

complex circumstances of life. Prudence, for all that we have emphasised its intellectual character, remains a moral virtue. Intellect and will, heart and mind are forever acting on one another in our moral lives. As we are, so we shall judge. There is no moral virtue without prudence, but no genuine virtue of prudence can develop independently of a good life.

It follows on deliberation that we judge; on judgment that we make a decision. I deliberate, I judge, I decide; the intellect commands the will and the will obeys. Without the decision there would be no action and all our intellectual activities would be valueless.

'Behold the handmaid of the Lord'—a decision of the most exalted prudence inspired by the most exalted supernatural wisdom, by a will perfectly in tune with the divine will. None the less the decision involved deliberation and judgment, and out of all this was born the crucial decision which did not so much change history as reveal to us its inner meaning. Without thinking that our Lady's decision to do God's will was ever for a single moment in doubt; without minimizing either its sovereign freedom, her *Fiat* is the expression of the most momentous decision ever taken by a human will and it remains all along a most perfect manifestation of the virtue of prudence.



## THE ANGELICAL SALUTATION

ST FRANCIS DE SALES

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[The style of this sermon preached by St Francis de Sales indicates that it belongs to the first year of his mission to the Chablais. It is not unlikely that it was delivered on the feast of the Annunciation, 25 March, 1595. The text here followed is that of the Annecy Edition, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, VII, pp. 240-243.]

*'Hail, thou who art full of grace.'*—Luke 1, 28.

THE early Church, all over the world, in perfect agreement, always greeted God's Mother in this angelic manner: 'Hail Mary, full of grace'. And our nearest ancestors, following in pious harmony the hallowed fashion of their forefathers, sang the 'Hail Mary' everywhere and at all times.

They thought by reverently honouring his Mother to make themselves very pleasing to the heavenly King. They knew no more fitting way of paying her this honour than imitating the respect and distinctions decreed and bestowed upon her according to his good pleasure by God himself. This was to do her honour on the day that his divine Majesty wished so greatly to honour the rest of mankind in this Virgin as to become man himself.

Holy greeting! Genuine praises! Splendid and unique homage! The great God inspired them; a great angel pronounced them; a great evangelist recorded them; the earliest ages have used them; our forefathers have taught them to us.

But here is an extraordinary thing. Whenever David plucked the strings of his harp—you may remember—the evil spirit left Saul, as though subdued by the tuneful melody (1 Kings 16, 23). Well, this evil spirit, sworn enemy of all harmony and agreement, taking possession of certain fickle-brained people, inharmonious and out of tune, speaks by their lips, uttering all kinds of abuse and blasphemies against the use of this holy greeting.

Calvin, in his *Gospel Harmony*, calls us superstitious, because we greet someone who is not present and meddle with what does not concern us. He further accuses us of sorcery, saying that we have been badly taught if we use this greeting as a prayer, since it is only a simple felicitation.

All these expostulations may be reduced in the end to three points. Firstly, it is an infringement of the angels' ministry to make our own the angel's greeting, since it is not our business. Secondly, it is superstitious to greet one who is not present. Thirdly, it is a gross blunder to think of using this greeting as a prayer.

What terrible people they are! They would be better advised to say quite simply that it is an evil thing because

the Church commands it; for that is what they mean.

Now, I say with the Church that it is a holy thing to honour and greet this holy Virgin; and to greet her with the angel's greeting. This greeting of the angel makes a very beautiful and devout prayer.

I shall not waste time explaining to you what a greeting is, less still telling you that to greet one another is a Christian duty. All the Scriptures are full of the beautiful examples and greetings of the patriarchs to angels and among themselves; and everywhere, at every meeting, the greeting is mentioned.

But let me tell you straight that not to greet a person one knows is an expression of contempt, indignation and detestation. I leave aside Aman, who took it for scorn that Mardochai did not greet him; for, from the beginning, all he wanted was to be worshipped, since afterwards his only complaint was that Mardochai did not greet him (Esther 3, 5 and 5, 13).

Listen to the beloved St John: 'If you are visited by one who does not bring this teaching with him, you must not receive him in your houses, or bid him welcome.' (2 John 1, 10.) He considers it a denunciation to give no greeting at all, and never say welcome. What, then, can we say of those who do not want Mary to be greeted at all, save that they hate her? Likewise, St Paul writes to his Philippians: 'Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus' (4, 21), as if he wished that it should be a recognized thing for all holy and virtuous people to be greeted.

If, then, Mary never gave us anything but good example, all her words in the Gospel being full of piety, why shall we be forbidden to greet her? If she is holy, and the holiest of our race, why shall we not greet her? Is that the doctrine our Lord taught us, saying so many times: 'Peace be upon you, peace be upon you'? (Luke 24, 36; John 20, 21.) And 'All hail', he said, meeting the two Marys on his resurrection morning (Matthew 28, 9).

But, say the heretics, you greet those who are absent. Yes, we reply, but what is risky in that? Does not St Paul, in all Epistles greet first this one and then another, although they are absent? To the Philippians does he not write:

'Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me send you their greeting; greeting, too, from all the saints?' (4, 22). And does not St Peter end his Epistle: 'The Church here in Babylon, united with you by God's election, sends you her greeting?' (1 Peter 5, 13). They would say that they were present by letter and by messenger; but our Lady is present to Christians principally whenever they think of her.

As St Paul writes to the Corinthians, speaking of the incestuous man: 'For myself, though I am not with you in person, I am with you in spirit; and, so present with you, I have already passed sentence on the man who has acted thus' (1 Cor. 5, 3). And did not Giezi say to Eliseus, in the fourth Book of Kings: 'Was not my heart present, when the man turned back from his chariot to meet thee?' (5, 26). And it is delightful to see in the following chapter how Eliseus tells the king of Israel all that the king of Syria deliberates in his privy chamber. What do you say to the Psalmist when he says: 'Too long have honest hearts waited to see thee grant me redress?' (Ps. 141, 8). How can they await the redress, unless they know the deeds that are to be rewarded?

Now, having thus decided that it is a holy thing to greet the Virgin, I ask you, what more holy greeting could be found than this? A holy Author, holy words. If you are desirous of honouring her, say the 'Hail Mary'. If you are doubtful as to the particular way in which she should be honoured, say the 'Hail Mary'.

But who can ever tell of the movements of grace stirred in the pious heart by this greeting? It represents the most holy mystery of the Incarnation, and therefore the Church adds to the words of the angel, which already convey this solemn mystery, those of St Elizabeth—'Blessed art thou among women'—in order to portray it still more expressively.