capable of withstanding the terrible Day of Judgement when the earth will be shaken? For Scripture says: *"Trembling shall seize the mountains" (Is 64:1:3)*. We also read: *"Heaven and earth shall pass away" (Lk 21:33)*. How then, since earth will not be able to save itself, can there be a portion of earth that will remain unshaken and where I can be safe? Or where can I hide myself from Him who troubles the very depths of the sea *(cf.Ps 64:8)*. *"If I climb to the heavens He is there; if I descend to the abyss, He is there" (Ps 138:8)*. In fact, you cannot escape from One who is everywhere. All you can do is to make your peace with Him.

39 So then, the Day of Judgement is at hand. If you do not want it to take you by surprise, fear each day, take to flight each day. You ask me where you are to flee to? *"Climb the mountain, you who bring the good news to Sion" (Is 40:9)*. Perch yourself on the heights of pre-eminent virtue. For *"God is God of the mountains, and not of the valleys" (1 K 20:28)*. Ascend to where Christ sits at the right hand of the Father, He *"whose foundations are on the holy mountains" (Ps 86:1)*, and whom *"the mountains surround" (Ps 124:2)*. Your mountain is Paul; your mountain is Peter. Plant the footsteps of your faith firmly on them. If you are rooted in the Law of God and the heritage of faith, Judgement day will come not to punish but to glorify you.

40 If someone is on the rooftop, it means that he has climbed to the summit of the house, and reached the very pinnacle of virtue. Such a person should not return and descend to the works of this world. Rahab – she who was figuratively a harlot and at the same time mysteriously represents the Church – hid the spies sent by Jesus *(cf.Jos 2:1 sq.)* on her rooftop. This she did because she was one of the Gentile people who was in communion with the Mysteries. Had those spies descended to the lower regions of the house they would certainly have been slain. The roof, as I see it, represents the higher functions of the spirit, the pinnacle of the soul, which shatters what is weak and defenceless in the body.

This makes me think, too, that the paralytic is on this account to be considered holy – I speak of the man who was lowered through the roof by four young men *(cf.Mk 2:3 sq.)*. He is holy because it was with the help of the four virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance and justice that he was lowered to the feet of Christ. He was lowered so that he might be elevated. For nothing is more elevated than humility. Being truly superior, it does not know what it is to raise itself. For no one can aspire to be what he knows is inferior to himself.

41 But, seeing that we are come to judgement, let us remain on the rooftop. Let no one be seized by the desire to go down into the house for his goods and chattels. It is not every house that contains vessels of gold and silver. Houses usually have furnishings of simple wood *(cf.2 Tm 2:20)*. Neither are all houses furnished, there are some that are empty. The prophet was aware of this when he said: *"What is wrong with you that you have mounted to the rooftops of empty houses? The city is full of clamour."* Then he adds: *"All your princes have fled" (Is 22:1 sq.)*.

Within your city, all your leaders have been wounded, and have fallen from faith to unbelief. Sabellius has been wounded, Arius has been wounded. All this happened because they found themselves in an empty house.

42 Would you like to live in a well furnished house? Follow Peter, who climbed to the housetop when he was hungry *(cf.Ac 10:9 sq.)*. There he learnt the mysterious fashion in which the Church was to be formed, and learnt too that he was not to look down on the Gentiles as unclean. For faith can purify us of every stain.

As for household vessels, these are made of earthenware; therefore the body being made from earth, is a vessel. Take care that the desires of the body do not distract your spirit from the search after higher things. If Peter could not grasp the mystery so long as he was in the lower regions of the house, how can you hope to grasp it? He understood it, just as soon as he had climbed up onto the housetop to proclaim the Lord *(cf.Is 40:9)*,and just as soon as he had shed all fear of bodily suffering.

43 So, *"if you are on the housetop, do not come down; and if you are in the fields, do not return to the house" (Lk 17:31).* I should scarcely understand what is meant by the field, if Jesus Himself had not taught me when He said: *"No one, putting his hand to the plough and then turning back, is fit for the Kingdom of Heaven" (Lk 9:62).* The idler sits in the farm house; the worker sows the fields. The weakling hugs himself in his corner by the fire; the strong puts his hand to the plough.

Fields give a fragrant smell, for the fragrance of Jacob was as the fragrance of a plentiful field *(cf.Gn 27:27).* The field is bright with flowers and full of produce of every description. Work your field well, if you want to reach the Kingdom of God. I pray that you may have a plentiful harvest of good deeds; and that there may be *"a fruitful vine growing on the walls of your house, and young olives around your table" (Ps 127:3).* Proud of her fertility, pregnant with the seed of God's word, cultivated with the plough of the spirit, may your soul say to Christ: *"Come, my brother, let us go out into the fields" (Sg 7:11).* And He will reply: *"I have entered into My garden, My sister, My spouse; I have gathered My myrrh" (Sg 5:1).* Is any harvest better than that of faith? Faith gathers in the fruits of resurrection, and is watered by the source of joy without end.

44 If you are not allowed even to look back, still less are you allowed to turn back to pick up your tunic. For you have learnt that if anyone asks you for your tunic you should give him your coat as well *(cf.Mt 5:40).* So, since you are now on your way to the Kingdom of God, do not turn back to look for your fortune and your inheritance. I know, in Scripture, another tunic. It is of this tunic that the apostle speaks when he says we must strip off the old man with his deeds and put on the new *(cf.Col 3:9)*; and we are not to put on again the tunic of our former sins.

Because of this the spouse says: *"I have taken off my tunic for the night. How can I put it on again?" (Sg 5:3).* For we should not only renounce our sins, we should even wipe out from our memory every recollection of our former activities. That is why Paul forgot the past *(cf.Ph 3:13)* and stripped off his old sins without, however, omitting to be sorry for them.

45 *"Remember,"* says our Lord, *"Lot's wife" (Lk 17:32).* Because she looked back *(cf.Gn 19:26 sq.)* she lost the very privilege of her nature. For behind you, there is Satan; behind you, lies the city of Sodom. Therefore take flight from drunkenness, avoid debauchery. But, to show you that not all can manage to flee to the mountain, recall that he who did not turn back towards his old pursuits – for remember that he had originally chosen Sodom – saved himself by arriving at the foot of the mountain. The other was weaker and looked back. She lost the help and support of her husband, who would have brought her to the mountain, and remained rooted to the spot.

46 ***"In that night there shall be two men in one bed. One shall be taken and the other shall be left"*** *(Lk 17:34).*

It is well put: *"In that night."* For the night is Antichrist, it is the time shrouded in darkness – the time of shadows that spread over the human heart as this wicked one claims to be the Christ. False prophets will arise to say that Jesus is at hand, or that He is in the desert. They do this to trick and confuse people by spreading abroad their falsehoods and erroneous opinions. At another time they say that He is here in the house, so that those who hear them are seized with terror. For even to hear the name of one possessed of such pre-eminent powers strikes fear.

But Christ, when He comes, will be like lightening that shines from end to end of the sky, filling the entire world with its dazzling splendour. He is not in the desert, and He is not shut up in any place: for *" 'I fill the heavens and the earth', says the Lord" (Jr 23:24).* Jesus, dazzling in light and glory, shines out on us so that in the darkness of this night we may see the glory of the resurrection.

47 What is the significance of these words: ***"There shall be two men in one bed; there shall be two women grinding together; two men shall be in the field. One shall be taken and the other shall be left"*** *(Lk 17:34-35)*?

It looks as if God is being unjust. It looks as though He is making a distinction in His manner of rewarding people whose occupations are the same, who live together without any difference between them as regards the merit of their acts. But it is not so, for the reward of each one corresponds to our actions. Simply because we live life in common does not mean that our merits are all equal. For zeal for religion can turn father against son and son against father *(Lk 12:53).* Not all bring to a successful conclusion the task that they have undertaken. *"It is the one who perseveres to the end that shall be saved" (Mt 10:22).* When our last moment comes, the Lord will judge us not by our exterior actions but by our interior attitudes. If you offer your sacrifice correctly, but do not divide it justly, that sacrifice will not please God *(cf.Gn 4:7).*

So, from the one bed, one is taken and another is left. The bed represents human infirmity, for Scripture says: *"You have turned his bed in his sickness" (Ps 40:4).* The one who is taken is lifted up into the air to meet Christ *(cf.1 Th 4:16)*, but the one who is left is found unworthy.

48 *"Two women shall be grinding together in the mill" (Lk 17:35).*

Certainly the sense would seem to be that here are people seeking in a secret place for what can nourish them, and then bringing it from where it is hidden into the light of day. But we must ask what exactly is it that the

women are grinding. For it could be the grain that Isaiah speaks of when he says: *"If you offer me finest wheat flour, it is in vain" (Is 1:15)*. So the finest wheat flour would seem to be the offering of those who were grinding. Now we must examine the women who are grinding and the mill where they grind. Perhaps the mill is the world. I can see, shut into this world, the human form; and in that human form I can see the soul imprisoned, so to speak, and grinding away – if she is wise – so as to produce the bread of Heaven *(cf.Jn 6:51)*.

In this mill the "woman" – whether it be the Synagogue or whether it be the soul prone to sin, grinds grain that is damp and spoilt by too much moisture. It proves impossible to separate the flour from the husk. Therefore she is left, because her wheaten flour does not come up to standard. But the holy Church or, if you wish, the soul that is pure and uncontaminated – the soul that is sinless – grinds grain that has been thoroughly dried in the heat of the Eternal Sun. This is wheat that God has clothed as He pleased *(cf.Lk 12:28)*, and that the angels have purified of every stain. This "woman" offers to God, from the heart of humanity, good wheaten flour in sacrifice. And He is very pleased with her offering.

49 in addition to the two women grinding, we have the two workers in the one field. One will be taken. This is a good sower who did not sow his seed on the footpaths, but in well cultivated land *(cf.Lk 8:5 sq.)*. In this way the seed was properly thrust down by humility, not scattered about in a boastful way, and so it multiplied. But as for the sower of cockle, he will be left behind. The flour he produces will be unacceptable. Who are these various workers? We can find that out if we examine carefully what the apostle says with regard to the two spirits or minds that are in us, and which he refers to as νους [mind] *(cf.Rm 7:23)*. Maybe one of these pertains to the exterior person that is subject to corruption *(cf.2 Co 4:16)*; and the other belongs to the interior person that is continually renewed by the mysteries.

Perhaps this "worker" is all the worse because he is *"vainly puffed up by the sense [or mind] of his own flesh, and fails to keep his head" (Col 2:18)*. Therefore he has fallen away from the practice of the life-giving precepts of our Lord Jesus Christ. For Christ is the Head of all, being the Creator of all. The other worker is far worthier. He loves humility, searches out wisdom, and does not forget to show mercy. He is the good sower, for *"he has sown generously and given to the poor. His justice remains for ever" (Ps 111:9)*. Such a worker is spiritual, the other is carnal. The apostle's words have shown us, surely, that the boastful seducer puffs himself up in the pride and exaltation of his mind of flesh; but the man who is holy renews himself in his spiritual mind. And the same apostle says: *"Renew yourself in the spirit of your mind" (Ep 4:23)*. Clearly there are two minds or spirits: one is a mind of flesh that succumbs to sin; the other being united to the Holy Spirit, shrinks from any stain of the flesh.

50 Not only are there two minds or spirits in us, but there are also two laws. Both are clearly represented to us by the apostle, when he says: *"I am delighted with the law of God, according to the inward self. But I see another law in my members. These fight against the law of my mind, and captivate me in the law of sin that resides in my members" (Rm 7:22 sq.)*. So there is a law of the inner person, and a law of the outer person. One law forbids sin, the other encourages it. One law condemns error, the other inspires it. One fortifies the soul, the other tempts it. There are even two other laws in us – God's law, and the law of sin. This I also learn from Paul where he says: *"Therefore I myself serve the law of God with my mind; but with the flesh I serve the law of sin" (Rm 7:25)*.

This indicates that even to mention the mind or spirit seems to be setting oneself against the flesh. For when Paul says that he serves the law of God with his mind, he is assuredly telling us that the mind or spirit is in itself good – so long as it does not succumb to the flesh. Its nature is such that it resists sin and error. So, when mind or spirit has a fall, this is due not to its own nature but to the flesh. Once defeated it passes, so to speak, into the possession of the conquering flesh. But the true nature of the spirit is opposed to the flesh. To put it briefly: we serve God with the spirit; we serve sin with the flesh. The best thing that the spirit can do is to co-operate with the Holy Spirit and persevere in its religious duties and offices.

51 Such are the workers in our field. One, by his hard work, produces a good crop. The other, by his idleness, loses it. This idleness or carelessness is called "blood" by the legislator. Listen: *"The soul of all flesh is its blood" (Lv 17:14)*. With these words many associate the following: *"You shall not eat the flesh in its blood" (Gn 9:4)*. The meaning is we are not to seize the delights of the body while we are blood stained by the wounds of the soul. We should not fall on such delights as though they were food, when we should be viewing ourselves as guilty of blood. After all, we are people whom God's word is meant to nourish.

There is therefore the food of refreshment; and there is the food of blood. The Lord's Flesh is truly our food; so, too, His Blood is truly our drink *(cf.Jn 6:56)*. By our good works we must prepare delightful nourishment for our Lord. Otherwise He might come back and find no figs on the fig tree *(cf.Mt 21:19)*, and then He would be left fasting because of our ineptitude and utter failure to be productive. At that, the Lord would drop the loving plans He had and would say to that soul which He found barren of fruit and stained with blood: *"For ever and for ever you shall never produce fruit" (Mt 21:19)*. So, you see, *"the soul of all flesh is its blood"*. But there also exists a more excellent soul. Of such a soul God says: *"All souls are mine. As the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine" (Ez 18:4)*.

52 At the same time, I am not forgetting that this can be interpreted as referring to two sorts of people. In this world – which is often compared to a field – there are two sorts of people: believers and non-believers. These will be paid what they deserve. The believers will be taken, the non-believer will be left behind. As for the two women grinding at the mill, these are two souls. Or, better, they are Church and Synagogue. You see, in Scripture, a type or figure does not stand for one thing only, but for a number of things. So that a single saying can contain a variety of riches.

So it follows that we have the spirit of the flesh and the mind of the soul; and we have the Synagogue gathering corn and grinding that flour which is offered in vain. But the spirit which is united to the soul, and the soul which welcomes salvation, or the Church of God, gather and grind the pure wheaten flour of the true Law. This is the Law that still produces those loaves of proposition which only the priests may eat – those priests who are commanded to eat bread made of fine flour *(cf.Lv 24:5 sq.)*. This, of course, is the Bread that came down from Heaven *(cf.Jn 6:51)*.

Now, we are all of us – provided of course that we merit it – priests of justice and holiness, anointed with the oil of gladness *(cf.Ps 44:8)* and consecrated to be both kings and priests.

53 Let us set to and work hard at our field, cultivating it sedulously so long as we are employed to cultivate it. And then we shall enjoy, in the heavenly Jerusalem where the true law is observed, the wheaten flour formed from our sheaves. How happy we shall be to have gathered them! How joyously we shall come, *"carrying our sheaves" (Ps 125:6)*! Such are the spiritual fruits and the happy harvest of true labour which no downpour of rain can ruin. But the fruit of the flesh, on the contrary, is subject to corruption; and those who sow in the flesh, will reap in the flesh *(cf.Ga 6:8)*. But truly what am I to say of the field? It is so obvious that it is the character of the cultivator that makes the field grow or depreciate in value.

54 ***"They said to Him: 'Where, Lord?' "*** *(Lk 17:36)*.

This is what the disciples said. But the Lord had already warned them where they were to flee, or where they were to stay, and against what they were to be on their guard. So He replied to them in a general sort of way, summing up the matter in these words: ***"Where the body shall be, there the eagles also shall be gathered together"*** *(Lk 17:37)*.

55 Let us have a guess as to who these eagles may be, and then we might arrive at discovering what is meant by "the body". The souls of the just are compared to eagles. They aim for the heights, leave behind them the plains, and reach – we are told – a great age. This is why David says to his soul: *"Your youth shall be renewed like that of the eagle" (Ps 102:5)*. Having identified the "eagles" we should have no difficulty in discovering

who is meant by the "body". All the more so when we recall how Joseph was given Christ's body by Pilate *(cf.Jn 19:38)*.

Now don't you see the eagles about the Body? There is Mary, wife of Cleophas, Mary Magdalen, and Mary, Mother of the Lord; and there is the group of apostles. These all surround the tomb of the Lord. You see, do you not, the eagles all about the Body when the Son of Man returns on celestial clouds? And then, *"all eyes shall see Him, and they shall look on Him whom they have pierced" (Rv 1:7)*.

56 We can consider "body" in another sense. Remember how the Lord said: *"My flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink" (Jn 6:56)*. Around this Body there are eagles. They encircle it, flying on wings of the spirit. Around this Body are eagles who truly believe that Jesus has come in the flesh; for *"every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God" (1 Jn 4:2)*. Wherever you have the faith, you have the mystery, you have the hearth and home of sanctity.

The Church, too, is a body. In her, the grace of baptism gives us spiritual renewal. In her, those declining into old age take on fresh youth and a new life.

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57 ***"They brought little children to Him that He might touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called His disciples together and said: 'Allow the little children to come to me, and do not forbid them. For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven' "*** *(Lk 18:15-16)*.

And yet, a little child is not physically strong; its character is not formed; its will is not mature. Our Lord cannot mean that one age is preferable to another, if so it would be a harmful thing to grow up. How could I want to reach a mature age if it meant losing my claim to the heavenly Kingdom? Am I to believe that God allows us to develop to full maturity only so that our vices could grow greater? If it comes to that, why did He not choose little children, rather than grown men, to be His apostles? Why does He say of children that theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven? *(cf.Mt 19:4)*? Perhaps the answer is that they are unacquainted with vice, have not learnt to deceive; are afraid to strike back; know nothing about the pursuit of wealth; and have neither the desire for honours nor the goad of ambition.

But virtue consists not so much in ignorance of all these things as in a certain contempt for them. If we are innocent simply because we are powerless, there is no great cause for praise. So the childhood to which our Lord refers is a pure goodness that imitates the simplicity of children. Virtue does not consist in being incapable of sin, but in willing not to sin; and persevering so steadfastly in that resolution to imitate childhood's innocence

that it becomes one's second nature. This is how our Lord puts it: *"Unless you change and become like this child, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 18:3).*

58 Who is this child that Christ's apostles are supposed to imitate? Surely it is not one of these little ones? Is such to be the virtue, the valour, of an apostle? I repeat, who is this child? I think that it must be the Child of whom Isaiah speaks: *"For a Child is born to us, a Son is given to us" (Is 9:6).* Now learn how you can recognise this Child: *"When He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten" (1 P 2:23).* You see, His virtue was perfect.

Therefore you can have, even in tender childhood, a venerable maturity of conduct; and in old age you can have an innocence such as children might have. For, as Scripture says: *"Venerable old age is not a matter of long life. It is not counted by the number of your years. White hair is wisdom, and a spotless life is old age" (Ws 4:8 sq.).* It is also written: *"Children, praise the Lord; praise the name of the Lord" (Ps 112:1)* – for none can praise the Lord unless he is perfect; and *"none can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Co 12:3).*

59 All this seems to point to the people of the Church. Though younger, they have surpassed the Jewish people on account of their zeal for virtue. That is why we read: *"Here I am with the children you have given me" (Is 8:18).* Then again you have the children who accompany, with prophetic cries of joy, the Lord who is riding on the foal of an ass *(cf.Mt 21:7 sq.).* These children announced that the Redemption of the nations had come. Look at the children, look at the little ones, who have drunk deep at those breasts of Christ that are better than wine *(cf.Sg 1:3).* Remember, too, the text: *"from the lips of children and of babies at the breast, you have received praise" (Ps 8:3).*

60 Some people might think it very rude and unkind that the apostles should prevent little children from coming to the Lord. But you must try to understand the symbolic meaning of this, or what may have been their intention. They were not acting through hardness of heart or bad feeling towards these children; but they were showing to their Lord the attentive service that they believed to be His due. They did not want Him crushed and harassed by crowds. We read this somewhere else: *"Master, the crowds are pressing on you" (Lk 8:45).* For we have to yield even what is to our advantage, in order that no injury be done to the Lord.

Let us run from pride, let us imitate the simplicity of children: for truth opposes pride, and simplicity accords with truth. And by its self-abasement, it is lifted up. God does not dwell in a base, ignoble soul, for as we know from the prophets, *"the throne of virtue has been raised on high" (Jr 17:12).* This means, He dwells in one whose wisdom raises him to the

level of sincerity and truth. Such a person – unlike Cain *(cf.Gn 4:8)* – does not conceal, under the appearance of a brother, the slyness of a murderer. No, he is truly a brother, both inside and outside.

Now I must turn to the mystical sense, according to which it would seem that the apostles wanted first that the Jewish people would be saved. For they were, after all, born of Jewish stock; but they interceded also for the Canaanite woman *(cf.Mt 15:23 sq.).* This shows that they had knowledge of the mystery that both peoples were to be called, but maybe they did not understand in what order of precedence this was to be.

61 Now notice the different ways in which Jesus expresses Himself. When He invites the children to come close to Him, so that He can bless them and say a prayer over them, placing His hands on them, He calls them "children". But when He warns His hearers not to scandalise them, He refers to them as "little ones" *(cf.Mt 18:6).* The meaning is that one is not scandalised on being touched by Christ; nor, when one approaches Christ, is one liable to fall from virtue. But grown up people, or old people, where virtue is indeed little, are liable to fall. Our Lord is also teaching us not to tempt weak characters. Should we do so, their sins, rather than their prayers, might fall back on us. And prayers, even though coming from people of great frailty as regards virtue and merit, are nonetheless carried to Heaven by the angels, and commended to the Lord.

Be very careful never to make sport of the poor person. That would make his Creator angry *(cf.Pr 17:5).* No one should ever tempt those who are weak, for that would offend the angels. No one should cause the frail to fall, for that would hardly bring a blessing from the Redeemer.

62 If the Lord said: *"Alas for this world, because of scandals" (Mt 18:7),* it is because many consider our Lord's Cross to be a scandal. And yet the humiliation of our suffering Saviour is a sacred sign of our salvation. He suffered so that we would undertake works of virtue, and model ourselves on His humility. Alas then for him who will not believe in the Lord's Cross; alas for weak and feeble man who is scandalised by it: *"Better for him that the millstone of an ass be tied around his neck, and that he be drowned in the sea" (Mt 18:6).*

63 In reading sacred Scripture we should not merely see the words of the text, but we should carefully consider their weight and force. In this instance, the ghastly image of a sort of instrument of torture placed round an animal's neck, is surely a powerful deterrent to sin. But lest I should myself be causing scandal to some infirm soul in using such an expression, let us see the reasoning that lies behind this association of the millstone of the ass, the man's neck, and the bottom of the sea.

Seeing that the Gentiles have been given the ass as their emblem, does it not seem to you that they turn the millstone of the ass, for so long as they

turn it in the blindness of their ignorance? By their true nature, these Gentiles are bound with bonds to grind the Word, to search out God. But they are blinded; a veil covers their mind [as a hood covers animals at the mill]. They cannot lift to God the face of their soul, nor can they open to Him the eyes of their heart. And so they turn and toil, ceaselessly and listlessly; for ever returning to the same point of departure. They toil in spite of themselves; toil and sweat for the profit of another.

But one who chooses to turn the mill sees at last an end to his labour. He sees that something has been achieved by his hard work; and he harbours the hope that he will be rid of whatever it is that blinds him. He, on the other hand, who has the millstone hung around his neck, carries this dead weight because he would not take the Lord's yoke. So the ass goes blind-folded to the mill; the blind person goes to the stone; the pagan goes to the rock, to adore some God that he neither sees nor recognises. For *"God does not dwell in buildings of stone" (Ac 7:48)*. It is not in a rock that you recognise God, but in spirit.

64 Both peoples, Jew and Gentile, are represented in this discourse. But the Jews are subject to a more rigorous punishment. The memory of the Gentiles will be swallowed up by the waves of the centuries and drowned in the mud and slush of this world, because they chose to be in the midst of that which exists not *(cf.1 Co 1:28)*. They know nothing of God, are totally strangers to Him, and so sink to the bottom of the sea. But the Jews, on the other hand, were chosen by God in the person of the patriarchs. They were marked by the sign of circumcision and instructed in the Law. They will not disappear like unknown persons, but will be punished like people guilty of sacrilege.

For the God who was unknown to the Athenians *(cf.Ac 17:23)* was known in Judah *(cf.Ps 75:2)*. He was known, but not welcomed. Therefore he who did not know will, in turn, be unknown; the false-hearted will be condemned. There will be no extenuation of the crime for one who refused to know his Creator; there will be no pardon for those who did not welcome the Lord. Yet it is a less heinous crime to refuse faith in Christ than to lay on Him violent hands.

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65 ***"A certain ruler asked Him: 'Good Master, what must I do to possess eternal life?' Jesus said to him: 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone' " (Lk 18:18-19).***

A clever answer to a clever question. This ruler, who was really tempting Jesus and trying Him out, called Him "Good Master" when he should in fact have called Him "Good God". Goodness lies in the divinity, and the divinity lies in goodness – for *"no one is good but God alone"*, whereas *"every man is a liar" (Ps 115:2)* – and it is certainly not a good

thing to be a liar. However, in adding "Good Master", the ruler is making out our Lord to be only partially good, and not totally good. For only God is totally good, while humankind is but partially good. This explains why the Lord says: "why do you call me good, you who deny that I am God. Why call me good when only God is good?" He is not denying that He is good, but He is pointing out that He is God.

But you will recall that it is written: *"There is no one who does good. No, not one" (Ps 13:3)*. Here it can plainly be seen that the Lord was speaking of humankind, not of God. For God is one; one in nature but not in number of persons. So the Son of God is set apart as being unique; He is not of the common multitude. He is the Only-Begotten, He is not one of a multitude that have been begotten. In saying "no one is good", there is no intention of denying that Christ is good, for none can judge Christ. "No one" is said in a general manner of the human species, but Christ is not of the common multitude.

66 If someone is in difficulties over these words: *"no one is good but God alone"*, let him be equally disturbed that no one is good but God. If the Son is not excluded from the divinity, then Christ is surely not excluded from goodness. While being in God, the Son remains a distinct Person – though one with the Father in power. For: *"There is but one God, of whom are all things; and one Lord, by whom are all things" (1 Co 8:6)*, since God and Lord are not two gods, but one single God, for *"The Lord your God is one Lord" (Dt 6:4)*. If by His majesty there is but one God in each Person, then in the two Persons – Father and Son – there is but one goodness. For how could He, who is begotten of the One who is good, fail to be Himself good? *"A good tree produces good fruit" (Mt 7:17)*. How could He be other than good, since the substance of goodness drawn from the Father has not degenerated in the Son? Nor has it degenerated in the Spirit. Therefore we read: *"Your good spirit shall guide me on the right way" (Ps 142:10)*. If therefore the Spirit is good, and the Spirit has received from the Son *(cf.Jn 16:14)*, then He who gave is surely good also. And if the Father is good, He who received all from the Father *(cf.Jn 17:10)* is most certainly good. In short, if you deny that the Son possesses goodness, you deny it of the Father too.

67 The obvious does not have need of proofs, at the same time it is good to follow the authority of the Scriptures. There it is written: *"The Lord is a good Judge for the House of Israel" (Is 33:22)*. Is this said of the Father or of the Son? But *"the Father judges no one"*, since *"He has entrusted all judgement to the Son" (Jn 5:22)*. Therefore this good Lord is the Son. And now I shall tell you another thing: those who come to be baptised certainly confess the Trinity, since they are baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This means that they praise the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Now recall that it is said: *"Praise*

the Lord because He is good" (Ps 135:1). Certainly the Father is good, the Son is good, the Holy Spirit is good; but God is ONE. We also read: *"The Lord is good to those who wait for Him" (Lm 3:25)*. Yes, He is good indeed to deal so lovingly with those *"who wait for Him"*. Do you not agree that He is good, He *"who fills your soul with good things" (Ps 102:5)*? Again, is He not good who says: *"I am the Good Shepherd" (Jn 10:11)*?

68 But what you are thinking is that God is good because He does not exercise judgement that would put Him in the position of having to punish people. Although we have already said that He is a good Judge for the House of Israel, I must point out that in another place we find: *"How good God is to the upright of heart" (Ps 72:1)*! Now I ask you, of whom is the psalmist speaking? Is he speaking of Father or of Son? If he means the Father, the implication is that the Father is not good to everyone indiscriminately. Why, therefore, do you wish to diminish the Son? But if the psalmist is speaking of the Son, then admit that the Son also is God *["who is good to the upright of heart"]*. For God the Son is He who is *"the blessed God of Israel. It is He who has visited His people and redeemed them" (Lk 1:68)*. He is both King and God of Israel, and to Him were addressed the words: *"Master, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel" (Jn 1:49)*.

Jesus is therefore saying here: Since you do not believe me to be good, why do you tempt me, why do you call me good? Yes, I actually am good – but good to the upright of heart. Goodness belongs to me by nature, not by putting on an act.

Yes, the Son of God is good; for He is *"the brightness of eternal light; the immaculate mirror of God's majesty; and the image of His goodness" (Ws 7:26)*. How could He not be good, seeing that He is the mirror of goodness? For, just as the image of God is God, but the one God, so too the Image of Goodness is good, but it is the one goodness. I would be very foolish not to think Him good, considering that He is one day going to be Judge of my faults. Take warning, all you who do not wish to believe Him good. So, since the ruler who is tempting Jesus is an expert in the Law – as shown in another book* – He has good reason to say *"No one is good but God alone"*. This would warn the doctor that Scripture says: *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Dt 6:16)*, and that he should therefore be praising God rather than tempting Him.

69 The Lord follows up this response with a number of well directed shafts. The ruler boasts of how well he has kept the Law, observing it from youth with absolute perfection. This man, so full of himself, is showing off. So the Lord shows him that in fact there is an aspect of the Law that he has neglected. And so He brings him round to the subject of mercy. This makes the man sad. It is as though his own nature is uttering sentence against him.

* Ambrose seems to be confusing the ruler in this episode with the doctor of law in Mt 22:35.

70 ***"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Lk 18:25).***

These are strong words to use. These words carry weight. How better could one express that the rich have no cause to boast of their piles of money? For these words indicate that it is against the nature of the rich to be merciful. Away with ornaments of speech and fancy talk that emasculate our thoughts! This was not the moment to flatter the man. Rather it was the moment to break him, since he could not lower his pride and show mercy.

Perhaps there are among you people who are more attracted to suavity and false eloquence than to the natural beauty and form, so to speak, of virile thought. Such people should take my advice and do what wise suitors do when choosing a wife: they ask what kind of character and disposition she has. They do not enquire whether she is pretty; and if the beauty of her soul and of her virtue attracts them they are not put off by a plain face. So, too, those people should not admire mere words but should search into the mystery conveyed by the words; for the mystery is the soul and spirit of the words.

71 The camel we must regard as the symbol of the Gentile people. The lion, seeking whom he may devour *(cf.1 P 5:8)* chases it into the desert. It is laden with a great treasure – the visions of the prophets: *"In trouble and distress, the lion and the lioness carry to the vipers and the flying basilisks their treasures, carried on the shoulders of asses and camels" (Is 30:6)*. The camel is a good image of the pagan races, because these people had grown hideous and degenerate in their superstitions. They had become – prior to their conversion – hideous as a camel, absurd in their manner of walking, deformed as regards their features. Then this sinner entered into the narrow way. That is to say they entered into Christ's way; and He, forcing open a way by His physical sufferings, renewed us, and like a needle, repaired the torn garments of our nature. This entrance into the narrow way was easier for the Gentile people than for the Jewish people. For they, rich in the Law but poor in the Faith, were transported with rage and had grown infamous in their crimes.

72 We have here a moral lesson, applicable to every sinner and to every rich and arrogant person. Don't you agree that the publican, his conscience bowed down with the burden of his sins, not daring to lift his eyes to God, entered like a camel into the needle's eye? Thanks to his humble confession, he enters the Kingdom of Heaven more easily than the Pharisee. That person's prayer was very arrogant. He boasted of his blameless life, and took all the credit for it to himself. He showed himself to

be an upbraider of mercy, a preacher of his own goodness, and an accuser of others. He was not so much praying to the Lord as calling Him to witness.

If, then, the camel is hideous, how much more hideous is he whose conduct makes him far more repulsive than a camel?

73 ***"Honour your father and your mother"*** *(Lk 18:20).*

It makes me happy that we should read the beginning of the Law on this the anniversary day of my episcopal ordination.* For it seems to me that each passing year the grace of priesthood recommences, just as the seasons of the year recommence. I am happy that we should read *"Honour your father and your mother"*, for it is you, my people, who are to me father and mother, having proffered to me the priesthood.

You are my children. You are my parents. Each one of you is my child. And all of you together are my parents, seeing that you listen to and live out in practice the word of God. You are my children, because Scripture says: *"Come, children, listen to me" (Ps 33:12).* You are my parents because the Lord Himself has said: *"Who is My mother, who are My brothers and sisters? My mother, My brothers, My sisters are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Mt 12:46 sq.).*

74 First the Law said: *"You shall love the Lord your God"*, and then: *"You shall love your neighbour"*. It then adds: *"Honour your father and your mother"*. This is the first step in the ladder of piety. For your parents are those chosen by God to be the authors of your life. Honour them with marks of respect. Take care never to be discourteous to them. For there must never even appear to be the slightest lack of respect towards parents.

But it is not enough to avoid hurting them. Even the Old Law has seen to it that they should suffer no insult or affront: *"Anyone who curses father or mother shall die" (Ex 21:17).* Honour them, my friend, so that you yourself may be good. A clause in a law is one thing; a duty of love is another. Honour your parents, because the Son of God honoured His. You have read what the Gospel says: *"He was obedient to them"(Lk 2:51).* If God behaved in such a way towards those who were His little servants, should you not be ready to honour and obey your parents? Christ honoured Joseph and Mary, not because it was a debt owed them by nature, but because it was a duty He owed to love. He also honoured God His Father as no other person has ever been able to honour Him. And He was obedient even to death *(cf.Ph 2:8).* So you, too, must honour your parents.

75 Honouring someone need not only mean showing marks of respect, but can extend also to giving: *"Honour widows who are genuinely widows" (1 Tm 5:3).* To honour means, in fact, to treat another according to

* Opinions vary, but the ordination to which Saint Ambrose refers is generally dated 7 December 374.

their merits. Nourish and support your father; nourish and support your mother. But even in nourishing your mother you will never repay her for the pangs she suffered, you will never repay her for the torment she endured, in giving you birth. You will never repay her for the care and attention she lavished on you; you will never repay her for the milk with which she fed you when, with love beyond all telling, she held her breasts to your lips. You cannot repay her for the hunger she suffered on your account, eating nothing that might have been harmful to you. She fasted, so that you might eat; for your sake she gave up things that she could have enjoyed; for your sake she ate things that she would have preferred not to eat. For your sake she kept awake at night; on your account she wept. And would you have the heart to see her now in want?

My child, what a dreadful judgement you will bring down on yourself if you fail to care for your mother! You owe her all that you have. What a judgement falls on you if the Church nourishes those whom you refuse to nourish! *"If any of the faithful have widows, they should look after them and not let the Church be burdened with them. In this way the Church will have sufficient means to look after those who are genuinely widows" (1 Tm 5:16).* This is said of strangers. But what is to be said of parents?

76 What I say, I say with very good reason. A mother's complaint forces me to speak. I prefer to give this warning in a general way rather than address the culprit in private. I do not betray his name, but I hope that in his heart, at least, he will blush for shame. Child, do not let your parents be fed at the cost of having others go hungry. My child, do not let the hunger of the poor allow your parents to be fed. If gratitude does not move you, nor thoughts of your salvation, at least let shame compel you to provide for your own ones.

Do you feel no shame, on entering the Church, to see your old mother stretch out her hand to others? And have you no shame at all if the daughter that you abandoned begs alms of strangers, while you pass her by: *"With haughty head and wanton glances of the eye; your robes trailing behind you; with earrings, necklaces, bracelets and all the rest"* – as Isaiah says *(Is 3:16, 20)*?

Tell me, what do you feel when your mother begs you to repay the debt of nature, the price of the milk with which she fed you? When she prays you to render her the service that your hand owes to a mother?

77 What reply do you make? That you will give to others? But if those others say to you: Go first and feed your mother? For, even though poor, they do not want to receive the alms of wickedness. Can you not understand that this rich man, reclining in purple and fine linen, feasting at table while Lazarus was picking up the crumbs, is now being everlastingly tortured in Hell *(cf.Lk 16:19 sq.)*? And all because he would not share his food with the poor.

It is a serious matter not to give to strangers, but far more terrible to cast off your own parents!

You will reply that you prefer to give to the Church the money that you might have given to your parents. God does not ask of you a gift that will mean letting your parents go hungry. So, too, when the Jews complained that our Lord's disciples did not wash their hands, the Lord replied: *"Whoever says: 'the gift which proceeds from me, shall profit you', is not honouring his father or his mother" (Mt 15:5).*

78 I am purposely making a detour on account of the obscurity of the meaning.

The Jews, following man-made traditions, neglect the intention of God. The disciples, who prefer the tradition of God, neglect traditions that are made by man. On this account they did not wash their hands before meals, because: *"anyone who is clean all over has no need to wash" (Jn 13:10).* Jesus had washed them. They had no need of other ablutions. Christ by His baptism had put an end to all ritual cleansings. Accordingly, no one who has been washed or baptised by the Church has any need of being baptised a second time. The disciples were aware of this mystery, and so they were not so much intent on cleanliness of the body as on purity of the soul. The Jews found fault with them, but the Lord is very quick to point out to these critics that while they scrupulously observe empty tradition, they neglect matters of real importance.

He says to them: Why do you say to your father or mother, whom the Lord commands you to honour: *"Every offering that proceeds from me will be of advantage to you" (Mk 7:11).* What it comes to is this: Whenever a father or mother asks their child for some means of subsisting, this Jew, who "fears the Law" and who is looking for some excuse not to give his parents anything, will say: *"Every offering that proceeds from me will be of advantage to you".* The result will be that the parent, being a religious person, will shrink from taking money that is promised to God. But this is a man-make tradition, and is but an excuse for miserliness. The true tradition of God is that you nourish and maintain your parents. If God's sentence condemns to death anyone guilty of offering an affront to a parent, what will the sentence be if you let him starve – a thing worse than death!

79 At this point the Lord checks misplaced vanity. Many people, to show off, give the Church donations which in fact they are taking from money that ought to be given to their own relations. Mercy begins at home, and among our own people who depend on us. So give first to your father; but give also to the poor. Give to some priest money that you can afford, and he in return will give you spiritual treasure that you lack. For the one who shows honour will be given honour. Look at it this way: in receiving from you, this priest is actually giving to you. He does not receive it as a poor person, but as someone able to repay you handsomely. Give to

the poor so that he may have peace and comfort; and then you, too, having shared with the poor, will one day obtain rest.

And yet, though Scripture says we must support our parents, it also says that we must leave them for God if they are an obstacle between us and our soul's devotion *(cf.Lk 14:26).*

80 ***"It happened that when He came near to Jericho there was a blind man sitting on the side of the road"*** *(Lk 18:35).*

In the Gospel according to Matthew *(cf.Mt 20:30)* we are shown two blind men. Here we have only one. In Matthew He is leaving Jericho, in Luke He is approaching it. But the difference is of no consequence. This single figure represents the Gentile people, to whom the Lord restores the sight and light that they had lost. Whether the Gentiles are healed in the person of one blind man or of two does not matter. For the Gentiles, after all, drew their origin from Ham and Japhet, sons of Noah *(cf.Gn 10:1)* and so we can see in the two blind people the two ancestors of the Gentile race.

81 Even Luke seems not unaware [that there were two personages in the Jericho story], for he goes on to speak of Zachaeus. This Zachaeus was very small, that is to say, he lacked the stature and dignity of noble birth; in merits he was mean and lowly, like the pagans. But learning that the Lord and Saviour was coming he longed to see Him who had not been welcomed by His own ones *(cf.Jn 1:11).* But no one sees Jesus easily. No one on earth can see Jesus. Zachaeus, having neither prophets nor royalty to clothe him with a sort of natural beauty, climbed up a wild fig tree. In other words, he hurled at their feet the vanity of the Jews. At the same time he made up for the sins of his past life. And so he received Jesus into his hearth and home as his Guest. It was wise of him to climb up a tree, so that he himself might be a good tree, producing good fruit *(cf.Mt 7:17).* Snipped from the wild tree and grafted, contrary to nature, onto the good olive tree, Zachaeus would produce the excellent fruit of the Law *(cf.Rm 11:24).* For even if the branches are useless, the root of the tree is holy; the Gentiles, by-passing their sterile show of foliage, arrive at faith in the resurrection; and this is a sort of climbing up, a kind of ascension, of the body.

82 ***"Now, there was a man named Zachaeus"*** *(Lk 19:2).*

Zachaeus is in his wild fig tree. The blind man is on the side of the road. The Lord, filled with love, is expecting to meet the one, so that He can show him mercy; the other He honours by staying in his house. He questions me, with the intention of healing him; and, without any invitation, invites himself to the house of the other. He well knows that His host would be lavishly repaid. Even though Jesus had not heard words of invitation, He had heard this man's heart.

83 But maybe I appear to be leaving too soon my blind man, as though I were abandoning the poor in favour of the rich. Therefore, we shall wait for him, just as the Lord waited for him. We shall question him, since Christ, too, has questioned him. We ask a question, because we do not know the answer. But Jesus asks, because He already knows. Let us ask, and so find out how he was cured. But Jesus asked so that, in the single person of this blind man, we might all of us learn how to ask and how to obtain sight of the Lord. For Jesus questioned him to lead us to realise that we cannot be cured without making profession of faith.

84 ***"Immediately he saw and he followed Him, glorifying God. And Jesus entered Jericho and walked through it"*** *(Lk 18:43 sq.).*

The blind man would not have seen, unless he intended to follow Christ, to praise the Lord, and to pass through this world. But now I must go back to my rich man. We do not want to fall out with the rich, for our wish is to heal all people. They might feel under pressure on account of that parable about the camel; they might feel left out of the picture because we were so quick to leave the subject of Zachaeus. We must give them no just cause to be hurt and offended!

85 What the rich need to learn is that there is no harm in having money. The harm lies in not using it properly. Riches, which are a snare for bad people, can be a source of virtue for good people. Yes, the rich Zachaeus is chosen by Christ. But in giving to the poor half his possessions, and in repaying fourfold those he had cheated, he receives a recompense far greater than the sums of money he gave away. It was, of course, necessary, that he should repay those he had wronged, for charity does not suffice, and extravagant generosity has no value if there is injustice. Otherwise you wouldn't be giving gifts. You would be giving the money you had robbed from someone else.

86 Wisely we are told that Zachaeus was the chief publican. Need anyone despair of salvation when a chief publican, a man who made his money by fraud, is saved? ***"And he was rich"*** *(Lk 19:2)* we are told. You can learn from this that not all the rich are misers.

87 How is it that nowhere else does Scripture refer to a person's height? Only of Zachaeus are we told: ***"he was low of stature"*** *(Lk 19:3).* Was he, I wonder, low because of malice, low because of lack of faith? After all, when he climbed the tree he had promised nothing and he had not yet seen Christ. So, in that sense, he was still a little person. Similarly, John is great of stature because he saw Christ and the Spirit descending on Him as a dove. Here are his own words: *"I saw the Spirit come down as a dove and rest upon Him" (Jn 1:32).*

88 As for the crowd, are they not a heterogeneous, ignorant multitude incapable of viewing the heights of Wisdom? So long as he is in the crowd, therefore, Zachaeus cannot see Christ. So he climbs up above the crowd and gets a view. Or, to put it another way, in raising himself above the ignorance of the crowd, he succeeds in contemplating Him whom he desired.

89 It is interesting that the evangelist adds: ***"For Jesus was to pass that way"*** *(Lk 19:4).* He was to pass by that way where he would find the wild fig tree, would find the future believer. At one and the same time He preserved the mystery and sowed the seeds of grace. For Jesus had come to pass over from the Jews to the Gentiles.

90 So it was that He caught sight of Zachaeus high up. For from now on the loftiness of his faith would make him stand out among the fruits of new works. He would be like fruit growing at the very summit of a fertile tree. (We have passed from the figurative to the moral sense, and it is indeed pleasant for us on a Sunday* to enjoy a little *détente* of the soul among such a crowded congregation of faithful and willing souls).

Zachaeus in his wild fig tree is the new fruit of the new season. In him these words of the Canticle come true: *"The fig tree has put forth her first fruits" (Sg 2:13).* For Christ came that trees might produce not fruit but men. Somewhere else we read: *"When you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (Jn 1:48).* Nathaniel is under the tree, that is to say, standing on its root – for he is a good sincere person, and *"the root is holy" (Rm 11:16).* And yet, he is under the tree because he is under the Law. Zachaeus is on the tree, because he is above the Law. One defends the Lord in secret, the other preaches Him publicly. *One searched for Christ in the Law; the other, being higher than the Law, gave up all that he had and followed the Lord.

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91 ***"Look, your pound has gained ten pounds"*** *(Lk 19:16).*

All is well thought out. Before calling the Gentiles and putting to death the Jews who refused to have Christ as their King, Jesus first proposes to them this parable. Otherwise people might object: He never gave the Jews a chance to mend their ways. Or they might say: Why exact profit from someone who received nothing? This "pound" is no small matter. Further back, that woman in the Gospel who had lost her pound, lit the lamp and

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* In paragraph 73, Ambrose refers to tthe actual date (anniversary of his episcopal consecration). Here we learn that this sermon is being preached on a Sunday, and in quite a lively setting.

* There is some confusion here between Nicodemus ands Nathaniel

searched her house. With the help of the light she had the great joy of finding her lost coin *(cf.Lk 15:8)*.

92 One trader gained ten pounds from his one pound; another gained five. Perhaps the latter represents that which is practical and of the moral order, for in the body there are five senses. The former category doubles that amount, and they could represent both the mysteries of the Law [the mystical order] and the practice of honesty [the moral order]. It is for the same reason that Matthew has five talents and two talents. Here again the five talents represent the moral order, and the two talents represent both the mystical and the moral orders. It follows that here the lesser number signifies the richer reality. We could also understand by the ten pounds the Ten Commandments, which is to say, the teaching of the Law. And by the five pounds we could understand the rule of correct conduct.

But I would wish a Doctor of the Law to be perfect in all points; for *"it is not in words, but in virtue that the Kingdom of God is to be found" (1 Co 4:20)*.

93 Since Jesus is speaking of the Jews, it is appropriate that only two make a profit. I do not mean pecuniary profit, but the profit that accrues from preaching. The interest from money placed in a bank is quite a different matter from the interest gained from the celestial teaching.

94 Besides, in saying: *"Why did you not place my money in the bank?"* the Lord is not claiming interest on *our* money but on his own.

95 The one man said he had buried the money in the ground *(cf.Mt 25:18)*. This he says because he had suffocated his mind and soul in love of pleasure. That soul, made in the image and likeness of God, was buried – so to speak – in a tomb of flesh.

Of the others nothing is said. They are like wastrels who threw away the entire fortune that was given to them. The two traders represent the very small number who, on two occasions, were sent as messengers to the workers in the vineyard *(cf.Lk 20:10 sq.)*. The rest represent the Jews in general.

Saint Matthew also intended us to understand the parable in the following sense: just as the rich person who did not share his money with the poor is guilty of a very serious sin, so too is the teacher who does not share with the ignorant the blessing of teaching. But I spoke of this in my Books on Faith *(cf.De Fide ad Gratianum, 5, Prologue 13 sq.)* and so I shall not dwell on it again.

96 As for the ten cities, what do they stand for? Might they not be souls, who in some sense are made subject to those who have deposited in the human intelligence the silver of their Lord? For what they taught were

"chaste words, refined as silver is refined" (Ps 11:7). For souls that are tranquil and at peace are like *"Jerusalem, which is built as a city" (Ps 121:3)*. And, just as angels are put over us, so too will it be with those who have merited to attain the life of angels.

BOOK NINE

1 ***"When he came near to Bethphage and Bethany, to the mountain called Olivet, He sent two of His disciples and said to them: 'Go into the town which is opposite you. As you enter it you will find the foal of an ass tied, a foal on which no one has ever sat' "*** *(Lk 19:29-30).*

Jesus has forsaken the Jews to dwell in the heart of the Gentiles. So it is well that He should ascend to the Temple. For the Temple to which He ascends is one where the Lord is adored not according to the letter but in spirit and in truth *(cf.Jn 4:24)*. This is God's temple, resting on the foundation of faith, and not built of stones. Our Lord abandons those who hate Him, and chooses those who are going to love Him.

2 He comes to the Mount of Olives with the intention of planting young olives on the heights of virtue *(cf.Ps 127:3)*. These olive plants would have as their mother: *"the Jerusalem that is on high" (Ga 4:26)*. Here, on this mountain, we find the heavenly gardener. Each one of us is placed by Him in the House of God *(cf.Ps 91:14)*; and each can say: *"As for me, I am a fruitful olive tree in the House of God" (Ps 51:10)*.

Perhaps, too, the mountain is Christ. Who else could bear such fruits? For the olives we speak of are not trees bent by the weight of their luscious fruits, but nations made fruitful by the Spirit. It is by Him that we climb, towards Him that we mount. He is the door. He is the way. He is open, and He opens. To those who knock *(cf.Mt 7:7)*, the portals are thrown open; they enter in, and the perfect adore Him.

3 In the little town was the foal of an ass, and it was tied up together with the she-ass. It could be set free only by command of the Lord. The apostles loosed it. There you have activity; there you have life; there you have graces. Imitate the apostles, and you too will set the captive free.

4 We shall now consider who were those people, caught out in sin, who were exiled from paradise and tied up in a fortress. Then you will see how those who were expelled by death have been recalled by life. And so, in Matthew *(cf.Mt 21:2)*, we read that there was a she-ass and a foal. For just as in the two people expelled from paradise we have male and female, so too in the two animals here we see both sexes being recalled. The she-ass represents Eve, mother of error, and her foal represents the Gentile people. This is why Jesus chooses the foal to be His mount.

5 Appropriately, this is a foal *"no one has ever sat"*, because previous to Christ no one had ever called the pagan races to enter the Church. So, too, in Mark you read: *"upon which no man has yet sat" (Mk 11:2)*. For the creature was held captive by the bonds of unbelief. He had been delivered to the wicked master to whom his own sinfulness had made him subservient, but who could not now reclaim him. For it was not by right of nature that the devil had mastery over him, but by reason of his sin.

In saying ***"The Lord [has need of him]"*** *(Lk 19:31)*, Jesus is showing us that there is but one Master. For though in a general sense there are many gods and many masters, there is only ONE GOD and ONE MASTER. In giving Himself no name, our Lord is making Himself known not as an individual person but in His nature as Lord of all.

6 Mark mentions that the foal was *"tied before the gate" (Mk 11:4)*. This means that whoever is not in Christ is outside, in the street. But one who is in Christ, is not outside. Mark also adds: *"in the meeting of two ways" (Mk 11:4)*. He stands in no man's land, without crib or fodder or stable. Unhappy is such servitude, where one is condemned to a wandering life. Being ownerless, he had many masters, These many masters tied him up so that they could possess him. Jesus frees him, so that He might have him. Far more powerful, as Jesus knows well, are gifts than chains.

7 It is also interesting that two disciples are sent. Peter is sent to Cornelius *(Ac 10:24)*, and Paul is sent to the rest. This is why we are not told the names of the apostles, simply their number. But if you are really anxious to know their names, then you can think of Philip - sent by the Spirit to Gaza when he had baptised the eunuch of Queen Canace; and who sowed the word of the Lord in all the cities from Azot to Caesarea *(Ac 8:26 sq.)*.

And we must not forget that the Lord promised to send them back soon *(cf.Mk 11:3)*, for He was going to send preachers who would preach the Lord Jesus in the lands of the Gentiles.

8 In setting the ass free, did the envoys use words of their own? No, they used the exact words that Jesus had given them. We might learn from this that it was not by their own preaching, but by the word of God, that they poured into the pagan people faith in Christ's name. And it was by that word of God that the hostile powers, who up to then had held sway over the nations, fell down before the Power of God.

9 The apostles spread their own garments before the feet of Christ *(cf.Lk 19:36)*, as though to highlight the splendour of so great an event as the preaching of the Gospel. In Scripture, as you know, garments often symbolise virtues. Also, these robes would, by their virtue, soften the harshness of the Gentile people. At the same time, by spreading these robes in their loving zeal, they were smoothing the way for Jesus.

For we must not imagine that it was to please Himself that the Lord of the World chose to be seen riding on the foal of a she-ass. No, there lies

here a deep and mysterious meaning. He wished to saddle the inmost recesses of our heart. Like a mystic Rider, He wished to seat Himself in the depths of our soul. As a rider might ride his mount, He wished, in His divinity, to "ride" our minds and direct our steps; reining in the lascivious desires of the flesh. He wished to accustom the Gentile people to His loving control, and so to tame their savage impulses. Happy, happy indeed, are those who inwardly submit their back to such a Rider as this! Truly, truly happy are those whose mouth is held in check from meaningless chatter, and restrained by the bridle of the Heavenly Word!

10 What bridle is this, my brothers and sisters? Who can teach me how it either checks or sets free our lips? Paul showed me what this bridle was when he said: *"that speech may be given me, that I may open my mouth with confidence" (Ep 6:19)*. So the word is the bridle. The word acts also as a spur, and therefore we read: *"It is hard for you to kick against the goad" (Ac 9:5)*. He has taught us to open our heart, to endure the goad, to bear the yoke. Let another teach us how to bridle our tongue: for far rarer is the virtue of silence than the ability to speak with eloquence. Yes, I wish someone would teach us; someone who, as though dumb, has not opened his mouth in the face of adversity *(cf.Ps 37:14)*. Such a person as this is ready for the whip, and does not refuse blows, for all he wants is to provide God with a docile mount.

11 Learn from one of God's household how to carry Christ, seeing that He carried you first. You were the lost sheep *(cf.Lk 15:6)*, and He was the Shepherd who carried you home. In heart and soul, learn how to carry Him on your back; learn to be submissive to Christ your Rider, and then you will find yourself lifted up above the world. It is not just anyone who can easily carry Christ, but only the one who can say: *"I am bent low and humbled exceedingly. I roared with the groaning of my heart" (Ps 37:9)*.

If you do not want to be deflected from your course, walk with feet unstained on the garments of the saints. Do not trample with muddy feet those garments. Take care to keep steadfastly on your way and do not abandon the path that has been strewn for you, the path of the prophets. Remember that it was to make the road easier for the Gentiles who were on their way, that those who preceded Jesus covered with their own clothing the road that led to the Temple of God. So that you could advance without stumbling, the Lord's disciples despoiled themselves of the garment of their own body; and by their martyrdom have strewn for you a path through the hostile multitude.

Of course, someone may wish to understand the event in quite another sense – and he is welcome to his opinion: that the foal of the she-ass walked on the garments of the Jews.

12 What of the broken branches *(cf.Mt 21:8; Mk 11:8)*? Surely they would get in the way of those walking over them? I would be very puzzled only for the fact that earlier on the Good Gardener of the World had taught me that *"already the axe is laid to the root of the trees" (Lk 3:9)*. At our Lord's coming, He will knock down the barren trees, and strew the ground with the vainglorious foliage of the nations that bear no fruit and hinder the advance of the faithful. And so, renewed in soul and in spirit, the peoples can spring up again like new shoots that arise out of the old stump.

13 But do not despise the foal. Just as there are wolves in sheep's clothing *(cf.Mt 7:15)*, so too a human heart can hide itself under the appearance of an animal. For under the garment of this mortal body, which we wear just as the animals wear theirs, the soul that is filled by God lives and thrives. That the foal is to be understood as figuratively representing us is made all the clearer when Saint John adds that the disciples took the flowers of the palm trees *(cf.Jn 12:13)*: for *"the just shall flower like the palm tree" (Ps 91:13)*.

And so, at Christ's approach, these banners of justice, these signs and standards of triumph, were lifted high above the shoulders of men. Why is the crowd so amazed at this mystery which unfolds? Without understanding, they are filled with wonder that Wisdom sits upon the foal of an ass; that Virtue chooses so lowly a mount; that Justice is established there.

14 For that matter, friend, you must not despise the she-ass. Long ago she saw an angel of God that man could not see *(cf.Nb 22:23 sq.)*. She saw, she stopped, she spoke; this was to show you that at the coming of the Great Angel of God *(cf.Is 9:6)*, the Gentiles – who up to then were asses – would speak.

15 How judiciously Luke remarks that the crowds who praised God came to meet Him at the foot of the mountain *(cf.Lk 19:37)*. In this way they signified that the Worker of the heavenly mystery had come down to them from Heaven. The multitude recognises God, acclaims Him King, and recalls the prophecy. For they cry aloud: *"Hosannah to the Son of David" (Mt 21:9; 15)*. Clearly they proclaim that the Redeemer, who was to be born of the House of David, had come; and that He truly was David's son in the flesh. Yes, this crowd, this very crowd who a moment later will crucify Him! We have here a very remarkable sign that God is at work, for it is in spite of themselves that these people bear witness; and it is also against themselves that they are bearing witness. For in their hearts they deny what their voices proclaim.

16 It is on this account that our Lord says: *"If they were to be silent, the very stones would cry out" (Lk 19:40)*. Indeed it would not be so very strange if, contrary to nature, the stones were to cry out in praise of the

Lord. After all, murderers harder than stone were proclaiming Him. Or perhaps we are to understand it this way: after the Lord's Passion the Jews would be silent, and therefore the living stones of which Peter speaks *(1 P 2:5)* would have to cry aloud.

In this way the crowd, with very contradictory feelings, escort God to His Temple, singing His praises.

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17 God hardly wishes His Temple to be a rendezvous for traders. He wants it to be a place of holiness. He impresses on us that a priest's ministry is not to consist in selling the services of religion, and that a priest should serve freely. Look, now, at our Lord's actions and see in Him the model of what your life should be:

18 ***"He drove out those that were selling and buying in the Temple; and overturned the money-changers' tables and the chairs of the sellers of doves"*** *(Mt 21:12)*.

Further back He taught us in a general way that business should not be carried on in God's Temple, but He makes a particular point of driving out the money-changers. Who are these money-changers? They are surely those profiteers who want to make themselves rich at the expense of the Lord's treasury, and are unable to distinguish between good and bad. Our Lord's silver and gold is divine Scripture. On taking His departure, He distributed His gold and silver coins among His servants, and divided out the talents *(cf.Mt 25:14; Lk 19:13)*. He gave the innkeeper two coins to look after the wounded man *(cf.Lk 10:35)*: for it is by the two Testaments that our wounds are healed.

My friend, as a good money-changer, treasure *"the words of the Lord, chaste words, silver proved and tested in the fire" (Ps 11:7)*. These are words purified by the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit. Never accept in exchange for them coins stamped with a false image of the King. For *"even Satan can change himself into the likeness of an angel of light" (2 Co 11:14)*. Do not mix in with your treasure an image of your Prince diminished by the foxiness and perfidy of the Arians. Do not tempt the ears of your listeners by jingling their coins, for the tinkle of such silver could prevent them listening devoutly to the scriptures; and the desire to shine could creep into the hearts of religious. I do not condemn all money-changers, for some are good. As we hear our Lord say in the Gospel: *"You should have given my money to the money-changers, and on my return I could have reclaimed it with interest" (Mt 25:27)*. If it is true to say that Scripture is a form of currency, then it has a right to claim interest.

19 As regards the literal sense of turning over the chairs of the sellers of doves, I am at a loss to understand why our Lord should do this. The chairs occupied by people who sell birds in the market place can hardly be looked on as conferring any dignity on the holder! Do the doves, then, confer some sort of dignity? One would not think so. However, if you consider the Lord's Baptism – when the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a Dove – you will learn something: we are being warned, by the example of these vendors chased from the Temple, that those who traffic in the grace of the Holy Spirit should have no place in the Church of God. For, *"freely you have received"*, says our Lord, *"and freely you should give" (Mt 10:8)*.

Simon thought he could buy with money the gift of sanctification. Peter replied to him: *"Keep your money to yourself, to perish with you: because you thought God's gift could be purchased with money" (Ac 8:20 sq.)*.

20 Those selling the lambs and the oxen represent, I think, wicked people who wait their opportunity to make a profit out of the simplicity and hard work of others. But then, when I remember that the lambs and oxen were put out, and that the Lord ordered the doves to be removed, it would look as though the banishing of the doves represented the expulsion of the Jewish people – for *"Ephraim is a dove" (Ho 7:11)*; they are banished because the Lord hates their heritage and their works. The money is spilt, so that grace can be gathered; the money-chargers' table is overturned, so that the Chair of the Lord may replace it; the table for offerings is knocked down, so that Altars may be erected.

21 All this the Lord does without armies or riches. He simply uses a whip made of cords. He whipped the people out, and no one resisted *(cf.Jn 2:15)*. Sometimes He uses a rod, and sometimes a whip – for *"the sceptre [or rod] of the King is a sceptre of uprightness" (Ps 44:7)*. He uses the rod to correct us, and the whip to persuade us. The teaching of the first is rigid, the teaching of the other is, as it were, human and flexible; it is a whip that strokes, so to speak, the conscience of the sinner. Very different is the terrifying manner of the prophets from the persuasion employed by the apostles. Yet, both the one and the other teach us with the same divine word.

If Jesus made a whip of cords, it is because *"the measuring line has marked out for me delightful places; for me the heritage is superb indeed" (Ps 15:6)*. The Psalmist speaks of those cords or measuring lines which quantity surveyors use to measure out land. So, like a good measurer, the Lord determined the frontiers of the Synagogue; and puts out from the Temple those who would profane His Church. For a new surveyor had arrived to determine the fertility of souls, one who would measure the quality of the land rather than the quantity.

22 It is well that the cords or lines are not stretched out in such a way as to encompass the domain of faith within a fixed limit, setting definite boundaries within which it would be held. Instead, the cords are made into a whip, free to stretch to infinity the boundaries of the Church. At the same time, this whip banishes the Jews to no fixed exile, but to exile without end.

In this way, there is no place in the world left for the Synagogue, for ever and for ever.

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23 ***"A man planted a vineyard"*** *(Lk 20:9).*
People interpret this vineyard in a great variety of ways, but Isaiah tells us perfectly clearly that the Vineyard of the God of hosts is the House of Israel *(cf.Is 5:7)*. Who but God could have planted this vineyard? He it is who let it out and then set off for a far country. I do not mean that the Lord goes from one part to another, for always He is present everywhere. I am saying that He is more present to those who love Him, more absent from those who neglect Him. He was away a very long time, not wanting to claim His fruits with undue haste. The more indulgent His liberality is, the more inexcusable is the obstinacy of the tenants.

24 In Matthew you read, and this is not without interest, that He surrounded the vineyard with a hedge *(cf.Mt 21:33)*: meaning that He fortified it, and surrounded it with the rampart of divine protection, not wanting it to be an easy prey to the incursions of spiritual beasts. *"And He dug in it a winepress" (Mt 21:33)*. To understand the significance of the winepress we might perhaps look at those psalms which are inscribed *"For the winepresses" (cf.Ps 8, 80, 83)*. In these psalms the mysteries of the Lord's Passion bubble, like new wine, in the heat of the holy inspiration of the prophets. That is why the apostles were considered to be drunk [with new wine] when the Holy Spirit was poured over them *(cf.Ac 2:13)*. So the Lord also dug a winepress from where the interior fruit of the vine, the grapes of the soul, might pour out a spiritual wine. *"He built a tower" (Mt 21:33)*, meaning that He erected the lofty pinnacle of the Law. And so his vineyard was fortified, furnished, and embellished before He let it out to the Jews.

25 When ***"the season of fruits"*** *(Lk 20:10)* came, He sent His servants. We do not read "gathering of fruits", because the Jews had no fruit to give. No fruit was forthcoming from this vineyard, for as Scripture says: *"I looked for it to bring forth grapes,and it brought forth thorns" (Is; 5:2)*.

What the winepresses bubbled with was not the wine that gives joy, it was not the new wine of the Spirit. No, it was the crimson blood of the prophets that these winepressers disgorged. This is why Jeremiah was thrown into a pit *(cf.Jr 38:6)*. Such were the winepresses of the Jews, overflowing not with wine but with mire.

Though, in a general way, the reference is to prophets, I believe that the servant who was stoned is Naboth *(cf.1 K 21:13)*. True, we have no verbal prophecy of his, but in deed he prophesied. By his own blood he prophesied

that this vineyard would produce many martyrs. And who is the servant wounded in the head? Evidently this is Isaiah. The sword could cut his body in two, but it could not bend his faith, nor diminish his constancy, nor cut out the vigour of his soul.

26 The parable continues. After many other servants had been sent *(cf.Lk 20:11-14)* whom the Jews insulted and sent away empty-handed – for the servants could get nothing from them – the Lord finally sent His only Son. But these wretches wanted to get rid of the Heir, so they killed Him. They crucified Him, cast Him out, denied Him.

27 How much has been said in so few words! First, that there was an original innocence, but that it generally betrayed itself to what was worthless. Then, as a last remedy for so many evils, Christ came. But in denying the Heir *(cf.Heb 1:2)*, these wicked people give up their Author. Christ is, however, both Heir and Testator. Heir, because He survives His own death and comes into His inheritance, which He Himself willed. He, being Heir, receives in our progress [in faith], the rich legacy and property of the Testaments that He Himself made.

28 So it is quite *à propos* that He should interrogate the tenants, so that out of their own mouths they should condemn themselves. The Master of the Vineyard will come. He says this either because in Christ the majesty of God resides equally; or because in the last times God's presence will be more keenly felt in our hearts. Then people will utter sentence against themselves. The wicked will perish, and the vineyard will go to other tenants. Who are these tenants, and what is the vineyard? Let us see.

29 The vineyard stands for us. God's people, rooted in the stock of the eternal vine, will rise above the earth. It will bloom and burgeon, it will shed beauty and loveliness over the sterile earth; it will, in season, cover itself in lovely verdure; it will joyfully bear the yoke once its branches have grown big enough to stretch themselves out like arms[*]

The Vine-dresser is the all powerful God, the Vine is Christ *(cf.Jn 15:1 sq.)*, and we are the branches. If we fail to bear fruit, the eternal Vine-dresser will cut us off. It is right to call Christ's people a vine: for one thing, we are covered with the sign of the cross; for another thing, the fruits of the vine are gathered at the last season of the year [the end of time]. Also, we have this in common with the vine: in God's Church all are equal, just as in a vineyard all the vines are aligned in the same order. For in the Church, all are equal. There is no distinction between rich and poor, between those with no power and those who have power, between servants and masters.

[*] The allusion is to the sort of cross-shaped supports which held the young vines in position.

Just as the vine twines around the trees, so the body is united to the soul, and the soul to the body. The vine, when attached to a strong support, holds itself up straight; and when pruned it does not decrease but increases. So too God's holy people when bound, are set free; when humiliated are raised up; and when pruned with the knife receive their crown.

But there is more than that: just as the tender shoot is cut from the old stock and grafted into another tree; so too this holy people, freed from the scars and knots of the old tree, grows within that Tree of the Cross like an infant growing in the womb of a tender mother. The Holy Spirit, like liquid poured into the deepest furrows of a trench, runs into this dungeon that is our body; and watering it with the waters of salvation it effaces all that is foul. Having done this, He raises the whole tendency of our members towards heavenly discipline.

30 The diligent Vine-dresser is careful to weed, to bind up the vine, to prune it. He clears the ground all round it, to give it room. Sometimes, with the heat of the sun, He burns the buried secrets of our body; sometimes He waters them with rain. He likes to dig up and weed His land, so that thorns, thickets and briars will not harm His vine in the bud, and that its growth would not be impeded by the over-shadowing of foliage. He digs up the sterile vanity of eloquence that casts a shadow over the virtues and delays the ripening of the natural good that lies within us. But God forbid that we need fear any harm coming to this vine. Our Lord and Saviour, vigilant guardian of His vine, has fortified it with the wall of eternal life against all the malicious attacks of this world. *"It has stretched forth its branches to the sea" (Ps 79:12),* for *"the earth belongs to the Lord" (Ps 23:1).* Everywhere God is honoured, everywhere Christ is adored.

31 This is our vintage, this is our gathering of the grapes, Now is the season of joy and relief, while some fill their bosom with bunches of sweet grapes; some taste these gifts of Heaven; and a great number, taking off their shoes, dance upon the fruit of divine blessing, joyously stamping out its juice till their bare feet are quite stained with the red of new wine that flows from the burst grapes. They take off their shoes, for the place where we are is holy ground *(cf.Ex 3:5);* and, as we ascend in spirit the steps of the most holy Throne, the feet of our soul must be quite freed from every bodily bond and tie.

It is right that for all the world there should be a season of vintage, since the whole world is the vine.

32 *"See, now is the favourable time" (2 Co 6:2).* The year no longer shivers and grows hard beneath the wintry frost and darkness of false faith, Earth's hard and frozen crust no longer thickens under great heaps of snow and persistent ice. Free now from the tempests of sacrilege, she

conceives new fruits, and brings forth the old. The storm of fierce ambition has died down. Yes, the tempest of dissension has ceased.

Now breathes a gentle zephyr; it tempers the burning heat that afflicted all Italy – the burning heat and violent passions stirred up whether by the perverseness of the Jews or, more recently, by the menace of the Arians.

The storm has died down. Peace spreads its sail. Faith blows. Eagerly the mariners of Faith return to the ports they had left, and press sweet kisses on their native shores now free from strife. How happy they are to be free from peril and delivered from danger![*]

33 Hail, Vineyard worthy of such a Guardian! You were sanctified by the blood not only of Naboth *(cf.1 K 21:19),* but of prophets beyond all telling. I am sure that Naboth was not frightened by the threats of the king and that fear did not shake his constancy. The richest gifts could not induce him to sell his religious attachment. No, Naboth resisted the desires of the king who wanted to cut down his ancestral vineyard and plant there a herb and vegetable garden for himself. Seeing that there was nothing else he could do, he quenched with his own blood the fire prepared for his vines. And yet, Naboth was defending what was merely a temporal vineyard; while you, my friend, were planted for eternity by the blood of a multitude of martyrs; the cross of the apostles, reproducing the Passion of our Lord, has caused your vine to spread to the very ends of the entire world.

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34 ***"Whose image, whose inscription, does it bear?"*** *(Lk 20:24).* In this passage the Lord is showing us how circumspect we have to be in replying to heretics or Jews. Somewhere else He says: *"Be wise as serpents" (Mt 10:16).* Many understand this verse in the following way: the serpent lifted up in the desert *(cf.Nb 21:8)* pre-figured the Cross of Christ by which would be destroyed the venom of the evil spirit. So, we are being told to be wise and circumspect as Christ, but simple as the Spirit, [the Dove]. See, here is the Serpent who always protects His head and saves it from mortal injury. When the Jews asked Jesus if He had received His authority from Heaven, He replied: *"John's baptism, was it from Heaven, or was it from men?" (Lk 20:4).* Since they dared not deny that John's baptism was from Heaven, they would have appeared out of their minds if they had denied that their own Author was from Heaven.

Our Lord asked for a coin and then enquired whose image was on it. For very different from the image of God is the image of the world. That is why Paul warns us: *"Since we once bore the image of the earthly, let us bear also the image of the heavenly" (1 Co 15:49).*

[*] There seems to be an allusion here to the events of A.D. 388. See Chronology of Events

35 Christ, being *"God's Image" (2 Co 4:4)*, does not bear the image of Caesar. Peter does not bear Caesar's image, for he says: *"We have left all things and followed you" (Mt 19:27)*. And you won't find Caesar's image with James or with John, for they are *"Sons of Thunder" (Mk 3:17)*. But you will find that image in the sea where monsters swim, with their heads crushed under the waters; while the principal monster, once his head is crushed, is given as food to the people of Ethiopia *(cf.Ps 73:13 sq.)*.

But if Christ did not carry Caesar's image, why did He pay the tax? I reply that He did not pay it out of what was His, but simply gave back to the world what belonged to the world. And you, too, if you do not want to owe anything to Caesar, do not have possessions that pertain to this world. But in fact, you do have money, and you do owe tribute to Caesar. If truly you desire not to be under an obligation to any earthly king, give up all that you have and follow Christ.

36 It is well that the Lord first makes clear what is to be rendered to Caesar: for no one can belong to the Lord unless they renounce the world.

Yes, yes, we all renounce it in word: but in our heart we do not renounce it. In word we renounce it when we receive the sacred Mysteries. But what a heavy chain we drag if we do not honour a promise that we made to God! Remember what Scripture says: *"Better not to make a vow, than to make a vow and break it" (Qo 5:4)*. A solemn promise to God is a more serious matter than a business contract. Keep your solemn promise so long as you are in this body, before your creditor comes and puts you in prison: *"I tell you truly, you shall not get out till you have paid the last farthing" (Mt 5:25 sq.)*.

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37 ***If a man's brother dies ...*** *(Lk 20:28)*.
In this passage the Saducees, that is to say the most detestable of the Jews, are putting Jesus to the test. Our Lord rebukes them for the stupidity of their literal interpretation [of the text], and rising to the mystical level utterly confounds them. In their cleverness, what an example they give of chastity! Imagine, in order to follow out the Law literally, they would have a woman forced against her will to marry, so that a man could raise up children to his deceased brother! Therefore the *"letter"*, like some vicious procuress, *"kills" (2 Co 3:6)*; but the Spirit is the teacher of chastity.

38 Let us look into it. Perhaps we shall find that this woman represents the Synagogue. She has had seven husbands, rather like the Samaritan woman to whom Jesus said: *"You have had five husbands" (Jn 4:18)*. You see, this Samaritan woman recognised only the Five Books of the Law of Moses. The Synagogue chiefly follow seven, and, because of

their unbelief, from none of them did they receive any children, any descendants, any heirs.

What is more, the Synagogue will have no part with her seven husbands at the resurrection. Because she understood in a carnal sense a precept that had a spiritual meaning. Scripture was not speaking of a carnal brother who was to raise up children to his deceased brother. The Brother that is meant is He who, from the dead people of the Jews, was to take to Himself a bride – a bride that is the Wisdom of true religion. From this spouse He would have descendants in the person of the apostles. These, like unformed infants of the dead Jews, had remained in the womb of the Synagogue till, in His gracious kindness, God chose to preserve them by the mixture of a new seed.

39 As for the Synagogue, often she receives the royal robe that is a symbol of marriage, because she is the mother of believers. Often, too, we see her as a repudiated wife, because she is also the mother of unbelievers. For her, the corporal Law has died, that it may rise again as a spiritual Law. Therefore God's holy people, if they love with a conjugal love the seven books of the Law, and if they obey them as they would obey a husband, will have this heavenly union in the resurrection. There, in that heavenly union, there will be no bodily impurity to make them blush. And with gifts of grace divine they will be enriched.

BOOK TEN

1 ***"The Lord said to my Lord"*** *(Lk 20:42).*
The Lord, now, is coming to the end of His teaching. At the end of His witness, and to complete his teaching, He includes – even before His Passion, even before mercy – the FAITH that consists in believing that He is the Christ. He is the Lord our God, who sits at the right hand of God *(cf.Mt 26:64)*. Of course, this is not meant corporeally, seeing that the Lord is everywhere. Christ is, Himself, in the Father *(cf.Jn 14:10)*, since He is in the substance of God, and since there is but one power and one majesty. He is in the Father and the Father is in Him; for the Word is in God and God is in the Word.

He is in the Father, He is at the right hand of the Father, because He is one with the Father, and does not yield His place to another. Sent by the Father, He came down from Heaven to do His will. Away with perfidious discussions! Keep to the true religion that you have here. He is not placed before His Father because He sits at the Father's right; nor is He dishonoured because He is sent. Where we have full and complete divinity, there is no need to go searching for degrees of dignity.

2 There is something else we must consider. How is it that He rebukes those who call Christ the son of David *(cf.Lk 20:44)*; and yet, when the blind man hails Him as the son of David *(cf.Lk 18:38)* He cures him? How is it that when the children called out *"Hosanna to the son of David" (Mt 21:9)*, they were glorifying God and rendering profoundest homage?

But in this particular passage, where the Pharisees went wrong was not so much in denying that Christ was the son of David as in refusing to believe that He was Son of God. True faith consists not in believing in one or the other, but in believing in both. For if we have begun by recognising *"Christ Jesus crucified" (1 Co 2:2)*, we shall – now that we are approaching judgement – no longer know Him as crucified but shall see Him coming on the clouds *(2 Co 5:16)*. Those who are incredulous will see His wounds *(cf.Jn 20:25; 27)*; and those who believe will go running to meet Him and will be lifted up into the air *(cf.1 Th 4:16)*.

3 We must believe that Christ is at the same time God and man. He is One in two natures. He is not two people. His Father makes His enemies bow down before the Son *(cf.Ps 109:2)*; not because the Son's own power is insufficient, but, because of the oneness of nature between Them, They operate as One. The Son also, by glorifying the Father on earth, causes His enemies to bow down before the Father. *"For this reason, God also has exalted Him, and has given Him a name which is above all names"*

(Ph 2:9). But the Son too says to the Father: *"I have made known Your name to those whom You have given Me" (Jn 17:6)*.

In giving His Son a name that is above all names, He is not giving the Son more than He had before; rather, He is giving Him all that He has. And if He conferred this name, it is in order that: *"every tongue shall confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father" (Ph 2:11)*.

4 Now examine every detail. The Father submits to the Son; the Son to the Father. The Father raises the Son to life; the Son raises Himself to life – His own words are: *"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19)*. The Father is Lord, and the Son is Lord. Yet there are not two Lords, but one only Lord. For the Father is God and the Son is God; yet there is but one God, since the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father *(cf.Jn 14:10; 17:21)*. There is only one God, only one divinity: *"Your throne, O God, is from all eternity; a sceptre of justice is the sceptre of your Kingdom. You love justice and hate iniquity; therefore God, your God, has anointed you" (Ps 44:7 sq.)*. Yet there is only one God.

With regard to this doctrine, the New Testament is in perfect harmony with the Old. For in the Old Testament you read: *"You shall love the Lord your God"* and *"you shall adore the Lord your God and you shall serve none but Him" (Dt 6:5; 13)*. And in the New Testament you read: *"One God who is Father of all" (Ep 4:6)*. So the Father is Lord and the Son is Lord, and yet there is only one Lord.

What is more, we read in Scripture: *"You cannot serve two lords" (Mt 6:24)*. That verse belongs to the New Testament. And in the Old Testament we read: *"Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord" (Dt 6:4)*. Most judiciously the apostle says: *"There is only one God, the Father, from whom come all things; and one Lord, Jesus, through whom are all things" (1 Co 8:6)*. In this way he adroitly avoids speaking of *"two Gods"* or *"two Lords"*, and he diminishes neither the Father nor the Son. For He who is God is also Lord, and He who is Lord is also God. As the psalmist says: *"Know that the Lord Himself is our God" (Ps 99:3)*.

5 It follows that anything the Father has, the Son has it too. In regard to the act of generation, God is Father; in the unity of Image, the Son is God. The Son is Lord because, though He could submit all things to Himself by might, He prefers to do so by wisdom. The Father is Lord, because He is the Root of the Son. As Persons, we distinguish the Father from the Son; but as regards power and might, They are one. So one is in the other, and both are one. The glory of the Father is that it did not degenerate in the Son; and the beauty of the Son is that we see the Father in Christ. In no way has He degenerated, for He preserves in unity the Sovereign Majesty. In no way is He a stranger, for He was truly begotten, and is the very expression of truth.

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6 ***"There shall not be left a stone upon a stone that shall not be thrown down" (Lk 21:6).***

Before this there was the story of the widow *(cf.Lk 21:1-4)*; but as I have already sung her praises in my book on Widows *(cf.De Viduis, 5:27 sq.)*, I shall not speak of her here. Regarding the text quoted above, these words were true of the temple built by Solomon. That temple was destroyed by the enemy even before the time of judgement. There is no building constructed by our hands that does not crumble with age, or is not destroyed by violence, or is not burnt down. But there is a temple of another kind, built of beautiful stones and adorned with gifts. Our Lord seems to have in mind the destruction of this temple. I refer to the Synagogue of the Jews, which was to fall in ruins at the rising of the Church. There is, too, a temple in each one of us, which crumbles if our faith gives way; especially if we false-heartedly profess the name of Christ while inwardly we deny Him our love.

7 That might be the best interpretation for me to consider. After all, of what use is it to me to know the Day of Judgement? Conscious of so many sins, what does it profit me to know when the Lord will come, if He does not come into my soul, if He does not come into my mind and spirit? What does it profit me if Christ does not live in me, if Christ does not speak in me? It is to me that Christ should come, it is for me that His Coming should take place. As for the Second Coming of the Lord, that will take place at the end of the world, when we can say: *"The world is crucified to me, and I to the world" (Ga 6:14).*

8 If the end of the world should find a person such as this on the housetop *(cf.Mt 24:17)*, living already in the heavens *(cf.Ph 3:20)*, then there will take place the destruction of the visible and material temple. Then will be the destruction of the material Law, of the material and visible Pasch, of the material and visible Azymes. I shall even go so far as to dare to say the destruction even of the temporal Christ – such as He was for Paul before Paul received the faith. Because once the world is dead to someone *(cf.Ga 6:14)*, then Christ is eternal. For such a person the temple is spiritual, the Law is spiritual *(cf.Rm 7:14)*, even the Pasch is spiritual – since Christ died once for all.

Such a person feasts on unleavened bread *(cf.1 Co 5:8)*. He does not feast on the fruits of this earth, but on the fruit of justice. To him Wisdom is present. To him Virtue and Justice are present. To him Redemption is present. For truly *"Christ has died once for the sins" (1 P 3:18)* of the people, but daily He redeems us.

9 ***"And when you shall hear of wars and rumours of wars ..." (Lk 21:9).***

They were asking the Lord when the destruction of the Temple would take place, and what sign would there be of His coming. He tells them about the signs but does not consider it suitable to tell them the time that these events would take place. But Matthew adds a third question *(cf.Mt 24:1-3)*: he shows us the disciples asking the Lord when the Temple was to be destroyed, what was to be the sign of His Coming, and when was to be the end of the world. Luke judged that they knew as much as they needed about the end of the world, if they were instructed as regards the Coming of the Lord.

10 No one could give better witness than ourselves to the Lord's words, for we have seen the end of the world come upon us!* What wars we have witnessed, what rumours of wars we have heard! The Huns rise up against the Alani, the Alani against the Goths; the Goths against the Taifali and the Samaritans. The Goths have been exiled and they in turn exile us from Illyria, from our own native land. And that is not all. Everywhere there is famine; everywhere there is plague – plague among cattle, plague among men; plague among livestock of every kind. So deadly has it been, that even where we have not had war, we are like a land devastated by hostile forces. So, since we are at the end of the world, we see the world in decline. This decline begins with the sicknesses of the world: famine is one sickness of the world, plague is another sickness of the world, and persecution is yet another sickness of the world.

11 But the valiant Christian has other wars to face. There are combats against lust; there is conflict with desire; and the enemy within is more dreadful than the enemy without. At one moment lust excites us; at another moment passion enflames us. At one moment fear makes our blood run cold; at another moment anger drives us mad. At one time ambition sorely tries us; at another time demons, wicked spirits that dwell in the air *(cf.Ep 6:12)*, attempt to daunt us.

Our passions are easily swayed, our minds are easily agitated, and so these combats cast us down, and these earthquakes — so to speak — cause us to tremble.

12 But the brave of heart say: *"Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear. Though war break out against me, even then will I hope" (Ps 26:3).* Bravely he stands in the line of battle and faces the enemy. Even though some Goliath were to rise up, ferocious and gigantic; and even though others should be filled with fear, our hero will withstand him. He will cast away the weapons offered him by the king of this earth

* Ambrose refers to the barbarian invasions.

(cf.1 S 17:39), and take up instead the lighter weapons of faith. With his sling, woven from three stout cords, he will hurl the missile of pure faith and fatally wound his mocking persecutor. He will despise the giant's threats. He does not tremble before the great and powerful ones of this world, for Christ is pleased to speak within him.

At one time it is Christ who speaks; at another time it is the Father; at another time it is the Spirit of the Father. Between them there is no discord, no disagreement. What One says, all Three say, for the Trinity has but one voice. The conquering David strikes Goliath with his own sword, welcomes death for the sake of Christ, and puts to flight the Philistines. And now see the young girls, come to gather round him like eagles, and to greet him with the words: *"Saul killed a thousand, David ten thousands" (1 S 18:7)*. Here we have a proof that those who conquer this world have precedence over princes. So, Emperors die, and martyrs inherit for ever the royal honours of heavenly grace. Emperors become suppliants, and martyrs become their patrons.

13 But Goliath has another sword, and the devil has another arrow; I refer to the arguments used by heretics. These enemies can, however, be overcome by one who knows how to sing the psalms. Such a one hears rumours of wars without undergoing those wars. No wind of false doctrine disturbs or disquiets him *(cf.Ep 4:14)*. Satisfied with the riches of divine Scripture, he has no hunger for the disputatious word. He does not fear to challenge the empty howlings and mouthings of the heretics.

The feeble-minded would do better to wait before speaking, for he could harm others by entering into a debate where his adversaries are stronger than he. Let David come, for Christ will open his mouth so that he can utter mysteries. Let the Nazarite come, he who could never allow his hair to be cut *(Jg 13:5 sq.)* – meaning that he was not to lose any of the choice virtues given to him. For he was chaste and sober; courageous and a lover of peace; master, right to the end, of his thoughts and words.

14 Let the Gospel be proclaimed, and the world destroyed! Already the Gospel has been preached to the world. Already the Goths and Armenians believe in it. So, the world is near its end. The spiritual person proclaims the Gospel when he follows all the ways of wisdom and practises all the virtues. For then mind and spirit sing together *(cf.1 Co 14:15)*, and death is finally destroyed. For *"the end is to come when Christ shall have delivered up the Kingdom to God the Father; and when all things shall have been made subject to Him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Co 15:24; 28)*. The Gospel is to be announced in all the cities, that is to say, in all the cities of Judah; for *"God is known in Judah" (Ps 75:2)*. Truly, *"the cities of Judah shall be built up" (Ps 68:36)*, once their foundations are firmly laid on virtue.

15 ***"When you shall see Jerusalem besieged by an army..." (Lk 21:20).*** As a matter of fact, Jerusalem was besieged by a Roman army. On this account the Jews believed that that was the occasion on which was accomplished *"the abomination of desolation" (Mt 24:15; Dn 9:27)*, because (so they say) the Romans threw a pig's head into the Temple to mock the Jews and make fun of their sacred rites. For my part, I would have to be mad to say such a thing. The true *"abomination of desolation"* is the coming of the accursed Antichrist. He, with his loathsome sacrileges, pollutes the sanctuary of souls and, so we are told, sits in the Temple – claiming for himself the throne of divine power. Taking this, however in a spiritual sense it is appropriate that we should be shown him standing, for his desire is to plant the crooked ways of perfidy in the heart of each one, while using arguments from Scripture to "prove" that he is Christ.

16 Then you will have desolation. For many will fall into error and abandon the true religion. Finally the Lord's Day will come. The apostle makes this very clear to us when he warns us to be on our guard: *"as if the Day of the Lord were at hand. Let no one deceive you by any means. For first there shall come the apostasy, and the man of sin shall be revealed, the son of perdition. This man opposes and is lifted up above all that is called God or that is worshipped. He goes so far as to sit in God's temple as though he were God" (2 Th 2:2-4)*, and so on.

17 You see, he will enthrone himself in the inner temple of those Jews who will deny Christ. This temple is not inviolable, but subject to corrupting influences. It is liable to fall crashing down in the ruins of false faith, or to be overthrown by violent anger, or to be set on fire by the flames of lust. Very aptly it is said that then will come the Day of the Lord, and that the days will be shortened out of consideration for God's chosen ones *(cf.Mt 24:22)*. For if Christ's first coming was to redeem us from sin, His second coming is to put an end to sin; so that greater numbers will not be led astray and thus fall into apostasy from the Faith.

18 There will be false prophets, followed by famines. Think back to the days of Elijah *(1 K 18)*, and you will find that at that time there were prophets who spread confusion; then there was Jezebel; then famine; then drought. Why? Because wickedness had overflowed and love had grown cold *(cf.Mt 24:12)*. As a result, the innocent went to live in the desert, and the unjust sat on royal thrones.

19 There is another Antichrist, father of the first one. I refer to the devil. He tries with his armies and legions *(cf.Lk 8:30)* to besiege my own

Jerusalem, my soul – a soul truly belonging to God for it is a soul at peace* *(cf.Lk 8:30). "For it is not against flesh and blood that we have to struggle, but against princes and powers, against the rulers of the world of darkness" (Ep 6:12).* There is apostasy when the soul abandons itself; then, she thinks about our Lord, she trembles and is troubled. So long as this Antichrist *"prevails, until the time comes when he is taken out of the way" (2 Th 2:7),* justice and innocence are in exile. Iniquity reigns.

Faith becomes rare so that the Lord says, as though doubtful about it, ***"When the Son of Man comes, shall He find any faith on earth?"*** *(Lk 18:8)* "On earth" means, of course, in the whole world. So, too, in another place we read: *"The Lord has looked down upon the children of men, to see if any of them understand and seek God" (Ps 13:2).* It does not really mean that God doubts. But faith had become so rare that humanly speaking He had grounds for doubting.

20 When the devil is in the midst of the temple, you have *"the abomination of desolation"*, according to the prophecy of Daniel. But when Christ's spiritual presence shines on those who struggle, the wicked one is chased away; justice begins to reign; and all tyranny is expelled from the souls of the faithful.

21 There is even a third Antichrist. I mean Arius or Sabellius. I shall go further and say that all who seduce us by false interpretations are Antichrists. *"Let him who reads, understand" (Mt 24:15).* Those who have understanding are not seduced to the point of believing that what is false is true. This was what happened to the Jews. They denied the true Christ and as a result they took to be true one who was false. It is the same with the Arians. What they refuse to Christ, they will not refuse to the Antichrist.

22 ***"Alas for those that are with child, and give suck in those days"*** *(Lk 21:23).*

Is it a crime to conceive? Impossible, for children are the fruits of marriage. And how comes it that when the Lord blessed Sarah she bore a child *(cf.Gn 18:10)*? How is it that when Anna prayed, she conceived *(cf.1 S 1:10 sq.)*? And again, how is it that when Rachel received the blessing, she too had children *(cf.Gn 30:22 sq.)?* Were the prophets mistaken? Certainly the Lord cannot have been mistaken, and it is the Lord who speaks in His prophets. My conclusion therefore is that the prophets made no mistake.

23 How then do we reconcile texts that appear to disagree? But since there is some conflict in this matter, let us turn to the spirit of peace. For Peace Himself has said: *"When a woman is in labour she has sorrow. But once her child is born she remembers no longer her anguish"*; then our Lord adds: *"So also you now indeed have sorrow, but I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice" (Jn 16:21-22).* In this way He indicates that those who arrive at being perfect, rejoice. But those who are weak vacillate, for they are still uncertain and fearful.

But further back the Lord had said: ***"They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage"*** *(Lk 17:27)* – indicating that they were attached to this life and held prisoner in the cares and pre-occupations of this world. Such as these are the women with child to whom disaster is foretold, for their bodies swell to a great size, and the footsteps of their souls are impeded. No longer can they bring forth virtue. Their offspring is vice.

24 But there are others again who are with child and who do not escape condemnation. These are they who conceive excellent intentions, but who produce absolutely nothing in the way of good works. There are those who conceive out of fear of God and who say: *"Of Your fear we have conceived and been in labour" (Is 26:18).* But not all bring forth children; not all are perfect; not all can say: *"We have brought forth the spirit of salvation on earth" (Is 26:18).* Not all are Mary, who conceived Christ by the Holy Spirit, and gave birth to the Word.

There are those who abort the Word before its birth; there are those who carry Christ in their womb, but as yet He is not formed. To the latter Paul says: *"My little children, with whom I am in labour again, until Christ be formed in you" (Ga 4:19).* Those still in the womb are being formed, and are not yet perfect. But to those who are already more perfect, Paul says: *"It is I who have begotten you through the Gospel" (1 Co 4:15).*

25 Many are fathers through the Gospel; and many are mothers who give birth to Christ. Who will show us Christ's parents? He Himself has shown them to us, when He said: *"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers and sisters? Those who do the will of my Father in Heaven are my brother, my sister, and my mother" (Mt 12:48, 50).* Do the Father's will and you will be Christ's mother. Many have conceived Christ but have never brought Him into the light of day. She who brings forth justice, brings forth Christ; she who brings forth wisdom, brings forth Christ. She who bears the Word, carries Christ.

26 But there is also she *"who has conceived injustice and brought forth iniquity" (Ps 7:15).* How horrible a pregnancy this is! Alas for those so heavy, so weighed down, that they cannot escape from peril! Alas for those about to go into labour of that sort, alas for those whose hour is close at hand and whose whole body is convulsed with pain! They are for others the sign of judgement to come, the *"beginning of sorrows" (Mt 24:8).*

* Jerusalem is sometimes interpreted as "vision of peace".

27 Moses speaks of a woman with child who gets injured when her husband and another man are fighting. As a result of this injury, the woman suffers a miscarriage *(cf.Ex 21:22)*. I would say that a good woman ought to keep well away from strife. She should lead a peaceful life so that she can safely be delivered of her child. Nor does one have to wait nine months. The birth of the Word does not depend on fullness of time but on fullness of zeal: *"The just person, being made perfect in a short space, has fulfilled a long time" (Ws 4:13)*. The imperfect soul, on the other hand, is quickly injured, and she loses the Word that she had conceived. But alas for those who scandalise any of these little ones *(cf.Lk 17:2)*! Alas for those who strike a woman with child! Should she lose a child that is not yet formed, the guilty one must pay a sum of money; *"but if the child is indeed formed, then the man must render life for life; eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand" (Ex 21:23 sq.)*.

28 But why an eye or a hand? The child, having been fully formed before the miscarriage, has his eye and his hand. The expression is a way of saying that a person will be punished in accordance with the injury that he caused. Take the case of a heretic or schismatic that snatches a catechumen from the womb – so to speak – of the Church that was forming it as a child, that heretic's punishment will be lighter. But if he snatches away one of the faithful, his punishment will be heavier. Be careful, when disputing with people of that sort, that you do not wound the Church. For Scripture says: *"Avoid foolish and unlearned questions, knowing that they lead to quarrels" (2 Tm 2:23)*. Such quarrels wound the Church, as though she were a woman with child and someone struck her.

29 Lose no time in filling your womb, and then you will bring forth your child all the sooner. Now I am going to tell you how to fill it, and with what: *"Of the fruit of a man's mouth shall his belly be filled; the offspring of his lips shall fill him" (Pr 18:20)*.

30 With regard to those who are breast-feeding, I have learnt something from the sublime judgement made by Solomon when two mothers were having a dispute *(cf.1 K 3:16 sq.)*. Both these women had been safely delivered of their children, and the pangs of birth were over. But the women are not happy or at peace; they are greatly agitated and afraid. There is the vexed question of who has a right to the [living] child. A drunken slumber had overcome one of the women as she nursed her baby, and she lay on it and the child was suffocated. She denied this, and claims the child of the other woman. But the mother who did *not* kill her son fears for his life. She trembles for him, not knowing what will be the outcome of the King's judgement.

31 We have a lesson to learn from this. We should wean our children as soon as we can, otherwise the day of judgement or of death might overtake us with our works unfinished and incomplete. Once Isaac was weaned, he had no more fear of his mother's sleep. So Abraham made a grand feast for him, to celebrate his weaning *(cf.Gn 21:8)*. Once weaned, David looks forward to his soul's reward *(cf.Ps 130:2)*. The Corinthian, still in the early stages of his faith, was not yet able for solid food and still sucked milk; but as he grew stronger he was able for more sustaining nourishment, until at last he grew up strong and healthy *(cf.1 Co 3:2; Heb 5:12; Ep 4:13)*. You see, it is not enough to become the parent of a child, you must also be able to nourish that child.

32 May it be your happiness, as it was Mary's, that the Word of God should grow in age, and in wisdom. This will happen if you treasure in your heart the words of justice. Do not wait till you are old but, from a tender age, unite yourself to the just Husband, and hasten to conceive Wisdom; and – without any physical change in your body – to bring forth and nourish this Child. Think of Paul – but yesterday he was a persecutor, today he is a believer, and tomorrow he becomes a preacher!

33 *"Pray that your flight does not take place in winter or on the Sabbath" (Mt 24:20)*.

On Judgement Day the Lord will come, and before Him fire will burn *(cf.Ps 49:3)*. But since fire always burns with the same energy, and in fact burns more hotly in summer, why are we to pray that our flight may not be in winter? Maybe the reason is that those who are going to flee into the mountains, should have no cause to fear the ice and cold, the storms and hail of sin. They should have every reason to look forward to the serene sky of a radiant summer, with no fear of the frail footsteps of the body slipping on icy patches.

34 Souls such as this, who have made good progress and whose roots are sturdy and strong should rejoice and say: *"The winter is gone; the time for pruning has come" (Sg 2:11)*. For in winter the wind strips the trees of their fair foliage; and rigorous cold, descending like death, slays the tender shoots. But when the springtime comes the seeds sprout; and, in a renewal of summer, nature rejoices to be green and fresh again. In spring we celebrate the Pasch that saved us; in summer we have the fifty days of Pentecost, during which we celebrate the glory of the resurrection – image of the glory that is to come.

35 We are also to pray that the Lord's coming will not surprise us on a Sabbath day. For that is a day when we are idle and free from work. So keep working, according to the Law, day after day. Always maintain fervour of spirit and constant vigilance. It is not without good reason that

Scripture says: *"On the Sabbath you shall humble your soul" (Lv 16:31).* Remember that the Captivity lasted seventy years, [a sort of long Sabbath], and that was the time when religion was profaned, liberty oppressed, and modesty abused. So what you want is to take your flight from this life while your virtues are vigorous, your vices captive. You do not want to leave this world when the soul is captive, and its vigour and force non-existent, and when the body is under the power of sin.

36 ***"And there shall be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars"*** *(Lk 21:25).*

The prophecy comes true. The mystery is accomplished. For the second time the Jews will be led captive to Babylon and into Assyria. They will be the captives of the whole world, for they denied Christ. Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by enemy forces, and the Jews will fall by the sword. All Judah will be placed under the dominion of the nations who believe. These nations will conquer the Jews with the aid of the spiritual sword, God's word that is more piercing than a two-edged sword *(cf.Heb 4:12).*

And various signs will be seen in the sun, the moon and the stars.

37 These signs are more clearly described in Matthew *(cf.Mt 24:29): "The sun shall grow dark, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall".* Yes, many will abandon their religion. The brightness of faith will be veiled by the clouds of incredulity. For the heavenly sun grows either dim or bright according to my faith.

It is the same when a number of people look up at the radiance of the sun, that sheds light on this earth. According to the capacity of the spectator, the sun appears darker or brighter. So, too, the splendour of spiritual light diffuses itself in accordance with the faith and devotion of the believer. So, too, with the phases of the moon. That light of heaven disappears when the earth comes between her and the sun; in the same way, when the vices of the flesh intercept the heavenly light, holy Church cannot borrow from Christ's radiance the glory of divine light. For often, in times of persecution, it is generally love of this life that stops the brightness of God from shining.

38 *"The stars shall fall".* This means that people, already shining in the dazzling light and glory of the resurrection, are going to fall. These people are *"stars of this world, holding out the word of life" (Ph 2:15 sq.).* They are those descendants promised to Abraham, and who were to shine like the heavens and the stars *(cf.Gn 15:5).*

Therefore, in the eyes of men, the patriarchs will fall, the prophets will fall, if the cruelty of persecution is to increase. This will continue until the Church sees accomplished in all and in each the fulness of virtue. For it is through persecution that the good are recognised, and the weak give themselves away. The various passions of the soul will be so tempestuous, the conscience will be so weighed down by a multitude of sins, that the fear

of judgement to come will dry up in us the freshness of the sacred fountain. For false faith dries us up, but true faith refreshes us.

39 ***"For the powers of heaven shall be shaken, and then they shall see the Son of Man coming on the clouds"*** *(Lk 21:26-27).*

We await our Lord's Coming so that in the whole universe – whether human or material – His presence may be made known. And truly, His presence is known in each of us if we receive Christ with all our heart. So, too, the powers or virtues of Heaven, will experience an increase of grace at the Coming and Return of the Lord of salvation – for remember that He is *"Lord of the virtues" (Ps 23:10).* And, feeling the power of God so close to them they will be, so to speak, "shaken".

40 There exist, too, powers or virtues of the heavens that make known the glory of God *(cf.Ps 18:1 sq.);* and these are now shaken by a more copious outpouring of Christ. These are the spiritual powers that see Christ. David teaches us how these powers are moved, when he says: *"Come close to me, and be enlightened" (Ps 33:6).*

41 Paul, too, teaches us how to see Christ, for he says: *"After you have been converted to the Lord, the veil shall be removed" (2 Co 3:16).* In other words, you will see Christ. You will see Him in the clouds. I do not imagine the Lord coming in dark and threatening rain clouds. For there are different sorts of clouds: some blot out the light of heaven, covering it over with gloom and darkness. And how could we say: *"He has set His tent in the sun" (Ps 18:6)* if He comes in a downpour of rain?

42 There are other clouds that cast a veil, but this is a veil to shield us from the blazing light of the heavenly mystery. There are clouds wet with the dew of spiritual grace. Think of that cloud in the Old Testament: *"To them He spoke in a pillar of cloud" (Ps 98:7).* Yes, He spoke through Moses; and through Jesus, son of Nun, who stopped the sun so that daylight could last longer *(cf.Jos 10:12).* So Moses and Jesus, son of Nun, are clouds. Just see how the saints are clouds: *"They fly like clouds, like doves with their fledgelings" (Is 60:8).*

Over my head I have, as clouds, Isaiah and Ezechiel. These, through the cherubim and seraphim, reveal to me the holiness of the divine Trinity *(cf.Is 37:16; Ez 10:1).* All are clouds. It is in clouds such as these that Christ will come. He comes on a cloud in the Song of Songs *(Sg 3:6; 11);* on a serene cloud – a Bridegroom radiant with joy. He comes, too, on *"a light cloud" (Is 19:1),* when He takes flesh from the Virgin. The prophet saw a cloud coming from the East and said, expressively: *"a light cloud"* – for it is not weighed down by the vices of the earth. See the cloud on which the Holy Spirit rested, and which the power of the Most High covered with His shadow *(cf.Lk 1:35).*

43 When Christ appears on the clouds, *"all the tribes of the earth shall prostrate themselves" (Rv 1:7)*. By Christ's coming the whole order and structure of sin and crime will be no more.

44 ***"Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When the fruit appears, you know that summer is near"*** *(Lk 21:29)*.

Though the accounts given by the evangelists appear to differ as to detail, the general sense concurs. Matthew speaks merely of the fig tree, saying: *"when its branch grows tender" (Mt 24:32)*. But here the evangelist speaks of trees in general. The point is that when we see the green fruits appear on the tree, and the fertile fig tree already in flower – when every tongue praises God *(cf.Ph 2:11)*, and the Jewish people praise Him too – that is the moment to expect our Lord's coming. For summer has come, and the fruits of resurrection are to be gathered. Or, to put it another way, we can guess that the Lord is coming when we see the man of iniquity *(cf.2 Th 2:3)* clothe himself in the garment of his vain and foolish boasting, as the branches of the Synagogue clothe themselves in their [barren] foliage. For the Lord is hastening. He hastens to reward faith and to put an end to the season of sin.

45 So our fig tree is doubly figurative! It can symbolise the softening of something that was hard; or it can stand for a superabundance of sins. Believe, have faith, and that which was dried up will flower again. But as for sinners, they, from their fine foliage of sins, will draw nothing but vanity.

The pains taken by the Gardener in the Gospel assure me that my fig tree will bear fruit *(cf.Lk 13:9)*. Do not lose heart if you see sinners dressed up in all their grandiose foliage, like a fig tree in its glory. It is but a deceitful robe thrown, as a covering, over their conscience. These fig leaves are a specious fraud. Such were the "garments" worn by the exiles from Paradise *(cf.Gn 3:7)*.

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46 ***"As you go into the city you shall meet a man carrying a pitcher of water"*** *(Lk 22:10)*.

It is important to note where the Lord keeps the Pasch. In Matthew you read: *"Go into the city to a certain man" (Mt 26:18)*. Just consider the divine majesty with which He speaks to His disciples: He knows in advance what is going to happen. And then, consider too His condescension. He does not choose someone rich, someone powerful. No, He wants someone who is poor. He prefers the simple hospitality of the poor to the palatial houses of the nobility. *"Go,"* He says, *"to a certain man."*. Lord, you knew his name. You must have, since You knew he was at Your service. You knew he was at Your service, since You knew he was about to present himself. But purposely You give him no name, just to show that he was someone unknown, Nothing here was pre-arranged. We are not told who the person is, all we are told is the business on hand.

According to Mark. *"he carries a pitcher of water" (Mk 14:13)*.

47 Such is the man whom the apostles are told to follow. Why is he called *pater familias* [head of a family, or household]? The term, in this case, designates not riches but dignity. Why has he couches prepared in an upper room? To show you how high his merits are. So lofty, so eminent are his virtues that the Lord and His disciples can repose with pleasure on them. May it please God that I shall be allowed carry this pitcher of water that was carried by the *pater familias* – who had a large upper room furnished with couches. What actually is this pitcher? I think that it represents a full, not a mediocre, measure. For the Lord said: *"They shall give you full measure, pressed down and flowing over" (Lk 6:38)*.

48 What shall I say of the water? As you know, the Spirit breathed upon the water even before the world was born *(cf.Gn 1:2)*. O water, you washed the orb of earth — when it was all stained with human gore – thus prefiguring the font of baptism! O water, privileged to be the sacrament of Christ, washing all without yourself ever having need to be washed! You initiate the mysteries, and you bring them to a perfect conclusion. From you is the beginning; in you is the end. Or rather, thanks to you we know no end. Thanks to you the foul stench of putrefied flesh is put to flight; while by the sprinkling of salt vital parts that were decaying are long preserved. Thanks to you, the body parched by heat, receives refreshing drink that saves its life and provides the most delightful pleasure.

You have given your name to prophets and apostles, you have given your name to the Saviour. The prophets are the clouds of heaven *(cf.Is 60:8)*; the apostles are the salt of the earth *(cf.Mt 5:13)*; and Christ is the wellspring of life *(cf.Jn 7:38)*. The mountains soak you up without imprisoning you. You fall on the rocks and do not hurt yourself. You spread yourself over the land and never diminish. Bubbling up from earth's deepest veins, at one time you give a breath of life; at another time you spread yourself out, providing fertile sap; at another time, in a broad flowing stream, you graciously water all that is around you. So refreshed, the earth that was exhausted, parched utterly and to its depths, can now yield its harvest in due season.

Substance of all the elements, you are the child of sky, air, sea and earth. Struck hard by the prophet, the rock brought you forth to water hearts that were thirsting *(cf.Ex 17:6)*. When you burst from Christ's side, His executioners saw you, and believed *(cf.Jn 19:34)*. More yet, you are one of the the witnesses to our re-birth: for *"there are three witnesses, the water,*

the blood, and the Spirit" (1 Jn 5:8): water to wash, blood to redeem, the Spirit to bring us back to life *(cf.Rm 8:11)*.

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49 ***"I go to prepare a Kingdom for you, as my Father has prepared a Kingdom for Me" (Lk 22:29).***

The kingdom of God is not of this world *(cf.Jn 18:36)*. We should aim, not at equality with God but at a resemblance to Him. Christ alone is the full Image of God. Only in Him does the Father's glory express itself in perfect unity. A good person, on the other hand, is in God's image and reproduces a likeness to the divine life. Good people despise this world in order to know God. They are dismissive of the pleasures and enjoyments of earth, because their desire is to receive the Word who is the food of our life.

We eat Christ's Body so that we may share in eternal life. For to eat and to drink is not promised us as a reward and an honour. What is held out to us is communion with grace and with the life of Heaven. So, too, the twelve thrones are not made for us to take and sit on, in a literal sense. The point is that the apostles will be like Christ: He, by virtue of His divine resemblance, judged us by knowledge of our hearts and not by questioning us on our actions; having thus judged us, He rewards virtue and condemns wickedness. So, too, the apostles learn to judge in spirit and in spirit to reward faith; they learn to detest perfidy, and vigorously to take to task those who fall into error. They learn to hate sacrilege with a perfect hate.

50 We must be converted. We must take care – or we shall be lost – that no dispute arises among us regarding our order of rank. The apostles argued about who was to take precedence, but that is no excuse for us. It is an invitation to be on our guard. If Peter is *"at some time"* converted *(cf.Mt 13:15; Mk 4:12)* – and remember that he was the first to respond to the Master's call – who can claim that their own conversion was immediate? Beware of boasting. Recall that Peter, whose charge it was to bolster up his brothers, said: *"We have left all things to follow You" (Lk 18:28)*.

51 We must also consider that showing great deference to someone is not necessarily humility. You could be playing up to someone for your own worldly advantage. Or you might be deferring to that person either through fear of their power or from some motive of self interest. You are making a nice nest for yourself; you are not really honouring that other person. Therefore let all be treated with like respect, so that no one need boast that they take precedence. Let the contest be: who can show the greater humility. Look at the example our Lord gives, and imitate that. There were we, in absolute need of everything; and there was Jesus, in need of nobody. Yet He made Himself a master of humility by serving His disciples. He certainly was not doing this out of self interest, but through sheer virtue.

52 Peter was warned that he would deny. Indeed, Peter was full of good will – but the flesh was weak *(cf.Mt 26:41)*. He could not equal the firmness of the Lord's divine will. Our Lord's Passion has its imitators, but not its equals. I do not reproach Peter for denying the Lord, but I congratulate him for having wept. Betrayal is a fact of our human condition, but to weep is a sign of virtue. Peter is warned to be on his guard; he is not forced to betray.

53 ***"He that has a purse, let him take it, and also a wallet; and if anyone does not have a sword, he should sell his tunic and buy it" (Lk 22:36).***

Why, Lord, do you tell me to make such a purchase, when you have forbidden me to strike back *(cf.Mt 26:52)*? Why do you tell me to have a sword that I am not allowed to draw from its scabbard? Maybe it is for purposes of defence, but not of vengeance – to show that you *could* avenge yourself, but did not choose to do so. The Law, however, does not forbid me to strike back. So perhaps that is why you say to Peter, when He offers you two swords, *"That is enough" (Lk 22:38)*. It is as if you are saying that to strike back was allowable up to the time of the Gospel; and that the Law gave us the rudiments of justice, but the Gospel gives the finishing touch of kindness and mercy.

54 Many people are shocked by these words *(cf.Lk 22:36)*, but the Lord is not doing anything wrong. He could have taken revenge; instead, He sacrificed Himself. Remember, too, that there is a spiritual sword, and that spiritual sword obliges you to sell your inheritance to buy the word that will clothe the inmost recesses of your soul.

There is, too, the sword of the Passion which makes us strip off the body and to purchase, with the spoils of the body, the holy crown of martyrdom. But this we could have concluded for ourselves from the Lord's own words in the Beatitudes. For there He tells us that the crown of all crowns goes to those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice *(cf.Mt 5:10)*. To prove to you that He is speaking of the Passion, and without wanting to dishearten His disciples, He gives Himself as an example. He says: ***"What has been written must be accomplished in Me: He has been numbered among the unjust"*** *(Lk 22:37)*.

55 There are however, various interpretations of the two swords that the disciples offer to the Lord. One sword might possibly stand for the New Testament, and the other for the Old. With these weapons we are armed *"against the deceits of the devil" (Ep 6:11)*. Also, when our Lord

says: *"That is enough"*, He could be indicating that there is nothing lacking to one who is fortified by the teaching of the two Testaments.

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56 ***"Father, if it is possible, take this chalice from me"*** *(Lk 22:42).* Some people would like to twist the true sense of these words. They exploit this passage and the Lord's sadness, pretending that such sadness gives proof of innate weakness; while, in fact, it was something assumed by the Lord for the time being. For myself, not only do I see no need to make excuses on the matter, but it makes me admire all the more the tenderness and majesty of the Lord. His kindness to me would have been less if He had not shared my sense of suffering.

It was for *me* that He was afflicted; as regards Himself, there was no need for Him to suffer affliction. But He put to one side His enjoyment of eternal divinity, and let Himself be attacked by the lassitude of my infirmity. He took on Himself my sadness, my depression, so that he might lavish on me His own joy. In our footsteps He followed all the way down to the anguish of death. In this way He chose that we should follow upwards in His footsteps and be restored to life.

I am not ashamed to speak of His sadness, since I preach the Cross. The point is that He did not take merely the appearance of incarnation, but the reality. That meant that He must also take suffering, and thereby triumph over sadness. To escape it did not serve His purpose. How can one be praised for their courage if they have been anaesthetised – so to speak – in order not to feel the pain of their wounds?

57 *"A Man of sorrows and acquainted with sufferings" (Is 53:3)*, He wanted to be a lesson to us. Joseph had already taught us not to fear prison *(cf.Gn 39:20 sq.)*; in Christ we learn how to overcome death. Better still, we learn how to overcome the anguish of eternal death. How could we imitate you, Lord Jesus, unless we followed you as Man, unless we believed that you died, unless we saw your wounds? How could the disciples have believed that He was on the point of death, unless they had seen for themselves the agony of one who is about to die?

They slept on, ignoring the grief of Christ – who suffered that grief for them. It is as we read in Scripture: *"He has borne our sins and carried our infirmities" (Is 53:4)*. So, Lord, you suffer. But it is my wounds, not yours, that cause you pain. You suffer, not because of your death but because of our infirmities. We looked on you as one who suffered, when all the time it was not for yourself that you suffered, but for me. You were wounded, but it was for our sins *(cf.Is 53:4)*. This state of woundedness was not something you received from your Father; it was something you assumed for my sake. For it was good for me that *"the chastisement that was to bring us peace lay on Him; and that by His bruises we were healed" (Is 53:5)*.

58 Is it so strange that He should suffer to save the world, when He wept for one single person? When, at the moment of raising Lazarus to life *(cf.Jn 11:33-35)* He shed tears? A sister's love moved Him to tears, for those tears touched His human soul; and here He is stirred to action by the profound consideration that He, in His own flesh, was about to abolish sin. And so, the dreadful anguish of our soul would be dissolved by the bitter anguish of His own soul.

Perhaps, too, His sadness stems from the fact that, since Adam's fall, the only way we can get out of this world is through death. God did not make death, and finds no joy in the death of the living *(cf.W 1:13)*. For Him, it is repugnant to have to undergo something that He did not create.

59 He says: *"Take this chalice from me"*. As Man, He shrinks from death; as God, He abides by His decree. For we have to die to this world to rise again to God. Only in this way, according to divine decree, can the curse be undone: our nature must return to the clay from which it came *(cf.Gn 3:19)*.

60 When He says: ***"Not my will, but yours be done"*** *(Lk 22:42)* He attributes His will to His humanity; and His Father's will to His divinity. Man's will is temporary; God's will is eternal. The Father has no will other than that of His Son; they possess but one will being one in divinity. However, learn from this passage to be submissive to God, and not to choose your own will. Choose what you know will please God.

61 Now let us weigh carefully the words: *"My soul is sorrowful" (Mt 26:38)*, and: *"Now is my soul deeply troubled" (Ps 6:4)*. This trouble, this disturbance, is not for Him who took to Himself a human soul. No, it is for the soul that He took. For the soul is subject to passions; the divinity, on the other hand, is exempt from passions. As you know, *"the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak" (Mt 26:41)*. It is not He who is sad, it is His soul. Divine Wisdom is not sad, divine substance is not sad, but the soul is. For, you see, He took *my* soul when He took my body. He was not deceiving me, He was not pretending to be other than what He was. Sad He seemed and sad He was, not on account of His suffering, but because His friends were scattered. This is why Scripture says: *"I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered" (Mt 26:31; Zc 13:7)*. He was sad to be leaving His little ones. As for the rest, Scripture shows us how bravely He went to meet His death. He went forward to meet those who had come to arrest Him. He re-assured those who were frightened, He encouraged those who were trembling, and He even accepted the traitor's kiss.

62 And I think that I can truthfully say that He was sad for His persecutors, knowing the torment that they would have to suffer for

their act of sacrilege. That is why He said: *"Take this chalice from me"*. It was not that He feared death, but He did not want to see the wicked go to their destruction. So, too, He will say: *"Lord, do not lay this sin to their charge" (Lk 23:34)*. For He desires, by His Passion, to save all.

63 ***"Judas, do you betray the Son of man with a kiss?" (Lk 22:48).*** Here we have a fine manifestation of the divine power, and a great lesson in virtue. The traitor is unmasked, but our Lord is still sweet and ready to forgive. Lord, you have made manifest his secret and at the same time you have revealed whom it is that is betrayed. You have shown this in saying: *"Son of man"*. For it is in the flesh, not in the divinity, that Christ is to be arrested. Yet, what a terrible reproach for the ungrateful Judas to be told he has betrayed one, who, though Son of God, had out of love for us been willing to be Son of man!

It is as if our Lord is saying: *"It is for you, ungrateful one, that I took upon myself the flesh that you betray"*. What hypocrisy on the part of Judas! In my opinion, we must read Christ's words as though they were a challenge; as though, with tenderest love, He was reproaching the traitor: *"Judas, is it with a kiss that you betray the Son of man?"* To put it in other words, Jesus is saying: "Is it by the pledge of love that you inflict this wound? Is it by a mark of affection that you spill my blood? Is it by the sign of peace that you do me to death? Is it by a kiss that you, a servant, betray your Lord; that you, a disciple, betray your Master; that you, a chosen one, betray your Creator?" How truly it is said: *"Better the wounds given by a friend, than the calculating kisses of an enemy" (Pr 27:6)*. So much for the traitor; but for the person of peace we have *"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Sg 1:1)*.

64 Then Jesus kisses him. This He does not in order to teach us dissimulation, but to show that He does not fly from the traitor's embrace. At the same time, by accepting the traitor's kisses, He heaps upon him reproaches. For it is written: *"With the enemies of peace, I was peaceful" (Ps 119:7)*.

65 At the agreed signal, those who had come with cudgels seized Him *(cf.Lk 22:52-54)*.

But the Lord of all things was prisoner of mysteries, not of weapons. So He speaks, and His assailants fall backwards *(cf.Jn 18:6)*. What need have I of legions of angels, of a heavenly army? The Lord's voice alone causes greater terror. John, who rested on the breast of Jesus, has recalled that voice, those words, as evidence of His divine majesty. It is because the Lord wishes it that the troops seize Him and bind Him with chains. O foolish ones! O perfidious ones! It is not with chains that one seizes Wisdom, it is not with chains that one seizes Justice.

66 I do not find fault with the zeal of the disciples. Peter, instructed in the Law, and knowing that Phineas was considered a just man because he put to death those who committed sacrilege *(cf.Ps 105:30 sq.)*, struck the servant of the High Priest *(cf.Lk 22:50)*. But the Lord substituted divine mysteries for bloody wounds. The slave of the prince of this world, the servant of the powers of this world – for such was man not by nature but by sin – received a wound on his ear. Yes, he was wounded in the ear, for he would not listen to the words of Wisdom.

For *"Whoever commits sin is the slave of sin" (Jn 8:34)*; we also read: *"You have been sold because of your sins" (Is 50:1)*. Sold because of our sins, we have been bought back by the bounty of God. Or, take it this way, Peter deliberately wounded the ear to teach us that we ought not to have a visible ear if we do not possess a sense of mystical hearing. But the Lord is good. He gave back to the servant his ear to show – in the words of the prophet *(cf.Is 6:10)* – that such healing is possible if we are converted. It is possible even for those who wounded Jesus during the Passion of the Lord. For by the mysteries of our Faith, every sin has been effaced.

67 We have seen that Peter cuts off the ear. Why Peter? Because he was given the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. He condemns, and he absolves, because he has received the power to bind and to set free. He cuts the ear off the servant who knew not how to listen; and with his spiritual sword he cuts off the inner ear of those who wilfully misunderstand.

68 Let no one cut off your ear. Be on your guard. We read the Passion of the Lord, but if we apply to His divinity the infirmity and suffering of His physical body, our ear is cut off. It is cut off by Peter who does not stand for people making out that Christ is but a prophet. No, no. Peter has taught us, by his proclamation of faith, that Christ is SON of GOD *(cf.Mt 16:14 sq.)*. So, when we read that Christ was arrested, let us beware of believing those who would tell us that as God He was arrested, arrested in spite of Himself, arrested because He was powerless. True, in His physical body He was apprehended and tied up – we have John's witness for this *(cf.Jn 18:12)*. But woe to those who would fetter the Word! We tie up Christ in chains when we see Him as being merely a man. We bind Him up when we do not believe that He knew all things in advance, or when we do not recognise that He is all powerful. But these chains used by the Jews are poor chains. They do not tie up Christ, on the contrary they bind fast those who use them. Now, Christ is not chained up in the house of some good, devout person, but in the house of Caiphas *(cf.Mt 26:57)*. That is to say, in a wicked house. That was the very house where it was prophesied that He should die for all *(cf.Mt 26:57; Jn 18:24)*. People must be mad to recognise the good Christ does and yet to persecute the very author of those good deeds!

69 So they lose their ear, because they have lost the purpose of their ear. There are many who think they have an ear, but have none. In the Church, all have an ear; outside the Church, they do not have an ear. Perhaps, too, Peter cut off the ear to prevent them sinning still more by hearing what they were incapable of carrying out in practice. It reminds me of what the Lord did long ago. He confounded the tongues of those who were building the tower *(cf.Gn 11:7 sq.)*, to prevent them from understanding each other and from bringing to a conclusion their impious work.

70 Try to understand, if you can, the way in which at the touch of our Lord's right hand pain vanished and the servant's ear was healed. Simply at our Lord's touch, and without any ointment or medication, he was healed. The clay recognises its Maker, and the flesh yields to the healing hand of the Lord at work. For the Lord heals, as He pleases, what He Himself has fashioned. Remember how He restored sight to the blind by rubbing his eyes with clay *(cf.Jn 9:6)*, as if to bring him back to his original nature. He could simply have uttered a command, but – to make us recognise Him – He preferred to do the work with His hands. For He it is who, from the slime of the earth, fashioned the limbs and members of our body; making each of them apt for the function it had to perform. And then, He breathed into us the breath of life, and gave us a living soul *(cf.Gn 2:7)*.

71 So the soldiers came and seized Jesus. The success of their enterprise was to cause them the most dreadful loss. These unfortunates neither understood the mystery nor appreciated a character of such sweetness and goodness that He would not allow even His enemies to be wounded. To the just, they brought death; to the persecutors, Jesus granted healing.

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72 ***"Peter followed afar off"*** *(Lk 22:54)*.
Yes indeed he followed *"afar off"*, for he was on the point of denying the Lord. Had he stayed really close to Jesus, he never could have denied Him. At the same time, I think we should have all the greater admiration and respect for Peter from the very fact that, even though very afraid, he did not abandon his Lord. Fear is natural; concern is beautiful. In fearing, he was not being himself; in not taking to his heels, he was being true to himself. Out of devotion, he follows; taken by surprise, he denies. To sin is common to all; to repent springs from Peter's own faith.

A fire had been lit in the High Priest's house *(cf.Mk 14:54)*, and Peter draws near to warm himself. Because the Lord, being a prisoner, was now shut off from him, Peter's soul felt cold and chill within him.

73 How is it that the first person to betray Peter is a woman servant *(cf.Lk 22:56)*? Could not the men more easily have recognised him? I think it is to indicate that both the sexes sin equally in the matter of the Lord's death; and this is so in order that both sexes may equally be ransomed by the Passion of the Lord. It is for the same reason that a woman was the first to learn the mystery of the Resurrection and to carry out the mandate given to her *(cf.Jn 20:14 sq.)*; and by so doing, she wiped out the remembrance of her ancient sin.

74 So Peter's presence was betrayed. Yes, I admit that Peter denied Jesus, because the Lord Himself said: *"You will deny me three times" (Mt 26:34)*, and I would rather think that Peter had denied than that the Lord had erred. What did he deny? He denied the promise that he had imprudently given. In making it, he was thinking of his devotion to the Lord, but was forgetting his own human condition. Peter was punished for saying that he would lay down his life, a thing that is beyond the power of human weakness. Only the Lord has power to do this. But if Peter had to pay so dearly for a thoughtless word, what will be the punishment of those who refuse to believe!

75 And yet, where was it that Peter denied Him? It was not on the mountain; it was not in the Temple; it was not in his own house; no, it was in the Jewish praetorium, in the house of the High Priest. He denies in a place where truth cannot be found. He denies in a place where Christ is a captive, where Jesus is tied up. How could he fail to go astray, having been let in by a Jewish portress and interrogated by a Jewish portress. It is tragic that Eve persuaded Adam; it is tragic that a woman let in Peter. But Adam fell in Paradise, where it is unforgiveable to sin; Peter sinned in the praetorium of the Jews, where innocence is difficult. One was not allowed to fall; but the denial of the other was predicted. The sin of the former did wrong to this other man; this other man sets free the first.

76 *"It was cold" (Jn 18:18)*. Now let us consider when it was that Peter denied: *"it was cold"*. At that time of the year, it could not have been cold; but a place where Jesus is not known is cold; it is cold where no one sees the light; it is cold where people deny Him who is a consuming fire. For the soul, not for the body, it was cold. Peter stayed near the fire, because he felt his heart turn cold. This fire that the Jews light is not a cheerful fire, not a good fire. It burns, but gives no heat. It is a wicked fire that gives off the smoke of sin even as far as the saints! Standing close to it, the inner eyes of Peter himself grow dark. I am not speaking of his eyes of flesh and blood, but of the eyes of the soul through which we see Christ.

77 You will say to me: "Are you condemning the elements themselves if used by the Jews?" No, I am not condemning the elements, for they

do not belong to the Jews. I condemn this flame concerning which the Lord has said: *"Your silver is reprobate" (Jr 6:30)*. If their silver is reprobate, so too is the furnace or crucible of the Jews [in which the silver was tested]. Remember, too, how the Jews melted down gold in a fire and from it made a calf's head *(cf.Ex 32:4)*, that is to say, the beginning and the foundation of their sacrilege.

78 We shall now consider the wording of Peter's denial. I see that it varies from one evangelist to another. It was such a strange thing for Peter to sin, that even the evangelists could not grasp how it happened. So, when the servant girl tells everyone that Peter was a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew writes that Peter replies: *"I do not know what you are saying" (Mt 26:70)*. Mark writes the same *(cf.Mk 14:68)*, and Mark was Peter's companion and could have learnt from him with certainty what it was that he said. This is Peter's first denial; but to my mind it is not really a denial. To my way of looking at it, Peter is declining to hold any conversation with this woman who wants to make him known.

79 Next consider what it is that he denies. Is he denying that he is one of those who went about with Jesus of Galilee, or, as Mark puts it, Jesus of Nazareth? Or, is he denying that he was in the company of the Son of God? He could be saying: "I did not know Him as a Galilean, I did not know Him as a man of Nazareth, but I know Him as Son of God". People are known by the names of their locality; but the Son of God cannot be designated by the name of His country, for no place can contain His divine majesty. To show you how true this is, I can prove it by an example. On a certain occasion, the Lord had been asking His disciples: *"Who do people say that I am, the Son of man?" (Mt 16:13)*. Some said Elijah, others said Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But Peter said: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16)*. Was he on that occasion denying too, when he declined to recognise Christ as Son of man, preferring to know Him as Son of God? Since Christ Himself approved of Peter's answer, He cannot have found it ambiguous.

80 And here's another thing: the girl asks, *"Surely you are you one of those who were with Jesus of Galilee?"*. But Peter will have nothing to do with the verb [to be] and its connotations with eternity. For of people who have a beginning, it cannot be said that "they were" In other words, only the Lord was from the beginning *(cf.Jn 1:1)*, and therefore of Him only can we say: "He was".

81 Peter says: *"I am not, no, not I"*; for "to be" [in an ontological sense] belongs only to Him who is from all eternity. That is why Moses said: *"HE WHO IS has sent me" (Ex 3:14)*. When the servants again insisted that Peter was one of the Lord's followers, according to Mark *(cf. Mk 14:70)* he

again denied it. This shows me that the evangelist was more concerned to tell the truth than to cover up for Peter. But what Peter denied was that he was of the number of the Lord's disciples, he did not deny Christ. He could deny having been among His companions, but he could not deny the grace of God.

82 Finally, and this is according to Matthew, when it was clearly shown that he had been with Jesus of Nazareth, he said: *"I know not the man" (Mt 26:74)*. According to the two evangelists [Matthew and Mark] with whom we are dealing, this is the statement that Peter made, with an oath, when replying for the third time. He said that he knew not the man. He was quite right to say that he did not know the man, for the One whom Peter knew was God. As for the oath, that meant that he knew exactly what he was saying. For even if he denied, Peter did not commit perjury – and remember that our Lord never said that Peter would perjure himself. If, in the case of Peter, his oath is doubted, then what a very risky thing it is to take an oath at all!

83 John's version runs as follows: Peter was asked by the servant girl if he had been one of the disciples of this man. Peter first replied: *"I am not" (Jn 18:17)*, since he was not the apostle of man, but of the Messiah. But recall that Paul, too, denied that he was the apostle of man, for he writes: *"Paul, an apostle, not of men, nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Ga 1:1)*. Then, not wishing to cast any doubt on the Incarnation, he immediately added: *"who raised Him from the dead"*. This is what Paul maintains, in somewhat similar terms, in another passage, where he says: *"There is only one God, and only one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Tm 2:5)*. Note that Paul begins by calling Him Mediator of God, and then Mediator of man — for it would not do simply to believe these two things if one did not observe the proper order of faith.

84 Between the two responses there is perfect harmony. For when Peter had said: *"I do not know the man"*, it followed logically that he should reply to the question of whether he was one of the man's disciples: *"I am not"*. He did not deny being Christ's disciple; he denied being man's disciple. Therefore Peter, together with Paul, denied to be man Him whom they professed to be God. What Peter thought, Paul expressed. Paul profited from Peter.

Peter's "error" is the true doctrine of the just, and Peter's "fall" is the rock on which all of us stand. So, too, he sinks on the waters, but he holds Christ's hand *(cf.Mt 14:30)*. He falls on the mountain, but is lifted up by Christ *(cf.Lk 9:34)*. The same Peter who wavered on the sea, walked on the sea. Peter's wavering is firmer than any firmness of ours. He falls, but falls on a place to which none of us could climb. He totters, but on waters where

none of us would walk. And yet, even though he sinks upon the waves, he does not drown. He walks unsteadily, but does not fall; he hesitates, but does not quite lose his footing. If he did fall, it was on the mountain. But he was more blessed in falling than others are in standing. Happy fall, seeing that Christ lifted him up!

85 John writes that when Peter was asked again if he was one of His disciples he said no. Quite rightly, since his questioners had earlier referred to the Lord as "man". If, at the third interrogation, Peter denied having been seen with Him, it is but the logical consequence of what goes before. "No, with someone you call man I have not been seen. But the Son of God, Him I have never left."

86 Luke, in his turn, writes that when Peter was questioned whether he was of their number he began by replying: *"I do not know Him" (Lk 22:57)*. And he was right. It would have been most presumptuous to claim to know Him whom no human mind can grasp. For *"no one knows the Father except the Son" (Mt 11:27)*. So, too, the second time – according to Luke – Peter says: *"I am not"*, preferring to deny himself than to deny Christ. Or, if you like, in seeming to deny his association with Christ, he denies himself.

Undoubtedly, in denying that which concerned man, he sinned against the Son of man, and for this he was forgiven *(cf.Mt 12:32)*; but against the Holy Spirit he did not sin. Questioned a third time Peter said: *"I do not know what you are saying"*. In other words, "I want to hear nothing of your sacrilegious talk".

87 We excuse Peter. But Peter does not excuse himself. An ambiguous answer is not sufficient to confess Jesus. The confession has to be frank. What use is it to wrap up your words in obscurity if the net result is that you appear to be denying? The answer Peter gave was not premeditated, and when he later thought about it, he wept. He preferred to accuse himself of his sin; and so, by accusing himself, he was restored to innocence: for *"the just person begins by accusing himself" (Pr 18:17)*. So he wept *(cf.Lk 22:62)*.

88 Why did Peter weep? Because, taken off his guard, he sinned. Alas for me that I weep because I cannot sin! I weep when I do not get revenge, I weep when I do not obtain what I unlawfully lust after. Peter suffered and wept because, being a mere man, he had erred. What he said, I do not know. I know only that he wept. I read that he wept. I do not read that he made excuses. Tears wash off the sins that shame prevents us from confessing. Tears provide pardon and show that we feel ashamed. Tears tell silently and movingly of our sin; tears admit our crime without offending modesty. Tears do not ask for pardon, but they obtain it. I know why Peter kept silent, he did not want to add to his offences by too quickly asking for pardon. First one must weep, and then one may ask.

89 Happy tears, that wash away our sin! That is why those whom Jesus regards, will weep. Peter denied the first time and did not weep, because Jesus did not look at him. He denied the second time, and did not weep because the Lord had not yet looked at him. The third time he denied, Jesus looked at him and he wept bitterly.

Look at us, Lord Jesus, so that we may learn to weep for our sin. These tears show that when the saints err, good comes of it. Peter's denial has done me no harm. I have gained by his repentance. I have learnt to be on my guard against the false hearted. Peter, in the midst of the Jews, denied. Solomon, deceived by his pagan concubines, sinned *(cf.1 K 11:4 sq.)*.

90 Yes, Peter wept – and wept bitterly. He wept so that, with his tears, he might wash away his sins. And you, my friend, if you want to obtain pardon, wash away your sins with your tears. At that very time, at that very moment, Christ looks at you. If you fall into some sin, He who is the witness of your secret life, looks at you to recall you and make you admit your fault. Imitate Peter who later says three times: *"Lord, you know that I love You" (Jn 21:15 sq.)*. Because he denied three times, he confesses three times. But he denied by night; he confesses in the light of day.

91 All this was written to teach us that no one should boast. Peter fell because he boasted: *"Although all shall be scandalised in You, I will never be scandalised" (Mt 26:33)*. But if Peter fell, who is there that can feel sure of himself? We have, too, the words of David: *"In my abundance I said: I shall never be moved...then you turned your face from me and I became troubled" (Ps 29:7 sq.)*; this clearly shows that by boasting he did himself much harm.

92 From where can I call you, Peter, to tell me what you were thinking as you wept. Yes, from where should I call you? From Heaven, where already you have taken your place among the choirs of angels? Or should I call you from the tomb? For you would not be ashamed to lie in a tomb seeing that the Lord rose from the sepulchre. Tell me what profit those tears were to you. But yet, you have already told me: for, having sinned before you wept, you were chosen to govern others; you, who prior to that had not known how to govern yourself.

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93 Peter wept, and with his tears poured out the abundance of his love. But the traitor had no tears with which to wash away what he had done. All he had was a tormented conscience which made him admit to his

sacrilege. That guilty one was condemned by his own judgement, and paid the penalty by being his own executioner. Here we see the kindness of the Lord, who was not Himself willing to take vengeance; we see also the Lord's divinity which, by its invisible power, caused this soul and this conscience to put itself on trial.

94 *"I have sinned"*, he said, *"in betraying innocent Blood" (Mt 27:4)*. The traitor's regret is useless, because he has sinned against the Holy Spirit, and yet there is some decent shame in acknowledging one's sin. Even though he is not absolved, at least he shows up the impudence of the Jews. Accused by the very person who had sold Jesus to them, they still claim the rights that are theirs due to this infamous contract. They imagine themselves clear of all blame, and simply say: *"What is that to us? It's your affair" (Mt 27:4)*. Plainly they are mad if they think that they are liberated, not incriminated, by the crime of the traitor. In money matters, once you have paid your bill the law has no hold on you. These people take back the money, but they go on with their sacrilege. Even when the man who sold Jesus gives back the money paid him for his crime, these madmen persist, with frightful pertinacity, in claiming that they have paid the price of Blood.

95 This money, that was the price of blood, is not put in the sacred treasury of the Jews. Instead, the potter's field is purchased *(cf.Mt 27:7)* with the pieces of silver for which Christ was sold. And, when this plot of land had been consecrated as a burial place for strangers, the prophetic oracle was clearly fulfilled and the mystery of the rising Church revealed.

For the field is, according to divine scripture, the whole world *(cf.Mt 13:38)*. The Potter is He who fashioned us from clay. As you have read in the Old Testament, *"God fashioned man from the slime of the earth" (cf.Gn 2:7)*. In His power it lay to form us from earth and to re-form us through grace. For even should we fall because of our own vices, His mercy will nonetheless restore to us the breath of life and build us up again *(cf.Jr 18:2 sq.)*.

96 Also, the price of His Blood is also the price of our Lord's Passion. Christ bought the world at the cost of His own Blood. For He came so that *"the world might be saved through Him" (Jn 3:17)*, and so that the world might be His both as its Author and as its rightful Redeemer. He came to save, for their eternal happiness, those who, through Baptism, would die and be buried with Christ *(cf.Rm 6:4; 8; Col 2:12)*.

But the place of our burial is not picked indiscriminately. For even though the world contains all, it does not preserve all, All live together in the world, but burial is the privilege of those who even now – thanks to their faith – belong to the household of God *(cf.Ep 2:19)*; whereas, under the Law, they were strangers and aliens. Who are these strangers? They are the

Gentiles of whom it was said: *"Remember that there was a time, pagans, when you were strangers in the flesh to the life of Israel, and shut out from the promises of the Covenant" (Ep 2:11-12)*. But now the Gentiles are no longer strangers and passing pilgrims, for by faith they have merited the right of being fellow-citizens of the saints.

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97 Now follows a wonderful passage which pours into our hearts a disposition to bear with patience every insult that comes our way. The Lord is accused, and He is silent *(cf.Mt 27:12-14)*. He is right to be silent, for He has no need to defend Himself. To defend yourself is all very well for people who are afraid of being defeated. By His silence He does not confirm their accusation; by not answering His accusers, He shows His contempt. Why should He fear, seeing that He does not wish to be saved? He, the salvation of all people, sacrifices His own safety so that He might win the salvation of all.

But why do I speak of God's silence? Susannah was silent, and won *(cf.Dn 13:35)*; the best causes are justified without need of defence. In this case, too, Pilate absolves. By his judgement he absolves; but because of the divine mystery, he crucifies. But this is Christ's mystery; what is human is that, in front of unjust judges, one shows not that one cannot defend oneself, but that one does not choose to do so.

98 Why was our Lord silent? He had already said: ***"If I speak to you, you do not believe me; if I question you, you do not reply"*** *(Lk 22:67 sq.)*. But what I find really remarkable is that He prefers to show His royalty rather than to affirm it. In this way they have no cause to condemn Him, and their very anger is proof of this.

99 Herod wanted to meet Jesus, hoping to see some miracles. Jesus was silent *(cf.Lk 23:8 sq.)*. He worked no wonders. The cruel man in front of Him did not deserve to see divine wonders; also, the Lord did not want to flaunt His power. Perhaps Herod is the figure and emblem of all impious people; if they believe neither in the Law nor in the prophets, they cannot esteem the marvellous miracles of Christ in the Gospel.

100 Jesus is sent to Herod, and sent back to Pilate *(cf.Lk 23:11 sq.)*. Though neither of them pronounce Him guilty, each indulges the other's love of cruelty. I know that Pilate washed his hands *(cf.Mt 27:24)*, but he could not wash off his foul deed. As judge, he never should have given in to the hate of the people, he should never have so yielded to fear as to condemn innocent blood. His wife warned him *(cf.Mt 27:19)*; during the night, grace had illumined her, and divinity had struck her with fear. Even so, Pilate persisted in pronouncing his sacrilegious sentence.

101 It is my opinion that we have, in Pilate, a pre-figuring, a rôle model, of all those judges who would, in future times, condemn people whom they well know to be innocent. On the other hand, Pilate's wife shows that the pagans are to be more readily pardoned than the Jews, and are more amenable to belief in divine marvels. but what can I say of those who crucified the Lord of majesty! ...

102 It is scarcely surprising that they demand the acquittal of a murderer, seeing that they insist on the death of the innocent *(cf.Lk 23:18 sq.)*. Such are the laws of iniquity: to hate innocence, to cherish crime. However, the translation of the name shows that here, too, we have a type of figure: for Barabbas means "son of the father". Those to whom the Lord said: *"As for you, you have the devil as your father" (Jn 8:44)*, are shown up for what they really are. To the true Son of God, they prefer their own father's son, the Antichrist.

103 ***"They clothed Him in a white garment, and sent Him back to Pilate" (Lk 23:11).***

This detail is significant, for when Herod clothed Him in a white garment we were shown that Christ's Passion is without stain. We see how the sinless Lamb of God gloriously takes upon Himself the sins of the world. So, too, in Herod and Pilate – formerly enemies but now friends through Jesus Christ – we see an image of Israel and the Gentile nations. For the Passion of our Lord will one day bring them together in friendship; but in such a way that the Gentiles first will welcome the word of God, and then, by their true devotion and faith, pass it back to the Jews. Then the Jews, in their turn will clothe themselves in the majestic glory of the body of Christ whom formerly they had despised.

104 As for the scarlet mantle *(cf.Mt 27:28)* and the tunic of purple with which the soldiers clothed Jesus: the former symbolises the martyr's victory; the latter is the mark of imperial power. For His flesh would gather up all the blood shed throughout the world, and His Passion would inaugurate His reign in our hearts.

105 What of the Crown of Thorns that they wove round His Head *(cf.Mt 27:29)*? What can it symbolise? I think that it shows forth the work of the Divinity, the glory and the triumph procured for God by the sinners of this earth and by the thorns of this world. The scourges, too, have their own significance. He, the Lord, was scourged *(cf.Mt 27:26)* so that we might be spared the scourges. For *"this Man, wounded and acquainted with infirmities, suffers for us" (Is 53:3 sq.)*. He turns the scourges away from us – from us who had previously fled from God. The Lord is patient even to the

point of submitting His hands to the chains of the fugitives; and His Body to the whips of the fugitives.

And so the Jews, no matter how detestable the spirit in which they did these things, foretell a glorious outcome. For in wounding Him, they crown Him; and in mocking Him, they adore Him. Their heart believes not, and yet they render homage to Him whom they immolate. It was never their intention to do Him good, I know that well, but nonetheless God is honoured. Christ is hailed as a King *(cf.Mt 27:29)*, crowned as a Victor, adored as God and Lord.

106 In addition – according to Matthew *(cf.Mt 27:29)* – they place a reed in His hand, so that human weakness might cease to shake like a reed in the wind *(cf.Lk 7:24)*; instead, we were to be firmly founded on the works of Christ. So, too, the decree that was written against us was to be nailed to the Cross and thus blotted out *(cf.Col 2:14)*.

Mark tells us that with the reed they struck Him on the Head *(cf.Mk 15:19)*. This was to signify that by contact with the divinity, the reed of our weak human nature would waver no more.

107 It is time now for the Victor to erect His Trophy. The Cross, being Christ's Trophy, is placed on His shoulders. Whether it is He or Simon *(cf.Lk 23:26)* who carries it, Christ carried it as Man, and man carried it in Christ. There is no disagreement between the evangelists, for as regards the mystery they are in total harmony.

All is told in proper order: first He Himself took up the Trophy of the Cross *(cf.Jn 19:17)*, and then He passed it on to the martyrs for them to lift it up It is not a Jew who carries the Cross, but a passing stranger. This man does not precede but follows. For it is written: *"Take up your cross and follow me" (Lk 9:23)*. It is our cross that Christ mounted, not His own. And He died not in His divinity but as man. This is why He says: *"O God, look at me! Why have You forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46)*.

108 It was right that before mounting the Cross He should lay aside His royal garments. It shows you that He suffered not as God and King, but as man. And even though Christ is both, you must know that it was as man, not as God, that He was nailed to the Cross. But it was the soldiers, and not the Jews, who knew at what moment the royal garments were appropriate to Christ and at what moment they were not. As a victor He attended the judgement; as a humble criminal He goes to His Passion.

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109 We have seen the Trophy. We have seen the conquering Hero mount His chariot. He hangs the spoils, that He has captured from

this world – the plunder taken from the enemy – not on tree trunks or on chariots and wagons, but on His triumphal Cross.

In this triumphal procession we do not see nations with their arms tied behind their back; nor do we see the gods of cities that lie waste or idols carried off from conquered territories. We do not stare in amazement at captive kings, their heads hanging low – as is the custom in human triumphs, nor wonder at entire countries that have been vanquished from end to end.

What we see here are tribes and nations joyfully gathered together; summoned not for torture but for reward. We see kings gladly adoring, and cities freely and willingly giving themselves up. The images these people bring from their cities are not painted idols but themselves restored by faith to their own true likeness. Here we have a Victor whose might and right prevail throughout the entire world.

Now is the prince of this world a prisoner, and with him all the evil spirits who dwell in high places *(cf.Ep 6:12)*. We see them now, obedient to a human command. The powers have submitted, and virtues of every sort shine now not in a glory of silk but in the splendour of morals. Chastity shines brightly now, and faith is seen in its splendour. Fidelity and fortitude, robed in the spoils of death, rise up again. The one Triumph,* the Cross of Christ, has made us all triumph.

110 We must go back now and consider in what manner He mounts His Cross. I see Him naked *(cf.Lk 23:34)*. This is how we must prepare if we are to ascend to conquer the world, without any of the resources of the world. Adam, who sought for a garment, was defeated *(cf.Gn 3:7)*. The Victor is He who strips Himself of His garments. In such fashion He ascended, naked as Nature originally formed us to be. The first man dwelt naked in Paradise, and the second Man entered Paradise naked. And since He did not want to be Victor just for Himself alone, He stretched out His hands to draw us to Him *(cf.Jn 12:32)*. He stretched out His hands to break the bonds of death, to fasten on us the yoke of faith, and to unite to Heaven that which had previously belonged to earth.

111 There is also an inscription written *(cf.Lk 23:38)*. Usually a procession precedes the victors; and the Lord's triumphal chariot was preceded by a beautiful procession of souls risen from the dead. Usually the inscription tells the number of nations conquered; on such occasions, and at such "triumphs", there is a most pitiable display of captives from the various nations that have been conquered. What a wretched, shameful sight to see!

* In this passage Ambrose conveys an idea of the traditional Roman triumph given to victorious generals.

But here, we see spread around us the beauty of a people redeemed. A procession worthy of so great a Triumph, where sky, earth, sea and underworld pass from corruption to grace!

112 Now the inscription has been written out and placed over the Cross, for *"the principality shall be upon His shoulders" (Is 9:6)*. What principality is this? It is none other than His eternal power and divinity. So, when they question Him: *"Who are You?"* He replies *"The beginning [principium], who also speak to you" (Jn 8:25)*. Let us read this inscription: *"Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (Jn 19:19)*.

113 Appropriately, the inscription is placed over the Cross, for Christ's royalty does not properly belong to His Body but to His divine power. Yes, it was right to put the inscription over the Cross, because though the Lord Jesus was on the Cross, He shone above His Cross by reason of His royal majesty. He was a worm on the Cross *(cf.Ps 21:7)*, He was a scarab on the Cross. Noble worm, noble scarab, He clung to His Cross, and He cried aloud *(cf.Hab 2:11, Septugint)*.*

What did He cry? *"Lord, do not hold this sin to their charge" (Lk 23:34)*. To the thief he cried: *"This day you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Lk 23:34)*. Like the scarab, He cried: *"O God, my God, look at me. Why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46)*. True scarab, He stirred the formless, slothful slime of our body; overturning it by the movements of virtue. Noble scarab, He lifts up the poor from the dung heap.** He lifted up Paul, who looked on himself as dung *(cf.Ph 3:8)*. He lifted up Job, who sat upon a dunghill *(cf.Jb 2:8)*.

114 The inscription is not without deep meaning. The situation of the Cross is also significant, for it is placed in the middle to be seen by all; or, as the Jews claim, over the Tomb of Adam.*** For it was fitting that the First Fruits of life should find place there, where death began.

115 They divide His garments, casting lots to decide what share will fall to whom. For the Spirit of God is not held captive by the human mind. It comes upon us suddenly, unexpectedly, perhaps these soldiers are a type or figure of the four evangelists, writing an inscription which we can all of us read. I read the title of the King of the Jews when I read: *"My Kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36)*. I read the inscription

* The scarab, or sacred beetle of the Egyptians, was an image very dear to Ambrose. We find reference to it in a number of his works, e.g. in his magnificent eulogy of the Cross, *De Obitu Theodosii, 45*.

** As an egg, the scared beetle of the Egyptians is enclosed in a pellet of dung.

*** Ambrose's sources for this statment are uncertain.

that was put over Christ's head, when I read: *"And the Word was God" (Jn 1:1)* – for *"Christ's head is God" (1 Co 11:3).*

116 Then they kept guard over Jesus *(cf.Mt 27:36)*. They still keep guard, so that He may not escape from anyone; so that He may not descend from His Passion – as the Jewish people asked Him to do *(cf.Mt 27:40)*. Yes, let Christ die for me in His Passion, so that He can rise for me after His Passion. He did not choose to come down from the Cross, for He wanted to rise again for me. It is, then, for our sakes that Christ is now guarded; it is on our account that His garments are shared out. No one can have everything. And if they cast lots for the tunic, it is because the Holy Spirit does not divide Himself at the bidding of man; for *"there are diversities of graces, but the same Spirit works in all, dividing to everyone according to His will" (1 Co 12:6; 11).*

117 Now contemplate these garments of Christ that have been divided. Where are we to look for them? Look in Matthew: there you will find only the scarlet mantle *(cf.Mt 27:28)*; in John, you will find only the purple robe *(cf.Jn 19:2)*; in Mark there is mention simply of purple *(cf.Mk 15:17)*; Luke has the white garment *(cf.Lk 23:11)*, and is well content to have that alone for his share.

What a number of people Christ has clothed in His garments! I think it was not merely the four soldiers, but all the world. Yes, He has clothed all, and done so abundantly.

118 Returning, now, to the evangelists, I would say that the four parts or divisions are not so much portions of cloth as different sorts of talents. For, one evangelist writes sublimely of the Kingdom, another goes deeply into His human formation. Luke chooses the splendour of the sacerdotal vestment; Mark cares not to weave an elaborate texture; John has, so to speak, woven rich discourses in which to clothe our faith. Does not this seem to you a well woven text: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning in God. Through Him all things were made" (Jn 1:1-3)*? But Mark, content with the brightness of his purple, begins his gospel with the very simple words: *"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1).*

119 The shared garments are, therefore, the actions or the grace of Christ. But the tunic could not be shared. By "tunic" I understand the faith. For the faith cannot be portioned out but is held in common by all, as by right. It remains intact. It cannot be shared out among individuals.

120 And truly it was *"woven from the top" (Jn 19:23)*: for Christ's faith is woven in such a fashion that, starting at the top, it descends from

the divine to the human. Begotten of God before all ages, He later took and espoused our flesh. We are here made to see distinctly that the faith must not be torn apart, but must remain entire and inviolate.

121 ***"Truly, truly I say to you, this day you shall be with me in Paradise"*** *(Lk 23:43).*

What a magnificent testimony! What a stimulus to conversion! For pardon is given so readily, so abundantly to the thief; and grace far exceeds the prayer. The Lord always gives more than we ask. The thief asked our Lord to remember him when He came into His Kingdom; and the Lord says: *"Truly, truly I say to you, this day you shall be with me in Paradise"*. Life consists in being with Christ; so, too, where Christ is, there also is the Kingdom.

122 Because the thief is so soon converted, the Lord is swift to pardon him. That seems to explain how it is that the other evangelists portray the two thieves insulting the Lord, but this evangelist shows one of them insulting Him and the other praying to Him. Apparently the latter began by insulting Him, but was suddenly converted. It is not surprising that this convert was forgiven by Christ, seeing that He was so prodigal of forgiveness even towards those who insulted Him.

Then again, we have to remember that sometimes the plural is used when the singular is meant, as in the text: *"The Kings of the earth stood up, and the princes met together" (Ps 2:2)*. Actually, Herod is the only king, and Pilate the only magistrate, who conspired against Christ. You can see this in the words of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles *(cf.Ac 4:27)*. You will find the same usage [of plural for singular] in the letter to the Hebrews: *"They wandered about in goatskins; they were cut asunder; they stopped the mouths of lions" (Heb 11:37; 33)*. In fact, so far as we know, Elijah was the only one to wear a goatskin *(cf.2 K 1:)*; Isaiah the only one to be cut asunder;* and Daniel the only one to stop the mouths of lions *(cf.Dn 6:23)*.

123 How unspeakably evil it was of the Jews to crucify, like a thief, the Redeemer of all! And yet, in a mystic sense, He is a thief: He laid snares for the devil so as to carry off his weapons *(cf.Mt 12:29)*. Besides, the two thieves mysteriously symbolise the two races of sinners who, by baptism, will be crucified with Christ. Their very disagreement marks the variety there will be of believers. Therefore one is on the left, the other on the right. Their reproaches represent the scandal that the Cross will cause *(cf.Ga 5:11)* and that will persist even among the faithful.

124 The Jews presented Him with vinegar *(cf.Lk 23:36)*. To put the finishing touch to the scene, it was necessary that He should drink

* There is a tradition that the prophet Isaiah was cut in two

even this corruption of the truth and so nail to the Cross everything that had been spoilt and corrupted. Yes, He drinks the vinegar. He refuses the wine mixed with gall, not because of the gall, but because He declined to take bitterness that was mingled with wine. Undoubtedly He accepted all the bitterness of our human condition, for He said: *"For food they gave me gall, and for drink they gave me vinegar" (Ps 68:22)*. But bitterness ought not to be mixed with truth, and the Lord wanted to show that, for those who rise again, eternal life will be without bitterness. Our immortal life had become sour in this human bottle of ours, but it has been restored in Christ. So He drinks the vinegar. In other words, the corruption – caused by Adam – of our immortality was removed by the reed *(cf.Mt 27:48)*. The human body was emptied of its bitterness and corruption. We too should pour out our vices into Christ; we should empty out those sins we have committed through lack of custody of the mind and body. Let us pour them all out by means of baptism, and so be crucified in Christ. Let us empty them out by means of penance, and then Christ will give us in exchange the true, the incorruptible wine of His heavenly Blood.

125 Then, having drunk the vinegar, He says: *"It is consummated" (Jn 19:30)*. For the whole mystery of the human flesh that He had united to Himself was accomplished. Now all sin and vice were wiped out. There remained only the joy of immortality.

126 This is why He says: ***"Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit"*** *(Lk 23:46)*. It was right that He should commend His spirit, since His spirit has been preserved; and by commending it, it will not be lost. For nothing given in trust is lost. The spirit is a good pledge, an excellent deposit. This is why we read: *"O Timothy, keep the good thing committed to your care" (2 Tm 1:14)*. Christ commends His spirit to the Father; He says: *"You will not leave my soul in Hell" (Ps 15:10)*. Now, we have here a great mystery: He is commending His spirit into the hands of the Father, He is reposing in the bosom of the Father, for none but the Father can contain the whole Christ. As He Himself says: *"I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me" (Jn 14:10)*. He indeed commends His spirit to the Father; but, even though He is in the heights, He is at the same time illuminating the infernal regions; for He wants to redeem all things, since *"Christ is all, and all is in Christ" (Col 3:11)* – at the same acting in each one individually. The flesh dies so that it can rise again; the spirit is commended to the Father so that the heavens themselves may be delivered from the bonds of iniquity, and that there may reign in the heavens a peace which earthly things may take as their model.

127 ***"And with these words, He yielded up His spirit"*** *(Lk 23:46)*. Truly it is said that He yielded it up, for He did not lose it against His will. So, too, Matthew says: *"He breathed forth His spirit" (Mt 27:50)*.

To breathe forth one's spirit is voluntary, but to lose it is not. That is why the evangelist adds: *"With a great cry" (Mt 27:46)*. There we have either a magnificent testimony that it was for our sins that He humbled Himself even to death – why should I blush to say so when Christ Himself affirmed it with a great cry? – or we have clear evidence that God is giving witness to the bond between Christ's divinity and His flesh. You read: *"Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying: 'O God, my God, look at Me. Why have You forsaken Me?' " (Mt 27:46)*. As man He cried out that He was about to die; that He was about to separate from His divinity. Divinity is not subject to death. Death could not take place unless life first departed, and Christ's life is divinity.

128 What follows shows that the end of the would will be caused by the wickedness of people. So the Lord's Passion gives us sure signs that things present will crumble away to make room for that which is to come. Darkness poured down on the eyes of the unbelievers *(cf.Lk 23:44)*, so that the light of faith might re-appear; the sun set, or hid itself from the sight of sacrilege, and thereby drew a veil over the ghastly spectacle of sin; rocks split apart *(cf.Mt 27:51)*, and by the rents caused in them made manifest that in time to come the force of the Word would penetrate the hardest of heart. In this way they would make it easier for the hunters, prophesied by Jeremiah*(cf.Jr 16:16)*, who would hunt for the children of the Lord in the crevices of the rocks.

As for the open tombs *(cf.Mt 27:52)*, these surely foretell the bursting open of the prisons of Death , and the resurrection of the dead; for the sight of the dead made those who saw them believe, and their apparition prefigured resurrection. These dead who arose, went through the holy city *(cf.Mt 27:53)* announcing, by their presence and their aspect, that the heavenly Jerusalem will be the meeting place of those who rise again. So, too, the Temple veil is torn in two, proclaiming either the separation of the two peoples or the profanation of the mysteries of the Synagogue. The ancient curtain is torn down so that the freshness and beauty of the Faith may be hung aloft. The veil of the Synagogue is removed so that, with the eyes of our soul, we might gaze steadfastly at the secret mysteries of religion *(cf.2 Co 3:14)*. See, too, how the Centurion *(cf.Lk 23:47)* proclaims that the Man whom he crucified is Son of God. O Jews, what hearts of stone you have! The rocks split, but those hearts of yours remain hard. The judge accuses you; the very executioner believes; the traitor so blames himself for his crime that he takes his life; the elements fall apart; the earth quakes; tombs open; yet, while all the world is shaken, your hearts remain unmoved!

129 The women stood, watching *(cf.Lk 23:49)*. His Mother stood there *(cf.Jn 19:25 sq.)*. Regardless of her own danger, she thought only

of her love for her Son. The Lord, hanging on the Cross, thought not of His peril, but with overflowing love commended His mother [to John]. John had a particular reason for recounting this detail.

The other evangelists had described how earth was shaken, how darkness covered the sky, how the sun was eclipsed. Matthew and Mark, who like to speak in more detail of the human and moral side, add that He said: *"O God, my God, look at Me. Why have You forsaken Me?"* They do this to strengthen our belief that it is the human nature assumed by Christ that has mounted the Cross. As for Luke, he has clearly shown us how the thief asked for pardon, and obtained it through the priestly intercession of Christ; and has shown us, too, how a like blessing was conferred on His Jewish persecutors when they asked for it.

130 But John who had penetrated more deeply than the others the divine mysteries, was intent on showing that she who had conceived God had remained a virgin *(cf.Bk 10:133 and De Insitutione virginis c. 7)*. Alone among the evangelists he teaches me what the other evangelists did not teach me; how, from the Cross, He addressed His Mother. For He, who had conquered pain and torment, He who had vanquished the devil, thought it more important to attend to the duties of filial love, and to share them out, than to bestow a heavenly kingdom. For though it was a pious and religious act on the part of our Lord to pardon the thief, it was a far more sacred and religious act that the Mother should be honoured by her Son.

131 You may, perhaps, think that I should have given the words of Jesus to His Mother before speaking of the pardon granted to the thief. But considering that He came to save sinners *(cf.1 Tm 1:15)*, it is not unreasonable that in writing my sermon I should give precedence of place to His fulfilment of His mission of ransoming and saving the sinner. Besides, He says somewhere else: *"Who is my mother? And who are My brothers and sisters (Mt 12:48)*? For He had come not to call the just, but to call sinners *(cf.Mt 9:13)*. All this was appropriate in its place; but here He is on the Cross, and He is thinking of His Mother. He says to her: *"See, this is your Son,"*. and to John, *"See, this is your Mother" (Jn 19:26-27)*. Christ, on the Cross, was making His last will and testament. John put his signature to the will – noble witness to a noble Testator. This was indeed a good testament that our Lord made, for He bequeaths not money, but life; and He writes not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God *(cf.2 Co 3:3)*. *"My tongue is the pen of a scribe writing swiftly" (Ps 44:2)*.

132 But Mary, too, was fully equal to her part as Mother of Christ. The apostles fled, but Mary stood at the Cross, and with loving eyes gazed upon the wounds of her Son; for what she foresaw was not her Child's death but the world's redemption, Or, it could be that knowing that her Son

was redeeming the world she thought it fitting that she, whose womb had been His Royal Hall, should by her own death add something to the world's redemption. But Jesus needed no helper in order to save mankind. Had He not said: *"I am become as a man without help; free among the dead" (Ps 87:5-6)*? Of course He was pleased with His Mother's sentiments, but He did not need human help.

So we have in the Lord a pattern of filial love. This text indeed teaches us what model we should take for motherly love, what pattern we should follow in showing respect for parents. Parents should offer their lives when their children are in danger; children should be more concerned that they leave their mother desolate than that they themselves must die.

133 This passage gives us evidence beyond a shadow of doubt that Mary was ever a Virgin. For our Lord is most certainly not separating a wife from her husband, since it is written: *"What God has joined together, let no one put asunder" (Mt 19:6)*. But for Mary, her marriage had been a veil to shroud the Mystery, and once the mysteries had been accomplished she had no further need of marriage *(cf.Book 2:4)*. Or again, if we wish to draw a moral lesson, chastity in widowhood is being recommended.

134 Yet, is it not strange that He commends Mary to John, the youngest of them all? Some mystery lies here, and we must pay heed. For usually it is dangerous for women to have a liaison with a youth, and with the beauty of youth. It could happen that some woman might see in this a precedent to follow, rather than a mystery to ponder. Such a woman might wish, while remaining in Christ, to live at her ease, to follow her natural inclinations. Such a woman could claim to be following Mary's example, though without having Mary's dispositions. (This is how the passage is understood by certain women of the people who leave an old husband so as to marry a young one). Let all such persons understand that what we have here is a mystery of the Church:

Mary, or the Church, was formerly united in appearance but not in effect, to an ancient people. Then, having given birth to the Word and having sown Him in the heart of humankind – by faith in the Cross and in the burial of the Lord's Body – she has, at the command of God, chosen to join herself to a younger people.

135 There is another thing at which I wonder. Why, if our Lord's heart was not pierced before His death, was it pierced after His death *(cf.Jn 19:34)*? Perhaps to show us that His departure was voluntary, not forced; and also to teach us the sacred series of the mysteries. For the Sacraments of the Altar do not precede baptism; but baptism comes first, and then the chalice follows. The incident also shows us that though His Body was indeed mortal, and though His human condition was like ours, His

grace was different. For it is well known that after death the blood congeals in the body. But Christ's Body was incorrupt and, even though dead, life poured out of it. For water and blood poured out – one to wash us, the other to ransom us. Come, let us drink our ransom, that by drinking it we may be redeemed.

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136 Why is it that Christ, instead of being buried by the apostles, is buried by Joseph and Nicodemus *(cf.Lk 23:50)*?* Such is the sepulchre of Christ. It is without fraud or iniquity. The Jews are vanquished by the evidence of their own fellow-Jews, and they have no scope whatever for twisting the truth. For, if the apostles had buried Jesus, the Jews would surely have said that He had not been buried at all. As it was, they pretended that the apostles had carried His Body away *(cf.Mt 28:13)*.

137 But the just person covers the Body of Christ with a linen winding sheet *(cf.Lk 23:53)*; and the innocent of heart embalms Him with perfume. Each of these two actions has its own distinct significance: for justice is the vestment of the Church, and innocence is her beauty. You, too, my friend, should clothe Christ's Body in glory, and then you too, will be just. Even if you think Him dead, clothe Him with the fullness of His divinity. Anoint Him with myrrh and aloes, so that you may be the sweet fragrance of Christ *(cf.2 Co 2:15)*. And Joseph, that good and just man, provided fine linen. It was, perhaps, the linen cloth that Peter saw descending from Heaven, and on it were *"all manner of four-footed beasts, and creeping things of the earth, and birds of the air" (Ac 10:11 sq.)*. These were symbolic of the Gentile nations. Therefore the Church is buried with this mysterious and precious perfume, having first gathered together all manner of people in the community of faith.

138 With regard to Joseph, it is only in John *(cf.Jn 19:38)* that I find that he went secretly to Pilate, for fear of the Jews. Why should a just person want secrecy? Why should he fear danger? Personally, I think that he asked in secret in order to obtain the Body, and not in order to avoid danger. Anyway, would it be so surprising for a just person to hide himself when even the apostles were hiding?

Come, my friend. Yes, I mean you. Even if you come late, even if you come at night. Come any time at all, and you will find Jesus very happy to welcome you. He will not pay you less because you come late. Even the one who came at the sixth hour was not deprived of his pay; and the one who came at the eleventh hour was given his full salary *(cf.Mt 20:5 sq.)*. Besides,

* Again we find confusion between Nicodemus and Nathanael, the Israelite without guile *(cf.Bk 8:90)*.

Nicodemus came by night *(cf.Jn 3:2)*. It was night because it was not yet the Resurrection. But once Christ is risen, the just person says: *"The night is passed, and the day is at hand" (Rm 13:12)*.

139 Luke calls Joseph just *(cf.Lk 23:50)*, and Matthew calls him rich *(cf.Mt 27:57)*. It is quite true that he was rich, for he had obtained the Body of Christ. In receiving Him who is rich, Joseph could not possibly be poor in faith. One is rich, therefore, when one is just. So Joseph wraps Jesus in a linen cloth. But the Israelite mingles his perfumes, collected from every variety of virtue, and he pours in about a hundred pounds of aloes *(cf.Jn 19:39-40)*: that is to say, the perfect measure of faith. And they swathed the Body of Jesus, according to the custom of the Jews. I mean Jews in the truly spiritual sense. They did not tie Him with knots of unbelief, but with the winding sheets of faith. Then they laid Him in a garden. Often the Church is compared to a garden *(cf.Jn 19:41)*, for in it you find, in rich variety, the fruits of merit and the flowers of virtue.

140 It is significant that one evangelist speaks of a new tomb *(cf.Lk 23:53)*, and another calls it Joseph's tomb *(cf.Mt 27:60)*. So Christ had no tomb of His own. Tombs are prepared for those subject to the laws of death; the Conqueror of death has no tomb of His own. What could God have in common with a tomb? That is why Ecclesiastes says of one who meditates on what is good: *"There is no burial for him" (Qo 6:3)*.

We see that Christ's death has a character all of its own, and that it is different from the death common to the rest of us. Also, He is not buried along with other people, but enclosed, alone, in a tomb. So, too, with the Incarnation of the Lord. It resembled in every way our humanity, but even while resembling our humanity there were certain points of difference: there is resemblance in His birth from a Virgin, but a difference in His conception; He healed the sick, but did so by His command; John baptised with water, but He baptised with the Holy Spirit *(cf.Lk 3:16)*. In the same way, Christ's death is like ours as regards His physical nature, but not like ours with regard to His power.

141 But who is this Joseph in whose tomb our Lord is laid? He is the just one. It is right that Christ's Body should be entrusted to the tomb of one who is just, it is right that in this way the Son of man should have somewhere to lay His head *(cf.Lk 9:58)*, a place of goodness and justice where He could take His rest. It is also right and proper that the tomb should be new: in the literal sense, so that it could not be said that someone else had risen from it; and, in the mystical sense, what are we to make of it? Perhaps the answer lies in the verse: *"Their throat is an open sepulchre" (Ps 5:11)*. The "open sepulchre" is the throat of those who pile up within themselves the unbelief that kills, and words that are dead. As this sepulchre

of theirs becomes an ancient ruin, over-run – so to speak – by wild beasts, it crumbles and falls.

There exists, on the other hand, in the human heart, a tomb that the Just One has hollowed out, by the penetration of His word into the hardened hearts of the Gentiles. It has been made smooth by the work of faith and by doctrine, and made fit to show forth the power of Christ among the nations.

142 Wisely, they placed a stone at the entrance *(cf.Mt 27:60)*, to prevent the tomb from being opened. For once you have Christ well buried in your heart, you must guard Him with care. You do not want to lose Him, and you do not want to let doubts against faith creep in, See how Peter and John merited to be the first to enter. In fact, John himself did not enter until he had believed *(cf.Jn 20:6; 8)*.

143 How truly they spoke when they said that the tomb was hewn from the rock! For this rock represents constancy in faith, and from it true Israelites suck the sweet honey and oil of the Spirit *(cf.Dt 32:13)*. Yes, Christ is buried by the just man and by him who has seen God.* For one cannot bury Christ unless one believes in God.

144 Not everyone can bury Christ. The women, excellent though they were, remained at some distance *(cf.Lk 23:55 sq.)*. But love made them observe with care the place where He was laid, so that they might return with sweet perfumes and scatter them. So anxious are they to see all, that they are the last to leave and the first to return to the tomb. Though constancy in faith may have wavered, love does not. Their sex is frail, but their devotion is ardent.

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145 So, at the hour of the Resurrection, the women are there *(cf.Mt 28:1-8)*. The men took to their heels, but the women are encouraged by the angel to have no fear. They call Peter. Ahead of him in zeal, they follow him in faith. Peter arrives without any fear, and though he comes later than the women to the tomb, he is the first to enter it. After all, he is the one who received the Keys of the Kingdom, and opens that Kingdom to others.

146 What shall I say of the earthquake *(cf.Mt 28:2)*? For those who believe, it means the Resurrection; to the dull and ignorant, it is a source of fear. For some it means that the body, weighed down by the sleep

* Again we see that Ambrose confuses Nicodemus with Nathanael, the true Israellite who has seen God. Maybe he believed that they were the same person?

of death, shakes off its heavy burden; others, troubled by carnal fear and swayed by worldly fickleness, lose their faith and belief in the Resurrection.

147 ***"And in the morning, they came early to the sepulchre"*** *(Lk 24:1)*.

This text gives rise to much perplexity. For, even if the evangelists do not seem to be contradicting each other, each one has a different version. Luke is saying: *"in the morning very early"*; Mark says: *"Very early in the morning" (Mk 16:2)*; Matthew has: *"in the evening of the Sabbath" (Mt 28:1)*; John's version is: *"the day following the Sabbath, when it was yet dark" (Jn 20:1)*, the women came to the tomb.

Luke mentions that they saw two men *(cf.Lk 24:4)*; according to Mark, they saw one young man, seated and wearing white *(cf.Mk 16:5)*. Matthew says that they saw an angel *(cf.Mt 28:2)*, and John claims that they saw two angels clothed in white *(cf.Jn 20:12)*. What is still harder to explain is that, according to John, Jesus says to Mary Magdalen: *"Do not touch me" (Jn 20:17)*; Matthew writes that the Lord appeared to Mary Magdalen and another Mary, and he describes in the greatest detail how they approached Him, took hold of His feet, and adored Him *(cf.Mt 28:9)*.

148 How are we to solve the problem? Are we to suppose that the four evangelists were speaking of four different times? Are we to think they were speaking of different women and different apparitions? In that event, we would have to imagine some coming with perfume on the day following the Sabbath; others coming, without perfume, on the evening of the Sabbath. Some of these women are given names; of others we are only told that they followed the Lord from Galilee.

149 It is not my wish to perplex you by ending my discourse with exegesis of an obscure and baffling nature, especially as you were expecting a smooth ending! So, imagine that we are a ship lowering its sails as we reach journey's end. Yes, the harbour is in sight, and the vessel that flew so lightly over the great expanse of sea, now begins to slow down as it nears the water's edge – for we could come to grief on hidden rocks. Not wishing that my discourse should suffer shipwreck, not wanting to be a clumsy pilot who allows the vessel to founder in the shallow waters, or be wedged among the hidden rocks, I shall slow down. Better that than to rush forward and allow our ship to be smashed to pieces or swallowed up!

150 The first thing we must do is to consider carefully the text that states that the Lord rose *"on the evening of the Sabbath when day was breaking on the first day of the week" (Mt 28:1)*. What you read is: *"on the evening of the Sabbath, Mary Magdalen and another Mary came to see the tomb; and behold, there was a great earthquake" (Mt 28:1-2)*. Clearly it is not on the day of the Sabbath – during which they would have been

obliged by law to remain inactive – but after the Sabbath day, and during the night, that the Lord rises from the dead. So, coming in the morning, very early, the women learn that the Lord has already risen.

151 Having weighed the matter carefully, we must believe that the Resurrection did not take place on the morning of the Sunday following the Sabbath, nor on the day of the Sabbath – for that would not have allowed for the three days. So it is neither in the twilight of the Sabbath day, nor at the end of the night that follows the Sabbath, that the Resurrection took place. Furthermore, the Greek says *οψε [late]*". Now, as we all know, "late" can either mean that time of day when night approaches, or it can mean that someone or something has been delayed.

You say, for example: "They made the suggestion late", what you mean is that they were rather slow about making their suggestion. Or you might say: "They came late", meaning that they came after the appointed time. Even if they arrived on the morning of the following day, you still say that they came late – because the time for action has passed. "Late" can also mean the darkest hour of night, the very middle of the night. For example, you will hear someone say: "I rose late [at night] in order to work". They do not mean that they rose in the evening, but at midnight.

152 This interpretation gives the women every possibility of approaching the tomb. The guards were already taking their rest – the very fact that they were woken from sleep makes them all the more terrified, as is the case when we are suddenly woken. Finally, the high priests themselves in their consultation with the elders, testify that the Resurrection took place at night. For they say to the guards: *"Say that His disciples came during the night and stole His Body while you slept" (Mt 28:13)*.

The guards must have told them that it happened at night, and acting on that information they hatch their crafty plot. Another point to be noted is that John says that it was *"in the morning, when it was still dark" (Jn 20:1)* that Mary Magdalen came to Peter and himself. Yet, at that stage she was still in ignorance of the Resurrection. Surely, if the event had taken place on the preceding evening she would have known of it at once.

153 Morning comes, and Peter does not yet know. John does not yet know. Our Lord would never have allowed His disciples to be left, [all night] tortured by His death and in an agony of uncertainty. Remember how prompt He was to send the angel, how prompt He was to send the women, to announce to the disciples His resurrection once the event was accomplished. Again, to show you that it was night, some of the women do not know, and others know. Those who kept vigil day and night, knew it was night. Those who went home, did not know. According to John, one Mary Magdalen does not know *(cf.Jn 20:14)*; according to Matthew, another

Mary Magdalen does know *(cf.Mt 28:9)*. For just as there are several women called Mary, so also there could have been two Mary Magdalens. The first name is a personal name, the second name designates a locality *(cf.Eusebius, P.G. 22:947-948)*.

154 In short, understand that there is another Mary Magdalen. One is allowed to embrace the feet of Jesus; the other is forbidden to touch the Lord. One merited to see the angel, the other – though she came first – saw no one. One announced to the disciples that the Lord had risen, the other tells them that the Lord's Body has been removed. One is joyful, the other weeps. To one, Christ presents Himself in glory, whereas the other seeks for Him among the dead. One saw the Lord and believed, the other could not recognise Him when she saw Him. One adored Him with deep-felt faith, the other tormented herself with doubts and uncertainty.

155 That is why the Lord has reason not to allow her to touch Him. For it is not by tactility that we touch Christ, but by faith. *"For,"* says He, *"I have not yet ascended to the Father" (Jn 20:17)*. He means: "In your eyes, I have not yet ascended, for you are seeking me among the dead." As a result, she is sent to stronger spirits whose example will encourage her to believe. She is sent to them so that they may preach to her the Resurrection.

156 Just as in the beginning woman instigated man to sin, and man consummated the sin, so now she who was the first to taste death is also the first to see the Resurrection. The remedy follows in the same order as the sin. But woman was not to bear for ever before the world the blame for this sin, and for having passed on to man her own guilt. No, hers was to be the honour of equally passing on to them God's grace. By announcing the Resurrection, she pays in full for the original disaster and the ancient sin. A woman's lips had once transmitted death. Now a woman's lips restore life.

157 But not having the strength to preach, for her sex was too frail for such a task, it was to men that the duty of preaching was entrusted. Jesus – not satisfied with wiping out the sin of woman – multiplies her grace so that she who had previously deceived Adam is now able to persuade several apostles to believe. So it was only fair that man, too – who in the person of Adam had been over hasty in believing his wife – should now receive payment with interest. Thus he who had formerly erred through credulity, was now deemed suitable to preach to others.

158 But we must look carefully at the wording of our Lord's prohibition: *"Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (Jn 20:17)*.

Lord Jesus, what do You mean by saying that You have not yet ascended? Already you had commended Your spirit to the Father, how then could You be absent from Him? Besides, You have said: *"If I go down to hell, You are there; if I spread out My wings at dawn and dwell at the furthermost ends of the seas, even then Your hand shall guide Me" (Ps 138:8-10).* So, how can You ascend, seeing that always You are everywhere?

159 You did indeed descend – it is true – as Son of Man. You descended but without leaving the Father. You did it for us, so that our eyes and souls might see You, and so that we might believe in You. Likewise, it was for us that You ascended, so that we would follow You in spirit – though unable to see You with our eyes. You went up for the sake of the apostles, and You said to them: *"Whoever has seen Me, has seen the Father also" (Jn 14:9).* John knew well where to look for You: he looked for You with the Father and found You. This is why he writes: *"And the Word was with God" (Jn 1:1).* You went up for the sake of Paul. He, not content with following You alone, has also taught us how to follow You and where to find You: *"If, then, you have risen with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God."* Not meaning us to use our eyes rather than our hearts, Paul at once adds: *"Mind the things that are above, not the things that are below" (Col 3:1-2).*

160 If we want to find You, we must search neither on the earth nor in the earth nor according to the flesh. For *"now we know not Christ according to the flesh" (2 Co 5:16).* Stephen did not look for You upon earth. No, for he saw You sitting at the right hand of God *(cf.Ac 7:55 sq.).* But Mary, who looked for You on earth, could not touch You. Stephen reached You because he looked for You in Heaven. Stephen, in the midst of the Jews, saw You even though You were absent. Mary, among the angels, failed to see You though You were present. But why could she not touch You? The evangelist himself furnishes the answer when he says that though she saw you she did not recognise you. Here is the text: *"She turned and saw Jesus standing there; but she did not know that it was Jesus" (Jn 20:14).* If she could not see Him, it is only reasonable that she could not touch Him. For to see, is to touch.

161 The Gospel text underlines the difference between this Mary and the other. One goes before Jesus to see Him; the other turns back; one is greeted by Jesus, the other is chided. Consider the wording: *"Jesus said to her: 'Woman' "(Jn 20:15).* She who does not believe is woman, and is designated by her physical sex; for she who believes arrives *"at the full stature of a perfect man, and the measure of the prefect age achieved by Christ" (Ep 4:13).* She then no longer retains her worldly name, or her physical sex, or the flightiness of youth, or the loquaciousness of old age.

Then Jesus says: *"Woman, why are you crying?" (Jn 20:15).* It is as if He says that God does not want mere tears. He wants faith. Real tears recognise Christ. *"Whom do you seek?"* He asks. For the Lord likes to come quickly to the point. Wisely He has chosen to say *"Whom".* Of course, it is not as if He does not know the answer, He knows whom she seeks. He says it because she herself does not know whom she seeks. For, since she thinks that His Body has been carried away, it is not truly Christ whom she seeks. Christ is present, He is here, why should she seek Him? She knows not whom she seeks, for when she sees Him she fails to recognise Him.

162 So, when she saw Christ, she took Him to be the gardener. Here is what we read: *"But she, taking Him to be the gardener, said to Him: 'Sir, if it is you who have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I shall take Him' " (Jn 20:15).* However hesitant her faith may have been, her speech is not astray. If she took Him to be the gardener, she nonetheless treated Him as Son of God. If as yet she does not believe, she desires to believe. For it is indeed He who removed the Body, having raised It up from the dead. So we can forgive this woman her mistake. True, she should not have doubted that Christ's Body was gloriously raised from the dead. At the same time, she is eager to be instructed by Christ. Even now, by her love and devotion, one sees in her the promise of faith, She will in truth raise Him up from earth and seek Him at God's right hand.

163 And so it happens that after speaking these words she is no longer called "woman", but "Mary". The first mode of address is common to women in general, the other belongs specially to a person who follows Christ. She is then sent to the disciples *(cf.Jn 20:17),* not as one in full and perfect possession of the faith, but at least as a messenger. But she is not allowed to touch Jesus, for she had not yet learnt, with Paul, the fullness of divinity that dwells in the Body of Christ. She had not yet shaken off the doubts that linger in this world, the doubts bred by the flesh. She had not, as yet, lived the life of Christ. So she does not adore the Lord and embrace His feet as the other Mary does. This other Mary is not so much paying physical homage as indicating, by her actions, a full and utter faith. She believes that Christ is at one and the same time both Man and God. For it is God whom she adores, and man whom she embraces.

164 It is not as if our Lord shrinks from a woman's touch. After all, He let Mary anoint His feet with perfume *(cf.Lk 7:38).* He is not refusing to be touched, but He is pointing out the way to make progress. For not everyone can touch the risen Christ even though they touched Him during His life on earth. Anyone who wants to touch Christ must mortify themselves. They must, as becomes people destined to rise again, *"put on the bowels of mercy" (Col 3:12),* and unhesitatingly renounce things terrestrial.

165 But why does He say: *"Do not touch Me"?* He means, do not reach out for the greater things, but go to my brothers – that is to say, to those who have reached a high degree of perfection: *"For whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven, is my brother, my sister, and my mother" (Mt 12:50)*. Only by those who are perfect can the Resurrection be properly grasped. The privilege of believing in this mystery is reserved to those more strongly grounded in faith. *"But as for women, I do not allow them to teach in the Church. They can ask their husbands at home" (1 Tm 2:12)*. So she is sent to those who belong to the household, and there she carries out the Lord's command.

166 I am not passing over the opinion of certain people regarding this passage. The way they see it is that Christ did not want to be touched because He had not yet received back the image which He had commended to the Father.* Therefore He did not want Mary Magdalen to touch Him yet.

167 *"I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and to your God" (Jn 20:17)*. Notice the clear distinction that He makes in speaking to her. For if we share a common nature with Christ, it is only his human nature that we share. The Father is His because the Father truly begot Him; as for us, He is our Father by His own free adoption. He is Christ's Father by nature, and ours by grace. For Christ He is God by the unity of the mystery, for us He is God by reason of His divine power.

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168 Someone will object: How is it, then, that Thomas, even though he did not yet believe, touched Christ *(cf.Jn 20:27)*? But it seems that it was not Christ's Resurrection that He doubted, but the manner of the Resurrection. Also, by touching, Thomas had to teach me; just as Paul taught me when he said: *"This corruption must clothe itself in incorruption, and this mortal body of ours must put on immortality" (1 Co 15:53)*. Only in this way can the incredulous learn to believe, only in this way can the hesitant cease to doubt. For it is easier to believe what we see. Thomas had reason for wonder and amazement at what he saw: the doors were closed, and yet a Body glided through barriers impenetrable to physical bodies, without causing them any harm or damage. Yes, it is truly extraordinary and marvellous that a physical body should pass through a solid and impenetrable substance. They did not see Him do it, all they saw was His presence. It was easy to touch Him, but difficult to recognise Him.

* The idea seems to be that prior to the Ascension into Heaven, Christ's glorification was not complete. See also Book 10:155.

169 So the disciples were very frightened and thought that they were seeing a ghost. That is why the Lord, wanting to prove to them the manner of His Resurrection, said: ***"Touch and see. A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see me to have"*** *(Lk 24:39)*. Clearly, when He rose, it was not with an incorporeal body; yet, such was the nature of His risen Body that it could pass through solid walls. We know it was a body, because it could be touched, it could be handled. It is in the body that we rise again, for: *"It is sown a natural body; it shall rise a spiritual body" (1 Co 15:44)*. The spiritual body is subtle; the natural body is coarse – being as yet weighed down by the earthiness of its human condition.

170 How could He not have had a body, seeing that He retained the signs of the wounds, the marks of the scars, and that He presented them to be touched? In doing so He not only strengthened their faith, but He fanned the flame of their love. For these were wounds He suffered for us, and He chose to carry them with Him to Heaven, to show them to God the Father as the price of our liberation. It was with these wounds that the Father placed Him at His right hand *(cf.Ep 1:70)*. The Father welcomed His Son who bore with Him these trophies of our salvation, these witnesses to us of the glorious wounds He suffered for love of us.

171 And, since we have arrived so far in our discourse, let us now consider why it is that, according to John, the apostles believed and rejoiced *(cf.Jn 20:20)*; that according to Luke they appear to have been incredulous *(cf.24:41)*; that in one Gospel they receive the Holy Spirit *(cf.Jn 20:22)*, and that in another they are ordered to stay in the city until they are clothed in the gift of Heaven *(cf.Lk 24:49)*? My opinion is that John, being both an evangelist and an apostle, has touched upon the greater and profounder mysteries; Luke tells of events of a more human nature. One evangelist goes into great detail; another prefers to summarise. One need not doubt the truth of a speaker who recounts events of which he himself has been an eye-witness – *"for his witness is true" (Jn 21:24)*. As for the one who merited to become an evangelist, there can be no shadow of a suspicion that he was either mendacious or negligent. The conclusion is that both are speaking the truth. They do not contradict each other either as regards how they see the event, or as regards the people they describe as playing a part in that event. For if Luke says first that the disciples did not believe, he later says that they did believe. If we consider the beginning of his narrative, there does appear to be a contradiction; but if we look at the end, we see perfect harmony. Now let us examine the actual wording of the text.

172 This is how John puts it: *"The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Then He said to them: 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you'. When He had said this, He breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are*

forgiven; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained'" (Jn 20:20-23).

Luke, however, says: ***"... and how they had recognised Him in the breaking of the bread. Now, while they were speaking in this way, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them and said: 'Peace be with you! It is I, do not be afraid'. For they, being troubled and frightened, thought that they were seeing a ghost"*** *(Lk 24:35-37).* There seems to have been a greater number of disciples present here *(cf.Lk 24:33).* But it is the evening of the Resurrection (for the two disciples, at sunset, had gone in with the Lord to stay in a house. There, we are told, He suddenly made Himself known to them, and they immediately returned to the other disciples *(cf.Lk 24:29 sq.)*). According to John, it is late in the day following the Sabbath *(cf.Jn 20:19 sq.)* that Jesus appeared to the disciples, showed them His wounds, and invited His disciples to touch them. To avoid all doubt on the matter, it seems to me wise that we should study these points attentively.

173 I think that He appeared to the Eleven separately from the other disciples; just as He showed Himself separately to Ammaeus *(cf.Book 7:132)** and Cleophas in the evening *(cf.Lk 24:13 sq.).* And, just as the two on the road had done, the Eleven had got together to encourage each other. *"They were troubled,"* as you read in Luke, and that is why Jesus *"opened their eyes to understand that which had been written" (Lk 24:45).* Undoubtedly Luke wrote at great length, and the other more succinctly. How indeed could they have said that He had appeared to Peter only, if in fact He had appeared to all?

But, just as among the women He had appeared only to Mary and to the other Mary Magdalen, so too among the men He appeared only to Peter at the break of day. Paul puts it this way: *"I taught you first that Christ died, according to the scriptures; that He was buried and that He rose again on the third day according to the scriptures; and that He was seen by Cephas" (1 Co 15:3-5).* This is why Mark makes a point of saying that the young man told the women that they were to tell Peter and the disciples *(cf.Mk 16:7)* that the Lord had risen.

174 So Peter alone saw the Lord. You see, he was always so loving and so ready to believe, and on that account eagerly gathered all the proofs of faith that he could. Whether with John, whether alone, he races ahead with zeal. Everywhere he is either out on his own, or first. Not satisfied with having seen, he goes back again to look at what he has seen. On fire with longing to seek the Lord, he is not content with seeing Him once. Peter sees Him alone, Peter sees Him with the Eleven, Peter sees Him with the seventy. He sees Him again at the moment when Thomas believes. He sees Him when he is out fishing.

But not content with having seen Him, and with all the impatience of love, he neglects his catch of fish *(cf.Jn 21:7 sq.),* he forgets the risk he is taking – but never forgets the respect due to the Lord, for on seeing Him at the water's edge he puts on his clothes. In his impatience, Peter cannot wait to come with the others in the boat. It was like this when the Lord was walking on the waters, Peter ran over the waves to meet Him, forgetting that he was but human. So, too, when Jesus was arrested by the Jews, he alone drew his sword against the troop. And it is the same here yet again. When the Lord stands at the edge of the lake, Peter puts his life in danger to show his Lord his love and homage.

175 There is no doubt that Peter believed, because he loved; and he loved because he believed. That is why he was very hurt when asked three times: *"Do you love me" (Jn 21:17)*? Because to question someone means that you are in some doubt. But the Lord does not doubt. He questioned Peter not in order to learn, but in order to instruct him. For the Lord intended leaving Peter – when the time came for His Ascension – as representative on earth of His love. Here is the text: *" 'Simon, son of John, do you care deeply for me?' 'Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.' And Jesus said: 'Feed my lambs' (Jn 21:15).* Peter is well aware of the love that he has, nor is it a passing love, for the Lord has long been aware of it. Who else but Peter could so easily have made that claim for himself? So, being alone among all the others in declaring himself, he is preferred before all the others. For love is the greatest of all *(cf.Co 13:13).*

176 Now we have to weigh very carefully why it is that when the Lord asks *"Do you care deeply for Me?"* Peter replies, *"You know, Lord, that I love You".* To me it seems that "to care deeply" [diligere] pertains to spiritual love, whereas "to love" [amare], is a sort of heat engendered by ardour both of soul and of body. To my way of thinking, Peter is pointing out that he loves not only with his spirit but even with his body, and that both spirit and body burn with desire to serve God. The third time, the Lord does not ask: *"Do you care deeply for Me?"* but: *"Do you love Me?" (Jn 21:17).* And this time He commands Peter to feed the full grown sheep. The first time, the Lord speaks of lambs – who have to be fed with milk; the second time He speaks of little sheep; but the third time He says sheep. And the meaning of this is that Peter, having become more perfect, was to govern the more perfect.

177 Peter is now perfect in all points. No longer can the flesh call him back from the glory of the Passion. So, Peter now learns of the crown that will be his. *"When you were young,"* says the Lord, *"you put on your own girdle and went wherever you wanted. But when you are old you*

* Scripture does not name the companion of Cleophas. Perhaps by "Ammaeus" Ambrose wishes to indicate an inhabitant of Emmaus, whither the two were going.

will stretch out your hands and another will girdle you, and lead you where you would rather not go" (Jn 21:18). Noble old age! Length of years did not make him incapable of serving; on the contrary maturity of virtue prepared him for martyrdom. Old age and maturity check the passions of the body, yield not to lust, fly from seductive pleasures, and do not covet beauty. *"For the flesh lusts against the spirit" (Ga 5:17).* The flesh likes to go where its pleasure takes it, it knows how to find the crooked paths that lead to forbidden delights. But the grand old age of the soul does not choose what is delightful to the body, but rather what is useful to the soul. It does not let itself be caught by the passing whims and appetites of the body; but steadfastly it holds itself in check – even despite itself – and knows how to bridle and master itself.

178 Peter, in his heart, had been all readiness for martyrdom; but when it came to the point, his courage had failed him. The idea of winning so heavenly, so sweet an honour, captivates us. After all, who would not choose martyrdom if he could die in the way he pleased? It would seem, however, as though Peter does not actually wish it but that nonetheless he is preparing himself to win the crown. We need not be surprised if Peter does not actually wish it when the Lord Himself said: *"Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from Me. Only not My will, but Yours be done" (Mt 26:39).* Finally Peter, after having had the experience of his own presumptuousness, no longer dares to promise that he will persevere in his resolve. Instead, as though seeking some kind of prop, he looks round for the company and support of another *(cf.Jn 21:20).*

179 We have seen so much evidence of Peter's virtue that we cannot doubt that he believed. It is equally evident that John believed when he saw the Lord, especially when you consider that he already believed when he saw the tomb empty and the Body gone. Why then, does Luke say they were troubled? Firstly, because the generally held opinion envelops – so to speak – all the rest of the group. Also, even though he believed in the Resurrection, Peter could have been frightened on seeing the Lord bodily penetrating locked doors and solid walls. Luke, then, has followed each detail in chronological order. John is concerned with the *finale.* For when he says: *"Their minds were opened so that they could understand what had been written" (Lk 24:45)* he gives ample evidence that the disciples, too, believed.

180 We come now to the question of the Holy Spirit. Either the Lord breathed the Spirit into the Eleven as being the more perfect, and promised to bestow Him later on the other disciples, or He breathed here, and promised there *(cf.Lk 24:49).* I do not think there is any contradiction, since: *"there are diversities of gifts: to one is given the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another the gift of healing; to another the gift of tongues" (1 Co 12:4; 8-10).* Here He breathes into them one activity, elsewhere He promises another sort. There they were given the grace to forgive sins – which appears to be the more paramount grace *(cf.Jn 20:23);* and it is breathed on them by Christ. This is to enable you to believe that the Holy Spirit is Christ's Spirit; that the Holy Spirit comes from God; that God alone forgives sins.

Luke, on the other hand, describes the outpouring of the gift of tongues. So, too, you have here: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained".* Whereas, in the Acts, you read: *"And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit gave them to speak" (Ac 2:4).*

181 The diversity of apparitions has this significance: it shows what a multitude of angels wait upon the Lord – just as He told the disciples when He said: *"You shall see the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (Jn 1:51).*

And would to God that, having come to the end of this Gospel, I had also come to the end of my discourse!

182 But why, according to Matthew *(cf.Mt 28:10)* and Mark *(cf.Mk 14:28),* does He tell the disciples: *"I will go before you into Galilee. There you shall see Me" (Mt 28:10)*? For, according to Luke and John, He appeared to the disciples in the Cenacle, and there showed Himself to them. In fact, He appeared to them a number of times. We are also told that He appeared *"to more than five hundred disciples" (1 Co 15:5-7),* and to Peter and James – according to the same apostle's testimony *(cf.1 Co 15:5-7).* Luke tells us, in the Acts of the Apostles, that He showed Himself alive to the disciples *"after His Passion, by many proofs, for forty days appearing to them and speaking of the Kingdom of God" (Ac 1:3).* In short, He appeared frequently and He appeared to numbers of people. That is why Scripture does not inform us precisely of the day on which He was seen in Galilee. It does, however, tell us the actual day and hour that He showed Himself in Jerusalem. That is because, in the Cenacle, they were full of fears. But on the Mountain they were braver.

183 Finally, John shows us the disciples gathered together in the Cenacle with the doors locked for fear of the Jews *(cf.Jn 20:19).* Luke writes not that they were eleven in all, but more numerous *(cf.Lk 24:33).* Matthew declares that only the Eleven gathered in Galilee – here are his words: *"But the eleven disciples went into Galilee, to the Mountain where Jesus had told them to meet. When they saw Him, they adored. But some doubted." (Mt 28:16-17).* Jesus then gave them power to teach and to baptise. Mark also writes that at the end Jesus appeared to the

Eleven when they were at table, and that it was then that He charged them to preach to the entire world *(cf.Mk 16:14 sq.)*.

184 I shall tell you what I think. The Lord certainly told the disciples that they would see Him in Galilee; but fear kept them in the Cenacle. There He showed Himself to them the first time. But later, when they felt braver, the Eleven made their way to Galilee.

In all truth – and I find that this solution meets with the approval of the most diligent of writers – there can be no objection to saying that the disciples were fewer in the Cenacle, and more numerous on the Mountain.