

# THE MYSTERIES OF THE CHILDHOOD AND HIDDEN LIFE OF CHRIST

Dom Columba Marmion, O.S.B.

- I. How, in the mystery of the Annunciation to the Virgin, the exchange between the Divinity and Humanity is concluded; the Divine Maternity.
- II. Mary's Purification and the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple.
- III. Jesus lost at the age of twelve.
- IV. The Hidden Life at Nazareth.
- V. Inward dispositions of the Blessed Virgin during the years of the Hidden Life.

The mystery of the Incarnation can be summed up as an exchange, in every point admirable, between the Divinity and our humanity. In return for the human nature that He takes, the Eternal Word makes us partakers of His Divine life.

It is indeed to be remembered that it is we who give a human nature to the Word. God could have created, so as to unite it to His Son, a humanity fully established in the perfection of its organism, as was Adam on the day of his creation. Christ would have been truly man because nothing that constitutes the essence of man would have been lacking to Him; but in not joining Himself directly to us by a human birth, He would not have been, properly speaking, of our race.

God did not will to act thus. What was the design of Infinite Wisdom? That the Word should take from us the humanity to which He was to be united. Christ would thereby be truly "the Son of man "; He would be a member of our race: <Factum ex muliere> (Gal 4:4) ... <ex semine David> (Rom 1:3), When at Christmas we celebrate Christ's Nativity, we go back through the centuries in order to read the list of His ancestors, His human genealogy. The successive generations pass before us till we see Him born of David's race, of the Virgin Mary <Christus> (Mt 1:16).

<De qua natus est Jesus qui vocatur>

As you know, God is by His nature infinitely generous; it is of the essence of goodness to diffuse itself: <Bonum est diffusivum sui>. Infinite Goodness is urged in an infinite manner to give itself. God is this boundless Goodness; revelation teaches us that there are between the Divine Persons, from the Father to the Son, and from the Father and the Son to the Holy Spirit, infinite communications wherein God finds the full satisfaction of this natural tendency of His Being to give itself.

But beyond this natural communication of Infinite Goodness, there is another, arising from God's <free> love towards the creature. The fulness of Being and of Good that is God has overflowed beyond, through love. And how has this come to pass? God has chosen in the first place to give Himself in an altogether special manner to a creature by uniting it in a personal manner with His Word. This gift of God to a creature is unique: it makes of this creature chosen by the Holy Trinity the very Son of God, <Filius meus es tu: ego hodie genui te> (Ps 2:7). It is Christ, it is the Word united personally and in an indissoluble manner to a human nature, like to ours in all things, excepting sin.

From us He asks this human nature. It is as if the Eternal Father were saying to us: Give Me your nature for My Son, and I, in return, will give to this nature, and, through it, to every man of good will, a participation in My Divinity.

For God thus communicates Himself to Christ only in order to give Himself, through Christ, to us all; God's plan is that Christ should receive the Divinity in its fulness and that we should draw, in our turn, from this fulness: <De plenitudine ejus nos omnes accepimus> (Jn 1:16).

Such is this communication of God's goodness to the world: <Sic Deus> DILEXIT <mundum, ut Filium suum Unigenitum> DARET (Jn 3:16). This is the wonderful order that rules the exchange between God and humanity.

But who is it, out of all others, that God will ask to be a mother to this humanity to which He wills to unite Himself so closely, in order to make of it the instrument of His graces to the world?

We have already named her whom all generations declare blessed: the human genealogy of Jesus ends with Mary,

the Virgin of Nazareth. From her, and through her from us, the Word asked a human nature, and Mary gave it to Him; this is why we shall henceforward see her inseparable from Jesus and from His mysteries. Wherever Jesus is found, we shall see her: He is her Son as much as He is the Son of God.

However, if Jesus everywhere remains the Son of Mary, it is above all in the mysteries of His Childhood and Hidden Life that He is revealed under this aspect; if Mary everywhere occupies a unique place, it is in these mysteries that her position as His Mother is most actively manifested outwardly and her divine Maternity shines forth most brightly. This incomparable dignity is the source of all the other privileges of the Virgin.

Those who do not know the Blessed Virgin, those who do not truly love the Mother of Jesus, run the risk of not profitably understanding the mysteries of Christ's Humanity. Christ is the Son of man as well as the Son of God; these two characters are essential to Him. If He is the Son of God by an eternal ineffable generation, He became Son of man by being born of Mary in time.

Let us then contemplate this Virgin at the side of her Son; in return she will obtain for us the power of entering more deeply into the comprehension of these mysteries to which she is so closely united.

## I

In order that the exchange which God willed to contract with humanity should be possible, it was necessary that humanity should consent to it.

Let us transport ourselves to Nazareth. The fulness of times has come. God decreed, says St. Paul, to send His Son into the world in causing Him to be born of a woman. The Angel Gabriel, God's messenger, brings to the young Maiden the heavenly proposals. A sublime dialogue takes place whereon hangs the deliverance of the human race. The Angel first salutes the Maiden declaring her, in the name of God, "full of grace": <Ave gratia plena.> Indeed, not only is she sinless, no stain has tarnished her soul,—the Church has defined that she, alone among all creatures, has not been touched by original sin;—but moreover, because He predestined her to be the Mother of His Son, the Eternal Father has lavished His gifts upon her. She is full of grace, not, doubtless, as Christ is to be, <plenum gratiae>, for He is so by right and with the Divine plenitude itself; Mary receives all in participation, but in a measure which cannot be estimated, and in correlation with her eminent dignity as Mother of God. "Behold," says the Angel, "thou shalt bring forth a Son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus... He shall be called the Son of the Most High, and He shall reign in the house of Israel for ever." "How shall this be done," asks Mary, "because I know not man"? For she wishes to keep her virginity. "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word": <Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum> (Lk 1:28, 31-35, 38).

In this solemn moment, the exchange is concluded. When Mary pronounces her <fiat>, all humanity says to God by her mouth: "Yes, O God, I consent, so be it." And immediately the Word is made Flesh: <Et Verbum caro factum est.> At this instant, the Word becomes incarnate by the operation of the Holy Spirit; the Blessed Virgin becomes the Ark of the New Covenant between God and man.

When the Church sings, in the <Credo>, the words that recall this mystery: <Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria virgine, et homo factus est>, she obliges her ministers to bend the knee in token of adoration. Let us too adore this Divine Word made man for us in the womb of a Virgin; let us adore Him with so much the more love the more He humbles Himself in taking, as St. Paul says, "the form of a servant": <Formam servi accipiens> (Phil 2:7). Let us adore Him, in union with Mary, who, enlightened with light from above, bows down before her Creator become her Son; let us adore Him with the Angels marvelling at this infinite condescension towards humanity.

Let us next salute Our Lady, and thank her for having given Jesus to us. It is to her consent that we owe Him: <Per quam meruimus auctorem vitae> (Collect for the office of the Circumcision.). Let us add our congratulations. Consider how the Holy Spirit by the mouth of Elizabeth, <Et repleta est Spiritu Sancto Elisabeth>, saluted her on the morrow of the Incarnation. "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!... And blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord" (Lk 1:41-42, 45): Blessed, for this faith in God's word made the Virgin the Mother of Christ. What simple creature has ever

received like praises from the infinite Being?

Mary refers to the Lord the glory of the marvels wrought in her. She sings within her heart a canticle full of love and gratitude. With her cousin Elisabeth, she lets the innermost feelings of her heart overflow; she sings the <Magnificat> which, throughout the centuries, her children will repeat after her in praise of God for having chosen her out of all women: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, because He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid... because He that is mighty, hath done great things to me," <Magnificat anima mea Dominum: quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est> (Lk 1:46, 49).

Mary was at Bethlehem, for the enrolment ordered by Caesar, when, says St. Luke, "her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn (Lk 2:6-7). "Who is this Child? He is Mary's Son, since he has just been born of her: <Primogenitum suum.>

But she saw in this Child, a child like other children, the Very Son of God. Mary's soul was full of immense faith, which went far beyond the faith of all the just of the Old Testament; and therefore in her Son she saw her God.

This faith translated itself outwardly in an act of adoration. As soon as she looked upon Jesus, the Maiden-Mother adored Him with an intensity we cannot conceive.

To this intense faith, this deep adoration, were added the transports of an incommensurable love, a love both human and supernatural.

God is love, and so that we may have some idea of this love, He gives a share of it to mothers. The heart of a mother with her unwearying tenderness, the constancy of her solicitude, the inexhaustible delicacy of her affection is a truly divine creation, although God has placed in her only a spark of His love for us. Yet, however imperfectly a mother's heart reflects the divine love towards us, God gives us our mothers to take His place in some manner with us. He places them at our side, from our cradles, to guide us, guard us, especially in our earliest years when we have so much need of tenderness.

Hence imagine with what predilection the Holy Trinity fashioned the heart of the Blessed Virgin chosen to be the Mother of the Incarnate Word. God delighted in pouring forth love in her heart, in forming it expressly to love a God-Man.

In Mary's heart were perfectly harmonised the adoration of a creature towards her God, and the love of a mother for her only Son.

The supernatural love of Our Lady is not less wonderful. As you know, a soul's love for God is measured by its degree of grace. What is it that, in us, hinders the development of grace and love? Our sins, our deliberate faults, our voluntary infidelities, our attachment to creatures. Each deliberate fault narrows the heart, and strengthens egotism. But Our Lady's soul is of perfect purity; unstained by sin, untouched by any shadow of a fault, she is full of grace: <Gratia plena.> Far from encountering in her any obstacle to the unfolding of grace, the Holy Spirit ever found her heart wonderfully docile to His inspirations, and therefore full of love.

What must have been the joy of the soul of Jesus to feel Himself loved to such an extent by His Mother! After the incomprehensible joy arising for Him from the Beatific Vision and from the look of infinite complacency wherewith the Heavenly Father contemplated Him, nothing can have rejoiced Him so much as the love of His Mother. He found in it a more abundant compensation for the indifference of those who would not receive Him. He found in the heart of this young Virgin a fire of undying love that He Himself further enkindled by His divine glances and the inward grace of His Spirit.

Jesus gave Himself to Mary in such an ineffable manner, and Mary corresponded so fully that after the union of the Divine Persons in the Trinity, and the hypostatic union of the Incarnation, we cannot conceive one greater nor deeper.

Let us draw near to Mary with a humble but entire confidence. If her Son is the Saviour of the world, she enters too deeply into His mission not to share the love that He bears to sinners. "O Mother of our Redeemer," let us sing to her with the Church, "thou didst bear thy Creator whilst remaining a Virgin, succour this fallen race which thy Son came to save in taking from us a human nature": <Alma Redemptoris mater... succurre cadenti surgere qui curat populo;> "Have pity upon the sinners whom thy Son came to redeem" <Peccatorum miserere.> For, O Mary, it was to redeem us that He vouchsafed to descend from the eternal splendours into thy virginal bosom.

## II

Mary understands this prayer, for she is closely associated with Jesus in the work of our redemption. Eight days after the Birth of her Son, she has Him circumcised according to the Jewish Law; she then gives Him the name told her by the Angel, the name of Jesus, which denotes His mission of salvation and His work of redemption.

When Jesus is forty days old, the Blessed Virgin associates herself yet more directly and deeply with the work of our salvation by presenting Him in the Temple. She is the first to offer to the Eternal Father His Divine Son. After the oblation that Jesus, the supreme High Priest, made of Himself from the moment of His Incarnation and that He consummated on Calvary, Mary's offering is the most perfect. It goes beyond all the sacerdotal acts of men, because Mary is the Mother of Christ, while men are but His ministers.

Let us contemplate Mary in this solemn act of the Presentation of her Son in the Temple of Jerusalem.

All the magnificent and circumstantial ceremonial of the Old Covenant converged towards Christ; in the New Covenant, the obscure symbols were to find their perfect reality.

You know that every Jewish mother has to present herself in the Temple a few weeks after the birth of her child, in order to be purified from the legal stain thereby contracted in consequence of original sin. Moreover, if it was her firstborn and a son, she must present him to the Lord to be consecrated to Him as to the sovereign Master of every creature: <Omne masculinum adaperiens vulvam sanctum Domino vocabitur> (Lk 2:23; cf. Ex 13:2). However, he could be "redeemed" by a more or less considerable offering—a lamb or a pair of turtledoves according as the parents could afford.

Certainly this prescription obliged neither Mary nor Jesus. Jesus was the supreme Law-giver of all the Jewish ritual; His Birth had been miraculous and virginal; there was nothing about it but what was pure: <Quod nascetur ex te> SANCTUM, <vocabitur Filius Dei> (Lk 1:35). It was therefore unnecessary to consecrate Him to the Lord as He was the very Son of God. Neither was it requisite that she who had conceived Him by the Holy Spirit and remained a virgin should be purified.

But Mary, guided by the Holy Spirit, was in perfect conformity of soul with the soul of her Son. Jesus had said to His Father on coming into this world: "Behold I come... that I should do Thy will, O God": <Ecce venio> (Heb 10:5-7). And the Blessed Virgin's words were "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word": <Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.>

Therefore she willed to accomplish this ceremony, showing thereby the depth of her submission. With Joseph, her husband, she brought her Firstborn, <Primogenitum suum.> He who was to remain her only Son, was to become "the Firstborn amongst many brethren" who, by grace, were to be like unto Him: <Primogenitus in multis fratribus> (Rom 8:29).

When we meditate upon this mystery, we are forced to say: "Verily Thou art a hidden God ", O Saviour of the world! <Deus absconditus, Deus Israel Salvator> (Isa 45:15). Upon this day, Christ enters for the first time into the Temple, and it is into <His> temple that He enters. This wonderful temple, the admiration of the nations and the pride of Israel, wherein were performed all the religious rites and sacrifices of which God Himself had regulated the details, this temple belongs to Him; for this Child carried in the arms of a young Maiden is the King of kings and the Sovereign Lord: <Veniet ad templum> SUUM <Dominator> (Mal 3:1).

And how does He come? In the splendour of His majesty? As the One to Whom all these offerings alone are due? No, He comes thither absolutely hidden.

Listen to what the Gospel relates. There must have been a hustling crowd at the approach of the sacred building—merchants, levites, priests, doctors of the Law. A little group passes unnoticed through this crowd. They are poor people for they do not bring a lamb, the offering of the rich; they bring only two pigeons, the offering of the poor. No one heeds them, for they have no following of servants; the great, the haughty among the Jews have not so much as a glance for them, and it is needful that the Holy Spirit should enlighten the old man Simeon and Anna the prophetess in order that they should recognise the Messiah. He Who is the Saviour promised to the world, the Light to be revealed to all nations, <Salutare tuum quod parasti ante faciem omnium populorum> (Lk 2:30-31), comes into His temple as a hidden God: <Vere Deus absconditus. >

Nothing, moreover, outwardly betrays the feelings of the holy soul of Jesus. The Light of His Divinity remains

hidden, veiled; but He renews, here in the Temple, the self-oblation He had made at the moment of His Incarnation. He offers Himself to God to belong to Him by every right: <Sanctum Domino vocabitur.> It was like the offertory of the Sacrifice that was to be consummated on Calvary.

This act was extremely pleasing to the Father. To outward appearance, there was nothing particular in this simple action that all Jewish mothers performed. But on this day God receives infinitely more glory in the temple than he had ever received by all the sacrifices and holocausts of the Old Law, for on this day it is His Son Jesus Who is offered and Who Himself offers infinite homage of adoration, thanksgiving, expiation and supplication. The Heavenly Father receives with incommensurable joy this sacred offering, this Gift worthy of Himself, and all the heavenly court fix their ravished gaze upon this unique oblation. There is now no more need of holocausts and sacrifices of animals. The only Victim worthy of God had just been offered to Him.

And it is by the hands of Our Lady, Our Lady full of grace, that this offering is presented. Mary's faith was perfect. Filled with the light of the Holy Spirit, her soul understood the value of the offering that she was making to God at this moment; by His inspirations, the Holy Spirit put her soul in harmony with the inward dispositions of the Heart of her Divine Son.

In the same way as she had given her consent in the name of the whole human race when the Angel announced to her the mystery of the Incarnation, so upon this day, Mary offered her Son Jesus in the name of the human race. She knew that her Son is "the glorious King of the new Light... begotten before the day-star... the Lord of life and death." And so she presents Him to God in order to obtain for us all the graces of salvation that Jesus, according to the Angel's promise, is to bring to the world: <Ipsa enim portat Kegem gloriae novi luminis; subsistit Virgo adducens manibus Filium ante luciferum genitum> (Antiphon <Adorna> at the Blessing of the Candles on the Feast of the Purification.).

Do not forget besides that the One she thus offers is her own Son, Whom she bore in her virginal and fruitful womb.

What priest, what saint ever presented the Eucharistic oblation to God in such close union with the Divine Victim as was the Virgin at this moment? Not only was she united to Jesus by faith and love, as we ourselves can be, although in an infinitely lesser degree, but the bond that united her to Christ Jesus was unique. This is why Mary, from the day on which she presents Jesus as the first fruits of the future sacrifice, has such a great part in the work of our redemption.

And see how, also from this instant, Christ Jesus associates His Blessed Mother with His state of Victim.

The old man, Simeon, guided by and filled with the Holy Spirit, is led thither: <Et Spiritus Sanctus erat in eo... et venit in Spiritu in templum.> He recognizes the Saviour of the world in this Child, He takes Him in his arms and sings his joy in having at length seen with his eyes the promised Messiah. After having exalted "the Light of the revelation of the Gentiles," he says, as he restores Him to His Mother: "Behold this Child is set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted; and thy own soul a sword shall pierce. (Lk 2:25, 27, 32-35)" It was the foreshadowing of the Sacrifice of Calvary.

The Gospel tells us nothing of how Our Lady received this prediction which she could never forget. St. Luke reveals to us later that Mary "kept all these words in her heart": <Mater ejus conservabat omnia verba haec in corde suo> (Lk 5:1). Could not this be already said of Simeon's unexpected announcement? Yes, she kept the memory of these words, so terrible in their mystery; now and henceforward they pierced her soul. But Mary, whose pure heart was in full accord with the Heart of her Son, already accepted to be thus closely associated with His Sacrifice.

We shall one day see her consummate, like Jesus, her oblation upon the mount of Golgotha; we shall see her standing, <Stabat mater ejus> (Cf. Jn 19:25), to offer again her Son, the fruit of her womb, for our salvation, as she had offered Him thirty-three years before in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Let us thank Our Lady for having presented her Divine Son for us; let us render fervent acts of thanksgiving to Jesus Himself for offering Himself to His Father for our salvation.

At Holy Mass, Christ offers Himself anew; let us present Him to His Father; let us unite ourselves to Him, like Him, in perfect submission to the will of His heavenly Father; let us unite our faith to the intense faith of our Lady. It is by this true faith and faithful love, <Te veraciter agnoscamus et fideliter diligamus> (Collect for the Blessing of

Candles), that our offerings will deserve to be pleasing to God. <Oculis tuae majestatis digna sint munera>  
(Cf. Secret of the Mass for the Feast of the Purification.)

### III

Whilst awaiting the fulfilment of Simeons' prophecy, Mary was to have even then her share of sacrifice.

She must soon flee into Egypt, into an unknown land, to snatch her Son from the wrath of the tyrant Herod; she stays there until the Angel, after the king's death, bids Joseph retrace the road to Palestine. The Holy Family now takes up its abode at Nazareth. It is there that the life of Jesus is to be spent until the age of thirty, so much so that He will be called "Jesus of Nazareth."

The Gospel has preserved for us only one episode of this period of Christ's life: Christ lost in the Temple.

You know the circumstances that had taken the Holy Family to Jerusalem. The Child Jesus was twelve years old. It was the age when young Israelites began to be subject to the precepts of the Mosaic Law, notably that of going to the Temple three times a year, at the feasts of the Pasch, of Pentecost and of Tabernacles. Our Divine Saviour who had willed, by His Circumcision, to bear the yoke of the Law, went then with Mary and His foster-father to the Holy City. It was doubtless the first time that He made this pilgrimage.

When this Boy entered into the Temple, none suspected that He was the God Who was there adored. Jesus was there mingling with the crowd of Israelites, taking part in the ceremonies of the worship and in the chanting of the psalms. He understood, as none other ever will, the significance of the sacred rites and the symbolism of this liturgy whereof God Himself had laid down the details. Jesus, seeing prefigured all that was to be accomplished in His Person, offered perfect praise to His Father in the name of all humanity. In this praise, God received a homage infinitely worthy of Him.

"And having fulfilled the days," says the Evangelist, "the Child Jesus remained in Jerusalem, and His parents knew it not" (Lk 2:43). At the time of the Pasch the throng of Jews was very considerable, and, in returning, the caravans cannot have been easy to form, so it was not until late in the day that it could be recognized how they were composed. Moreover, according to the custom, the young people might join, as it pleased them, such or such a group of their caravan. Mary believed that Jesus was with Joseph. She journeyed then in peace, singing the sacred hymns; above all she thought of Jesus, hoping soon to see Him again.

But what was her sorrowful surprise when, upon rejoining the group where Joseph was, she did not find the Child. Where was Jesus? Neither she nor Joseph could tell.

When God wills to lead a soul to the heights of perfection and contemplation, He makes her pass through great trials. Our Lord has said that when a branch united to Him, Who is the Vine, bears fruit, His Father purges it: <Purgabit eum.> And why? "That it may bring forth more fruit": <Ut fructum plus afferat> (Jn 15:2). Spiritual darkness falls upon the soul. She feels forsaken by God Who thus tries her in order to make her worthy of a closer and higher union with Himself.

The Virgin Mary had certainly no need of such trials. What branch was ever more fruitful, since she herself gave the Divine Fruit to the world? But when she lost Jesus, she knew those sharp sufferings which were to increase her capacity of love and the extent of her merits. We can scarcely measure the greatness of this affliction. In order to comprehend it, we should have to comprehend all that Jesus was for His Mother.

Mary knew Jesus too well to think that He had left them without some purpose. When would He return? Would she ever see Him again? She had not lived several years with Jesus at Nazareth without being aware that there was in Him an ineffable mystery. And this was for her at that moment a source of unequalled anguish.

The Child must now be sought. What days were those! God permitted that Our Lady should be in darkness during those anxious hours. She did not understand why Jesus had not forewarned her. Her sorrow was immense in being thus deprived of Him Whom she loved at once as her Son and her God.

Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem with troubled hearts. The Gospel tells us that they everywhere sought Jesus among their kinsfolk and acquaintance (Lk 2:44); but none of them had seen Him. Finally, you know how after three days they found Him in the Temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors of the Law.

The Doctors of Israel assembled in one of the halls of the Temple to explain the Holy Scriptures. Anyone might

come and join himself to the group of disciples and listeners. This is what Jesus did. He came into the midst of them, not to teach,—the hour when He would present Himself to all as the one and only Lord Who had come to reveal the secrets from on high, had not yet struck;—He came there, like other young Israelites, among the doctors "hearing them, and asking them questions," as the Gospel tells us (Lk 46).

And what was the object of the Child Jesus in thus questioning the doctors of the Law? He wished, doubtless, to enlighten them, to lead them, by His questions and His replies, by the quotations that He made from the Scriptures, to speak of the coming of the Messiah; to direct their search towards this point, so that their attention should be awakened as to the circumstances of the appearing of the promised Saviour. This is, apparently, what the Eternal Father willed of His Son, the mission that He gave Him to accomplish, and for which He caused Him to interrupt, for a short space of time, His hidden and silent life. And the doctors of Israel "were astonished at His wisdom and His answers": <Stupebant... prudentia et responsis ejus> (Lk 2:47).

Mary and Joseph, overjoyed at finding Jesus, drew near to Him, and His Mother said: "Son, why hast Thou done so to us?" It is not a reproach,—the humble Virgin-Mother was too wise to dare to blame Him Whom she knew to be God;—but it is the cry of a heart betraying its maternal feelings. "Behold Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing," <dolentes.> And what is Christ's answer? "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know, that I must be about My Father's business?" (Lk 2:48-49).

These are the first words fallen from the lips of the Incarnate Word that have been gathered up by the Gospel. They epitomise the whole Person and work of Jesus; they tell of His Divine Sonship and indicate His supernatural mission. All Christ's existence will be but a striking and magnificent commentary on these words.

They contain, too, precious teaching for our souls.

As "Son of man," <Filius hominis>, Christ was bound to observe the natural law, and the Mosaic Law commanded children to show respect, love and submission to their parents. And who did so better than Jesus? He will say later that He was not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it (Mt 5:17). In whose heart could there be a deeper fund of human tenderness?

As "Son of God," <Filius Dei>, He had duties towards His Heavenly Father that were higher than human duties, and at times seemed to be in opposition to the latter. His Father had given Him to understand that He was to stay that day in Jerusalem.

By the words that He uttered on this occasion, Christ gives us to understand that when God requires us to accomplish His will, we must not allow ourselves to be stayed by any human consideration; it is on these occasions that we must say: I must give myself up wholly to the interests of my Heavenly Father.

St. Luke, who had doubtless gathered the humble avowal from Our Lady herself, tells us that "they understood not the word that He spoke unto them" (Cf. Lk 2:50). She well knew that her Divine Son could only act in a perfect manner; but why had He not forewarned her? She did not realize what relation there was between this manner of acting and His Father's interests, nor how it entered into the plan of salvation which His Heavenly Father had given Him.

But if she did not perceive all the meaning of the present conduct of Jesus, she knew that He was the Son of God. Therefore she submitted silently to the Divine will which had just required such a sacrifice from her love. She "kept all these words in her heart": <Conservabat omnia verba haec in corde suo.> Her heart was the tabernacle where she adored the mystery of her Son's words whilst awaiting the full light that was to be given her.

#### IV

The Gospel tells us that after having been found in the Temple, Jesus went down to Nazareth with His Mother and St. Joseph and that He there remained until the age of thirty years. And the sacred scribe sums up all this long period in these simple words: <Et erat subditus illis> (Lk 2:51). "and He... was subject to them."

Thus out of a life of thirty-three years, He Who is Eternal Wisdom chose to pass thirty of these years in silence and obscurity, submission and labour.

Herein lies a mystery and teaching of which many souls, even pious souls, do not grasp all the meaning.

He Who is infinite and eternal, one day after centuries of waiting, humbles Himself to take a human form:

<Semetipsum exinanivit, formam servi accipiens... et habitu inventus ut homo> (Phil 2:7). Although He is born of a spotless Virgin, the Incarnation constitutes an incommensurable abasement for Him: <Non horruisti virginis uterum> (Hymne, <Te Deum>). And why does He descend into these abysses? To save the world, in bringing to it the Divine Light.

Now,—excepting those rays granted to a few privileged souls: the shepherds, the Magi, Simeon and Anna,—this Light is hidden; it remains voluntarily, during thirty years, "under a bushel," <sub modio>, to be at last manifested only for the duration of scarcely three years.

Is not this mysterious; is it not even disconcerting for our reason? If we had known the mission of Jesus, should we not have asked Him, as many of His kinsfolk did later, to manifest Himself to the world: <Manifesta teipsum mundo> (Jn 7:4).

But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are higher than our ways. He Who comes to redeem the world wills to save it first of all by a life hidden from the eyes of the world.

Truly, my Saviour, You are a hidden God: <Deus absconditus, Israel Salvator.> Doubtless, O Jesus, You grow "in wisdom age, and grace with God and men" (Lk 2:52). Your soul possesses the fulness of grace from the first moment of Your entrance into this world, and all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom, but this wisdom and this grace are only manifested little by little. You remain a hidden God in the eyes of men. Your Divinity is veiled beneath the outward appearance of a workman. O Eternal Wisdom Who, to draw us out of the abyss into which Adam's proud disobedience had plunged us, chose to live in a humble workshop and therein to obey creatures, I adore and bless You!

In the sight of His contemporaries, the life of Jesus Christ at Nazareth then appeared like the ordinary existence of a simple artisan. We see how true this is. Later, when Christ reveals Himself in His public life, the Jews of His country are so astonished at His wisdom and His words, at the sublimity of His doctrine and the greatness of His works, that they ask each other: "How came this man by this wisdom and miracles? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His Mother called Mary?... Whence therefore hath He all these things?" <Unde huic sapientia haec et virtutes Nonne hic est fabri filius? Nonne mater ejus dicitur Maria? Unde ergo huic omnia ista> (Mt 13:54-56. Cf. Mk 6:2-3)? Christ was a stumbling block for them.

This mystery of the hidden life contains teachings which our faith ought eagerly to gather up.

First of all there is nothing great in the sight of God except that which is done for His glory, through the grace of Christ.

We are only acceptable to God according to the measure in which we are like unto His Son Jesus.

Christ's Divine Sonship gives infinite value to His least actions; Christ Jesus is not less adorable nor less pleasing to His Father when He wields the chisel or plane than when He dies upon the Cross to save humanity. In us, sanctifying grace, which makes us God's adoptive children, deifies all our activity in its root and renders us worthy, like Jesus, although by a different title, of His Father's complacency.

The most precious talents, the most sublime thoughts, the most generous and splendid actions are without merit for eternal life if not vivified by sanctifying grace. The passing world may admire and applaud them; eternal life neither accepts them nor holds them of account. "What doth it profit a man," said Jesus, the infallible Truth, "if He gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?" (Mt 16:26).

What does it serve a man to conquer the world by the force of arms, by the charm of eloquence or the authority of knowledge, if, not having God's grace, he be shut out from the kingdom that has no end?

See, on the other hand, that poor workman who painfully gains his livelihood, this humble servant ignored by the world, this beggar disdained by all: no one heeds them. If Christ's grace animates them, these souls delight the Angels, they are continual objects of love for the Infinite Being; they bear within them, by grace, the very features of Christ.

Sanctifying grace is the first source of our true greatness. It confers upon our life, however commonplace it may seem, its true nobility and imperishable splendour.

Oh! if you knew the gift of God!...

But this gift is hidden.

The Kingdom of God is built up in silence; it is, before all things, interior, and hidden in the depths of the soul:



<Vita vestra est abscondita cum Christo in Deo> (Col 3). Undoubtedly grace possesses a virtue which nearly always overflows in works of charity, but the principle of its power is entirely within. It is in the depths of the heart that the true intensity of the Christian life lies, it is there that God dwells, adored and served by faith, recollection, humility, obedience, simplicity, labour and love.

Our outward activity has no stability nor supernatural fruitfulness save in so far as it is linked to this interior life. We shall truly only bear fruit outwardly according to the measure of the supernatural intensity of our inner life (This truth has been remarkably demonstrated and set forth in a recent work which we strongly recommend to our readers: <The True Apostolate> by Dom J. B. Chautard, Abbot of Sept-Fons, translated from the French by Rev. F. Girardey, C. SS. R. The work is especially addressed to priests and religious, but it is not less useful to all lay-people who are occupied in works of zeal.).

What can we do greater here below than promote Christ's reign within souls. What work is worth so much as that? It is the whole work of Jesus and of the Church.

We shall, however, succeed in it by no other means than those employed by our Divine Head. Let us be thoroughly convinced that we shall do more work for the good of the Church, the salvation of souls, the glory of our Heavenly Father, in seeking first of all to remain united to God by a life of love and faith of which He is alone the object, than by a devouring and feverish activity which leaves us no leisure to find God again in solitude, recollection, prayer and self-detachment.

Nothing favours this intense union of the soul with God like the hidden life. And this is why souls living the inner life, and enlightened from on high, love to contemplate the life of Jesus at Nazareth. They find in it a special charm and, moreover, abundant graces of holiness.

## V

It is especially through the Blessed Virgin Mary that we shall obtain a share in the graces that Christ merited for us by His hidden life at Nazareth. Those years must have been for the Mother of God a wellspring of priceless graces. We are dazzled by the very thought of them, and intuitions scarcely to be expressed in words are awakened within us when we reflect upon what those thirty years must have been for Mary and how every movement, word and action of Jesus were for her as so many revelations.

Doubtless there must have been much that was incomprehensible even for the Blessed Virgin. No one could live in continual contact, as she did, with the Infinite, without at times feeling and touching mystery. But yet what abundant light for her soul, what a continual increase of love this ineffable intercourse with a God, working under her eyes, must have wrought in her immaculate heart !

Mary lived with Jesus in a union surpassing all that can be said of it. They were truly one; the mind, heart, soul, in a word the whole existence of the Virgin-Mother was in absolute accord with the mind, heart, soul and life of her Son.

Her life was, as it were, a pure and perfect vibration, tranquil and full of love, of the very life of Jesus.

What was the source of this union and of this love in Mary? It was her faith. The Blessed Virgin's faith is one of her most characteristic virtues.

How wondrous and how full of confidence is her faith in the word of the Angel! The heavenly messenger announces to her an unheard of mystery which astonishes and overthrows nature: the conception of a God in a virginal womb. And Mary says: <Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum> (Lk 1:38). It is because she gives the full assent of her mind to the Word of the Angel that she merits to become the Mother of the Incarnate Word: <Prius concepit mente quam corpore> (S. Augustin, <De Virgin.>, c. 3; Sermo CCXV, n. 4; S. Leo. <Sermo I de Nativitate Domini,> c. I; S. Bernard. <Sermo I de Vigilia Nativit>), Mary's faith in the Divinity of Jesus is never shaken. She ever sees in her Son the Infinite God.

And yet to what trials is not this faith subjected! Her Son is God. The Angel tells her that Jesus will sit in the throne of David, that He will save the world, and of His kingdom there shall be no end. And Simeon predicts to her that Jesus will be a sign of contradiction, a cause of ruin as well as of salvation. Then Mary has to flee into Egypt to snatch her Son from Herod's tyrannical fury; until He is thirty years old, her Son, Who is God and comes to redeem the human race, lives, in a poor workshop, a life of labour, submission and obscurity. Later on, she will see her Son

pursued by the hatred of the Pharisees, she will see Him forsaken by His disciples, in the hands of His enemies, she will see Him hanging upon the Cross, mocked and despised, she will hear Him cry out from the depths of anguish: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me"—but her faith will remain unshaken. It is even then, at the foot of the Cross, that it shines in all its splendour. Mary ever recognises her Son as her God, and therefore the Church proclaims her the "the Faithful Virgin" supereminently: <Virgo fidelis.>

And this faith is the source of all Mary's love for her Son; it is through this faith that she remains ever united to Jesus. Let us ask her to obtain for us a firm and practical faith that has its culmination in love and in the accomplishment of the Divine will: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to Thy word." These words sum up all Mary's existence. May they likewise sum up ours!

This intense faith which was a source of love for the Mother of God was also a principle of joy. The Holy Spirit Himself teaches us this, by the mouth of Elizabeth, when He declares that the Virgin is blessed because of her faith: <Beata credidisti> (Lk 1:45).

It will be the same for us. St. Luke relates that once after Jesus had been speaking to the multitude, a woman lifting up her voice, cried out: "Blessed is the womb that bore Thee, and the paps that gave Thee suck": <Beatus venter qui te portavit, et ubera quae suxisti.> And Christ answered: "Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 11:27). Jesus in nowise contradicted the acclamation of the Jewish woman; was it not He Who inundated His Mother's heart with incomparable joys? He only wishes to show us where the principle of joy is to be found for us as for her. The privilege of the Divine Maternity is unique. From all eternity God chose Mary for the wondrous mission of being the Mother of His Son. That is the root of all Mary's greatness.

The Blessed Virgin merited the joys of Divine Motherhood by her faith and love, and Jesus wishes to teach us that we may share, certainly not in the glory of having given birth to Christ, but in the joy of bringing Him forth in souls. And how are we to obtain this joy? By hearing and keeping the word of God. We hear it by faith, we keep it by doing with love what it ordains.

Such is for us, as for Mary, the source of the soul's true joy and the way of happiness. If, after having inclined our heart to the teaching of Jesus, we obey His will and remain united to Him, we shall become as dear to Him—it is He again Who declares it,—as if we were for Him, a mother, brother, sister: <Quicumque enim fecerit voluntatem Patris mei, qui in caelis est, ipse meus frater, et soror, et mater est> (Mt 12:50; cf. Lk 8:21; Mk 3:35).

What closer union than this could we desire ?

\*\*\*\*\*