

The Angelic Doctor

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On the Angelic Salutation

Translated from the Latin Text of the Marietti Edition: 1954
taken from http://www.tacalumni.org/aquinas/TOMA_081.txt

IN THIS SALUTATION three things are contained. One part the Angel wrought, that is, « Hail full of grace, the Lord is with Thee! Blessed art Thou among women ». Another part Elisabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, wrought, that is, « Blessed is the fruit of Thy womb ». The third part the Church added, that is, « Mary »: for the Angel did not say, "Hail Mary", but « Hail, full of grace ». And this name, that is Mary, according to its interpretation befits the things said by the Angel, as will be made clear.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee!

§2. Therefore, the first thing to be considered about it is, that in antiquity it was a very great thing that angels appeared to men; and/or because men would make reverence to them, they held them in [pro] the greatest praise. Whence to praise Abraham it is written, that he received the Angels with hospitality, and that he exhibited reverence to them. Moreover, that an angel would make reverence to a man, was a thing never heard, except after he saluted the Blessed Virgin, reverently saying, « Hail! » Moreover, the reason that in antiquity an angel did not revere a man, but a man an angel, is that an Angel is greater than a man; and this as much as it regards three things.

§3. First as much as regards dignity: the reason is, an angel is of a spiritual nature. Psalm 103:4, « Who makes His angels of spirit »; but a man is of a corruptible nature: whence Abraham use to say, Gen. 18:27, « I will speak to my Lord, although I am dust and ashes » It was not, therefore, decent that a spiritual and incorruptible creature exhibit reverence to a corporal one, that is to a man.

§.4 Second, as much as regards familiarity before [ad] God. For an angel is familiar with God, as one assisting. Dan 7:10, « Thousands of thousands were ministering to Him, and tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands assisted Him. » But man is as if a stranger [extraneus], and distanced from God by means of sin. Psalm 54:8, « I have distanced myself as one fleeing ». For that reason it is fitting [conveniens] that a man revere an angel, as one who is near and familiar with his King.

§6. Third, he was pre-eminent on account of the plenitude of the splendor of divine grace: for angels are participants in that Divine Light in the highest plenitude. Job. 25:3, « What is the number of His soldiers, and upon which does His light not rise? » And for that reason he always appears with light. But men, even if some participate from the light of grace, however in a little manner, and in a certain obscurity. Therefore it was not decent that he exhibit reverence to a man, so long as someone in human nature was not found, who exceeded angels in these three. And this was the Blessed Virgin. And for that reason, to designate that She exceeded him in these three, the Angel wanted to exhibit reverence to Her: whence he said, « Ave! » Whence the Blessed Virgin exceeded angels in these three.

§7. And first in a plenitude of grace, which is greater in the Blessed Virgin than in any angel; and for that reason to insinuate this, the Angel exhibited reverence to Her, saying, « full of grace », as if he said, "For that reason I exhibit reverence to Thee, because Thou dost excell me in the plenitude of grace." Moreover the Blessed Virgin is said to be full of grace as much as regards three things. First as much as regards Her soul, in which She had every plenitude of grace. For the grace of God is given for two things: that is, for working the good, and for avoiding the evil; and as much as regards those two the Blessed Virgin had the most perfect grace. For She Herself avoided every sin, more holy than anyone after Christ. For sin is either original, and from this she was cleansed in the womb; or mortal or venial, and from these She was free. Whence Cant. 4:7, « Thou art entirely beautiful, My love, and there is not a stain in Thee ». St. Augustine in the book On Nature and Grace says: "Except the holy Virgin Mary, if all the saints, when they were living here, had been asked whether they were without sin, all would have shouted with one voice: « If we said that we did not have sin, we seduce ourselves, and the truth is not in us. » (1 Jn. 1:8) Except, I say, this holy Virgin, of whom for the sake of the honor of the Lord, when one deals with sin, I want, plainly, to have no questioning." For we know that upon Her there was conferred more grace to conquer sin on every side, She who merited to conceive and bear Him, who it is established never had sin.

§8. But Christ excelled the Blessed Virgin in this, that He was conceived and born without original (sin).¹ Moreover the Blessed Virgin was conceived in original (sin), but not born (in it). She Herself also exercised the works of all virtues, but the other saints (only) certain special ones: because one was humble, another chaste, another merciful; and for that reason they are given as an example of special virtues, just as blessed Nicholas is an example of mercy etc.. But the Blessed Virgin is an example of all virtues: because in Her you find the example of humility: Lk. 1:38, « Behold the handmaid of the Lord », and after this, verse 40, « He has looked back upon the humility of His handmaid », of chastity, « since I do not know a man », verse 34, and of all virtues; as is sufficiently clear. Thus, therefore, the Blessed Virgin is full of grace both as much as regards the working of good, and as much as regard the avoiding of evil.

§9. Second, She was full of grace as much as regards it redounding from the soul to the flesh and/or body. For it is a great thing among the Saints that they have so much of grace that it sanctifies their soul; but the soul of the Blessed Virgin was so full that from it there overflowed grace into Her flesh, so that from it She might conceive the Son of God. And for that reason Hugh of St. Victor says: "Because in Her heart the love of the Holy Spirit burned in a singular manner, for that reason She worked wonders in Her flesh, inasmuch as that from it there was born God and man ". Lk 1:35, « For that which shall be born from Thee holy, shall be called the Son of God ».

§10. Third, as much as regards it overflowing unto all men. For it is a great thing in any saint, when he has so much of grace that it suffices for the salvation of many; but when one had so much that it would suffice for the salvation of all men of the world, this would be the greatest; and this is in Christ, and in the Blessed Virgin. For in every danger you can obtain salvation from the glorious Virgin Herself. Whence Cant. 4:4, « A thousand round shields, » that is the remedy against dangers, « hang from her ». Likewise in every work of virtue you can have Her as a helper; and for that reason Eccli.i. 24:25 says of Her, « In Me ever hope of life and virtue ». Thus, therefore She is full of grace, and exceeds the angels in the plenitude of grace; and on this account She is fittingly [convenienter] called Mary, which is interpreted "She who is illuminated in Herself"; whence Isaiah 58:11, « He shall fill Thy soul with splendors »; and She is an Illuminatrix unto others, as much as regards the whole world; and for that reason She is likened to the sun and to the moon.

§11. Second, She excelled the angels in divine familiarity. And for this reason the Angel, designating this, said: « the Lord is with Thee »; as if he were to say: "For this reason I exhibit reverent to Thee, because Thou are more familiar with God than I, for the Lord is with Thee" « The Lord », he said, the Father with the same Son; which no angel, nor any creature had. Lk 1:35, « For that which shall be born from Thee holy, shall be called the Son of God ». The Lord, the Son, in Her womb. Isaiah 12:6, « Exsult and praise, O habitation of Sion, because great in thy midst is the Holy One of Israel ». Therefore, the Lord is with the Blessed Virgin in a manner other than with an angel; because He is with Her as Son, He is with an angel as Lord. The Lord, the Holy Spirit, as in a temple; whence She is called: "temple of the Lord", "sacrarium of the Holy Spirit", because She conceived of the Holy Spirit: Lk. 1:35, « The Holy Spirit shall come upon Thee ». Thus, therefore, the Blessed Virgin was more familiar with God than an angel; because He was with Her as the Lord, the Father, the Lord the Son, the Lord, the Holy Spirit, that is as the whole Trinity. And for that reason there is sung of Her: "Of the whole Trinity the noble Triclinium". Moreover this word, « The Lord is with Thee », is the more noble word which can be said to Her. Deservedly, therefore, does the Angel revere the Blessed Virgin, because She is the Mother of the Lord, and for that reason is the Lady. Whence this name Mary befits her [convenit ei], which in the Syriac tongue is interpreted, "the Lady".

§12. Third, She exceeds angels as much as regards purity: because the Blessed Virgin was not only pure in Herself, but also procured purity for others. For She Herself was the most pure even as much as regards fault, because the Virgin Herself incurred neither mortal nor venial sin. Likewise as much as regards punishment. For three maledictions have been given to men on account of sin. The first was given to the woman, that is, that she would conceive with corruption, would carry with a burden [cum gravamine], and would give birth in pain. But from this the Blessed Virgin was immune: because She conceived without corruption, carried in solace, and gave birth to the Savior in joy. Isaiah 35:2, « Sprouting forth she shall sprout forth, leaping for joy and praising ». The second was given to man, that is that in the sweat of his face he would eat his bread. From this the Blessed Virgin was immune: because, as the Apostle says, 1 Cor. 7, virgines are released from the cares of this world, and make time for God alone. The third was common to men and women, that is that they would return into dust. And from this the Blessed Virgin was immune, because She was assumed into Heaven with Her body. For we believe that after death She was resuscitated, and born into Heaven. Psalm 131:8, « Rise, Lord, unto Thy rest; Thou and the ark of Thy sanctification ».

Blessed art Thou among women.

§13. Thus, therefore, was She immune from every malediction, and for that reason blessed among women; because She alone endured the malediction, and carried the Blessing, and She has opened the gate of Paradise; and for that reason the name Mary befitted her, that which is interpreted "Star of the Sea"; because just as sailors are directed to port by means of a star of the sea, so Christians are directed by means of Mary to glory.

Blessed is the fruit of Thy womb.

§14. A sinner sometimes seeks in something that which he cannot attain, but the just does attain it. Prov. 13:22, « By the just is the substance of the sinner guarded. » Thus Eve sought the fruit, and in that she did not find all that she desired; but the Blessed Virgin in Her Fruit found all that Eve desired. For Eve in her fruit desired three things. First, that which the Devil falsely promised her, that is, that they would be as gods, knowing good and evil. « You shall be », that liar said, « as gods », just as is said in Gen. 3:5. And he lied, because he is a liar, and the father of him. For Eve on account of eating of the fruit was not made like to God, but unlike: because by sinning she receded from God her Savior, whence she was also expelled from Paradise. But this the Blessed Virgin found, and all Christians, in the Fruit of Her womb: because through Christ we are conjoined and assimilated to God. 1 Jn. 3:2, « When He shall appear, we shall be like Him, since we shall see Him just as He is ».

§15. Second, in her fruit Eve desired delight, because it was good to eat; but she did not find this, because she immediately recognized herself to be naked, and was sorrowful. But in the Fruit of the Virgin we find sweetness and salvation. Jn 6:55, « He who eats My Flesh has eternal life ».

§16. Third, the fruit of Eve was beautiful in sight; but more beautiful was the Fruit of the Virgin, upon Whom the angels desire to look. Psalm 44:3, « Sightly in form before the sons of men »: and this is, because He is the Splendor of the Father's glory. Therefore, Eve could not find in her fruit what even no sinner can find in sins. And for that reason, that which we desire, we seek in the Fruit of the Virgin. Moreover, this Fruit is blest by God, because He has so filled Him with every grace that he comes to us by exhibiting reverence to Her: Ephes. 1:3, « Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blest us in every spiritual blessing in Christ »: by the angels: Apoc. 7:12, « Blessing and clarity and wisdom and thanksgiving, honor and virtue and fortitude to our God »; by men: the Apostle says in Phil. 2:11, « Let every tongue confess, that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father ». Psalm 117:26, « Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord ». Thus, therefore, is the Virgin blessed; but more blessed is Her Fruit.

¹ In this reckoning St. Thomas erred, by not considering that for the most perfect redemption it is proper to have a most perfect redeemed, and this not only after contracting sin, from conception, but even before contracting it, in conception. Cf. Ineffabilis Deus, Pope Pius IX.