

CHAPTER XVII

The Salutation Given to St. Elizabeth by the Queen of Heaven, and the Sanctification of St. John.

215. St. Elizabeth had completed the sixth month of her pregnancy, bearing in the grotto of her womb the future Precursor of Christ our Good, when the most holy Mother Mary arrived at the house of Zacharias. The body of the child John had already attained a state of great natural perfection, much greater than other children due to the miracle of his conception by a sterile mother and the intention of the Most High to make him the depository of greater sanctity than other men (Mt. 11:11). Yet at that time his soul was filled with the darkness of sin which he had contracted in the same way as the other children of Adam, the first and common father of the human race; and since according to the universal and general law mortals cannot receive the light of grace before they have issued forth to the material light of the sun, so after the first sin contracted by our nature (Rom. 5:12) the womb of the mother must serve as a dungeon or prison for all of us who have laden upon ourselves this guilt of Adam, our father and head. Christ our Lord resolved to anticipate this great blessing in his Prophet and Precursor by conferring the light of his grace and justification upon him six months after his conception by St. Elizabeth so he would be as privileged in sanctity as he was in his office of Precursor and Baptist.

216. After the first salutation of Elizabeth by most holy Mary the two cousins retired, as I have said at the end of the preceding chapter (212). And immediately the Mother of Grace saluted anew her cousin (Lk. 1:40), saying: "May God save thee, my dearest cousin, and may his divine light communicate to thee grace and life." At the sound of the voice of most holy Mary St. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost (Ib. 41), and so enlightened interiorly that in one instant she perceived the most exalted mysteries and sacraments. These effects, and those felt at the same time by the child John in the womb of his mother, were caused by the presence of the Word made flesh in the bridal chamber of the womb of Mary, for making use of her voice as his instrument He began from that place to use the power given to Him by the eternal Father for the salvation and justification of souls as their Repairer (Mt. 9:6). And since He now operated as man, his little body having been formed in the virginal womb only eight days before, He placed Himself (O wonder!) in a humble manner and posture in order to pray and beseech the Father. He petitioned and asked for the justification of his future Precursor, and obtained it from the most holy Trinity.

217. St. John was the third one for whom our Redeemer made special petition since his presence in the womb of his Mother. His Mother was the first for whom He rendered gratitude and prayed to the Father; next in order was her spouse St. Joseph, for whom the incarnate Word offered up his prayers, as we have said in chapter XII (147); and the third one was the Precursor St. John, whom the Lord mentioned by name in his prayers to the Father. Such was the great good fortune and privilege of St. John that Christ our Lord presented to the eternal Father the merits of his Passion and Death to be endured for men, and in view thereof He requested the sanctification of this soul. He appointed and set apart this child as one who was to be born holy as his Precursor and a witness of his coming into the world (Jn. 1:7), as one who was to prepare the hearts of his people so they could recognize and receive Him as the Messiah (Lk. 1:17). He ordained that for such an exalted ministry the Precursor would receive all the graces, gifts and favors which are befitting and proportionate to his office. All this the Father granted just as the humanity of his Onlybegotten petitioned.

218. This preceded the salutation and voice of most holy Mary. At the pronounciation of the words mentioned above God looked upon the child in the womb of St. Elizabeth and gave him perfect use of reason, enlightening him with his divine light so he could prepare himself by foreknowledge for the blessings which he was to receive. Together with this preparation he was sanctified from original sin, made an adopted son of God, and filled with the most abundant graces of the Holy Ghost and the plenitude of all his gifts. His faculties were sanctified, subjected and subordinated to reason, thus verifying in himself what the archangel Gabriel had said to Zacharias, that his son would be filled with the Holy Ghost from the womb of his mother (Ib. 15). At the same time the happy child from his place saw the incarnate Word, serving Him from the chamber of the womb as through walls of glass and the purest crystal of the bridal chamber of the womb of most holy Mary, and on his knees he adored his Creator and Redeemer. This was the movement of jubilation which was felt by his mother Elizabeth as coming from the infant in her womb (Ib. 44). Many other acts of virtue the child John performed during this blessed exchange, exercising faith, hope, charity, worship, gratitude, humility, devotion, and all the other virtues possible to him there. From that moment he began to merit and grow in sanctity without ever losing it and without ever ceasing to work with all the vigor of grace.

219. St. Elizabeth was instructed at the same time in the mystery of the Incarnation, the sanctification of her own son, and the sacramental purpose of this new wonder. She also became aware of the virginal purity and the dignity of most holy Mary. On this occasion the heavenly Queen, being absorbed in the vision of the Divinity and of the mysteries operated by it through her most holy Son, became entirely deified, filled with the clear light of the divine gifts in which She participated, and St. Elizabeth saw Her in this majesty; and as through most pure glass she saw the Word made man in the virginal chamber, as upon on a couch of burning and animated crystal. The efficacious instrument of all these wonderful effects was the voice of most holy Mary, as powerful as it was sweet in the hearing of the Lord. All this power was as it were only a participation of that which was contained in those powerful words *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* (Ib. 38) by which She had drawn the eternal Word from the bosom of the Father down to her soul and into her womb.

220. Filled with admiration at what she saw and heard regarding these divine mysteries St. Elizabeth was wholly moved with spiritual joy of the Holy Ghost, and looking upon the Queen of the world and what she saw in Her she burst forth in praise in a loud voice, pronouncing the words reported to us by St. Luke (1:42-5): *Blessed art Thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed art Thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to Thee by the Lord.* In these prophetic words St. Elizabeth rehearsed the noble privileges of most holy Mary, perceiving by the divine light what the power of the Lord had done in Her, what He now performed, and what He was to accomplish through Her in the time to come. All this the child John also perceived and understood while listening to the words of his mother, for she was enlightened for the purpose of his sanctification, and since he could not from his place in the womb bless and thank most holy Mary by word of mouth she both for herself and for her son extolled Her as being the instrument of their good fortune.

221. These words of praise pronounced by St. Elizabeth were referred by the Teacher of wisdom and humility to the Creator, and in the sweetest and softest voice She intoned the Magnificat as recorded by St. Luke (1:46-55).

46. *My soul doth magnify the Lord;*

47. *And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.*

48. *Because He hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.*

49. *Because He that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is his name.*

50. *And his mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear Him.*

51. *He hath shewed might in his arm; He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.*

52. *He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble.*

53. *He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away.*

54. *He hath received Israel his servant, being mindful of his mercy;*

55. *As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.*

222. Just as St. Elizabeth was the first one who heard this sweet canticle from the mouth of most holy Mary, so she was also the first one who understood it and by means of her infused knowledge commented upon it. She penetrated some of the great mysteries which its Authoress expressed therein in so few sentences. The soul of most holy Mary magnified the Lord for the excellence of his infinite being; to Him She referred and yielded all glory and praise (I Tim. 1:17; Apoc. 1:8), both as the beginning and the end of all her works. She knew and confessed that in God alone every creature should glory and rejoice, since He alone is their entire good and their salvation (II Cor. 10:17). She confessed also the equity and magnificence of the Most High in attending to the humble (Ps. 137:6) and placing in them his divine love and Spirit in abundance. She saw how worthy of mortals it is to perceive, understand and ponder the gifts that were conferred on the humility of Her whom all nations were to call blessed, and how all the humble ones, each one according to his degree, could share the same good fortune. By one word also She expressed all the mercies, benefits and blessings which the Almighty showered upon Her in his holy and wonderful Name, for She calls them altogether *great things*, for nothing was small regarding such an immense capacity and disposition as that possessed by this great Queen and Lady.

223. And as the mercies of the Most High overflowed from the plenitude of most holy Mary to the whole human race, and since She was the portal of heaven through which they issued and continue to issue, and through which we are to enter into the participation of the Divinity, therefore She confessed that the mercy of the Lord in regard to Her is spread out over all generations, communicating itself to those who fear Him. And just as the infinite mercies raise up the humble and seek out those who fear God, so also the powerful arm of divine justice scatters and destroys those who are proud in the disposition of their heart, and hurls them from their thrones in order to set in their place the poor and lowly. This justice of the Lord was exercised in wonderful splendor and glory upon Lucifer, the chief of all the proud, and his followers when the almighty arm of God scattered and hurled them (because they precipitated themselves) from their exalted seats (Is. 14; Apoc. 12) which befitted their angelic natures and their graces, and which they occupied according to the original decree of divine love, for by it He intended for all to be saved (I Tim. 2:4), while they, in trying to ascend in their vain pride to positions which they neither could attain nor should aspire to, on the contrary cast themselves from those which they occupied (Is. 14:13). In their arrogance they were found opposed to the just and inscrutable judgments of the Lord which scattered and cast down the proud angel and all his followers (Apoc. 12:8). In their place were installed the humble of heart through the mediation of most holy Mary, the Mother and the treasure house of his ancient mercies.

224. For the same reason this heavenly Lady says and proclaims that God enriches the needy, filling them with the abundance of his treasures of grace and glory; and those who are rich in their own estimation and presumptuous arrogance, and those who satisfy their heart with the false goods which the world esteems as riches and happiness, the Most High has banished and does banish from his presence, because they are void of the truth, which cannot enter into hearts filled and occupied with falsehood and deceit. He received his servants and his children, the people of Israel, remembering his mercies in order to teach them wherein prudence, truth and understanding, wherein free and abundant life and nourishment, wherein the light of the eyes and peace consist (Bar. 3:14). He taught them the way of prudence and the hidden paths of wisdom and discipline (Ib. 37), concealed from the princes of the gentiles and not known to the powerful who dominate over the beasts of the earth, and entertain themselves and play with the birds of the air, and heap up treasures of silver and gold (Ib. 16-18). Nor can the sons of Agar and the inhabitants of Theman, who are the wise and the proudly prudent of this world, ever attain this wisdom (Ib. 23). But to those who are children of the light, and sons of Abraham by faith (Gal. 3:7), hope and obedience, the Most High distributes it, for in this manner has it been promised to his posterity and his spiritual children, made secure by the blessed and happy fruit of the virginal womb of most holy Mary.

225. St. Elizabeth, looking upon Mary the Queen of creation, understood these hidden mysteries; and not only those which I am able to express here did this fortunate matron understand, but many more and greater sacraments which my understanding cannot reach, nor do I wish to dilate upon all that have been shown to me lest I unduly extend this History. But the sweet discourses and divine conferences which these two ladies and holy and prudent women, most holy Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, held with each other reminded me of the two Seraphim which Isaias saw above the throne of the Most High, repeating the divine and always new canticle, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, etc., while they covered their head with one pair of wings, their feet with another, and flew with the third pair (Is. 6:2-3). It is certain the inflamed love of these two holy women exceeded that of all the Seraphim, and most pure Mary alone loved more than all of them together. They were consumed in the flame of divine love, extending the two wings of their hearts in order to manifest to each other their love and soar into the most exalted intelligence of the mysteries of the Most High. With two more wings of rarest knowledge they covered their faces, because both of them discussed and contemplated the sacrament of the King (Tob. 12:7), guarding it within themselves all their lives, and also because they restrained their discourse and subjected it to their devoted faith without giving scope to proud inquisitiveness. They also covered the feet of the Lord and their own with the third pair of seraphic wings because they were lowered and annihilated in their own humble estimation of themselves at the sight of such a Majesty; moreover, since most holy Mary enclosed within her virginal womb the God of majesty Himself, we can with reason and all truth say She covered the throne upon which the Lord took his seat.

226. When it was time to come forth from their retirement St. Elizabeth offered herself, her whole family, and all her house for the service of the Queen of heaven. She asked Her to accept, as a quiet retreat, the room which she herself was accustomed to use for her prayers and which was much retired and accommodated to that purpose. The heavenly Princess accepted the chamber with humble gratitude and made use of it for recollecting Herself and sleeping therein, and no one ever entered it except the two cousins. As for the rest She offered to serve and assist Elizabeth as a handmaid, for She said this was the purpose of visiting her and consoling her. O what friendship is so true, so sweet and inseparable, as that which is formed by the great bond of

divine love! Admirable do I see the Lord in first manifesting this great sacrament of his Incarnation to three women rather than to any other of the human race! For the first was St. Anne, as I have said in its place (*Con.* 183); the second was her Daughter and the Mother of the incarnate Word, most holy Mary; and the third was St. Elizabeth and her son with her, yet in the womb of his mother so he cannot be considered as the third person to whom this was manifested. Thus *the foolishness of God is wiser than men*, as St. Paul says (I Cor. 1:25).

227. Most holy Mary and Elizabeth came forth from their retirement at nightfall, having passed a long time together. The Queen saw Zacharias standing before Her in his muteness, and She asked him for his blessing as from a priest of the Lord, which the Saint also gave to Her. Although She tenderly pitied him for his affliction, She did not exert her power to cure him because She knew the mysterious occasion of his muteness; yet She offered a prayer for him. St. Elizabeth, who already knew the good fortune of the most chaste spouse Joseph (though he himself was not as yet aware of it), entertained and served him with great reverence and highest esteem. After staying three days in the house of Zacharias he asked permission of his heavenly spouse Mary to return to Nazareth and leave Her in the company of St. Elizabeth in order to assist her in her pregnancy. The holy spouse left them with the understanding that he was to return in order to accompany the Queen home as soon as they would give him notice. St. Elizabeth offered him some presents to take home with him, but he would take only a small part of them, and this because of her insistence, for this man of God was not only a lover of poverty but had a magnanimous and noble heart. Thereupon he pursued his way back to Nazareth, taking along with him the little beast of burden which they had brought with them. At home in the absence of his Spouse he was served by a neighboring woman and cousin of his, who also when most holy Mary was at home was accustomed to come and go on the necessary errands outside of the house.

INSTRUCTION WHICH THE QUEEN HERSELF, OUR LADY, GAVE ME.

228. My daughter, so thy heart may be ever more and more inflamed with the desire of gaining the grace and friendship of God, I desire very much for thee to grow in the knowledge of the dignity, excellence and happiness of a soul who has been endowed with this privilege of sanctifying grace; however, remember it is so admirable and of such great value that thou canst not comprehend it even if I would explain it to thee, and much less canst thou express it in words. Look upon the Lord and contemplate Him by means of the divine light which thou receivest, and then thou shalt understand that the Lord performs a greater work in justifying a soul than in having created all the orbs of heaven and the whole earth with all the beauty and perfection contained within them. And if because of the wonders which creatures are able in part to perceive in these works by the senses they are impressed with the greatness and power of God (Rom. 1:20), what would they say and think if they could see with the eyes of their soul the preciousness and beauty of grace in so many creatures who are capable of receiving it?

229. There are no terms of human language equal to the task of expressing what participations and perfections of God are contained in sanctifying grace. It is little to say that it is more pure and spotless than the snow, more refulgent than the sun, more precious than gold or precious stones, more charming, more amiable and pleasing than all the most delightful feasts and entertainments, and more beautiful than all that in its entirety can be imagined or desired by the creatures. Take notice also of the ugliness of sin, that by the opposite thou mayest come to so much the better understanding of the beauty of grace, for neither darknesses, nor rottenness, nor

the most horrible, the most dreadful, nor the foulest of creatures can ever be compared to sin and to its ugliness. The Martyrs and Saints understood much of this mystery, who in order to secure the beauty of grace and preserve themselves from the ruin of sin did not fear fire, nor wild beasts, nor the sword, nor torments, nor prisons, ignominies, pains, afflictions, nor death itself, nor prolonged and perpetual suffering (Heb. 11:36-7); for all this is of little account, weighs less, is worth little, and is not worthy to be compared to even one degree of grace.* This and much more can be obtained by each soul, even the most outcast of the whole world. All this men ignore, who only esteem and seek after the fleeting and apparent beauty of creatures, and whatever does not have it is for them vile and contemptible.

230. Thus thou dost perceive something of the greatness of the blessing which the incarnate Word conferred upon his Precursor in the womb of his mother, for St. John upon recognizing it leaped for joy and exultation in the womb of his mother. Thou dost also see what thou thyself must do and suffer in order to attain this happiness and not lose or in the least impair this most precious beauty by any fault, nor retard its consummation by any imperfection, no matter how small. I desire thee in imitation of my cousin Elizabeth to not enter into any friendship with any human creatures except those with whom thou canst and must converse about the works of the Most High and his mysteries, and with whom thou canst learn to pursue the true path of his divine pleasure. Although thou art engaged in important undertakings and works, do not forget or omit thy spiritual exercises and the strictness of a perfect life, for this must not only be preserved and watched over when all things go smoothly but also under the greatest adversity, difficulty and labor, for imperfect human nature takes occasion of the slightest circumstance to relax its vigilance.

* cf. I Cor. 13:3 [Ed.]