

DECEMBER 8.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

OF THE MOST BLESSED VIRGIN.

AT length, on the distant horizon, rises, with a soft and radiant light, the aurora of the Sun which has been so long desired. The happy Mother of the Messiah was to be born before the Messiah himself; and this is the day of the Conception of Mary. The earth already possesses a first pledge of the divine mercy; the Son of Man is near at hand. Two true Israelites, Joachim and Anne, noble branches of the family of David, find their union, after a long barrenness, made fruitful by the divine omnipotence. Glory be to God, who has been mindful of his promises, and who deigns to announce, from the high heavens, the end of the deluge of iniquity, by sending upon the earth the sweet white Dove that bears the tidings of peace!

The Feast of the Blessed Virgin's Immaculate Conception is the most solemn of all those which the Church celebrates during the holy time of Advent; and if the first part of the Cycle had to offer us the commemoration of some one of the Mysteries of Mary, there was none whose object could better harmonise with the spirit of the Church in this mystic season of expectation. Let us, then, celebrate this solemnity with joy; for the Conception of Mary tells us that the Birth of Jesus is not far off.

The intention of the Church, in this Feast, is not only to celebrate the anniversary of the happy moment in which began, in the womb of the pious

Anne, the life of the ever-glorious Virgin Mary; but also to honour the sublime privilege, by which Mary was preserved from the original stain, which, by a sovereign and universal decree, is contracted by all the children of Adam the very moment they are conceived in their mother's womb. The faith of the Catholic Church on the subject of the Conception of Mary is this: that at the very instant, when God united the Soul of Mary, which he had created, to the Body which it was to animate, this ever-blessed Soul did not only not contract the stain, which, at that same instant, defiles every human soul, but was filled with an immeasurable grace which rendered her, from that moment, the mirror of the sanctity of God himself, as far as this is possible to a creature. The Church, with her infallible authority, declared, by the lips of Pius the Ninth, that this article of her faith had been revealed by God himself. The Definition was received with enthusiasm by the whole of Christendom, and the Eighth of December of the year 1854 was thus made one of the most memorable days of the Church's history.

It was due to his own infinite sanctity that God should suspend, in this instance, the law which his divine justice had passed upon all the children of Adam. The relations which Mary was to bear to the Divinity, could not be reconciled with her undergoing the humiliation of this punishment. She was not only Daughter of the Eternal Father; she was destined also to become the very Mother of the Son, and the veritable Spouse of the Holy Ghost; nothing defiled could be permitted to enter, even for an atom of time, into the creature that was thus predestined to contract such close relations with the adorable Trinity; not a speck could be permitted to tarnish in Mary that perfect purity which the infinitely holy God requires in those who are one day to be admitted to enjoy even the sight of his divine majesty in

heaven ; in a word, as the great Doctor St. Anselm says, "it was just that this Holy Virgin should be "adorned with *the greatest purity which can be conceived after that of God himself*, since God the Father was to give to her, as her Child, that only "Begotten Son, whom he loved as himself, as being "begotten to him from his own bosom ; and this in "such a manner, that the self-same Son of God was, "by nature, the Son of both God the Father and of "this Blessed Virgin. This same Son chose her to be "substantially his Mother ; and the Holy Ghost "willed that in Her womb he would operate the conception and birth of Him, from whom he himself "proceeded."¹

Moreover, the close ties which were to unite the Son of God with Mary, and which would elicit from him the tenderest love and the most filial reverence for her, had been present to the divine thought from all eternity : and the conclusion forces itself upon us, that, therefore, the Divine Word had for this his future Mother a love infinitely greater than that which he bore for all his other creatures. Mary's honour was infinitely dear to him, because she was to be his Mother, chosen to be so by his eternal and merciful decrees. The Son's love protected the Mother. She, indeed, in her sublime humility, willingly submitted to whatever the rest of God's creatures had brought on themselves, and obeyed every tittle of those laws which were never meant for her : but that humiliating barrier, which confronts every child of Adam at the first moment of his existence, and keeps him from light and grace until he shall have been regenerated by a new birth,—oh ! this could not be permitted to stand in Mary's way,—her Son forbade it.

The Eternal Father would not do less for the Second Eve than he had done for the First ; yet she

¹ *De Conceptu Virginali*, Cap. xviii.

was created, as was also the first Adam, in the state of original justice, which she afterwards forfeited by sin. The Son of God would not permit that the Woman, from whom he was to take the nature of Man, should be deprived of that gift which he had given even to her who was the mother of sin. The Holy Ghost, who was to overshadow Mary and produce Jesus within her by his divine operation, would not permit that foul stain, in which we are all conceived, to rest, even for an instant, on this his Spouse. All men were to contract the sin of Adam; the sentence was universal; but God's own Mother is not included. God, who is the author of that law; God, who was free to make it as he willed; had power to exclude from it Her whom he had predestined to be his Own in so many ways; he could exempt her, and it was just that he should exempt her; therefore, he did it.

Was it not this grand exemption which God himself foretold, when the guilty pair, whose children we all are, appeared before him in the garden of Eden? In the anathema which fell upon the serpent, there was included a promise of mercy to us. *I will put enmities*, said the Lord, *between thee and the Woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head.*¹ Thus was salvation promised the human race under the form of a victory over Satan; and this victory is to be gained by the Woman, and she will gain it for us also. Even granting, as some read this text, that it is the Son of the Woman that is alone to gain this victory, *the enmity between the Woman and the Serpent* is clearly expressed, and she, the Woman, with her own foot, is to *crush the head* of the hated Serpent. The Second Eve is to be worthy of the Second Adam, conquering and not to be conquered. The human race is one day to be avenged,

¹ Gen. iii. 15.

not only by God made Man, but also by the Woman miraculously exempted from every stain of sin, in whom the primæval creation, which was *in justice and holiness*,¹ will thus reappear in her, just as though the original sin had never been committed.

Raise up your heads, then, ye children of Adam, and shake off your chains! This day, the humiliation, which weighed you down, is annihilated. Behold! Mary, she who is of the same flesh and blood as yourselves, has seen the torrent of sin, which swept along all the generations of mankind, she has seen it flow back at her presence and not touch her; the infernal dragon has turned away his head, daring not to breathe his venom upon her; the dignity of your origin is given to her in all its primitive grandeur. This happy day, then, on which the original purity of your race is renewed, must be a Feast to you. The Second Eve is created, and from her own blood, (which, with the exception of the element of sin, is the same as that which makes you to be the children of Adam,) she is shortly to give you the God-Man, who proceeds from her according to the flesh, as he proceeds from the Father according to the eternal generation.

And how can we do less than admire and love the incomparable purity of Mary in her Immaculate Conception, when we hear even that God, who thus prepared her to become his Mother, saying to her, in the divine Canticle, these words of complacent love: *Thou art all fair, O my Love! and there is not a spot in thee?*² It is the God of all-holiness that here speaks; that eye, which sees all things, finds not a vestige, not a shadow of sin; therefore does he delight in her, and admire in her that gift of his own condescending munificence. We cannot be surprised after this, that Gabriel, when he came down from heaven to announce the Incarnation to her, is full

¹ Eph. iv. 24.

² Cant. iv. 7.

of admiration at the sight of that purity, whose beginning was so glorious and whose progress was immeasurable; and that this blessed Spirit should bow down profoundly before this young Maid of Nazareth, and salute her with, "Hail, *O Full of Grace!*"¹ And who is this Gabriel? An Archangel, that lives amidst the grandest magnificences of God's creation, amidst all the gorgeous riches of heaven; who is Brother to the Cherubim and Seraphim, to the Thrones and Dominations; whose eye is accustomed to gaze on those nine angelic choirs with their dazzling brightness of countless degrees of light and grace; he has found on earth, in a creature of a nature below that of Angels, the *fulness of grace*, of that grace which had been given to the Angels measuredly. This *fulness of grace* was in Mary from the very first instant of her existence. She is the future Mother of God, and she was ever holy, ever pure, ever Immaculate.

This truth of Mary's Immaculate Conception, which was revealed to the Apostles by the divine Son of Mary, inherited by the Church, taught by the Holy Fathers, believed by each generation of the Christian people with an ever increasing explicitness, this truth, we say, was implied in the very notion of a Mother of God. To believe that Mary was Mother of God, was an implicitly believing that she, on whom this sublime dignity was conferred, had never been defiled with the slightest stain of sin, and that God had bestowed upon her an absolute exemption from sin. But now, the Immaculate Conception of Mary rests on an explicit Definition dictated by the Holy Ghost. Peter has spoken by the mouth of Pius; and when Peter has spoken, every Christian should believe; for the Son of God has said: *I have prayed for thee, Peter, that thy faith fail not.*² And again: *The*

¹ St. Luke, i. 28.

² St. Luke, xxii. 32.

*Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I shall have said to you.*¹

The Symbol of our faith has therefore received not a new truth, but a new light on a truth which was previously the object of the universal belief. On that great day of the Definition, the infernal serpent was again crushed beneath the victorious foot of the Virgin-Mother, and the Lord graciously gave us the strongest pledge of his mercy. He still loves this guilty earth, since he has deigned to enlighten it with one of the brightest rays of his Mother's glory. How this earth of ours exulted! The present generation will never forget the enthusiasm with which the entire universe received the tidings of the Definition. It was an event of mysterious importance which thus marked this second half of our century; and we shall look forward to the future with renewed confidence; for if the Holy Ghost bids us tremble for the days when *Truths are diminished* among the children of men,² he would, consequently, have us look on those times as blessed by God in which we receive an *increase* of truth; an *increase* both in light and in authority.

The Church, even before the solemn proclamation of the grand dogma, kept the Feast of this 8th day of December; which was, in reality, a profession of her faith. It is true, that the Feast was not called the *Immaculate Conception*, but simply the *Conception of Mary*. But the fact of such a Feast being instituted and kept, was an unmistakable expression of the faith of Christendom in that truth. St. Bernard and the Angelical Doctor, St. Thomas, both teach that the Church cannot celebrate the Feast of what is not holy; the Conception of Mary, therefore, was

¹ St. John, xiv. 26.

² Ps. xi. 2.

holy and immaculate, since the Church has, for ages past, honoured it with a special Feast. The Nativity of the same holy Virgin is kept as a solemnity in the Church, because Mary was born full of grace ; therefore, had the first moment of Mary's existence been one of sin, as is that of all the other children of Adam, it never could have been made the subject of the reverence of the Church. Now, there are few Feasts so generally and so firmly established in the Church as this which we are keeping to-day.

The Greek Church, which, more easily than the Latin, could learn what were the pious traditions of the East, kept this feast even in the sixth century, as is evident from the ceremonial or, as it was called, the *Type*, of St. Sabas. In the West, we find it established in the Gothic Church of Spain as far back as the eighth century. A celebrated calendar which was engraved on marble, in the ninth century, for the use of the Church of Naples, attests that it had already been introduced there. Paul, the Deacon, Secretary to the Emperor Charlemagne, and afterwards Monk at Monte-Cassino, composed a celebrated Hymn on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception ; we will insert this piece later on, as it is given in the manuscript copies of Monte-Cassino and Benevento. In 1066, the Feast was first established in England, in consequence of the pious Abbot Helsyn's¹ being miraculously preserved from shipwreck ; and shortly after that, was made general through the whole Island by the zeal of the great St. Anselm, Monk of the Order of St. Benedict, and Archbishop of Canterbury. From England it passed into Normandy, and took root in France. We find it sanctioned in Germany, in a council held in 1049, at which St. Leo IX. was present ; in Navarre, 1090, at the

¹ Some writers call him *Elsyn*, and others *Elpyn*. See Baronius in his notes on the Roman Martyrology, Dec. 8. [Tr.]

Abbey of Irach; in Belgium, at Liege, in 1142. Thus did the Churches of the West testify their faith in this mystery, by accepting its Feast, which is the expression of faith.

Lastly, it was adopted by Rome herself, and her doing so rendered the united testimony of her children,—the other Churches,—more imposing than ever. It was Pope Sixtus IV. who, in the year 1476, published the decree of the feast of Our Lady's Conception for the City of St. Peter. In the next century, 1568, St. Pius V. published the universal edition of the Roman Breviary, and in its Calendar was inserted this feast as one of those Christian solemnities, which the faithful are every year bound to observe. It was not from Rome that the devotion of the Catholic world to this mystery received its first impulse; she sanctioned it by her liturgical authority, just as she confirmed it by her doctrinal authority, in these our own days.

The three great Catholic Nations of Europe,—Germany, France, and Spain,—vied with each other in their devotion to this mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception. France, by her King Louis XIV., obtained from Clement IX. that this feast should be kept with an Octave throughout the kingdom; which favour was afterwards extended to the universal Church by Innocent XII. For centuries previous to this, the Theological Faculty of Paris had always exacted from its Professors the oath that they would defend this privilege of Mary; a pious practice which continued as long as the University itself.

As regards Germany, the Emperor Ferdinand III., in 1647, ordered a splendid monument to be erected in the great square of Vienna. It is covered with emblems and figures symbolical of Mary's victory over sin, and on the top is the statue of the Immaculate Queen, with this solemn and truly Catholic inscription:

TO GOD, INFINITE IN GOODNESS AND POWER,
 KING OF HEAVEN AND EARTH,
 BY WHOM KINGS REIGN ;
 TO THE VIRGIN MOTHER OF GOD
 CONCEIVED WITHOUT SIN,
 BY WHOM PRINCES COMMAND,
 WHOM AUSTRIA, DEVOUTLY LOVING, HOLDS AS HER
 QUEEN AND PATRON ;
 FERDINAND III., EMPEROR,
 CONFIDES, GIVES, CONSECRATES HIMSELF,
 CHILDREN, PEOPLE, ARMIES, PROVINCES,
 AND ALL THAT IS HIS,
 AND ERECTS IN ACCOMPLISHMENT OF A VOW
 THIS STATUE,
 AS A PERPETUAL MEMORIAL.¹

But the zeal of Spain for the privilege of the holy Mother of God surpassed that of all other nations. In the year 1398, John I. King of Arragon, issued a Chart, in which he solemnly places his person and kingdom under the protection of Mary Immaculate. Later on, Kings Philip III. and Philip IV. sent ambassadors to Rome, soliciting, in their names, the solemn definition, which heaven reserved, in its mercy, for our days. King Charles III. in the last century, obtained permission from Clement XIII., that the Immaculate Conception should be the patronal feast of Spain. The people of Spain, so

¹ D. O. M. supremo cœli terræque imperatori, per quem reges regnant ; Virgini Deiparæ Immaculatæ Conceptæ, per quam principes imperant, in peculiarem Dominam, Austriæ Patronam, singulari pietate susceptæ, se, liberos, populos, exercitus, provincias, omnia denique confidit, donat, consecrat, et in perpetuam rei memoriam, statuam hanc ex voto ponit Ferdinandus III. Augustus.

justly called the *Catholic Kingdom*, put over the door, or on the front of their houses, a tablet with the words of Mary's privilege written on it; and when they meet, they greet each other with an expression in honour of the same dear mystery. It was a Spanish Nun, Mary of Jesus, Abbess of the Convent of the Immaculate Conception of Agreda, who wrote *God's Mystic City*, which inspired Murillo with his *Immaculate Conception*, the master-piece of the Spanish School.

But, whilst thus mentioning the different nations which have been foremost in their zeal for this article of our holy faith, the Immaculate Conception,—it were unjust to pass over the immense share which the Seraphic Order, the Order of St. Francis of Assisi, has had in the earthly triumph of our Blessed Mother, the Queen of heaven and earth. As often as this feast comes round, is it not just that we should think with reverence and gratitude on him, who was the first theologian that showed how closely connected with the divine mystery of the Incarnation is this dogma of the Immaculate Conception? First, then, all honour to the name of the pious and learned John Duns Scotus! And when at length the great day of the Definition of the Immaculate Conception came, how justly merited was that grand audience, which the Vicar of Christ granted to the Franciscan Order, and with which closed the pageant of the glorious solemnity! Pius the Ninth received from the hands of the children of St. Francis a tribute of homage and thankfulness, which the Scotist School, after having fought four hundred years in defence of Mary's Immaculate Conception, now presented to the Pontiff.

In the presence of the fifty-four Cardinals, forty-two Archbishops, and ninety-two Bishops; before an immense concourse of people that filled Saint Peter's, and had united in prayer, begging the assistance of

the Spirit of Truth ; the Vicar of Christ had just pronounced the decision which so many ages had hoped to hear. The Pontiff had offered the Holy Sacrifice on the Confession of Saint Peter. He had crowned the Statue of the Immaculate Queen with a splendid diadem. Carried on his lofty throne, and wearing his triple crown, he had reached the portico of the basilica ; there he is met by the two representatives of St. Francis : they prostrate before the throne : the triumphal procession halts : and first, there advances the General of the Friars Minor Observantines ; he presents to the Holy Father a branch of silver Lilies : he was followed by the General of the Conventual Friars, holding in his hand a branch of silver Roses. The Pope graciously accepted both. The Lilies and the Roses were symbolical of Mary's purity and love ; the whiteness of the silver was the emblem of the lovely brightness of that orb, on which is reflected the light of the Sun ; for, as the Canticle says of Mary, "she is beautiful as the Moon."¹ The Pontiff was overcome with emotion at these gifts of the family of the Seraphic Patriarch, to which we might justly apply what was said of the Banner of the Maid of Orleans : "It had stood the brunt of the battle ; "it deserved to share in the glory of the victory." And thus ended the glories of that grand morning of the Eighth of December, Eighteen-hundred and Fifty-four.

It is thus, O thou the humblest of creatures, that thy Immaculate Conception has been glorified on earth ! And how could it be else than a great joy to men, that thou art honoured by them, thou the aurora of the Sun of Justice ? Dost thou not bring them the tidings of their salvation ? Art not thou, O Mary, that bright ray of hope, which suddenly bursts forth in the deep abyss of the world's misery ? What should we have been without Jesus ? and thou art his dearest Mother, the holiest of God's creatures,

¹ Cant. vi. 9.

the purest of virgins, and our own most loving Mother!

How thy gentle light gladdens our wearied eyes, sweet Mother! Generation had followed generation on this earth of ours. Men looked up to heaven through their tears, hoping to see appear on the horizon the Star, which they had been told should disperse the gloomy horrors of the world's darkness; but death came, and they sank into the tomb, without seeing even the dawn of the Light, for which alone they cared to live. It was for us that God had reserved the blessing of seeing thy lovely rising, O thou fair Morning Star! which sheddest thy blessed rays on the sea, and bringest calm after the long stormy night! Oh! prepare our eyes that they may behold the divine Sun which will soon follow in thy path, and give to the world his reign of light and day. Prepare our hearts, for it is to our hearts that this Jesus of thine wishes to show himself. To see him, our hearts must be pure; purify them, thou O Immaculate Mother! The divine wisdom has willed that of the feasts which the Church dedicates to thee, this of thy Immaculate Conception should be celebrated during Advent; that thus the children of the Church, reflecting on the jealous care wherewith God preserved thee from every stain of sin, because thou wast to be the Mother of his divine Son,—might prepare to receive this same Jesus by the most perfect renouncing of every sin and every attachment to sin. This great change must be made; and thy prayers, O Mary! will help us to make it. Pray, we ask it of thee by the grace God gave thee in thy Immaculate Conception, that our covetousness may be destroyed, our concupiscence extinguished, and our pride turned into humility. Despise not our prayers, dear Mother of that Jesus who chose thee for his dwelling-place, that he might afterwards find one in each of us.

O Mary! Ark of the Covenant, built of an incorruptible wood, and covered over with the purest gold! help us to correspond with those wonderful designs of our God, who, after having found his glory in thy incomparable purity, wills now to seek his glory in our unworthiness, by making us, from being slaves of the devil, his temples and his abode, where he may find his delight. Help us to this, O thou that by the mercy of thy Son hast never known sin! and receive this day our devoutest praise. Thou art the Ark of Salvation; the one creature unwrecked in the universal deluge; the white Fleece filled with the dew of heaven, whilst the earth around is parched; the Flame which the many waters could not quench; the Lily blooming amidst thorns; the Garden shut against the infernal serpent; the Fountain sealed, whose limpid water was never ruffled; the House of the Lord, whereon his eyes were ever fixed, and into which nothing defiled could ever enter; the mystic City, of which such *glorious things are said*.¹ We delight in telling all thy glorious titles, O Mary! for thou art our Mother, and we love thee, and the Mother's glory is the glory of her children. Cease not to bless and protect all them that honour thy immense privilege, O thou that wast conceived on this day! May this feast fit us for that mystery, for which thy Conception, thy Birth, and thy Annunciation, are all preparations,—the Birth of thy Jesus in Bethlehem: yea, dear Mother, we desire thy Jesus,—give him to us and satisfy the longings of our love.

FIRST VESPERS.

The five Psalms which are chanted by the Church in this Office, are the ones which she always employs on the feasts of our Lady.

¹ Ps. lxxxvi. 3.

The first celebrates the Royalty, the Priesthood, and the supreme Judge-ship of Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Mary ; it implies, therefore, the great dignity, and the incomparable purity of Her that was to give him birth.

ANTIPHON. Thou art all fair, O Mary, and the stain original is not in thee.

ANTIPHONA. Tota pulchra es, Maria, et macula originalis non est in te.

PSALM 109.

The Lord said to my Lord, *his Son* : Sit thou at my right hand, *and reign with me.*

Until I make thy enemies thy footstool.

O Christ ! the Lord, *thy Father*, will send forth the sceptre of thy power out of Sion : *from thence* rule thou in the midst of thy enemies.

With thee is the principality in the day of thy strength, in the brightness of the saints : *for the Father hath said to thee* : From the womb before the day-star I begot thee.

The Lord hath sworn, and he will not repent : *he hath said, speaking of thee, the God-Man* : Thou art a Priest for ever, according to the order of Melchisedech.

Therefore, O Father, the Lord *thy Son* is at thy right hand : he hath broken kings in the day of his wrath.

He shall *also* judge among nations ; *in that terrible coming*, he shall fill the ruins of the world ; he shall crush the heads in the land of many.

Dixit Dominus Domino meo : * Sede a dextris meis.

Donec ponam inimicos tuos : * scabellum pedum tuorum.

Virgam virtutis tuæ emit- tet Dominus ex Sion : * do- minare in medio inimicorum tuorum.

Tecum principium in die virtutis tuæ, in splendoribus sanctorum : * Ex utero ante luciferum genui te.

Juravit Dominus, et non pœnitebit eum : * Tu es Sa- cerdos in æternum secun- dum ordinem Melchisedech.

Dominus a dextris tuis : * confregit in die iræ suæ reges.

Judicabit in nationibus, implebit ruinas : * conquas- sabit capita in terra mul- torum.

De torrente in via bibet : *
propterea exaltabit caput.

ANT. Tota pulchra es, Ma-
ria, et macula originalis non
est in te.

ANT. Vestimentum tuum
candidum quasi nix, et facies
tua sicut sol.

*He cometh now in humi-
lity ; he shall drink in the
way of the torrent of suf-
ferings ; therefore shall he
lift up the head.*

ANT. Thou art all fair, O
Mary, and the stain original
is not in thee.

ANT. Thy garment is white
as snow, and thy face is as
the sun.

The second Psalm celebrates the greatness of God, yet shows him to us as looking down with complacency on the humble of heart. It was the humility of Mary which made him choose her for his own Mother, and crown her as the Queen of the universe. She ever remained a pure Virgin, and yet our Lord made her to be Mother of all mankind.

PSALM 112.

Laudate, pueri, Domi-
num : * laudate Nomen Do-
mini.

Sit Nomen Domini bene-
dictum : * ex hoc nunc et
usque in sæculum.

A solis ortu usque ad oc-
casum : * laudabile Nomen
Domini.

Excelsus super omnes
gentes Dominus : * et super
coelos gloria ejus.

Quis sicut Dominus Deus
noster qui in altis habitat : *
et humilia respicit in coelo et
in terra ?

Suscitans a terra inopem :
* et de stercore erigens pau-
perem.

Ut collocet eum cum prin-

Praise the Lord, ye chil-
dren ; praise ye the Name of
the Lord.

Blessed be the Name of the
Lord, from henceforth now
and for ever.

From the rising of the sun
unto the going down of the
same, the Name of the Lord
is worthy of praise.

The Lord is high above all
nations : and his glory above
the heavens.

Who is as the Lord our
God, who dwelleth on high :
and looketh down on the low
things in heaven and on
earth ?

Raising up the needy from
the earth, and lifting up the
poor out of the dunghill.

That he may place him