

MARY'S VESPER HOUR WITH THE FRIARS

As the shades of evening are gathering on St. Gabriel's day, the first Vespers of Our Lady's Feast is ushered in by the cantors' intoning the words, "Ave Maria gratia plena"—"Hail Mary full of grace." Thus does Mary receive from us that familiar salutation which furnishes, as it were, the whole setting for the Office of her Annunciation. This greeting recalls the scene enacted at Nazareth nearly twenty centuries ago. With grateful hearts, then, the chorus breaks forth into a fivefold song of praise. These "Laudate" psalms ascend to heaven high in thanksgiving to God, for "His mercy is confirmed upon us and the truth of the Lord remaineth forever."

The prior turns towards the altar and pronounces the prophecy of Isaias: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel. He shall eat butter and honey, that he may know to refuse the evil, and to choose the good."

Two brothers standing before the lectern narrate, in the words of St. Luke, how this prophecy is to be fulfilled: "And Mary said to the Angel: How shall this be done, because I know not man? And the Angel, answering, said to her: The Holy Ghost 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."

After these inspired words of Sacred Scripture have been said, that sublime creation of man's poetic genius: the "Ave Maris Stella"—Hail, Star of the Sea," is sung by the choir. This venerable song of the Church is sung on most of the feasts of Our Lady. No heart can resist the confidence and love this Canticle inspires; for, as a pious writer says, "The nun in cloister and the mariner on the storm tossed deep both love their 'Ave Maris Stella.'"

"Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the just," ring out the cantors. From the choir comes the response: "Let the earth be open, and bud forth a Saviour." Under these two beautiful figures Isaias pictures the coming of Christ. Hardly do these utterances of the Prophet die away ere the rich notes of the Magnificat Antiphon resound throughout the cloister of the Mother Immaculate. This Antiphon both pre-

cedes and follows Our Lady's canticle, bringing before our minds Christ coming like the sun out of the heavens and descending into the womb of the Virgin as the sparkling dew of the aurora. It is intoned by the Prior as he stands at the altar, surrounded by his ministers. As the words of the canticle itself vibrate throughout our Gothic chapel, the celebrant, like Zachary of old, fumes the Holy of Holies with blessed incense, which typifies how Mary's praises in our own generation are being borne heavenwards.

The incensing finished, the celebrant and assistants move processionally from the sanctuary to the middle of the choir. There the oration is sung, during which the choir inclines profoundly. In this prayer the Church glories in her faith in the Divine Maternity; and Mary's threefold prerogative of mediatrix, queen, and mother of all Christians. With a flourished "Benedicamus Domino," the formula of dismissal proper to the Divine Office, and with a passing remembrance of the faithful departed by the silent Pater, Vespers terminates. It the Church's Even-Song, and the most impressive of all her liturgical hours.

The sacred ministers recede through the clouds of holy incense to the altar, ablaze with symbolic tapers. There they linger a moment, in loving adoration, before the Incarnate God of the Tabernacle. The brethren depart from the oaken stalls, the waxen torches cease to flicker, and the "Hora incensi" of Mary's Annunciation is over. But, like the veil of incense that hovers about the Sacramental Throne, the ineffable joys of this solemn event remain in the hearts of the faithful, to be called forth thrice each day by the peaceful stroke of the Angelus Bell.

—Bro. Albert Muller, O. P.