

ST. THOMAS' EXPLANATION OF THE HAIL MARY

Translated and Annotated by

LOUIS EVERY, O.P.



HIS EXPLANATION of the Hail Mary is a summary of one of the Lenten sermons preached by St. Thomas to the students and to the faithful of Naples in April, 1273.

It was recorded by his secretary and close associate, Reginald of Piperno. St. Thomas could touch the hearts of the people with his eloquence. He often had to interrupt a sermon because of the tears of his audience. A sermon is meant to be preached, so that we cannot hope to experience its full effect from just reading it. Likewise, a summary lacks the warmth, the skill, and the artistry of the finished product. But despite all these disadvantages, we can still appreciate the depth, the clarity, and the beauty of St. Thomas' thought, so as to be aroused to a greater devotion to Mary.

THE HAIL MARY

This salutation has three parts.¹ The Angel delivered the first part, "Hail full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women" (Luke, 1,28). Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, uttered the second portion, "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Luke 1,42). The Church added the third part, *Mary*: for the Angel did not say, *Hail Mary*, but Hail full of grace. And this name, *Mary*, according to its interpretation agrees with the words of the Angel, as will be clear from what follows.²

HAIL (MARY)

Concerning the first part of the prayer it must be remembered, that in ancient times it was a great event when Angels appeared to men; and that men should show them reverence was regarded as

¹ *Opera Omnia*, Vives Edition (Paris), 1875, Vol. 27, Opusculum VI, Expositio De Ave Maria, pp. 198-202.

² During the Middle Ages the Hail Mary was composed only of those parts explained by St. Thomas. The prayer as we know it today was fixed at the Council of Trent in 1568, although it appeared earlier in the writings of St. Antoninus and Savanarola. The shorter formula is still retained in the Little Office of the B.V.M. and at the beginning of the Rosary as recited in the Dominican rite.

especially praiseworthy. So we read in praise of Abraham that he received the Angels with hospitality, and showed them reverence. That an Angel should pay homage to man, was never heard of, until the Angel greeted the Blessed Virgin, reverently saying, *Hail*. In the past an Angel would not humble himself before man, but man would show his respect for the Angel. The reason being that an Angel was greater than man, and in three ways. First, the Angel is greater in dignity. For the Angel has a spiritual nature: "Who makest thy angels spirits" (Ps. 103, 4).; man on the other hand has a corruptible nature: thus Abraham said: "I will speak to my Lord, whereas I am dust and ashes" (Gen. 18, 27). Therefore, it was not fitting that a spiritual and incorruptible creature should manifest reverence to a corruptible creature, namely, man. Secondly, the Angel is more intimate with God. For the Angel is friendly with God, in as much as he is standing close to God. "Thousands of thousands ministered to Him, and ten thousand times a hundred stood before Him" (Dan. 7, 10). But man is as a stranger, and removed a great distance from God through sin. "I have gone afar off" (Ps. 54, 8). It is fitting then that man esteem an Angel, as a neighbor and friend of the King. Lastly, the Angel excels man because of the fullness of the splendor of divine grace: for the Angels participate in the divine light itself to the highest degree. "Is there any numbering of His soldiers? And upon whom shall not His light arise?" (Job 25,3.) And thus, the Angel always appears arrayed in light. But men, even though they participate in something of that light of grace, nevertheless do so to a less degree and with a certain amount of obscurity. Therefore, it was not fitting that an Angel should show reverence to man, until someone could be found in human nature who excelled the Angels in these three perfections: and this person was the Blessed Virgin. And to manifest that she excelled him in these three gifts, the Angel wished to pay her homage: hence he said, *Hail*. Therefore, the Blessed Virgin excelled the Angels in these perfections.

FULL OF GRACE

First, there is a greater fullness of grace in the Blessed Virgin than in any Angel; and to indicate this, the Angel paid her homage, saying, *full of grace*: as if to say: "I show you reverence because you excel me in the fullness of grace." The Blessed Virgin is said to be full of grace in three ways. First, as regards to her soul, she possessed all the fullness of grace. The grace of God is given for two purposes: namely, to do good, and to avoid evil; and for these, the Blessed Virgin had the most perfect grace since she avoided every

sin more than any saint, except Christ. Sin is either original, and from this she was cleansed in the womb;³ or mortal or venial, and from these she was free.⁴ "Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is not a spot in thee." (Cant. 4,7) St. Augustine in his work, *On Nature and Grace*, c. 36, says: "Except for the holy Virgin Mary, if all the saints when they lived upon earth, were asked whether they were without sin, all with one voice would cry out: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us' (I John 1,8). Except, I say, for this holy Virgin, of whom, on account of the honor of God, I wish to avoid entirely any discussion when it is a question of sin. For we know that to her was granted grace to overcome sin of every kind, who merited to conceive and bring forth Him Who clearly had no sin." But Christ excels the Blessed Virgin in this, that he was conceived and born without original sin; while the Blessed Virgin was conceived and born in it.⁵

Furthermore, she exercised the works of all the virtues, whereas the saints are characterized by the performance of certain special virtues; one was humble, another chaste, another merciful; and they are given as models of special virtues, as for example, St. Nicholas

³ "That the doctrine, which holds that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary at the first moment of her conception was, by singular grace and privilege of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the Human race, preserved from all stains of original sin, is revealed by God, and therefore to be firmly and resolutely believed by all the faithful." (Denz, 1641. Dogmatic Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of Dec. 8, 1854.) The words of St. Thomas are not in opposition to the definition. The meaning will perhaps be brought out clearer by citing some other texts. "Not only from actual sin was Mary free, but she was by special privilege cleansed from original sin. This special privilege distinguishes her from Jeremias and John the Baptist." (*Comp. Theo.* c. 224). In other words, in order that Mary might receive more grace than Jeremias and John the Baptist, who were freed from original sin before birth, she had to be not only sanctified in the womb but also preserved from the stain of original sin. St. Thomas also states: "Mary was immune from all sin, original and actual." (*I Sent.* dist. 44, q. 1, a. 3 ad 3).

⁴ "After his justification a man cannot avoid, during the whole course of his life, every venial sin, without a special privilege such as the Church recognizes was conferred on the Blessed Virgin." (Denz. 833, Council of Trent—1547).

⁵ Christ did not have a human father so that there is no possibility of sin, but Mary did have a human father and she would have incurred sin if it were not for the special intervention of Divine Providence. St. Thomas does not mean original sin in the strict sense, which is in the soul, but the debt of original sin which was antecedently in the body, before perfect animation, conceived according to the normal processes of generation. For an explicit treatment of this problem we refer the reader to the Dec., 1953 issue of *Dominicana*, St. Thomas' Teaching On The Immaculate Conception by Terence Quinn, O.P., pp. 298-303.

who is a model for the virtue of mercy. But the Blessed Virgin is the model of all the virtues: because in her you find the pattern of humility: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1, 38).; and again, "He hath regarded the humility of his handmaid" (Luke 1, 48). She is the exemplar of virginity, "Because I know not man" (Luke 1, 34), and so it is with all the virtues, as is sufficiently well known. In this way, therefore, the Blessed Virgin is not only full of grace in regard to the performance of good but also in the avoidance of evil. Secondly, she was full of grace in regard to the overflowing of grace from her soul to her flesh or body. It is a wonderful thing in the saints that they have sufficient grace to sanctify their souls, but the soul of the Blessed Virgin was so full of grace that from it overflowed grace to her body; so that from her flesh she might conceive the Son of God, and therefore, Hugh of St. Victor says: "Because the love of the Holy Ghost burned so ardently in her heart, it accomplished wonderful things in her flesh, so that from it might be born God and Man." "And therefore the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1, 33). Thirdly, Mary was full of grace in so far as she had an abundance of grace for all mankind. For it is a great thing in each saint when he has such grace as suffices for his own salvation, but greater when a saint has so much grace that it is sufficient for the salvation of many; but when he has such an abundance of grace that it suffices for the salvation of all mankind, this indeed is the greatest of all. And this fullness of grace is in Christ and in the Blessed Virgin.⁶ For in every danger you can obtain salvation from this glorious Virgin. "A thousand bucklers," that is, remedies against evils, "hang upon it(her)" (Cant. 4,4). Likewise in every work of virtue you can have Mary as your helper; and therefore she can truly say of herself, "In me is all hope of life and of virtue" (Eccl. 24, 25). Therefore Mary is full of grace, and she exceeds the Angels in the plenitude of grace; and because of this she is fittingly called, *Mary*, which means, "enlightened in herself"; "The Lord will fill thy soul with brightness" (Isa. 58,11), and above all she will enlighten others throughout the world; and for this reason she is compared to the sun and to the moon.

THE LORD IS WITH THEE

Secondly, Mary excels the Angels in her intimacy with God;

⁶ "Mary . . . since she surpasses all creatures in holiness and union with Christ, and since she has been associated by Him with the work of salvation, has merited for us *de congruo* (of becomingness), as it is termed, all that Christ merited for us *de condigno* (in justice), and is the principal minister in the distribution of graces." (Denz. 3034. Encyclical *Ad Diem Illum* of Febr. 2, 1904).

and to indicate this the Angel said: *The Lord is with thee*; as if to say, "I show you reverence because you are more intimate with God than I am, for *the Lord is with thee*." When he says, *Lord*, he means the *Father* with the Son and with the Holy Ghost; Who are not with any Angel nor any creature in the same way as They are with Mary. "The Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke, 1,35). God the *Son* would soon dwell in her womb. "Rejoice and praise, O thou habitation of Sion; for great is He that is in the midst of thee, the Holy One of Israel" (Isa. 12,6). Therefore, the Lord is with the Angel in a different way than He is with the Blessed Virgin: because with her He is as Son, but with the Angel He is as Lord. God the Holy Ghost dwells with her as in a temple, for it is said: "The temple of the Lord, the sanctuary of the Holy Ghost," because she conceived by the Holy Ghost: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee" (Luke 1, 35). The Blessed Virgin is more intimate with God than the Angel because with her are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, that is to say, the Holy Trinity.⁷ And so we sing of her: "Noble abode of the Most Blessed Trinity." *The Lord is with thee* are the most praiseworthy words the Angel could have uttered. Hence the Angel deservedly esteemed the Blessed Virgin, since she is the Mother of our Lord,⁸ and our Lady. This name Mary then, is fittingly attributed to her, which in the Syrian tongue means *Lady*.

BLESSED ART THOU AMONG WOMEN

Thirdly, the Blessed Virgin excels the Angels even in regard to her purity; for she was not only pure in herself, but she also secured purity for others. She was most pure in regard to fault; for this Virgin incurred neither original,⁹ nor mortal, nor venial sin. Likewise

⁷ "Likewise we believe that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are of one substance, yet we do not say that Mary begot the unity of the Trinity, but only the Son, Who alone assumed our nature in the unity of His Person." (Council of Toledo—675).

⁸ "If anyone dooes not confess that God is truly the Emmanuel, and on that account that the holy virgin is the mother of God (for she bore according to the flesh the Word of God made flesh), let him be anathema." (Denz. 113). At the Council of Ephesus in 431, it was defined that there was one person in Christ and that the Blessed Virgin Mary was the Mother of God.

⁹ "It is highly improbable that St. Thomas would contradict himself in the space of a few lines (cf. footnotes 3 and 5). The difficulty vanishes if one recalls that in St. Thomas' view *the conception of the body* and the beginning of the evolution of the embryo preceded by a month at least the *animation* (or consummated passive conception) before which the person did not exist since there was as yet no rational soul." (*The Mother of the Saviour*, Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, p. 70).

in regard to punishment. For three curses fell upon man on account of sin. The first curse fell upon woman, that in conceiving she should lose her virginal integrity, that she should bear in difficulty and should bring forth in pain. But the Blessed Virgin was immune from this pain and sorrow, for she conceived without losing her virginal integrity, bore in comfort and brought forth in joy the Saviour.¹⁰ "It (She) shall bud forth and blossom, and shall rejoice with joy and praise" (Isa. 25, 2). The second curse fell upon man, that he should earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. The Blessed Virgin was exempt from this hardship since, as the Apostle says, virgins are free from the cares of the world and devote themselves to God alone. (I Corinth. 7) The third curse fell upon both men and women, that they must return to dust from whence they came. And from this law of nature, the Blessed Virgin was exempt, because she was taken up body and soul into heaven. For we believe that after her death,¹¹ she arose and was taken into heaven. "Arise, O Lord, into Thy resting place, Thou and the ark which Thou hast sanctified" (Ps. 131, 8). Consequently, the Blessed Virgin was immune from every curse, and therefore, blessed among women, because she alone took away the curse, and brought us a blessing, and opened the gates of paradise. Wherefore the name, *Mary*, which means "Star of the Sea," is proper to her; because just as by means of the star of the sea, navigators are directed to the harbor, so too are Christians directed by Mary to eternal glory.

BLESSED IS THE FRUIT OF THY WOMB (JESUS)

Sometimes a sinner seeks for something which he cannot obtain, but the just man obtains it. "The substance of the sinner is kept for the just" (Prov. 13,32). Thus Eve sought the fruit, but she did not

¹⁰ "If anyone in agreement with the Holy Fathers does not confess that, properly speaking and according to the truth, Mary is the holy mother of God, and ever a virgin and immaculate, seeing that she truly, but in a special way conceived of the Holy Ghost without seed in the fulfillment of time the very Word of God Who was born of God the Father before all ages, and that she brought Him forth without losing her integrity, and that after His birth her virginity remained inviolate, let him be condemned." (Denz. 256. Lateran Council—649).

¹¹ "The Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." (Apostolic letter *Munificentissimus Deus*). It is not a dogma of faith that our Lady actually died. Her assumption into heaven without death preceding has an ancient tradition in the Eastern Church, while St. Thomas is a witness to the opposite opinion. Since it is still a matter of discussion, the Holy Father in the definition of the Assumption did not say that Mary died.

find in it all the things which she wished. But the Blessed Virgin in her fruit found all the things which Eve desired. For Eve in her fruit longed for three things. First, that which the devil falsely promised to her, namely, that they would be *as God, knowing good and evil*. The deceiver said to them: "You will be as gods" (Gen. 3,5). He lied, for the devil "is a liar, and the father of lies" (John 8,44). For Eve, on account of eating the forbidden fruit, did not become like to God, but more unlike Him, because the sinner by sinning departs from God, his salvation, and so she was driven from paradise. But the Blessed Virgin found this likeness, and all Christians will find it in the fruit of her womb (Jesus); because through Christ we are united and likened to God.¹² "When He appears, we will be like unto Him, for we will see Him, as He is" (I John 3,2). Secondly, in her fruit, Eve desired delight because it was good to eat or it seemed so to her; but she did not find delight, for immediately she realized that she was naked (cf. Gen. 3,7) and experienced pain and sorrow. But in the fruit of the Virgin we will find sweetness and salvation. "He that eateth My flesh, hath everlasting life" (John 6,55). Lastly, Eve's fruit was beautiful to the eye, but more beautiful was the fruit of the Blessed Virgin upon Whom the Angels love to gaze. "Thou art beautiful above the sons of men" (Ps. 44,2), and this is because He is the splendor of the Father's glory. Eve, therefore was able to find in her fruit only that misery which every sinner finds in sin. Consequently, let us seek those things which we desire in the fruit of the Virgin. Moreover, this fruit was blessed by God, because God so filled Him with every grace that as a result grace comes to us. "Blessed be the God, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephes. 1,3). He is revered by the Angels; "Benediction and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving, honor and power and strength, to our God" (Apoc. 7,12). He is paid homage by men: "Every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2,11). Accordingly, therefore, the Blessed Virgin is blessed, but even more blessed in the fruit of her womb (Jesus).

CONCLUSION

In this sermon St. Thomas gave his listeners, at least implicitly, his whole doctrine on Mariology. From what he has said we are led to the conclusion that the role of Mary in the mystery of our Redemption is radically found in the fact that she was chosen to be

¹² "Mary was associated with Jesus in the painful work of the redemption of mankind." (Encyclical *Jucunda Semper* of Sept. 8, 1894).

the Mother of God. Mary did not merit this unique privilege because of any intrinsic goodness which she possessed, but rather all her graces, virtues, and privileges were preparatory, concomitant, or consequent to her being chosen by Almighty God to be the mother of His Only Begotten Son. This position seems to be in accord with the mind of the Church, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors, and the teaching of eminent theologians.¹³ For the purpose of clarity we will place an outline of Mary's privileges as based upon her Divine Maternity. The numbers correspond to those given in the footnotes, which indicate the passages where St. Thomas, at least in principle, treats each privilege.

OUTLINE OF MARY'S PRIVILEGES

THE DIVINE MATERNITY	{	preparatory—THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION. 4, 9
		preparatory, concomitant, and consequent { MORAL IMPECCABILITY. 4, 9, PERPETUAL VIRGINITY. 10
		consequent { THE ASSUMPTION. 11 CO-REDEMPTRIX. 12 MEDIATRIX OF ALL GRACES. 6

We can clearly see the great veneration which is due to Mary because of her exalted position as the Mother of God. From all eternity she had been destined by Divine Providence to share in the reconstruction of the world and the renewal of the life of grace in the souls of men. Even though we cannot imitate Mary entirely in possessing the grace of her holy life; yet we should practice her virtues to the best of our ability. "I am the mother of fair love, and of fear, and of knowledge, and of holy hope. In me is all grace of the way and of the truth, in me is all hope of life and of virtue" (Eccles. 24,24-25).

¹³ "From this sublime office of the Mother of God seem to flow, as it were from a most limpid hidden source, all the graces with which her soul and life were adorned in such extraordinary manner and measure." (Encyclical *Fulgens Corona* of Sept. 8, 1953). The following Fathers and Doctors of the Church can be considered as holding for the pre-eminence of the Divine Maternity: St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. John Damascene, St. Bernard, St. Albert the Great, and St. Bonaventure. Theologians who hold this opinion include such men as: Gonet, Hugon, Contenson, Merkelbach, and Garrigou-Lagrange.