

THE VISITATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY 1

The Fact:

Mary left Nazareth after the Annunciation: “*and Mary rising up in those days went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah*” (Lk. 1:39) and went over the mountains to Hebron, south of Jerusalem, to wait upon her cousin Elizabeth, because her presence and much more the presence of the Divine Child in her womb, according to the will of God, was to be the source of very great graces to the Blessed John, Christ’s Forerunner.

Many women, if they were expecting a child, would refuse to hurry over the hills on a visit of pure kindness. They would say they had a duty to themselves and to their unborn child which came before anything or anyone else.

The Mother of God considered no such thing. Elizabeth was going to have a child, too, and although Mary’s own child was God, she could not forget Elizabeth’s need.

St. Joseph probably accompanied Mary, returned to Nazareth, and when, after three months, he came again to Hebron to take his wife home, the apparition of the angel, mentioned in Matthew 1:19-25, took place to end the tormenting doubts of Joseph regarding Mary’s maternity.

Arriving at the house of Zachary and Elizabeth, Mary greets her cousin, and something wonderful happens: John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth’s womb. As the Gospel puts it in its entry on the Visitation, Mary’s “*presence and much more the presence of the Divine Child in her womb, according to the will of God, was to be the source of very great graces to the Blessed John, Christ’s Forerunner*” (Catholic Encyclopedia, 1913). John’s leap was no ordinary movement of an unborn child, for as Elizabeth tells Mary, “*as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy*” (Luke 1:44). His joy, the Church has held from the time of the early Church Fathers, came from his cleansing at that moment of Original Sin, in accordance with the angel Gabriel’s prophecy to Zachary, before John’s conception, that “*he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb*” (Luke 1:15). “*As the presence of any sin whatever is incompatible with the indwelling of the Holy Ghost in the soul, it follows that at this moment John was cleansed from the stain of original sin*” (Catholic Encyclopedia).

Elizabeth, too, is filled with joy, and cries out in words that would become part of the Hail Mary, “*Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,*” before acknowledging her cousin as “*the mother of my Lord*” (Luke 1:42-43). Mary responds with the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), a canticle or biblical hymn that has become an essential part of the Church’s evening prayer (vespers). It is a beautiful hymn of thanksgiving, glorifying God for choosing her to be the mother of His Son, as well as for His mercy “*from generation until generations, to them that fear Him*”.

Our Lady now for the first time exercised the office which belonged to the Mother of God made man, that He might by her mediation sanctify and glorify us. “*I am come, said Christ, that they may have life and may have it more abundantly*” (Jn. 10, 10). Even before He was born His presence gave life.

The Magnificat:

Immersed thus in Scriptural thought and phraseology, summing up in its inspired ecstasy the economy of God with His Chosen People, indicating the fulfillment of the olden prophecy and prophesying

anew until the end of time, the Magnificat is the crown of the Old Testament singing, the last canticle of the Old and the first of the New Testament.

*“My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit has found joy in God, who is my Savior,
Because he has looked graciously upon the lowliness of his handmaid.
Behold, from this day forward all generations will count me blessed;
Because he who is mighty, he whose name is holy, has wrought for me his wonders.
He has mercy upon those who fear him, from generation to generation;
He has done valiantly with the strength of his arm, driving the proud astray in the conceit of their hearts;
He has put down the mighty from their seat, and exalted the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty-handed.
He has protected his servant Israel, keeping his merciful design in remembrance,
According to the promise which he made to our forefathers,
Abraham and his posterity for evermore.”*

It was uttered (or, not improbably, chanted) by the Blessed Virgin, when she visited her cousin Elizabeth under the circumstances narrated by St. Luke in the first chapter of his Gospel.

Commentators divide it into three or four stanzas, of which easily accessible illustrations may be found. It is an ecstasy of praise for the inestimable favor bestowed by God on the Virgin, for the mercies shown to Israel, and for the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and to the patriarchs.

The Magnificat is in many places very similar in thought and phrase to the Canticle of Anna (1 Samuel 2:1-10), and to various psalms (33:3-5; 34:9; 137:6; 70:19; 125:2-3; 110:9; 97:1; 117:16; 32:10; 112:7; 32:11; 97:3; 131:11). Similarities are found with Hab. 3:18; Mal. 3:12; Job 5:11; Isaiah 12:8 and 49:3; Genesis 17:19.

The Feast:

The earliest evidence of the existence of the feast is its adoption by the Franciscan Chapter in 1263, upon the advice of St. Bonaventure. The first official record of the Feast was kept July 2, the day after the octave of St. John, at Le Mans, France, in 1247. The idea was to tie the celebration of the Visitation, at which Saint John had been cleansed of Original Sin, to the celebration of his birth. The liturgical color is white.

With the Franciscan Breviary this feast spread to many churches, but was celebrated at various dates. It was extended to the entire Church by Urban VI, 6 April, 1389, with the hope that Christ and His Mother would visit the Church and put an end to the Great Schism which rent the seamless garment of Christ. Since, during the Schism, many bishops of the opposing obedience would not adopt the new feast, it was confirmed by the Council of Basle, in 1441.

The lesson:

If we practice this contemplation taught and shown to us by Our Lady, we will find that our experience is like hers.

If Christ is growing in us, if we are at peace, recollected, because we know that however insignificant our life seems to be, from it He is forming Himself; if we go with eager wills, “*in haste*,” to wherever our circumstances compel us, because we believe that He desires to be in that place, we shall find that we are driven more and more to act on the impulse of His love.

And the answer we shall get from others to those impulses will be an awakening into life, or the leap into joy of the already wakened life within them.