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WHILE AS YET HE WAS IN HIS MOTHER'S WOMB

A Homily on the Visitation Attributed to St. John Chrysostom

This remarkable sermon on the Visitation of Mary to Elisabeth is taken from the Latin pre-1970 Roman Breviary for July 2, Second Nocturn, attributed to St. John Chrysostom, and referenced from the works of St. Symeon Metaphrastes.

As soon as our Redeemer was come among us, he went with haste, while he was as yet in his mother's womb, to visit his friend John. And John, in the one womb, as if conscious of the presence of Jesus in the other womb, dashed himself impatiently against the narrow walls of his natural prison, as though crying out: I perceive the very Lord that gave nature her bounds! Why therefore should I wait for the due season of my birth? What need is there for me to linger here till nine months are ended, now that the Timeless One is with me! I would break out of my dark cell! I would proclaim my

manifold knowledge of marvelous things! I am meant to be a sign, and so even now I would show that the Christ is here! I am the trumpet-voice, and I desire to peal forth the news that the Son of God is come in the flesh. Let me sound as a trumpet, and bless and loose my father's tongue, and make it speak again! Let me sound as a trumpet and quicken my mother's womb!

You see, O beloved brethren, how new and how strange a mystery is here! John is not yet born, but by leaping he speaks. He is as yet unseen, but he gives warning. He is not yet able to cry, but by his acts he bears witness. He draws not yet the breath of life, but he preaches God. He sees not yet the light, but he makes known the Sun. He is not yet come out of the womb, but he hastens to play the Forerunner. In the presence of the Lord he cannot restrain himself, but rebels against the bounds set by nature, and struggles to break out of the imprisoning womb, eager to herald the coming Saviour. He says, as it were: Behold, the Deliverer comes, and why am I yet in bonds and made to abide here? The Word comes, that he may set right all things, and am I still to tarry in prison? I would go forth! I would run before him, and proclaim to all mankind: Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

But tell us, O John, how it came to pass that while you were still in the darkness of your mother's womb, you did see and hear? How did you behold the things of God? How did you leap and bound for joy? If we could hear him answer, he would say: Great is the mystery of that which here takes place. Beyond the understanding of men are these doings! It is meet that I should show forth a new thing in nature for the sake of him who is making new things which are beyond nature. Even though I am yet in the womb, I perceive, for upon me from another womb the Sun of Righteousness shines. As it were, with my ears I understand, for I was created to be the Voice of the Great Word. I would cry aloud, for I contemplate the only-begotten Son of the Father clothed in flesh. I tremble for joy, for I perceive that he, by whom all things were made, has taken upon himself the form of a servant. I leap as I think of the Redeemer of the world being made flesh, for I would run before his coming. Nonetheless, I herald his approach to you as best I can, and in this manner make my confession of him whose Forerunner I am.

We must consider here that the greater comes to the lesser, in order to help the lesser: Mary to Elisabeth, Christ to John. And again afterwards, that he might sanctify John's baptisms, the Lord came to him to be baptized. And quickly were these blessings of Mary's coming, and of the divine presence,

made manifest. Regard here the distinction made, and the special weight of every word. Elisabeth was the first to hear the voice of Mary's salutation, but John was the first to receive the grace. She heard it by natural means, but he leaped by reason of the mystery. She hailed the coming of Mary, he that of the Lord. Mary and Elisabeth spoke words full of grace, but Jesus and John worked unseen within, and entered upon this mystery of godliness as their mothers met one another. And so by twin miracles the mothers prophesied from the spirit of their unborn offspring. The babe John leaped, and the mother was filled with the Holy Ghost. The mother was not filled before her son, but when the son was filled with the Holy Ghost, he filled his mother also.

"And whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" That is to say, how does it come to pass that so great a good should befall me, as that the Mother of my Lord should come to me? I feel the wonder, I acknowledge the mystery; the Mother of my Lord, pregnant with the Word, is full of God. And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house. It is meet to record how Mary showed this kindness, and abode this mystic number of months. She tarried long, not only for friendship's sake, but also for the good of the great Prophet. For if the first coming of Mary so blessed him, that even as a babe in the womb he leapt for joy, and his mother was filled with the Holy Ghost, what blessedness must we not believe to have flowed upon him from living so long near Mary? Thus was the Prophet anointed, and trained by exercise like a strong wrestler in his mother's womb, for his sinews are being braced for a hard battle. ✦