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## THE ACTIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

(Continued.)

This our obligation is further enhanced by a consideration to which we have alluded, and which has often struck us in reflecting on a passage in the Gospel. May we be allowed to add, that its beauty, as well as its importance, seems to us to have been almost overlooked. From Mat. i. 18-24, it is clear that the angel's visit to the Blessed Virgin was by her completely concealed. This would have seemed almost impossible. It was a subject for the purest, yet intensest joy; for an exultation of spirit that would beam forth from every feature, would quiver on the lips, betray itself by involuntary gestures of bliss. Then to be so exalted, and not show consciousness of it; to be raised above every attainable dignity, to find oneself become the theme of prophecy, the fulfilment of types, the term of the Old Law, the dawn of the new day, the mother of the world's life, in one word, the Mother of God, and not, by look, or word, hint it; to be as calm, as simple, as natural, the next time she spoke with Joseph, as if nothing had occurred; this gives us a truer estimate of the beauty and perfection of her character, than almost anything else that is on record. And further, that naturally foreseeing or knowing, as time went on, Joseph's tormenting perplexity, she should have preferred to bear its pain—the most grievous possible to her pure and affectionate heart, to a manifestation of her lofty privileges, and heavenly maternity, proves both a humility without parallel, and a confidence in God's providence worthy of it. But now, is it rash to say, that, if even such strong motives as were here presented did not suffice to overcome her humble modesty, and induce her to manifest her hidden glory, there must have been a reason stronger still, to influence her, when afterwards she gave minute details of Gabriel's interview, and the circumstances of the divine Incarnation? And this will be supplied by the same power which impelled St. John, in extreme old age, to record his remembrances of our Lord's discourses; the Holy Spirit's prompting to a work important for our instruction, and so for our salvation.

And now we may ask, is there anything exaggerated, unnatural, or repugnant to God's word, in the view which we have taken of the Blessed Virgin's place in the economy of faith? We feel sure there is not. We have then only further to ask, is this her position one in accordance with Protestant ideas, or Protestant affections? Would it suit the palate or the pen of Anglican or Dissenter, Lutheran or Calvinist? Would it be tolerated even as a speculative thesis in a Protestant university, or be proposed as a theme for devout meditation by a high church director? Take the whole range of heretical feelings towards the Mother of the Incarnate Word, from brutish abhorrence, (we blush to write it,) to formal indifference, and see where her claims will fit in. But to a Catholic such a position is at once natural and acceptable. He greets with joy whatever tends to enhance her merits, or increase her praise. He recognises her as a being placed above his power of adequately doing justice to either. It is gratifying, therefore, and consoling to him to learn, even though it may not have struck him before, that the ever holy Virgin Mother of God holds a high, or the highest, place, in any relation which binds her, on the one side, to the merciful counsels of God, and, on the other, to those for whom they are decreed.

2. And now let us proceed to enquire, what place those early records of our dear Saviour's life assign to His parent in the order of grace. That she was full of grace when she was chosen by God for that high dignity, we have an angel's word. That the impouring of all grace into the already full vessel, by the incarnation itself, made it overflow, who can doubt? We have only to examine what happened, on the first occasion of proof, to satisfy ourselves of this.

There must have been particular reasons, as we have before suggested, for the selection of any given Gospel history from the abundance withheld; and, therefore, it is no presumption to believe, that one of the most remarkable, and profitable events, succeeding the incarnation, was the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Simply read, it is a touching record. The humble condescension of that now sovereign lady towards her aged relative, in travelling into the mountains to congratulate with her, on her miraculous conception, and the lowliness of respect and veneration with which her greeting was received, and the breaking out from Mary's holy lips, of her first and last recorded canticle and prophecy, render this meeting remarkable in the eyes of the most superficial reader. Catholic meditation will go deeper than this.

Gabriel's was the first salutation of Mary, Elizabeth's the second; and in the Church's both are united and fit together, and are rivetted as naturally as we are told the chains of Peter at Jerusalem and

at Rome did, when brought into contact. "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!" This might have been all spoken by one, so well do all its parts cohere. And what wonder? An archangel sent from God, and a matron filled with the Holy Ghost, are but different instruments moved by the same breath, and must sound in perfect harmony. And hence Elizabeth is the second, external witness of the incarnation, receiving knowledge of that marvellous mystery from the Spirit of God. What a full and overpowering sense of its grandeur, and of the dignity of Mary, do not her words convey? "Whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me? and blessed art thou who hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord." Suppose, three months before, it had been announced to Elizabeth that her relation Mary had come to see her, would it have appeared to her anything astonishing? She was the elder by many years, and her husband was a Priest of high rank; could it have been thought a wonderful favor, an unexpected condescension, that the young maiden, betrothed to a carpenter, and their relation, should come to pay them both a visit? But Zachary, moreover, had been favored by an angel's visit, a rare honor in those days, when the direct word of God had become precious, as in the time of Heli. And let us observe, as we pass, that the respective positions of Zachary and Joseph, in relation to Elizabeth and Mary, are definitely distinguished by the difference of the two annunciations. In the first, the archangel Gabriel appears, and conveys the tidings of a son to the future father; in the second, he brings his message only to the immediate mother. But to return, Elizabeth, too, had been blest by a miraculous gift, of a child in her old age, of a child pre-described by the greatest of the prophets. In the order of grace, therefore, both had been signally enabled. How much more sublime must the position of the Blessed Virgin have appeared to them, how much superior her rank, that her coming to them should have been, to their minds, as a royal visit, of which they could not, in any way, consider themselves worthy? Nor must it be forgotten that the expression of these sentiments proceeded not merely from a personal conviction, but from the Holy Spirit, who spake through Elizabeth. The words which she uses are worthy of special note. "Whence is this to me?" In other words, "What have I, or what am I, that such an honor should be conferred upon me? However favored I may have been myself, however honored by God's choice, and God's blessing, the distance between me and thee is so immense, that I cannot account for this act of kindness." Then how does she describe it? "That the mother of my Lord should come to me?" She was indeed the mother of the Precursor; Mary, of her, and his Lord. Her son was to close the Old Testament, (for "until John was the law"—Luke xvi. 16.) Mary's was to give and ratify the New; John was to be the sealer of prophecy, Jesus its fulfilment; John was the herald, Jesus the King. But the words "my Lord" recall to our minds a similar expression, where the two ideas of the Messiahship and the Godhead are united. "The Lord said to my Lord," as spoken by David, and explained in this sense by Christ Himself: "My Lord and my God," as similarly applied by St. Thomas. Elizabeth, then, the woman "just before God walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord without blame"—Luke i. 6.; Elizabeth, the mother of the "greatest who rose born of woman"—Mat. xi. 11., given to her miraculously; Elizabeth, in fine, the inspired of the Holy Ghost, here assigns to Mary, a place immeasurably superior to her own: in virtue of her prerogative as the mother of the incarnate Word, the Saviour of the world, the only begotten of God the Father.

We may pause to ask with whose belief about the Blessed Virgin does this feeling of Elizabeth agree—with that of Catholics or with that of Protestants? The latter, as we are told, in a most important work, just published, consider her as "good woman," perhaps a holy one. But with the exception of a few more ultra-high churchmen, none are prepared to exalt her so completely, by right of her prerogative, above every other order of sanctity, even that which the word of God has pronounced "without blame." In the Catholic system, on the contrary, no one will deny, that this superiority is not a matter of opinion, but one of universal belief; not a sentiment, but a doctrine. And it is assigned on the same ground as it is by Elizabeth, the incommunicable privilege of the divine maternity.

But all that we have said goes no further than allotting to the Blessed Virgin the highest place in the order of grace; whereas, we have to enquire what is her relation to the economy, or dispensation

of grace. For we have remarked, that the Visitation is a fair test of this. If any Catholic sentiment respecting her, give particular offence to the Protestant mind, it is one which forms the basis of confidence in our devotion towards her: that it pleases God to make her the channel of great spiritual graces. In reality, there is nothing very unnatural in the idea, when one considers that it pleased Him to give, through her, to the world, the Grace of graces, the very Fountain of every good gift. While the ordinary laws of nature were so over-ruled, as that she alone should have a part in this god-like work, they were so preserved, as that her share should be real and complete. She was the only being ever created, from whom God at any time received or took anything. And it was that humanity thus derived in truth from her, that, united with the divinity, in one person, but two natures, was the ransom of man, and the source of salvation and grace. After this, can it be wondered, if by the same means are dispensed the fruit of that first and divine Gift? But let us see how it was in the Visitation.

Elizabeth thus addressed our Blessed Lady: "For behold, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy"—Luke i. 44. It has been the unfailing tradition of the Church, attested, with perhaps one exception, by every Father, that, in that instant, the Baptist was cleansed from original sin, and sanctified in his mother's womb. In fact, it would be repugnant to imagine consciousness of his Redeemer's presence so prematurely granted him, and a joyful recognition of Him made, without this boon. For the very knowledge, thus miraculously communicated, would imply conviction of sin, whereof He was the Redeemer; and this could only inflict pain, unless accompanied by immediate removal of what estranged one from the other. The joy attendant on the consciousness reveals that this took place.

St. John was thus purged and hallowed in the womb; this was a fruit of redemption, and, in fact, its essential result. To purchase for us forgiveness of sin, to reverse the original curse, and make us once more children of God, and heirs of His kingdom, were the great objects which brought down the Word from the bosom of His Father. Not only was this purification of John, before birth, a fruit of Redemption, but it may be well considered the first act of our Saviour's life, in application of His atonement. It was indeed meet that His very first recorded action, being yet unborn, should be the forgiveness of a sinner. It was no less becoming that this first deed of mercy and grace—the forerunner of so many similar ones, should be performed in favor of the Precursor; the theme of whose preaching, the burthen of whose prophetic song may well be supposed to have been taught him now: "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world!"

Now through whose instrumentality was this first act of graciousness performed, this first application of the fruits of redemption made? There was nothing to prevent its taking place silently. Jeremiah was not made aware till his mission commenced, that he had received consecration before birth. But in this instance God was pleased to employ an outward agency, and we are told what it was. It was the voice, the word of His mother. As soon as the voice of her salutation sounded in Elizabeth's ears, so soon, and no sooner, does the act of mercy take place. Had that salutation been anticipated or delayed, by her will, the prophet's liberation would have come sooner or later. Her word of greeting was the sentence of his forgiveness. The pardon was our Lord's alone, the grace His, the love His; but the conveyance of them all was left to her; she transmitted pardon, grace, and love to the exulting prisoner.

This gives us then the place assigned, by the early records of our Lord's life, to His most blessed Mother, in the economy of grace. It makes her the dispenser of the very first grace which He bestowed after His incarnation; a grace of the most sublime order, in favor of his dearest saint, the friend of the bridegroom. Now let us take, in conjunction with this remarkable fact, another and a parallel one. We mean the performance of Christ's first miracle at Cana. From St. John's account it is evident, that our Lord performed in obedience to His Mother, and even anticipated His appointed hour for her sake: "My hour is not yet come." Heedless of this protest, she feels confident that He will grant her request, and order the servants to make preparations for the miracle. Again we have the same principle acted upon. The first temporal grace, though it required a miracle, and that miracle involved departure from a predetermined plan, was for her, at her request, through her means. The wine would never have been obtained, had she not interposed.

Our divine Master's actions, as we have before

now remarked, were never purposeless. They give us principles and analogies which cannot deceive us. His first action especially, in a given case, may be supposed to lay down a rule. Thus we are told how He called His first disciples—Peter and Andrew, the sons of Zebedee, and Mathew. It was by a command to leave all and follow Him. We do not doubt, though not informed of it, that every other Apostle was called on the same terms. We find how He treated Magdalen, and the woman accused before Him; and nothing would induce us to believe that He ever showed Himself austere or unforgiving. Nay, one action of our Lord suffices to give a certain law. For instance, could we doubt, after seeing His conduct at Cana, that had His blessed Mother, at any subsequent period of His life, asked Him for any other similar favor, or exercise of power, He would have refused it? The common sense of analogy forbids us to think so, with an *a fortiori* power; for it would have been much less to ask for a miracle when thousands were being performed, than to ask and obtain a first, and, in some sense, a premature one.

Again this argument of analogy, or precedent, carries the Church always beyond this life. It is not necessary to enter upon any elaborate reasoning on this subject, but we may illustrate it by one or two examples. We assign to the Apostles their place in the celestial court, by that which they occupied, in relation to our Saviour, on earth. We do not compare their actions with those of others, and award relative merit accordingly. We do not consider whether St. Francis Xavier, or St. Boniface, may not have labored more, or converted more to Christianity, than St. James, whom Herod slew, so early as the year 42. We do not even give them rank by reason of their martyrdom; for St. John, who was not allowed to lay down his life for Christ, holds his pre-eminence as an Apostle far above all martyrs; nor would it make any difference in the place of any Apostle, could it be proved that he did not die for the faith. Why this? Because our Lord, by His mere choice of the twelve to be His companions, and by the high commission, and the powers which He bestowed on them, assigned them a position above every other class of saints, and this we believe to be continued to them in heaven. Again Magdalen and Martha were sisters. The second preserved to the end of life an unblemished character, and is honored by the Church among her holy virgins. She follows the Lamb in heaven whithersoever he goeth. Her sister has not this privilege; she is a saint only as a penitent. Yet the Church bestows upon Magdalen her higher honors, and gives to Martha an inferior reverence. Wherefore the difference? Simply because on earth our Redeemer, by His conduct, gave her this rule. It was clear that He granted precedence to the ardent penitent, whose love and tears had blotted out every trace of guilt, before her more faultless, but less fervent, sister. It was really the parable of the Prodigal in action; the blameless son who had never left home, saw the best garment prepared, and the fatted calf killed, for his wandering but rescued brother.

If then there be truth in all the foregoing remarks, we come to the following conclusions: That, firstly, it pleased our Saviour to make His dear Mother His instrument in the first conveyance of the highest grace, and of the first fruit of redemption, after He came on earth; secondly, and similarly, He made her the first cause and motive in the exercise of His beneficial miraculous powers, in favor of men; thirdly, His conduct being always a principle or rule, we may deduce, that on other similar occasions, He would have allowed her a similar privilege or right; and, fourthly, this argument of analogy does not end with His life, but gives the Church a just ground of belief and action, after both he and His Mother have been re-united in heaven. So far, then, from there being any strangeness, or impropriety, in considering the Blessed Virgin to be an ordinary channel of grace, and that of the highest order, such a view of her position seems borne out by our Lord's conduct, interpreted by the usual rules which we apply to it. This reasoning places our Blessed Lady, in the economy of grace, in the same position which we have seen her occupy in the economy of faith. She stands immediately next to her divine Son, above every other created being.

For if we compare her power even with that of the Apostles, we shall find it of a different, and a superior, character. They had in all fulness a double gift; the sacramental energy in its completest development, and a miraculous command over nature and its laws. The first was surely not comparable to the conveying directly saving virtue, from the Son of God in her womb, to the Precursor in Elizabeth's; thereby not only cleansing him from original sin, but probably arming him with immunity against actual transgression, sanctifying him for his high calling and