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ON THE ENTRY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD
INTO THE HOLY OF HOLIES II

WHEN TASKS EXCEED HUMAN STRENGTH, whether it be necessary to move something very heavy or to engage in a struggle with words, men outstanding in their excellent physical strength and eloquence find themselves in the same position as those completely incapable in both respects, because they are all equally unable to achieve anything or to succeed in their purpose. If someone attempts to touch the stars with his hand, even though he is tall and stretches his arm further than the rest, he is almost as far away from those ethereal heights as men of much shorter stature, the difference not being worth mentioning. In the same way, on subjects transcending words, eminent speakers are not significantly better at saying something than anyone else. Who can attempt to treat of matters which utterly defy all words without being seen to give way beneath the weight of these topics, like those reputed to have boasted they could counterbalance the weight of the universe, or those in the myth who attempted to make their way up to heaven? Men who make such attempts are as far from the truth as their aims are beyond the grasp of human minds and speech, being outside the sphere of this world, based

and contemporaries, she separated herself from the assembled company and went forward to the High Priest, absolutely alone and full of joy. Turning her gracious and gentle gaze upon him, she affirmed with whatever gestures she could, and with childish murmurings, her wholehearted devotion to God.

How can these events fail to inspire amazement? The three-year-old puts herself into the hands of him who can direct her course in accordance with higher providence. She makes her own wise choice between nature and its Creator, and gives higher esteem to what is better. She chooses God instead of her mother and father's embrace and prefers God's Temple and its High Priest to being cosseted at home. Reckoning all these things worthless, but valuing God and everything pertaining to Him above all else, she ran gladly towards His Temple. Surely it was of her that David the Prophet said to God, "Justice and judgment are the preparation of thy throne" (Ps. 89:14 Lxx), and "Righteousness and judgment are the achievement of his throne" (Ps. 97:2 Lxx). For she is styled the living throne of God, and in fact this honour belongs solely to her (because the word "throne" in the singular is not actually used of the bodiless, heavenly orders). It is through her rather than by means of those angelic Thrones that the foundation of great justice and ineffable righteousness came about and was revealed. So even before her birth the Virgin's discerning judgment was extolled, and now, before she had grown up, she publicly demonstrated its steadfastness.

Whereas Moses' tongue, although slow in other respects, nevertheless clearly proclaimed its own lack of discretion in his youth (Exod. 4:10), preserving traces of that flame, which is used, as the saying goes, for the testing of our mind's discernment, and the brightness of which is preferred to the radiance of gold. As for the other things we hear about him, to a certain extent they are good signs of his soul's future valour, but even these tokens are scarcely worthy of admiration compared to the events we are presently considering. For how could a kingly crown adorned with gold leaf and bright gems (*cf.* Exod. 28:36–29:6) appeal to a child's mentality as much as her mother's warm and loving embrace

and overshadowed her (*cf.* Luke 1:35), rather, the power of the Most High came to dwell in her in His very person. He did not reveal His presence through darkness and fire, as He did to Moses (*cf.* Exod. 19:16, 18), nor through a tempest and cloud, as He did to Elijah (*cf.* 1 Kgs. 18:45), but the unveiled power of the Most High directly overshadowed the Virgin's perfectly pure womb with nothing intervening, neither the air of earth or heaven, nor anything visible or invisible. For this was not overshadowing, but pure union.

Since anything that overshadows something else naturally gives it its own form and character, what came to pass in the Virgin's womb was not just union but the formation, out of both the power of the Most High and her all-holy virgin womb, of the incarnate Word of God. The Word of God in the flesh made His abode in her, came forth from her, "and appeared on earth and went about among men". He made our human nature divine, and bestowed on us, according to the holy Apostle, "things the angels desire to look into" (1 Pet. 1:12). Such is the extraordinary honour and all-surpassing glory of the Ever-Virgin, which defeats the mind and speech of all, however angelic they be. Again, what words can express the events that followed this indescribable Birth? Co-operating with, and sharing in the sufferings of, the self-emptying of the Word of God (*cf.* Phil. 2:7), which was accomplished through her, and led to His exaltation, she was justly glorified and lifted up with Him, constantly adding great gifts to the extraordinary ones already bestowed upon her. Even after He Who took flesh from her ascended into heaven, it was as though she was striving to emulate the great works past understanding and speech which He had wrought in her, through patient endurance in all kinds of asceticism, through prayers and exertions for the whole world, and counsels and exhortations for those going to the ends of the earth to preach. She was the sole support and consolation of all who saw or heard her, assisting by various means in the proclamation of the Gospel. Thus she showed that her whole life, her behaviour, her mind and her words, were utterly devoted to godly striving.