

THE NATIVITY OF MARY
Loving God First
The Wisdom of God in a Mystery

The Nativity of Mary – September 8th
September 8, 2017
Revision C

GOSPEL: Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28
EPISTLE: Philippians 2:5-11

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Introduction to the Life of the Virgin Mary

The primary importance of the Virgin Mary to the Church is the Incarnation. Because of this, the Virgin Mary is usually portrayed in iconography as holding her young Son. The message proclaimed by the icon is that God has come in the flesh, and here is proof: His mother holding her Son. There are aspects of the life of the Virgin Mary that are not very commonly known from an historical viewpoint. The significance of some of the events in the life of the Virgin Mary, including her place among the saints in glory, is covered quite well in a book on the life of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Apostles Convent¹, which is recommended for further reading.

One can divide up the life of the Virgin Mary into four parts, each of which produced major changes in her life. These four periods of her life are described below: Parts I and IV use historical writings as their primary source with Scriptural references woven in where appropriate. Parts II and III use Scriptural references as a primary source and supplement this with historical writings for clarification.

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¹ Holy Apostles Convent, [The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos](#), Buena Vista, Colo. 81211.

	DATES	PERIOD	FEAST DAY
Part I	20 BC to 5 BC	Birth to Annunciation	Nativity of Mary; Presentation of Mary
Part II	5 BC to 1 BC	Annunciation to Infancy of Jesus	Annunciation
Part III	1 BC to 30 AD	Jesus' Life & Ministry	See Appendix B
Part IV	30 AD to 55 AD	Pentecost to Her Death	Dormition of Mary

Figure I is a family tree of the Lord Jesus in the flesh. This was pieced together primarily from the Prologue from Ochrid² which is a collection of brief accounts of the lives of the saints that originated in the Macedonian churches in the 1st Century and that has been added to over the years. Butler's Lives of the Saints³ is a similar work that came from the Church of Rome and that was started by Clement of Rome also in the 1st Century. The goal of both of these sources is that future generations might not forget the price that was paid by their forefathers in establishing the Faith.

The Life of the Virgin Mary Up to Her Entry into the Temple

Figure I will be referred to from time to time to aid in understanding events in the life of the Virgin Mary. In each of the four parts, when historical references are used, only the most commonly available ones will be footnoted in cases where many refer to the same events.

Mary's Parents

One major distinguishing characteristic about the lives of the Virgin Mary and her parents is their love of God and their devotion to Him first and foremost. This can be seen from historical accounts of their lives.

The Virgin Mary's father, Joachim, was from the tribe of Judah, was a native of Nazareth, and was a descendant of King David. Mary's mother, Anna (Hebrew: *Hannah*) was the daughter of Matthan the priest (Figure 1) and was a descendant⁴ of Aaron the High Priest. According to 1st Century writings, Joachim was a shepherd by occupation and was very wealthy from owning large herds of sheep. In humbleness of heart, Joachim had the practice⁵ of offering more than the Mosaic Law required. One third of his income he gave to the Temple as his tithe, one third he gave to orphans, widows, strangers and the poor, and one third he kept for himself.

According to the Mosaic Law, a tenth (i.e. a tithe) was to be devoted to the Lord and was used to support the priests and Levites (Numbers 18:20-24), a second tithe was used for the festivals (Deuteronomy 12:12-19), and a third tithe every three years was set aside for the orphans, widows, strangers and Levites (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-13). The Lord had

² Nickolai Velimirovic, *Prologue from Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986.

³ Thurston & Attwater, *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, Christian Classics, Westminster, MD, 1990.

⁴ Nickolai Velimirovic, *Prologue from Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, September 9.

⁵ Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew", *Ante Nicene Fathers*, v.8.

Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v.8

promised that if people were faithful in doing this, He would open the windows of heaven and bless His people in the land (Deuteronomy 26:12-15, Malachi 3:8-10). The more Joachim gave, the more the Lord blessed him. While the Lord's blessing was strong on Joachim and Anna, there was one aspect where it was not: they were unable to have children⁶.

Just as Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel, was ridiculed for being unable to have children (1 Samuel 1:1-10), so Joachim and Anna were ridiculed too. People assumed that because the Lord's blessing was absent in this part of their lives, that there was some secret sin. To see an example of this assumption, the man born blind was assumed to have sinned, either he or his parents (John 9:2-3). In the case of Joachim and Anna, around the time of their 50th wedding anniversary, the high priest publicly refused to accept their offering⁷, calling them cursed when they came to present their offerings in accordance with the Law.

The Conception of Mary

Joachim and Anna returned to Nazareth and retired separately for prayer and fasting with many tears. Joachim spent his time in the remote hill country with his flocks while Anna prayed in the garden of their home. Both prayed separately that the Lord would work in them the wonder that He had done with Abraham and Sarah. And they separately agreed that they would dedicate the child to the Lord⁸ as Hannah did with Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11-2:11).

When Joachim went to the hills to pray, he did not intend to return until the Lord answered his prayer. Knowing this, Anna prayed and wept, mourning both her barrenness, her reproach among the people and her imminent widowhood. During this time of fasting and prayer, an angel appeared first to Joachim, then to Anna telling them (1) that their charitable deeds have gone up into God's presence, (2) that their shame among men in the face of righteous living had not gone unnoticed and (3) that the Lord was going to answer their prayers. As a sign of this, the angel instructed Joachim and Anna separately to leave Nazareth and go to Jerusalem immediately. When they got there, they would meet each other by the Golden Gate of the city. The angel went on to say that the child to be born (Mary) would be filled with the Holy Spirit from her mother's womb and her life would be exemplary among her peers⁹. This is very similar to the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the priest Zachariah concerning the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:4-23).

Anna and Joachim hurried to Jerusalem without knowing that the other had seen the angel also. Anna arrived first and waited for a long time before Joachim arrived driving a large herd: 10 lambs for the Lord, 10 calves for the priests and elders and 100 goats for the people who had ridiculed him¹⁰. Since this was not a prescribed offering but a freewill offering, which even Gentiles could offer, the high priest could not refuse (Leviticus 17:8). An interesting

⁶ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue from Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, September 9.

⁷ Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew", Ante Nicene Fathers, v.8.

Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary", Ante-Nicene Fathers, v.8

⁸ Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew", Ante Nicene Fathers, v.8.

Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary", Ante-Nicene Fathers, v.8

Roberts & Donaldson, "The Protevangelium of James", Ante-Nicene Fathers, v.8

⁹ Roberts & Donaldson, "The Protevangelium of James", Ante-Nicene Fathers, v.8

¹⁰ Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary", Ante-Nicene Fathers, v.8

Roberts & Donaldson, "The Protevangelium of James", Ante-Nicene Fathers, v.8

teaching in a similar vein by the Lord 45 years later involved loving one's enemies and doing good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27-36).

When they saw each other, Joachim and Anna rejoiced greatly. The next day, they offered their offerings and returned home to Nazareth together. When it was heard that Anna had conceived, all their neighbors and acquaintances rejoiced also and the whole land of Israel congratulated them¹¹.

From the above account, there was no more of an "immaculate conception" of Mary than there was of John the Baptist. As a further illustration of the similarity of the birth of Mary to the birth of John, an icon of the Virgin with her Child and an icon of John are conspicuously displayed at the front of all Orthodox churches: John next to the Lord on His left; Mary on the other side of the altar on His right.

The Birth of Mary

The birth or nativity of Mary is celebrated in the Orthodox Church as one of the twelve major feast days of the Church Year. In this context, the Church Year begins September 1st and the first major event is the Nativity of Mary on September 8th, emphasizing the Incarnation, followed quickly by the feast day of the Exaltation of the Cross, on September 14th, emphasizing the Cross in our lives.

The Lord had said, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37-38). Joachim and Anna certainly had to bear their cross prior to Mary's birth. And as will be seen in the study of the feast day of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, they did not hold back on their vow to dedicate Mary to the Lord's service. Beginning at the age of three, Mary began a celibate life of serving the Lord in the Temple in company with such notables as the Prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36-38), the Righteous Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and the future Apostle Matthias¹².

Mary was born c.19 BC after a normal 9-month pregnancy. According to the Mosaic Law, Anna came to the Temple 80 days after giving birth to Mary for the rite of purification (Leviticus 12:2-8). At this time she gave her child the name Mary (Hebrew *Miriam*, just like Aaron's sister.) Some discrepancy exists in early literature as to Mary's birthplace: some say Nazareth; others say Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate. For a man as wealthy as Joachim, it is quite possible he had homes in both locations. However, his primary residence seems to be Nazareth.

Anna made her infant daughter's bedchamber into a miniature copy of the Holy Place, like a sanctuary, and permitted nothing common or unclean to come near her. She also invited certain young virgins into her home to help care for and play with Mary¹³. She was thus

¹¹ Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v.8
Roberts & Donaldson, "The Protevangelium of James", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v.8

¹² Nickolai Velimirovic, *Prologue From Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, August 9. Matthias was a student of the Righteous Simeon at that time.

¹³ Holy Apostles Convent, *The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos*, Buena Vista, Colo. 81211, p. 19.

preparing Mary for the time when she would dedicate her daughter to the Lord's service as Hannah did the young Samuel.

According to Mosaic Law, the firstborn males received a blessing on the fortieth day after birth (Leviticus 12:2-4). This didn't apply to Mary; instead, Joachim invited the priests, scribes, elders and all the people to a feast at the first anniversary of Mary's birth. Everyone recognized Mary's birth as a Divine event, just as they did regarding the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:64-66), and a celebration was well-received. At this occasion, Mary was blessed¹⁴ by the priests and chief priests with the words "O God of our fathers, look upon this child and bless her with the utmost blessing which shall be an everlasting blessing, and give her an everlasting name throughout all generations". And all the people replied "Amen".

The Entry of Mary into the Temple

When Mary reached the age of three and was weaned¹⁵, the time came for her to be dedicated to the Lord's service just as Hannah dedicated the Prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1:21-2:11). This occasion was celebrated with considerable pageantry and ceremony and today the Orthodox Church celebrates this as another of the Twelve Major Feasts of the Church Year.

As part of the ceremony at the Temple, Mary was accompanied by a number of young virgins who had been her attendants. The chief priest was Zachariah who would later become the father of John the Baptist. The year was c.16 BC and there was some construction of the Temple going on as King Herod was financing major renovations. As Joachim and Anna presented their daughter to Zachariah as to the Lord, Zachariah was filled with the Spirit and said "Mary, the Lord God has magnified your name to all generations and, by you, to the very end of time, the Lord will show His Redemption to the children of Israel"¹⁶. With many other words Zachariah prophesied and rejoiced; then he led young Mary into the Temple¹⁷ with the other virgins.

For the next 7 years, Joachim and Anna visited young Mary often until they died. Joachim was 80 and Anna 79 when Mary was orphaned¹⁸. During the construction of the new Temple, Herod had trained 1000 priests to be masons since only priests could enter the house and the inner court. At the time of Mary's entry into the Temple, the central part was completed but much construction was still underway. According to Josephus¹⁹, however, the Ark of the Covenant was not in the Holy of Holies at any time during this period. Presumably it had been carried away by the Babylonians or by some priests prior to the Babylonian invasion and not returned.

Thus for both Mary and her parents, their lives were a demonstration of how one should love God first (Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37-40), even in the face of difficulty.

¹⁴ Roberts & Donaldson, ed. "The Protevangelium of James", Chapter 6, in Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 8.

¹⁵ Hebrew mothers nursed their babies longer than modern women; see 2 Maccabees 7:27, 1 Samuel 1:24.

¹⁶ Roberts & Donaldson, "The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary", Ante-Nicene Fathers, v.8

¹⁷ Matins Canon, Ode 1, Tone 2, by Basil the monk, as cited in Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, Buena Vista, Colo. 81211, p. 49.

¹⁸ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue from Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, September 9

¹⁹ Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book V, v, 5, 119.

Parables from the Old Testament

The birth of Mary began a process of revealing a mystery to mankind. “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7-9). But as it is written: “Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (Isaiah 64:4).

Proverbs 9:1-11: Wisdom Built Her House

This reading is used for the Nativity of Mary, the Annunciation and the Dormition, and speaks of Wisdom building her house. The reading begins with Wisdom building her house (Proverbs 9:1) and goes on to say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). Yet it wasn't until after the Resurrection that it was revealed how extensive the house was that Wisdom built.

Gregory of Nyssa stated that the heretics of his day cited Proverbs, “The Lord created me in the beginning of His ways, for His works” (Proverbs 8:22 LXX) to say that Christ was created by the Father, and is therefore a lesser God. Besides quoting this out of context (the “creating” was from eternity past), Gregory pointed out²⁰ that Solomon was addressing the Incarnation²¹, the “creating” of the human flesh of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

The Wisdom that built herself a house is not mere human wisdom. “Wisdom” refers to God as something eternal, not something Christ acquired as either created or imported. The “house” that Wisdom built was the body of the Virgin Mary, where Wisdom lived for nine months.

“In saying, ‘Wisdom has built herself a house’ (Proverbs 9:1), he refers in these words to the preparation of the flesh of the Lord. Wisdom did not dwell in another’s building, but built for Itself that dwelling-place from the body of the Virgin. Both are made one, the house and the Wisdom which built the house; that is, the Humanity and the Divinity that was commingled with man. To each of these he applies suitable and fitting terms, as in the Gospels, where the more lofty and divine phraseology indicates the Godhead, and that which is humble and lowly indicates the Manhood. Solomon, prophetically moved, delivers to us in its fullness the mystery of the Incarnation. For we speak first of the eternal power and energy of Wisdom; and here the evangelist, to a certain extent, agrees with him in his words. As the evangelist proclaimed Him to be the cause and Maker of all things, so Solomon says that by Him were made those individual things, which are included in the whole. For he tells us that God by Wisdom established the earth, and in understanding prepared the heavens, and all that follows these in order, keeping to the same sense. That he might not seem to pass over without

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, Against Eunomius, III, 2.

²¹ For other teaching on the same subject, see:

Leo the Great, Letter to Flavian, XXVIII, 2.

Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, Chapter 2.

Athanasius of Alexandria, Four Discourses Against the Arians, II, xix, 44, 47, 50.

mention the gift of excellence in men, he goes on to say, speaking in the person of Wisdom, the words, ‘I made counsel my dwelling-place, and knowledge, and understanding’ (Proverbs 8:12 LXX), and all that relates to instruction in intellect and knowledge. After recounting these and the like matters, he proceeds to introduce also his teaching concerning the dispensation with regard to man, why the Word was made flesh”.

Gregory of Nazianzen summarized²² the implications of the number seven representing perfection, where Solomon had said, “Wisdom has built a house for herself, and set up seven pillars” (Proverbs 9:1). Hippolytus stated²³ that the seven pillars, on which Wisdom rests (Proverbs 9:1), refers to the sevenfold unity of the Holy Spirit as stated by Isaiah (Isaiah 11:2), where the context is the New Jerusalem. That is, the Holy Spirit represents:

Resting	Wisdom	Understanding	Counsel
Might	Knowledge	Fear of the Lord	

Clement of Alexandria noted²⁴ that it was Wisdom Who sent her servants to invite everyone, with a loud proclamation, to a goblet of wine. The precursor to Wisdom, philosophy, had learned something of the truth, but didn’t abide in it. Therefore, Christ stated that all who came before Him were thieves and robbers (John 10:8).

Gregory of Nyssa stated²⁵ that the invitation from Wisdom to eating bread and drinking wine has eternal dimensions for both the righteous and the wicked. But it takes a wise man to understand this.

“But someone perhaps will say that man will not be returning to the same form of life²⁶; that is, if we now exist by eating, and will not have to eat when the Lord returns. However, when I hear the Holy Scripture, I do not understand only bodily meat, or the pleasure of the flesh. I recognize another kind of food also, having a certain analogy to that of the body, the enjoyment of which extends to the soul alone. ‘Eat of my bread’ (Proverbs 9:5), is the bidding of Wisdom to the hungry; and the Lord declares those blessed who hunger for such food as this. He said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink’ (John 7:37); ‘drink joy’ (Isaiah 12:3 LXX) is the great Isaiah’s charge to those who are able to hear his sublimity. There is a prophetic threatening also against those worthy of vengeance, that they shall be punished with famine. But the ‘famine’ is not a lack of bread and water, but a failure of the word; ‘not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the word of the Lord’” (Amos 8:11 LXX).

²² Gregory Nazianzen, Oration on Pentecost, XLI, 3.

²³ Hippolytus, “Commentary on Proverbs”, Fragments from Commentaries on Various Books, Part I, Exegetical.

²⁴ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, I, 17.

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man, XIX, 1.

²⁶ That is, when the Lord returns in glory.

Cyprian of Carthage, referring to those who used water in the chalice for the Lord's Supper, stated²⁷ that Solomon foretold the Lord's Table, where water mingled with wine was used from the beginning.

“Solomon declares the wine mingled, that is, he foretells with prophetic voice the cup of the Lord mingled with water and wine²⁸, that it may appear that this was done in our Lord's passion, which had been before predicted”.

For example, Paul wrote that he was privileged to help to “make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things through Jesus Christ. Now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the Church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:9,10). Paul also said, “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew. For had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7,8). This Wisdom of God involved the Cross, and it became a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness for Greeks. For those who were called, however, the Wisdom of God was also the Power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18-24). All this began with the Incarnation. From the history of the life of the Virgin Mary, we see that there is considerable wisdom also associated with the simple humility of the Lord's mother. She was involved in everything the Lord did, even from before He was born (Luke 1:41), and treasured these things in her heart (Luke 2:19, 51). Hers may have been a lowly, humble state, but she certainly has been called blessed over the centuries (Luke 1:48).

Genesis 28:10-17: Jacob's Ladder

This reading is used for the Nativity of Mary, the Annunciation and the Dormition, and is the account of Jacob's ladder. Jacob was en route to Mesopotamia, where Abraham had come from, to seek a wife from among his kinsmen. One night, he had a dream of a ladder that was set on the earth but whose top reached to heaven, where the Lord was standing at the top of the ladder. And the angels of God were ascending and descending on the ladder. When Jacob awoke, he cried, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17).

Jerome noted that Jacob was born into a wealthy family, but he had left this wealth behind when he had the vision of the ladder to heaven. Jerome's implication is that as we leave our worldly cares behind, we also get a glimpse of the Gate of Heaven.

“Jacob's father was²⁹ a man of great wealth; yet, when Jacob went to Mesopotamia, he went alone and destitute. When he felt weary he had to lie down by the wayside and, delicately nurtured as he had been by his mother Rebekah, was forced to content himself with a stone for a pillow. Yet it was then that he saw the ladder set up from earth to heaven, and the angels ascending and descending on it”.

“Jacob, in his flight³⁰ from his brother, left behind in his father's house great riches and made his way with nothing into Mesopotamia. The lesson being

²⁷ Cyprian, Epistles, LXII, 5. See also Athanasius of Alexandria, Festal Letters, VII, 5.

²⁸ In the Orthodox Liturgy, the Eucharist is served in a common cup, where the wine is mixed with a little water.

²⁹ Jerome, Letter to Julian, CXVIII, 7.

³⁰ Jerome, Letter to Ageruchia, CXXIII, 15.

taught is that the sinner must not despair of salvation nor the righteous man rest secure in his virtue”.

Jerome continued that the ladder represents our walk in the Christian Faith. The Lord beckons from the top and the angels help along the way. The foot of the ladder on earth is the House of God, which is the gate of heaven. Even holy men can lose their footing, and sinners can regain their place.

“The Lord was at the top³¹ holding out a helping hand to such as fall and encouraging the climbers to fresh efforts by the vision of Himself. Therefore the spot is called Bethel or the house of God; for there, day by day there is ascending and descending. When they are careless, even holy men lose their footing; and sinners, if they wash away their stains with tears, regain their place. I say this not that those coming down may frighten you, but that those going up may stimulate you”.

“In the lives of Christians³² we look not to the beginnings but to the endings. Paul began badly but ended well. The start of Judas wins praise; his end is condemned because of his treachery. Read Ezekiel: ‘The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression; as for the wickedness of the wicked he shall not fall thereby in the day that he turns from his wickedness’ (Ezekiel 33:12). The Christian life is the true Jacob’s ladder on which the angels ascend and descend (Genesis 28:12), while the Lord stands above it holding out His hand to those who slip and sustaining by the vision of Himself the weary steps of those who ascend. While He does not wish the death of a sinner, but only that he should be converted and live, He hates the lukewarm (Revelation 3:16) and they quickly cause him loathing”.

Hilary of Poitiers stated³³ that Jacob’s dream was not a bodily manifestation, but the foreshadowing of the Gospel mystery, where his vision would become revealed truth. It is only through God the Son that God the Father can be apprehended.

“The Law, in its progress, follows the sequence of the Gospel mystery, of which it is the shadow; its types are a faithful anticipation of the truths taught by the Apostles. In the vision of his dream, the blessed Jacob saw God; this was the revelation of a mystery, not a bodily manifestation. He was shown the descent of angels by the ladder, and their ascent to heaven, and God resting above the ladder. The vision, as it was interpreted, foretold that his dream should some day become a revealed truth. The Patriarch’s words, ‘The house of God and the gate of heaven’ (Genesis 28:17), show us the scene of his vision. Then, after a long account of what he did, the narrative proceeds: God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, return to Bethel, and dwell there, and make a Sacrifice to God’ (Genesis 35:1). The faith of the Gospel has access through God the Son to God the Father, and it is only through God that God can be apprehended”.

³¹ Jerome, Letter to Julian, CXVIII, 7.

³² Jerome, Letter to Furia, LIV, 6.

³³ Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, V, 20.

John Chrysostom stated that we can get to heaven by understanding Jacob's ladder and taking it one step at a time. The ladder is a riddle indicating a gradual ascent by means of virtue. We attain to heaven, not using material steps, but by improvement and correction.

“Let us learn³⁴ then, and having reckoned up our faults, let us accomplish their correction in time, and let us determine to correct one this month, another next month, and a third in that which follows. Mounting as it were by steps, let us get to heaven by a Jacob's ladder. For the ladder seems to me to signify in a riddle by that vision the gradual ascent by means of virtue, by which it is possible for us to ascend from earth to heaven, not using material steps, but improvement and correction of manners. Let us then lay hold on this means of departure and ascent, that having obtained heaven, we may also enjoy all the blessings there”.

Chrysostom also stated³⁵ that upward movement on the ladder results in greater understanding of the mysteries of God, such as the Incarnation. The lower rungs describe the birth of children to barren women in the Old Testament, which foreshadowed the Virgin birth at higher rungs. The lower rungs also speak of a plurality in the Godhead (Genesis 1:26); this foreshadows the Incarnation, where God begot by Himself.

“Even the things of old stood in need of forerunners and types. For as in a ladder, the first step sends on to the second, and from the first it is not possible to step to the fourth. It is not possible to get to the second before the first”.

“Observe the signs of signs, and you will discern this in the ladder which Jacob saw. ‘The Lord stood at the top, and underneath angels were ascending and descending’ (Genesis 28:13). It was prophesied that the Father had a Son; it was necessary this should be believed. We can see this from above, downward, or from beneath, upward. Because He begets without passion³⁶, for this reason did she that was barren first bear. It was necessary to be believed, that He begot of Himself. The thing happens obscurely, as in type and shadow, but still it happens, and as it goes on it becomes somehow clearer. A woman is formed out of man alone, and the man remains whole and entire (Genesis 2:21-23). Again, it was necessary there should be some sure sign of the Conception of a Virgin. So the barren bear, not once only, but a second time and a third, and many times (Genesis 21:1-8, 30:22-23, 1 Samuel 1:11-20). Of His birth of a Virgin, the barren is a type, and she sends the mind forward to faith. This was a type of God being able to beget alone. For if man is required, and birth takes place without him, in a more excellent way, One is begotten by God Himself. There is still another generation, which is a type of the Truth, i.e. ours by the Spirit. Of this again the barren is a type, and the fact that it is not of blood (John 1:13) pertains to the generation from above. The Virgin Mary, as also the types, shows that the generation is to be without passion and that it would proceed from one above”.

The Virgin Mary, in her understanding, her enlightenment and her humility illustrated the workings of Jacob's ladder. Just as the ladder connected heaven and earth, so did the Virgin Mary. And just as Jacob saw angels ascending and descending on the ladder, so there was a

³⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXXXIII, 5.

³⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Colossians, V, v. 5.

³⁶ For an explanation of this, see Athanasius of Alexandria, Four Discourses Against the Arians, I, viii, 28.

strong angelic presence around the Lord and His mother everywhere they went. Even Satan recognized this in quoting from the Psalms, “He shall give His angels charge over You (to guard You in all Your ways); in their hands they shall bear You up lest You dash Your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:11-12). Following this encounter with Satan, angels came and ministered to Jesus (Matthew 4:11).

Around the Throne of God in heaven, angels continually surround the Lord (Revelation 4). The Tabernacle in the wilderness pictured this. Cherubim were embroidered into the veil (Exodus 26:31, 36:35, 2 Chronicles 3:14) and the Presence of God dwelt between two cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18-22, 37:6-9, 2 Chronicles 10:13). Just because the Lord took up residence on earth in the womb of the Virgin doesn’t mean the angels disappeared. For nine months, the House of God was the womb of the Virgin, and heaven and earth met there.

Ezekiel 43:27-44:4: The East Gate

This reading is used for the Nativity of Mary, the Annunciation, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, and the Dormition, and is a little less obvious than the others. Ezekiel’s vision took place during the Babylonian captivity (Ezekiel 40:1). Ezekiel saw a vision of some future Temple and he described this Temple at length including its dimensions. This Temple was to be “the place of My Throne and the place of the soles of My feet where I will dwell among the sons of Israel forever” (Ezekiel 43:7). Ezra and Nehemiah did not incorporate these dimensions into the Temple that they rebuilt after the captivity (Ezra 7:1-3), and neither did King Herod incorporate them into his reconstruction beginning about 20 BC. In fact, there is not even adequate room on the “Temple Mount” in Jerusalem to accommodate the dimensions given to Ezekiel³⁷. So the imagery in Ezekiel’s vision must refer to something else.

The parable used for these feast days only addresses the East Gate of the Temple, which in Herod’s Temple was the only gate into the Temple area. The East Gate opened onto the Garden of Gethsemane, the Kidron Valley, and the Mount of Olives. In Ezekiel’s vision, the Glory of the Lord came into the house by the East Gate (Ezekiel 43:4). Ezekiel was told, “This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut” (Ezekiel 44:2). The question about this passage is when was the East Gate permanently shut? There is no record of this occurring during or after the time of Christ; and “the Glory of the Lord” is unlikely to refer to anyone else.

The East Gate in Ezekiel’s vision speaks of the Incarnation, where the East Gate represented the womb of the Virgin Mary. And as the East Gate was shut in Ezekiel’s vision, so the Virgin Mary remained a virgin her entire life according to her vow and the vow of her parents. Jerome stated³⁸ this very emphatically. She is the East Gate through whom God entered at the Incarnation, and through whom He was born as a man. As the East Gate, she reveals the Presence of God.

“Christ Himself is a virgin; and His mother is also a virgin; though she is His mother, she is a virgin still. Jesus has entered in through the closed doors, and in His sepulcher no man is laid either before Him or after Him (John 19:41). Mary is ‘a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed’ (Song of Solomon 4:12), and that

³⁷ See Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 9, p. 392.

³⁸ Jerome, Letters, XLVIII, 21.

fountain flows from the House of the Lord (Joel 3:18) to water the Valley of Acacias. She is the East Gate, always shut (Ezekiel 44:1-3) and always shining, and either concealing or revealing the Holy of Holies. Through her 'the Sun of Righteousness' (Malachi 4:2), our 'high priest after the order of Melchizedek' (Hebrew 5:10), goes in and out. Let my critics explain to me how Jesus can have entered in through closed doors when He allowed His hands and His side to be handled. He showed that He had bones and flesh (John 20:19-27), thus proving that His was a true body and no mere phantom of one. Similarly, I will explain how the holy Mary can be at once a mother and a virgin. She was a mother before she was wedded; she remained a virgin after bearing her Son. Therefore, the virgin Christ and the virgin Mary have dedicated in themselves the first fruits of virginity for both sexes. The Apostles have either been virgins or, though married, have lived celibate lives".

John Cassian, quoting the writings of Jerome, concurred³⁹ that the Virgin Mary is the East Gate spoken of by Ezekiel. Cassian also connected the writings of Solomon on Wisdom building a house to the Incarnation.

"Jerome, the Teacher of the Catholics, whose writings shine like divine lamps throughout the whole world, says⁴⁰ in his book to Eustochium: 'For our salvation the Son of God is made the Son of Man. Nine months He awaits His birth in the womb, undergoes the most revolting conditions, and comes forth covered with blood, to be swathed in rags and covered with caresses. He who shuts up the world in His fist is contained in the narrow limits of a manger'. Again in his commentary on Isaiah: 'For the Lord of hosts, who is the King of glory, Himself descended into the Virgin's womb, and entered in and went forth from the East Gate which is always shut' (Ezekiel 44:2). Of whom Gabriel says to the Virgin: 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you. Therefore that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God' (Luke 1:35). And in Proverbs: 'Wisdom has built herself a house' (Proverbs 9:1). Compare this with your doctrine or rather your blasphemy, in which you assert that God is the Creator of the months, and was not an offspring of nine months. For Jerome, a man of the greatest knowledge and also of the most pure and approved doctrine, says that He waited nine months in the womb to be born. Whoever admits that the Son of God is the offspring of the Virgin, admits that He is the offspring of nine months".

³⁹ John Cassian, Seven Books on the Incarnation, VII, 26.

⁴⁰ Jerome, Letters, XXII, 39.

The Wisdom of God in a Mystery
Mary: a Model of Humility

September 8, 2017
Revision C

Epistle: Philippians 2:5-11

The Epistle lesson used for the Nativity of Mary and the Dormition is Philippians 2:5-11. In this passage, Paul was encouraging the Philippians to be like Christ who, although exalted in heaven as God, “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a slave (in the Incarnation) and coming in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7). Not just this, but then “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:8). We see His humility aptly illustrated in the Garden of Gethsemane when Peter cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant trying to defend Jesus. Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “Do you think I cannot now pray to My Father and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53). This was truly humbling Himself to the point of death on the cross. He didn’t have to do that, but chose to do so for our sake.

And as a result, God has highly exalted Him “that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth” (Philippians 2:10). Jesus spoke of the Cross as being His glorification; he compared it to a grain of wheat falling into the ground, dying and producing much grain (John 12:23-24). This glorification, of course, refers to His humanity; He has always been glorified in His Deity.

Mary’s humility, like that of her Son is illustrated in the Matins Gospel for the Nativity, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, the Annunciation and the Dormition (Luke 1:39-49, 56). This text describes Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, after the Annunciation. This reading and Gabriel’s greeting to Mary preceding the Matins Gospel illustrate Mary’s deep humility.

John Chrysostom spoke⁴¹ of true humility by taking the example of Christ, who laid aside the glory He had with the Father, took on flesh and suffered an accursed death for those He loved.

“I consider it more desirable to suffer evil for Christ’s sake, than to receive honor at Christ’s hands⁴². This is transcendent honor, this is glory that surpasses all things. If He Himself, who became a servant for my sake, and ‘emptied’ His glory (Philippians 2:7), thought Himself truly in glory, when He was crucified for my sake, what can I not endure? For hear His own words: ‘Father, glorify Your Son’ (John 17:1). What is this You are saying? You are being led to the cross with thieves and grave robbers; You endure the death of the accursed; You are about to be spit upon and punched; and You call this glory? Yes, He says, for I suffer these things for My beloved ones, and I count these things altogether glory. He who loved the miserable and wretched calls this glory, not to be on the throne

⁴¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians*, VIII.

⁴² This is something to pause and reflect about. In Christian circles today, people tend to magnify their ministry, which is an honor that they have received from God. Rarely does anyone in Christian circles today speak of a desirability to suffer evil for Christ’s sake.

of His Father, nor in His Father's glory, but in dishonor. If this was His glory, and if this He set before the other; much more ought I to regard these things as glory”.

Clement of Alexandria wrote⁴³ that true beauty comes when the flesh takes its proper place as a servant to the soul. This is true humility, and is illustrated by the Lord's emptying Himself.

“The flesh is a slave to the soul, as Paul testifies; how can anyone with any reason adorn the handmaid like a pimp? For that which is of flesh has the form of a servant. Paul says, speaking of the Lord, ‘He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant’ (Philippians 2:7), calling the outward man a servant, prior to the Lord wearing flesh. But the compassionate God Himself set the flesh free, released it from destruction and from bitter and deadly bondage, endowed it with incorruptibility, and arrayed the flesh in immortality, the holy embellishment of eternity”.

John Chrysostom commented⁴⁴ on Paul's words to Timothy, where he said that the proud might be knowledgeable, but actually know nothing (1 Timothy 6:4). Everything we have, we received from God, not from ourselves.

“He that knows the doctrines of godliness is also the most disposed to moderation. An inflammation of arrogance in the body comes from pride in the soul. And as we do not say that the inflamed part of the body is sound, so neither do we consider the arrogant to be sound. It is possible then to be knowing, and yet to know nothing. For he that doesn't know what he ought to know, knows nothing. And that pride arises from knowing nothing is clear from this: Christ ‘made Himself of no reputation’ (Philippians 2:7); he therefore who knows this will not be high-minded. Man has nothing except from God; therefore he will not be high-minded. ‘And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive *it*, why do you boast as if you had not received it?’” (1 Corinthians 4:7)

Gregory the Great wrote⁴⁵ to Shepherds in the Church about how best to admonish those under them whether they are humble or haughty. To the humble, like the Virgin Mary, he suggested that the Shepherds emphasize how true the excellence of humility is. To the haughty he suggested that they consider how their temporal glory is as nothing, and even when embracing it they don't hold it. Gregory set his suggestions in a series of contrasts; following are his admonitions for the humble:

- Let the humble hear how eternal are the things that they long for, how transitory the things that they despise.
- Let the humble hear from the authoritative voice of the Truth. ‘Everyone that humbles himself shall be exalted (Luke 18:14).

⁴³ Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, III, 1.

⁴⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XVII.

⁴⁵ Gregory the Great, The Book of Pastoral Rule, III, 17.

- Let the humble hear, ‘Humility goes before glory’ (Proverbs 16:18 LXX).
- Let the humble hear, ‘Unto whom shall I have respect, but to him that is humble and quiet, and that trembles at my words’ (Isaiah 66:2 LXX)?
- Let the humble hear, ‘God has respect for the things that are humble’ (Psalm 138:6 LXX).
- Let the humble hear, ‘That the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve’ (Matthew 20:28).
- Let the humble hear, that ‘Our Redeemer humbled himself, being made obedient even unto death’ (Philippians 2:8).
- The pride of the devil became the occasion of our perdition, and the humility of God has been found the argument for our redemption. For our enemy, having been created among all things, desired to appear exalted above all things; but our Redeemer, remaining great above all things, desired to become little among all things.
- Let the humble be told that, when they abase themselves, they ascend to the likeness of God.
What, then, is more debased than haughtiness? And what is more sublime than humility, which, while it depresses itself to the lowest, joins itself to its Maker who remains above the highest?

The Matins Gospel: Luke 1:39-49, 56

Mary’s humility, like that of her Son is illustrated in the Matins Gospel for the Nativity, which is also used for the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, the Annunciation and the Dormition (Luke 1:39-49, 56). This text describes Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, after the Annunciation. This reading and Gabriel’s greeting to Mary preceding the Matins Gospel illustrate Mary’s deep humility.

In the Annunciation, Gabriel’s words: “Rejoice, highly graced one” (Luke 1:28) and “you have found grace with God” (Luke 1:30) indicate a very special honor⁴⁶ to Mary. If we compare this to Gabriel’s announcement to Zachariah regarding the birth of John, Gabriel did not call Zachariah “highly graced”. And yet it was quite an honor to be the father of John the Baptist -- whom Christ called the greatest of the prophets (Luke 7:28). Mary’s response to Gabriel’s announcement was a very humble statement, “Behold the slave (female) of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). An archangel had just given her accolades unprecedented in human history (and she knew it!!) yet she still referred to herself as a slave!!!

As Mary arrived at Elizabeth’s house following the Annunciation, Elizabeth, in the spirit, spoke with a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:42-43). Elizabeth recognized that Mary was pregnant with the Son of God and therefore “highly graced”. This Elizabeth recognized even though Mary was in her first week of pregnancy.

But Mary’s reaction was one of great humility, both to Gabriel and to Elizabeth. To Gabriel, Mary merely replied, “Behold the maidservant (i.e. female slave) of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). To Elizabeth, Mary replied, “My soul magnifies the

⁴⁶ The word “grace” and “graced” is the Greek word *charis* and is translated “grace” everywhere else in the New Testament, but often not translated so here.

Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant (i.e. female slave), for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed (Luke 1:46-48).

Even though she was so “highly graced” for bearing the Son of God, Mary never sought to exalt herself during her life. She was always content to stay in the background, praying, while the Twelve and others got all the recognition. This is a very good example for us: the only person who was ever called “highly graced” by God never sought recognition for herself. This is quite a contrast to attitudes today where it is fashionable to be arrogant and obnoxious and to revile anything that isn’t easily understood.

Gospel: Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28

Mary of Bethany Sits at Jesus’ Feet

This Gospel lesson is used for the Nativity of Mary, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple and the Dormition. The first part is the account of Mary and Martha when Jesus was invited to their house for dinner. Both Mary and Martha were among the eight “Myrrh-Bearing Women” at the Cross and at the Tomb. They were rather wealthy and helped finance Jesus’ public ministry along with Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and the others (Luke 8:3). We see examples of their wealth in several ways:

1. Mary’s ability to afford oil of spikenard worth 300 denarii (i.e. 300 days’ wages for a laborer) to pour on Jesus (Mark 14:3-5; John 11:1-2, 12:1-3).
2. Lazarus’ funeral including the burial wrappings, a new tomb and prominent people in attendance (John 11:35-46). Common folk couldn’t afford a funeral like this and were buried much more simply.
3. The size of the house that they lived in. When Martha welcomed Jesus into her house (Luke 10:38), Jesus was traveling with the Twelve and most of the Seventy, including some of their wives and children. The same situation occurred when Lazarus died and many of the Jewish leaders came to the funeral (John 11:19). The house was large enough to accommodate a large crowd.

The dinner at Mary and Martha’s took place in late 29 AD, or just a few months before the Crucifixion. Mary and Martha had been traveling with Jesus and helping to finance His ministry for several years at this time. During that time, it would have been their role to work in the background providing meals and accommodations for Jesus, the Twelve, the Seventy, etc. In this account, Martha was busy doing all the things she had been doing these last few years (Luke 10:40), but Mary took time out to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen (Luke 10:39).

The work carried out by the Myrrh-Bearing Women was a humble but necessary work. Martha reminded Mary that she needed to do her part and she even asked Jesus to back her up (Luke 10:40). Jesus replied by saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42). Martha had become somewhat arrogant in her preoccupation with serving; Mary had maintained her humble focus on doing the Lord’s Will. The serving really didn’t need to get done right away. The Lord could always have broken loaves and fish and fed the Seventy as He did the 5,000.

This Gospel lesson is used for feast days involving the Virgin Mary even though the person involved is Mary of Bethany. Mary of Bethany in this account illustrates the personality of the Virgin Mary: maintaining a quiet, cheerful devotion and concentrating on the things of God without getting overly concerned about material things. And this is also a good lesson for us: hearing the Lord's Word is the most important part of our lives and this won't be taken away from us. Positions of leadership may come to an end, but hearing the Lord's voice goes on forever.

Mary of Bethany's Effort in Perspective

John Cassian compared⁴⁷ Mary of Bethany sitting at Jesus' feet and leaving hospitality aside to useful alloys such as bronze that are outshined by silver and gold. The things of this world are useful to lead us to eternal life and to see the invisible things of God. But even these can be put aside when compared to the things of the world to come, which Mary was considering.

“What is that one thing which is so incomparably above those great and innumerable good things that it alone should be acquired? Doubtless it is that truly good part, which is described by the Lord, when Mary disregarded the duties of hospitality and courtesy and chose it. Contemplation then, i.e., meditation on God, is the one thing, the value of which all the merits of our righteous acts, all our aims at virtue come short of. But as, for example, the alloys, which are considered useful and worthwhile, become worthless when silver is taken into account. And the value of silver disappears in comparison with gold, and gold itself is disregarded when compared with precious stones. So all those merits of holiness, although they are not merely good and useful for the present life, but also secure the gift of eternity, yet if they are compared with the merit of Divine contemplation, will be considered trifling and fit to be sold. The Scripture declares all things, which were created by God, ‘And behold everything that God had made was very good’ (Genesis 1:31). And again, ‘The things that God has made are all good in their season’ (Ecclesiasticus 39:16). These things, in the present time, are termed not simply good, but emphatically ‘very good’. They are convenient for us for purposes of life, or for remedies for the body, or because they enable us ‘to see the invisible things of God from the creatures of the world, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead’ (Romans 1:20). Yet none of these things will keep the name of good if they are regarded in the light of that world to come”.

Cassian continued⁴⁸ to say that our effort should be to aspire to cleave to God and to heavenly things. Whatever is alien to this should take second place. The case of Mary and Martha is a good illustration of this. Martha was performing a sacred service in serving the Lord and His disciples, but Mary still chose the better part.

“Mary was intent only on spiritual instruction, and the Lord showed her to have chosen the better part, and one, which should not be taken away from her. Martha was toiling with pious care, and was encumbered about her service, seeing

⁴⁷ John Cassian, Third Conference of Abbot Theonas, III, xxiii, 3.

⁴⁸ John Cassian, First Conference of Abbot Moses, I, i, 8.

that she was insufficient for such service. She asked for the help of her sister from the Lord; certainly it was to worthy work, and to a praiseworthy service that she summoned her. The Lord made the chief good consist in meditation, in divine contemplation. We see that all other virtues are in second place, even though we admit that they are necessary, and useful, and excellent, because they are all performed for the sake of this one thing. ‘Mary chose the good part, which shall not be taken away from her’, and this must be more carefully considered. Although He says nothing of Martha, and certainly does not appear to blame her, yet in praising the one, He implies that the other is inferior. Martha’s portion can be taken away, for a bodily ministry cannot last forever, but one’s desire can never have an end”.

Jerome stated⁴⁹ that we should prefer the food for the soul to the food for the body and not seek the burden of the world. In this way, we will become daughters of the heavenly Jerusalem.

“See how the example of Mary sitting at the feet of the Lord is set before the zealous Martha. In her anxiety to be hospitable Martha was preparing a meal for the Lord and His disciples; yet Jesus said, ‘Martha, Martha, you are careful and troubled about many things. But few things are needful except one. And Mary has chosen that good part which shall not be taken away from her’ (Luke 10:41-42). Be then like Mary; prefer the food of the soul to that of the body. Leave it to your sisters to run to and fro and to seek how they may fitly welcome Christ. But you, having once for all cast away the burden of the world, sit at the Lord’s feet and say: ‘I have found him whom my soul loves; I will hold him, I will not let him go’ (Song of Solomon 3:4). And He will answer: ‘My dove, my undefiled one; she is the only one of her mother, she is the choice one of her that bore her’ (Song of Solomon 6:8). Now the mother of whom this is said is the heavenly Jerusalem” (Galatians 4:26).

Clement of Alexandria compared⁵⁰ the rich young (synagogue) ruler, who had kept the Mosaic Law his whole life, with the busy-ness of Martha in serving the Lord. Martha’s effort was good and noble, but there is a higher ideal. One thing the ruler lacked, which endures, which is now above the Law, which the Law doesn’t give, which the Law doesn’t contain, which is the choice of those who live.

“He who had fulfilled all the demands of the law from his youth, and had gloried in what was magnificent, was not able to complete the whole with this one thing, which was specially required by Christ, so as to receive the eternal life which he desired. But he departed displeased, vexed at the commandment of life. He did not truly wish life, but aimed at the mere reputation of having made the good choice. And he was capable of busying himself about many things; but the one thing, the work of life, he was powerless and unable to accomplish. Such was what the Lord said to Martha, who was occupied with many things, and distracted with serving. She blamed her sister, because she set herself at His feet, devoting

⁴⁹ Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, XXII, 24.

⁵⁰ Clement of Alexandria, Salvation of the Rich Man, 10.

her time to learning. So also He bid the young ruler to leave his busy life, and cling to Him, adhering to the grace of Him, who offered everlasting life”.

Gregory the Great spoke⁵¹ of times in his life when he felt like Martha due to his responsibilities as Bishop of Rome. He longed to get back to sitting at Jesus’ feet like Mary, but the needs of his people kept him away. He felt that there is false glory, even for good leaders within the Church, which can empty us of true glory.

“Even though I have no fears for myself, I am greatly afraid for those who have been committed to me. On every side I am tossed by the waves of business, and sunk by storms, so that I may truly say, I am come into the depth of the sea, and the storm has overwhelmed me (Psalm 69:2 LXX). After business I long to return to my heart; but, driven away by vain tumults of thoughts, I am unable to return. Because of this, that which is within me is made to be far from me, so that I cannot obey the prophetic voice, which says, ‘Return in your heart, transgressors’ (Isaiah 46:8 LXX). But, pressed by foolish thoughts, I am impelled only to exclaim, ‘My heart has failed me’ (Psalm 40:12). I have loved the beauty of the contemplative life as a Rachel, barren, but keen of sight and fair (Genesis 29), who, though in her quietude she is less fertile, yet sees the light more keenly. But, Leah has been coupled with me in the night, that is, the active life; fruitful, but tender-eyed; seeing less, but bringing forth more. I have longed to sit at the feet of the Lord with Mary, to take in the words of His mouth. But I am compelled to serve with Martha in external affairs, to be careful and troubled about many things (Luke 10:39-41). A legion of demons having been cast out of me, I wished to forget those whom I had known, and to rest at the feet of the Savior. Yet it is said to me, so as to compel me against my will, ‘Return to your house, and declare what great things the Lord has done for you’ (Mark 5:19). But who in the midst of so many earthly cares can preach the wondrous works of God? It is already difficult for me even to call them to mind. Pressed as I am in this office of dignity by a crowd of secular occupations, I see myself to be of those of whom it is written, ‘While they were being raised up you cast them down’ (Psalm 73:18 LXX). For he did not say, ‘You cast them down after they had been raised up, but while they were being raised up; because all bad men fall inwardly, while through the support of temporal dignity they seem outwardly to rise. Therefore their very raising up is their fall, because they are emptied of true glory, while they rely on false glory”.

Blessed Are Those Who Hear the Word and Keep It

The second part of the Gospel lesson involves a brief answer Jesus made to a comment from someone in the crowd. Jesus had just taught His followers to pray using the Lord’s Prayer, explaining how our Heavenly Father is a good father (Luke 11:2-13). Following this, Jesus cast a demon out of a person who was demon-possessed, blind and mute. When the formerly possessed person then saw and spoke, the multitudes marveled and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” (Matthew 12:22-24, Luke 11:14-16) The Pharisees, however, ridiculed Jesus by saying that He cast out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. Jesus then proceeded to

⁵¹ Gregory the Great, Epistle to Theoctista, I, 5

debunk this claim by showing that Satan's kingdom would be divided against itself if their claims were true.

Following this debunking, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts which nursed You!" Jesus replied, "More than that; blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:27-28).

The setting for the woman's comments about Mary's blessedness was probably the approach of Mary with some family members. Tertullian suggested⁵² this, where Mary and some of Jesus' relatives were standing outside or approaching. Just who was approaching is not clear, since Jude, of the Twelve, was now traveling with Jesus and had already been sent out two-by-two with the Twelve about 7 months earlier (Luke 9:1-6). Joseph Barsabas (Acts 1:23, 15:22, 32), of the Seventy, was also now traveling with Jesus and had been sent out two-by-two with the Seventy about two months earlier (Luke 10:1-20). James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19), had been devoted to Jesus since His birth, and was also traveling with Him.

In a similar setting over a year earlier, Jesus' mother and brothers wanted to speak to Him, but couldn't approach due to the crowd. Jesus said at that time, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). "His brothers" at that time may have included Joseph Barsabas and Simeon (Matthew 13:55), but probably not James and Jude.

In this context, Jesus had just been publicly acknowledged as the Messiah, the Son of David. The woman in the crowd was stating what every Jewish woman longed for: to be the mother of Messiah. Such was a position of great honor: The Queen Mother. Because this was such a great honor, barren women were considered cursed, since they were not able to be the mother of Messiah.

In replying as He did, Jesus was not denying that His mother was blessed. He was merely pointing out that everyone else could be blessed also by hearing the Word of God and keeping it. This the Virgin Mary did very well. When she heard the Word of God from Gabriel, she replied "Be it done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

A little after this, Jesus commended the Twelve for having left the things of this world, including father and mother, for the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:29). Jesus denied His parents, then, in the sense in which He has taught us to deny ours — for God's work.

John Chrysostom addressed⁵³ why Jesus spoke to His mother as He did at the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1-11), 'Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? (John 2:4) He revered his mother a great deal, but He was instructing her to wait for the recipient to ask for help before offering it. A similar case applies to His words in this context. Mary is blessed due to her own righteous deeds, not just for being the mother of Christ in the flesh.

⁵² Tertullian, *Five Books Against Marcion*, II, ii, 3, 11.
Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, II, v, 7.

⁵³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, XXI, 3.

“What is done at the request of one’s friends often causes offense to the spectators; but when they, who have the need, make the request, the miracle is free from suspicion, the praise unmixed, the benefit great. So if some excellent physician should enter a house where there are many sick, and none of the patients or their relatives speaks to him, but only his mother directs him, the sufferers would dislike him, and none of the patients would think he did anything great. This was a reason why Jesus rebuked Mary on that occasion, saying, ‘Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? (John 2:4), instructing her for the future not to do this. Though He was careful to honor His mother, yet He cared much more for the salvation of her soul, and for the doing good to the many, for which He took on flesh. These were words, not of one speaking rudely to his mother, but belonging to a wise dispensation, which brought her into a right frame of mind, and provided that the miracles should be attended with that honor which was fitting. This appearance, which these words have of having been spoken chidingly, is enough to show that He held her in high honor, for by His displeasure He showed that He revered her greatly⁵⁴”.

“Think of this then when you hear a certain woman saying, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the nipples which You sucked’, and Him answering, ‘rather blessed are they that do the will of my Father’ (Luke 11:27). Suppose that those other words also were said with the same intention. For the answer was not One rejecting His mother, but One showing that her bearing Him would have availed her nothing, had she not been very good and faithful. Setting aside the excellence of Mary’s soul, if it profited Mary nothing that the Christ was born of her, much less will it help us to have a father or a brother or a virtuous child, if we ourselves are far removed from his virtue. ‘None of *them* can by any means redeem *his* brother’ (Psalms 49:7). We must place our hopes of salvation in nothing else but our own righteous deeds done with the grace of God”.

⁵⁴ For more discussion on this, see John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXII, 1.

FIGURE 1

FAMILY TREE OF JESUS

