Jean Gerson

JOSEPHINA

A Heroic Poem on Saint Joseph

From the Latin of Dupin's edition of his works (Antwerp, 1706)

English translation

Contributed to Mind of the Church by a friend of the library who wishes to remain anonymous

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About this translation

Translated from the *Josephina*, Gerson's poem in praise of Saint Joseph in twelve distinctions of hexameter verse, in *Joannis Gersonii Doctoris Theologi et Cancellarii Parisiensis Opera omnia*, edited by Louis Ellies Du Pin, tome IV (Antwerp, 1706), cols. 743–784. Gerson wrote it at the time of the Council of Constance and was still correcting it in 1418; it tells the life of Joseph with Mary and the Child from the flight into Egypt to his death, Gerson’s Theosopher listening as the four senses of Scripture, the Letter, Allegory, the Moral sense and Anagogy, take their turns to speak.

The translation follows the Latin line by line. The columns of Du Pin's edition are given in the text as (col. N). With the poem are the brief argument that heads it, the edition's note on the copy corrected in Gerson's own hand, the argument in the order of the story, and the verses of Guillaume Scissoris in its praise.

Prologue

(col. 743) A brief title, containing twelve books according to twelve principal matters

Illustrious Joseph, the Josephina, a song for your name,
Tells how you spend seven years in Memphis;
How you return thence to Nazareth, working, where long ago
You had come to know the Virgin’s conception, and how you wed the Virgin;
How the bride goes and returns through the hill country at your will;
How you give the worship of latria to the Infant born, and add the name Jesus;
How you then receive the Kings, and afterwards carefully present the Child;
How you then find Him in the Temple, and at last, dying, are at rest.

Prologue

The poets of old were wont to celebrate a spring
Sacred to the Muses, rising beneath the mount of Parnassus,
Which a horse’s hoof dug out; but our wisdom has
Another mountain, a spring and muses whose voice is other:
The spring of life, the Word of the Lord, goes forth from the high
Heavens in a constant, pure and wholesome flow;
Like crystal, flowing from the seat on high
Among the eternal mountains, it cares nothing for the rustic Muses,
Which sound mortal things, which weave harmful songs,
Which soothe only the ears of the body with empty sounds,
And do not quench the parching thirst, but burn the heart,
To be drunk continually, with honeyed poisons.
Our spring is bright, and health-giving with its savoury waters,
On which the divine Sun shines from above, where with open
Marks, believe it, it shows all things like the mirror of the world.
Yet this pure light, dazzling, strikes back every
Mortal sight, as the material sun, the brighter it is,
Darkens the gaze of the night-raven.
Yet much is granted us to see, by means of the beryl of Faith,
In a riddle, and with a sure voice.
I will speak wonders: this spring offers four faces
To the one who gazes, like so many mirrors, as the vision
Of Ezechiel gives the living creatures four faces each (Ezech. 1:6).

Wisdom gives four faces to her handmaids;
For in one word she shows twice two senses:
The Letter teaches the deeds; Allegory, what you are to believe;
The Moral, what you are to do; Anagogy, whither you are to tend.
These pierce the ears of the mind with a hidden sweetness,
Speaking together with a fourfold and a single word.
In the beginning this mystical spring watered Adam;
Afterwards it is read to have flowed over the earth in four rivers,
(col. 744) And it waters the whole world with happy streams.
You it fills more richly with its torrent, O mother
Of studies, Paris, without peer, greater than Athens,
And greater than Egypt; your Philosophy is older
And pure, not mixed with the harmful mire of errors;
You alone are free of monsters, and have no portents of the gods.

A certain Theosopher, nurtured in that city,
To whom Grace gave the name, and the stranger his surname,
Laid his limbs beside this spring on the green turf of the bank,
Under the fruitful wood of the vine,
After his custom, seeking to soften the weariness of the road,
And to taste with the mouth of the heart the waters of the blessed spring,
A sweet refreshment against the heat of trial.
That he was a pilgrim was known by fitting signs:
A stuffed little scrip hangs from his right shoulder
To the opposite side; a round hat covers his tall head,
With which to keep off the suns and the rains
From his face; and a smooth staff guides his steps against foes,
With an iron point; his calf is guarded with a boot.
His left hand bears a shield, the colour of sapphire, or of the clear sky;
On it you might see seven planets shining in gold;
In the midst a winged heart flashes like fire,
And marks for itself a Thau in ruddy gold.
With this aegis the Theosopher beats back the enemy’s darts;
Nor does he lack an angelic guide, but the flesh stands in the way of his sight;
A careful little dog goes with him, as with Tobias.
I saw him indeed, while Constance gathers the general
Synod of the Church, that she might have one shepherd.
It was evening, stretching out its chill shadows further:
The stranger, while the stream glided with a pleasant murmur,
As he fixed his eyes in meditation, seemed to hear from the spring
A tuneful voice speak to him, fitted to his own desires:
“The life that presses upon you, an exile in pilgrim lands,
Wills you to seek freedom in your fatherland in the heavens.
This Moses, this Levi himself (Exod. 2:22; 6:16), when they give the name Gerson
To their firstborn, signify, as do many others.
You lean on examples; but that God came into these lands
To become a sojourner: no exhortation is greater than this,

To compel you, born of earth, to seek heavenly things.
Faith therefore, with a devout heart, wills it to be told in song
How God willed to stoop to the depths of the earthly
Region, and to be enclosed in the womb of Mary;
Whom, when He was born, Joseph was bidden to carry abroad
Into Memphis, where he spends seven years as a fugitive;
Then how, brought back, he was (O wonder) subject to Him of His own accord,
(col. 745) Until death, longed for, received him in old age."
The Theosopher rejoices while such a harmonious voice
Sounds in his ear; habit takes away fear.
Yet the voice is a wonder to Phronesis, because it is fourfold,
Of four handmaids, and to each is given her own speech,
By which she may be known, as in the harper's
Strings, or in the organ's modes, or the odes of song.
He himself lends his devout ears the more skilfully to the words,
With sharpened senses; it is no small matter
How far he will either tell his companions with his mouth what he has heard,
Or put it on paper. First, a suppliant, he begins by praying:
"Kindly Joseph, holy Patriarch, for whose honour
Our wisdom sings; you, Virgin; you, Jesus, once
You three, one house, dwellers in narrow lands,
Whom the immense kingdoms of heaven now place in happiness:
Make our devotion acceptable to the muse
That serves Faith, prejudges no truth,
Urges many things as probable, nowhere rash,
Fitted to lift a pilgrim heart up to the heavens."
Thus far; let this narrative come first: why Joseph
Flees from his country, with his spouse and Jesus accompanying,
That example presents itself more readily to the first senses.

Distinction I: The flight into Egypt

(col. 745) Joseph, refreshing in sleep his limbs worn out with labour,
Wakeful in heart, hears the sad commands the Angel brings:
"Arise, Joseph, son of David, take the Mother
With the Child, and flee; delay not; seek the fields of Egypt
In haste, for fierce Herod will seek the Child
To destroy Him." Alas for pity! Trembling and shuddering he loosens
His heavy limbs; he leaps from his lowly bed, and
Most sorrowful enters the virgin chamber of his spouse.
Mary, while sleep held Jesus in the cradle,
Was by chance cherishing Him devoutly with gentle, wakeful care.
When she saw her spouse, who was not used to come by night,
Foreboding some evil at hand, she cries: "O husband,
What is this? What is the matter? Where does chance bring you? Tell me, I pray."
"Alas, arise; quickly snatch up the Child; the Infant is sought
To be destroyed, believe me; dread Herod

Grieves that he has been mocked by the Kings. Make haste; a messenger
Sent down just now from high heaven brought word; nor do I invent it: suddenly
So it must be." What then, O Virgin, should I believe
Was in your soul, a young mother newly delivered, and poor,
Simple, used to home, ignorant of foreign lands, while such words
Pressed upon you? But trusting in God, at once,
Your hands clasped, and the tears rolling down your
Worn cheeks, bending both knees before the very cradle of your Son,
You kneel, and for a little while
You cling to Him with a dazed and fixed gaze; and, contemplating Him kindly,
You sigh many things in your heart; at last you break out,
Sighing from a bitter soul: "What, my love, O tender Infant,
Beloved of my womb, what of you, what shall we do?
Your guardian here and I, which way shall we turn?
Where will a road lie open to you? Where are your messages, Gabriel,
Spoken to me but lately: The Lord will give Him the seat of David
As He grows; He shall reign in the house of Jacob for ever?
Behold, He goes into exile." "Dearest, this is not
The hour for weeping," the anxious husband answered; "we must flee,
And obey the commands of God; He has promised (hope well)
To bring back the Child, and He will do it, for He is guide, way and life."
Roused by these words, the Infant, opening His calm eyes,
Seemed with a joyful smile to know His Mother.
Then the image of tender pity gripped the Virgin's
Soul; a sword passed through the depths of her heart.
At once she falls upon the face of the Child: "Sweetest Son,"
The Mother cries more sharply, sobbing, "we are forced to go away,
To leave at once, to forsake our friends, our country and our hearth.
You smile? Not our will,
But the Lord's be done." Her husband, beloved Joseph,
Advanced in years, replies: "Loose the Infant from milk and cradle,
Wrapping Him in His swaddling-clothes; our little ass
Shall be saddled by me to carry both the Child and you."
The Mother obeys; without delay they take to flight secretly by night,
(col. 746) The little doors shut behind them; and no greetings,
No farewell, did all the dear neighbourhood receive.

What greater wonder among the sights, O soul,
Will you behold? Was there ever another case
Harsher, or more astounding in its exceeding tenderness?
Have compassion, then, at least, for Him for whose love
All this is done: God is a fugitive and a stranger for you.
A tender Virgin, Joseph heavy with age, and an Infant scarcely
Two months old, travel unknown and rough ways.
They had gone far enough from Nazareth, not without much
And constant fear lest anyone should perceive them going,
Whether by the sound of their feet, or by the wailing of the Child

Crying at His Mother’s breast, or by meeting the watchmen,
Or by the braying of the ass, or the barking of a dog.
From the top of a little hill the Virgin turned
Her face back, and devout Joseph with her; both
Stood still there, and greet their house, the village and the Temple.
Already the dawn, the sun’s herald, glowing red, was breathing out
Its comely light; the Virgin, most learned in the Law,
Partly by human study, partly by the more abundant breath
From above, uttered (it is lawful to believe) these words:

“I magnify You, Father most high, one sure hope
Of my salvation; great things You have given me, mighty One, I acknowledge.
I will confess myself grateful, carrying it laid up in a mindful
And unceasing heart; a humble handmaid, I will obey Your command;
Though I must go through the midst of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evils, for You, God, are with me.
And You, divine Child Jesus, whom the overshadowing Holy
Spirit formed from me: You the Lord saved Sara and her husband,
You Jacob and Joseph, Judith, Esther, and You Susanna;
You led the Hebrews through the sea,
Drawing them through the desert, for whom food was prepared from heaven;
Their garment was not worn out. What? That He snatched Daniel
And David from the mouth of the roaring lion?
What? That He fed Elias in his flight by ravens?
Raphael was the guide of Tobias, Michael the guide of the Synagogue.
Why linger over examples? Gabriel is my guide; God has done
What He willed; all things are possible to Him.
He has no envy; yet, supremely wise, He
Disposes all things in number, measure and weight; He wills not
To be tempted, but that men should follow the motions of their own reason,
Which can bring them help when help is at hand.
Hence we flee from a man, though You, Almighty, could have sent him
Sudden death: You will this Son of Yours, who reigns on Olympus,
To become poor and a stranger in the world,
That, made like His brethren, He may set them free and reform their ways;
You will to give us labour as a shield of the heart;
You will us to be mindful to seek another life,
To be pilgrims, and to know that sad things must always
Be mingled with glad in this sorry valley of tears.
Be You then, most high King of kings, our leader and ruler,
Our companion, protector and nourisher on our pilgrim way,
You whom no mortal king can withstand, against whose will
No bar can be set; let the promise made of old
To our fathers, to Abraham and his seed, be fulfilled.
Sweet native soil, farewell; farewell, my friends;
And you, the Temple on Sion’s height in Jerusalem.”

She had spoken; then, eager in spirit, Joseph and Mary
Turn their steps, and keep to the road they had begun.
In the village of Nazareth a murmur had already arisen
Among the people that Joseph had fled, that Mary had fled
With the Child; great anxiety wearies their kinsfolk
To seek where they go, what hiding places they have sought,
Until the cause of the flight, once known, at last quieted all.

Evening lodges the two weary travellers, and the tired ass,
Late, in the house that Joseph judged the more fitting
Among the inns of the village; at once in his own arms
He took the Child, and lays Him on the ground.
Snatched from His Mother's lap He wails; and then
The man gives help to his Lady, taking care that she gets down from the ass
With an easy descent; the host gives a stable and straw;
They heap wood on the fire; soon the Virgin, taking the Infant
Back into her lap, unwraps Him from His swaddling-clothes by the fire,
And handling Him with a gentle hand, warms Him. Who, O most beautiful
In form above the sons of men (Ps. 44:3), who
(col. 747) Has granted to behold Your virginal limbs and comely face,
On which the Godhead breathed sacred honours for the eyes?
Give milk, give baths, O Virgin; and you, her husband,
Do the rest. So it is done. Then both take the pulse
Set before them, frugally; a hymn then sounds from grateful
Lips; their brows and hearts are lifted up.
Rising from there, the Virgin went to a secret couch,
And with the little door shut she is silent, and gives herself to prayer
Until He sleeps whose heart always watches.
Him first Joseph himself, embracing Him tenderly, adores,
And bids the Mother farewell; another place is kept for him;
He enters it carefully, first praying, and then he rested.

O, what do you say, ambition, seeking excessive pomp,
Splendid banquets for yourself every day, great
Furnished houses, a large crowd of servants?
Be ashamed, repent, as you see such things.
In a small house, believe me, sorrow and anxiety are less;
But hurtful things please, and senseless tumult pleases.

Thus far one shortened day shows
What a devout mind may meditate in the rest.
Let the mind's eye, I pray, skilfully foresee the many dangers
Of the roads, the many frauds of innkeepers, the mockery of the wicked,
As, going forward, it enters a land
More unknown, more rough and savage.
O how often could the robber, how often thirst, cold and heat,
And hunger, have troubled the needy travellers!
But the mind of both, set in the citadel of virtue,
Looking down on lowly things, fleeing to the ark of the covenant,

The true, not the figurative ark, sought You always, O Christ,
Their refuge, as Moses did, and the asylum of liberty.
Add that a whole battle-line went with them and protected them,
Terrible, of the virtues, and of the blessed gifts:
Sure faith, firm hope, the prudent love of God,
Sober justice, mighty, and fortitude above all.
What? That you, O Virgin, could recite the melodious hymns
Of the divine Law with a sweet-sounding voice,
The canticles of Sion, no small solace on the road?
For you could both use these words in their figurative sense too.
Be sung by us pilgrims, kindly Law of the Lord;
Let it relieve the hard wearinesses of the roads;
For sad cares depart more swiftly into empty air
While divine love tunes pleasant songs.
Therefore, O heaven-born mind, a stranger in these wretched lands,
Be a psalmist, see to it; be devoted to the odes due to the heavenly ones;
So you will not think yourself wholly in the foul prison of the earth,
But placed in the serene heaven.
With a devout heart let the wise man meditate
The words your Virgin Mary gave her husband, and received in turn;
Bring some part of them, O Saints, to our ears;
Join to them the endearments of the Child; beautiful, and Himself
Joyful, by His look alone He put to flight everything sad.
Add how many comforts the whole creation gives to Jesus,
As if in remembrance of the blessed
First state of man, when all things were
Subject under his feet, birds and beasts,
Though He does not often use this command.
Yet He uses it; for forty days
And as many nights He is read to have stayed among the wild beasts
In the desert (Mark 1:13), without any companion.
No savage beast harmed Him; He was abundantly safe
By the gift of the first justice: so Paul, taught in it,
Gives Faith very many miracles of the virtues.
The microcosm has its end in the greater world;
When man is changed, the world must be varied
According to the various merits of the just or the wicked;
And all created things serve the Creator
When He wills to render punishments to the wicked and rewards to the just.
Grasp in your mind, then, what sure Faith, and Hope, unceasing prayer,
And divine grace can do;
For, made good and wise, you will be lord over the stars.
What? That God Himself gives, if temptation rises,
A way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13)? Joseph may be thought to have learned this under an image.
By night a woman warrior appeared to him with threatening face,
Brandishing, after her custom, a thorny scourge in her hands,
Always ready to torture with cruel blows.

(col. 748) Tribulation has her name from the thing; she is the handmaid of the dread
Judge, the guardian of men, their leader and their tester;
Many punishments are at her right hand, and many at her left,
A crowd of companions; no one could run through their names.
Joseph himself trembles; but his mind, undaunted, asks:
“Tell me, I pray, whence you come, whither you go, and where you dwell?”
“Remember,” she says, “that three companions dwell with you:
The first Faith, the second Hope, the third Grace, who
Will make you certain of the threefold doubt you ask.”
The vision disappears; Joseph comes to himself; then
The light rises; they rise and go on by the road begun,
The Virgin and Joseph together. Joseph recounts all he has seen;
The Virgin, praising God, and lifting her eyes to the stars:
“Blessed be You,” she says, “whom temptation serves;
For she comes from You, as the messenger of the supreme King,
And leads back to You; Hope is witness; and Grace, further,
Teaches that she dwells among the chosen travellers,
To be received by devout souls; for temptation
Is the life of man (Job 7:1), as Job judges; it fights for him,
And issues in various fruits, and crowns at the end.
The last of punishments, cruel and terrible death,
Unties the bonds of the body and the chains of the flesh,
That the spirit, free, may seek the lofty palaces of heaven.
Strong patience, sure faith, and hope, and the zeal of true love
Drive far away every murmur.
Why are wandering fortune, why inexorable fate,
Put forward? All things are drawn from the freedom of the supreme
Will, wisely, and in right order;
Nor does His freedom perish thereby, nor our will,
Because they are joined in the number or in the order of causes.
But because the causes often lie hidden, the Almighty
Is called fortune on earth; and because He rules over all,
We wonder at all things, we tremble at every noise.
But he who has known the supreme art of the Lord,
That He is almighty and immense, and knowable by none,
Wonders at nothing when he sees the lowest effects,
Unless he wonder that it produces things so vile.
By philosophers and theologians it is marked differently,
With a reasoning as it were reversed: for Philosophy
Climbs from the effect, striving to know the cause;
Theology is bent down from the highest, and runs downward,
And finds nothing wonderful beneath it, nothing to be feared.”
“You say true things, my Lady,” the man says, “but believed by few;
You know that an outcry is wont to rise against the Lord,
That labour is the lot of the just, and the wicked rest in peace.”
“This comes about, dear Joseph, because, like cattle, they see
Only the things present; they will not see heavenly things

By the light of Faith, nor hope for the things to come.
Add that they cling to the accustomed laws of nature;
They say she never deserts her own courses;
That grace presides over nature, that it is her mistress,
Leader and ruler, they do not grasp with their mind.
They use the senses only, though the spiritual
Region is nobler, and the governor of the body.
This region holds the infused gifts of the virtues,
Which grace forms, directs, fits and adorns;
It gives the power to work motions which are miracles to us,
And changes the turns of nature. So did not grace long ago
Hold back the waves of the Red Sea as in a wineskin?
It rained manna on the fathers; the earth opening
Swallows the perverse, and fire suspends its own powers:
Who could number all? Grace is the conqueror of nature.
As the strings of a lyre, sounding under the governing quill,
Stretched more or less, give, as we see, various songs,
So grace uses this whole world,
Giving to things songs harmonious in wondrous concord.
The highest end has one solid tenor,
And as the end requires, so must all else be governed;
Since in human things heavenly grace is the end,
Grace as leader seeks it by manifold means.
I confess that grace never wills to tempt God;
What tempted nature cannot do, that grace supplies;
And she brings you hope of yourself when you have despaired;
Provident, in a mother’s way, she trains her dear ones;
She multiplies blows as the avenger of a crime committed,
(col. 749) That the beauty of justice may reform the ugliness of sin;
Or, that she may preserve, she sometimes increases the scourges.
Would not that tenderness be cruel which, careful to spare, destroys?
Temptation exercises the just for a greater
Heap of merits, and lest vain glory trouble them.”
“Here, my Lady,” says Joseph, “I ask: if temptation be
Useful, as you say, how is it that we see so many
Continually perishing through it? Did it not destroy our first parents,
And subject the world to such disasters?
How did the provident mind of the Most High permit such things?”
“But enough has been said so far; evening, sloping down from heaven,
Drives us soon to be received into a lodging.
Very many things on these matters remain to be taken up on other days;
Learned talk relieves the way and beguiles its labour.”

The sun, lighting all things and rolled round in its own circles,
Brings back and renews the days in which kindly Mary
Speaks with Joseph of the secrets of our wisdom,
Which she learned in the Temple of Sion as in the citadel of Pallas,

Whence went forth the new law for all posterity,
Written on hearts, not carved on tables of stone (2 Cor. 3:3),
Which the sacred school of Theology teaches and explains;
And which, though it has been spread through the immense world,
Yet has settled in our city in greater fullness.
Go over it again, reader, for the narrowness of the metre
Forces the teachings of such great mysteries to be compressed,
Such as the Virgin could have taught her husband on the way.

Distinction II: The sojourn in Egypt

(col. 749) After a journey of immense and heavy labour,
From afar is seen the sought land of Canopus.
Sudden horror and fear then shake both their hearts,
Though the mind itself try to stand unshaken.
The husband first addresses his spouse: “I know, fair Lady,
What you are: this people burns with lust,
Driven by foul goads. If it learns that you are my wife,
What but certain death is prepared for me,
And peril to your chastity? A wicked servant’s hand
Will soon lead you before Pharaoh’s face —
A lot too unworthy. What then shall we do for you,
Gentle Child? We fled lest Herod destroy You alone;
We left our homes and dear kin.
Behold — so many and such dangers await us alone,
Unknown, poor, ignorant of the tongue! Kind God,
What must we wretched ones do? I ask, Mary:
Say that you are my daughter — age will urge them
To believe it true; the rest I commit to help from above.”

“Rightly indeed, beloved Joseph, must we commit
Our lot to the Lord, who governs all things,
Almighty, and cares for us with equal love.
Spare now to give your eyes to tears, I pray,”
The Virgin Mary answers, firm, leaning on faith,
“And drive trembling fear from your heart.
Do we not both hold in mindful memory
The miracles of the ancient age — how the Lord
Saved both Abram and Sarah?
He is a sure Protector in the opportune time,
Provided firm faith hold the heart and rule within.”

As suddenly the sea is calmed when the south winds cease,
So Joseph’s anxieties flee at Mary’s words.
Wonder not that a man’s mind, shaken with dread,
Is strengthened and restored to peace by Mary’s gentle speech.
As much as Eve’s bland words once harmed Adam,
And nearly every woman born of that first mother

Often harmed men, skilled to corrupt hearts
With honeyed poisons before Christ God's birth —
So much does woman now profit after Christ's nativity
By counsel and words, following the tracks of a later Eve —
Or rather of Mary. The Holy Spirit who possessed her
Already when she was scarcely conceived
Seems to have distilled into Christian mothers' minds
Her piety, counsel, and sense.
Hence piety, said to be departing from our lands,
Seems to dwell almost only in a mother's heart
And in the hearts of sacred priests.
She already imbues her still-babbling Son's mind
With divine precepts; and the priest in the temples,
When His adult age is more perfect, after this
Takes care to unfold the same.
O that public education now agreed, as once,
With the fatherland and with religious training
Which colleges offer the chosen youth!
How chaste manners, what perennial faith
Would reign in every condition of life!
The vessel preserves the scent with which it was once imbued while new.
Such teaching as is poured into youth's minds —
Believe me — such will be the whole series of life
As the years roll on.

Vain portents of the gods had lately fallen throughout Egypt,
As Isaiah once foretold. Hidden songs of Memphis' seers
Also kept this sign of the Virgin who was to give birth.
In those greatest times of peace there fell for you also,
O Rome, powerful queen of the world, that house of Peace
Which you hoped would stand firm on eternal foundations.
Already God here, though hidden — He who was to change
The face of your world — was beginning to disturb
The demon's empire.
Therefore, the idols having been stirred, Pharaoh the king
And Memphis itself (it is right to believe) are wholly moved.
Many a watcher stands at the city's gates,
Vigilant, skilful to inquire of nation and place
Whenever some stranger wishes to enter their bounds,
Wanting to know where a virgin is reported to have given birth;
For rumour had already been spread through the whole world
That a certain victor would come from the East
Who would hold sea and lands under every dominion.
From afar they look on both of you — you, Virgin, and the man
With the Boy. They hurry to meet and look,
Eager to ask. Scarcely have they come nearer
When they stand with astonished spirits; mutual speech

Arises among them in wonder: “How fair!
How remarkable this girl, and how beautiful,
Of divine countenance, whom an honest man accompanies!”
Certain men of Memphis cry. Fear invades Mary’s heart.
But a Memphite with kindly voice: “Lay aside fear, woman,”
He said. “Reckon yourself about to see the king’s blessed face.
From what region have you come? Speak frankly, good man, to us,
I beseech. *(col. 750)* Is this your wife, or your daughter? Tell.
Who is the Infant’s father — He most beautiful, who of Himself
By the splendour of His face confesses Himself born of high blood?”

Few things, but grateful, Joseph then returns with practised mouth:
“To you, men of Memphis, we cannot pay thanks
Worthy enough — whose courtesy already at the first meeting
Opens such comfort and help.
Hostile fortune forced us from Israel’s land
To seek these shores. The unhappy woman you see
Is this Infant’s mother; she alone is left to me as daughter,
For the Boy’s father dwells in a far region.”
Swift fame at once carries this to Egypt’s royal hall:
That a girl has come from the famous city Jerusalem
Whose beauty and grace are such that nothing stands above.
The whole assembly cries at once: “Let her come, be seen, adore
The king, and at once be joined in the marriage bond,
And make him a father of most beautiful offspring.”

At the city’s entrance the care of seeing crowds the peoples
In rivalry. Some vary words by turns, some nods;
Others accompany those going to the king.
Set before him, you, Virgin Mary, and Joseph
On bent knees offer the accustomed honours.
Though he be a worshipper of idols, though wicked —
Yet God alone is adored, from whom is all power.
The king, contemplating them prostrate, through an interpreter
Asks many things: the causes of the journey, their lot, race, origin,
And whether besides a Hebrew virgin had given birth.
She is silent, eyes cast down. Of his own will Joseph,
Elder, wise, and prudent, sets words in reply;
Then the divine Spirit moves and rules his mouth:
“Illustrious and wise Prince, health to you who deign
To look on us afflicted and poor with kindly eye —
May He who founded all things be your reward.
We are sprung, O king, from the fertile land of Galilee.
This was the kings’ land while Juda’s realms remained —
Rich and renowned, with kings born from it
Who were outstanding in virtue and in their counsels.
But nothing anywhere for mortals is safe or stable.
Today it is pressed by foreign dominion.

Yet the oracles of the prophets foretell that there will be
One from the blood of the ancient kings,
Of whom the chief are held to be David and Solomon,
Whom the fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob begot —
To whom this once most rich land was host
With twelve sons, of whom that Judah is more famous
From whom Judaea's line draws its origin,
Who will hold sea and lands under every dominion.

Now, king, I come to the lot that compelled this woman
And me with the Boy to flee fierce Herod's empire —
Who, fearing all things, rages against all,
And while he reigns confounds right and wrong.
Therefore this Infant's Father commanded me to withdraw,
Giving me this wretched one as companion; to obey was hard —
But what can paternal piety not extort?
We fled by night through so many hazards of affairs,
So many varied chances. God has brought us here. O king,
Therefore by your sceptre and the asylum of majesty —
If royal clemency has already begun to treat the needy
And strangers with mild favour —
King, bring help to fugitives. This little Infant asks it
With a groan; this new bride, a poor woman in childbed, asks it.
We will be a burden to no one, nor seek bread free,
But wish to seek what is gained by our own hands."

So brightly did they give tears, minds struck,
That the king commands at once: let a house be given, and a fitting place;
Let nothing hard be done, no force, no injury.
Further he remembers and repeats: whether any virgin birth
Had been in Juda? The hero so tempers his word
That he neither denies knowing, nor reveals that he has known.
"Lately," he says, "varied rumour on this arose
In the city Jerusalem; a throng of sacred Scribes
Was at court, re-reading the answers of their seers —
The time for them doubtful, but the expectation certain."
The king offers the sceptre to be touched, gives gifts,
Commands that they rise and be led home. Soon
The whole court cohort resounds, applauds, blesses,
Gladly fulfils the orders, praises the king triumphantly
With varied murmur. One marvels at Joseph's eloquence,
Another praises the woman's beauty,
Another pities the gentle and comely Boy.
O Almighty Father, who would not hope in You —
(col. 751) In whose hand are the hearts of kings and of men,
Which You bend wherever You will? Behold — a slippery, harsh king,
An unordered people receive fugitives,
Look on them with grateful spirits, treat them chastely,

Offer hospitality where you, Virgin, receive yourself
With spouse and Boy. For a servant the earth yields
Wood, food; the man prepares the table; but the pious Mother
Nurses the Infant, unwraps Him, bathes Him; then
Fitted to the cradle He sleeps. What praises that time
Gives to their tasks — how often they lifted hearts
With hands to the Lord, safe after such dangers.
O how often they turn their little eyes toward Zion's Temple —
So Solomon teaches; this Daniel performed in Babylon.

Whoever you are that pant toward the citizens of the heavenly fatherland,
So act, so holding fast meditate that you are a stranger;
Let Christ, Joseph, and Mary be your example.
For the brave every soil is fatherland — live you brave.

Afterwards light rises; officious Joseph rises,
Soon enters the market for sale, buys for himself fitting
Tools he had been accustomed to use — for he was
A craftsman in wood. The strong woman sought wool and flax.
The neighbourhood hands work over that she may prepare it;
She draws fine threads, then commits them to the weaver's work —
Most learned of art is the virgin finger. The house receives no idleness;
Quiet labour feeds them — free, honest.
Whoever wishes to be blessed, let him labour to eat;
Idleness infects every heart, slays the sluggish.

Jesus Himself had grown; He had passed two years.
His Mother had already spun for Him a tunic of many colours.
Already He could stand, though with trembling foot,
And with grateful whisper a tongue not yet perfected
Stammers words. Far sweeter hence He caresses either parent,
Smiles, rushes into arms, is set in the lap;
Lifting little arms He wishes to twine parents' necks
In tender embrace, wishes to plant chaste kisses,
And puts hand into hand for you, Virgin, and Joseph,
And follows him through the house, and you with unequal step;
Whatever He sees, wondering, He asks, that He may know all.
At times by chance He interrupts your labour —
Handling tasks, distaff, baskets, saws, and little axes —
Or of His own accord seeking to be carried.

Someone will say this whole childish recital
Is worth nothing but a laugh. We confess it childish —
But the childishness of God; and what is foolish and weak
Is greater, stronger, and wiser than this world, believe it.
Nothing is worse than a hard heart, nothing fouler; yet what
Does more with greater piety to soften hearts
Than when certain Faith sees the Highest grow as a child?
(col. 752) So He learned punishments, reproaches, wounds, death;

So He wishes to know many things by His Mother's speech.
Therefore He asks, wholly hanging on His Mother's mouth.
At last she opens her mouth, sighing, and speaks such things:

"Alas for me, dear Child — already You feel reproaches, pains,
Punishments undeserved. Jeremiah bewailing this said:
'We shall be filled with reproaches.' Alas for me, Son —
Already You bear our crimes and our guilt!
Sweet was the forbidden apple which Eve bit,
But for You who have not sinned it is too bitter.
Dear offspring, You pay what parents committed.
And since You wish, Son, from the first origin of things
I will repeat more deeply what you may lay up in mind.
In the beginning God Himself created heaven and earth.
The angelic spirit, sunk with no body,
At once filled heaven; afterwards in five days
He distinguished bodies and adorned all things, balancing
By weight, measure, number, as with eternal fingers —
For Power gives measure, Wisdom gives number to things,
Goodness returns its weight to all.
Thus species, mode, order mark God's footprints —
Him from whom, through whom, in whom all things are created.
Hence He undertakes a wondrous work: He deliberates to join
Both natures, that man be a fair image of Deity,
A lesser world lacking no nature;
Mind rules the organic body with capacity of reason,
Which contemplates heavenly things with upright face,
Powerful in liberty, horizon of eternal lot,
Strong in justice, which could preserve the spiritual kingdom
Of man in quiet under fair order.
The cunning serpent envied — whose tongue was moved
By a demon. Son, the demon was once
An angel wholly beautiful, who while he wished to climb the mountain
Likening himself to the Most High in proud mind
Fell; hence his mind is troubled with fury;
With envy and hatred he wishes to be exalted above all
That God is. Hence death came into the world.
First the parents sinned, this one deceiving.
He wishes life, which he himself lost, to be open to man —
No: all are his evil members, all unjust,
Through whom he pursues the just, troubles and anguishes;
He seeks You out of all — O how many innocent boys
Through Herod he has already given to be slain by iron and sword —
How many snares, trials, frauds he prepares for You!
For he is afraid, nor is he deceived that the time will be
When the gate of salvation will be opened to the human race,
And fair redemption will be made for wretched captives.

Alas — Your death will be the price, O most sacred Son.”

At the sound of the name of death the Virgin is struck with grief
For us wretched men and our salvation, and groans;
She broke her complaint with wailing.
Soon, kind Jesus, this bitter grief of Mother
And the foreseeing of dire death strikes Your heart;
The mind remains unmoved — bitter tears roll.

How this can be is worth inquiring:
Spirit and reason there are, if you distinguish aptly
Sense, and in the Infant deity together; therefore will
In Christ was fourfold, moved toward diverse things,
Not willing adverse things — for spirit and God always
Will one and the same; but the soul’s lower part
Wishes to be made like us, wishes to be equal to a child
Who, little, strives to climb heaven’s heights.
Innocent, pure, humble, above all simple —
As newborn infants, ask for milk: for indeed
Virtue, wisdom, life become milk for you.

Already the Boy Jesus Himself forms whole words
With numerous sounds; already He longs to play with equals.
As a child He goes with children; like seeks likes for Himself.
While playing, one boy of malignant heart
Perhaps casts it in Your teeth, Jesus, that You are a wretched stranger,
Unknown, who cannot name fatherland or Father.
You turn the other cheek to him who strikes the jaw.
Weeping You return to Mother; receiving You kindly in her lap
She asks why You weep, what You have; she joins kisses,
Dries tears. “If my spirit is bitter, Mother,
What wonder? I do not know my own Father,
Nor our fatherland, if true things are now cast at me.
Is Joseph then my Father? Is this not our fatherland?”
At these the Mother stood with unmoved face, without voice,
Entering the secret of her heart, long and much
Conferring with herself whether or what she should answer Him
Who is ignorant of nothing, since He is the Word made flesh.
The Boy urges her delaying more strongly for answers —
Not because He is unknowing, but that by experience He might
Bear certain modes of knowing in human fashion.
So face, so voice, so gesture were signifying.
At last He learned all things with Mary relating;
He groaned sharply, and weeping with those who weep He said:
“With equal mind, whatever be, let it be borne
While we are sojourners — since thus You will, God, this land receives us.
It is expedient, beloved Joseph, guardian of patience —
Best of virtues, it grows rich with richest merits.”

(col. 753) From His first nature the Boy begins to show this way.

Perhaps once, while Joseph mixes words with equals —
Learned and grave men — one older brought Annals:
A guest of like name to yours. They recount that one
Dwelt in ancient days whose provident mind worked
Great salvation for all Egypt, born of your people’s race.
Another, instructed in the stars, when by chance he had seen
Mary carry the Boy in her lap and call Him Jesus,
And that the Virgin was of long and clean and decent garment,
Remembered something of the virgin-sign
Such as is said to be seen in heaven’s high region.
What they will say on these things Joseph they look to.
He delayed a little; at last he brought forth with wise mouth:

“Famous men of Memphis, always to be rightly cultivated by me —
For I am treated as guest as if I were a citizen among you —
We hold written the deeds of Joseph of whom you remind us,
Which Moses the Lawgiver knew and wrote: that the aged Patriarch
Jacob begot him, and a large throng of brothers was his,
But he was lovable to the parent more than the others.
Envy turned the brothers into enemies;
The dreams he reported gave fuel to hatred —
For they pretended that Joseph would be lord, as indeed he was.
The brotherly cohort plots bitter death; but otherwise
Willed the provident mind of the Most High,
In whose hand are hearts, which turns each thing
To the end of obedience which He saw from the first age.
Therefore Joseph is sold lest he become lord — and behold
He becomes lord, proved through varied trials,
Supported on the tetragon of virtues, just in all
His lord’s affairs: chaste, when the mistress urged unspeakable
Lying together; strong, because he endured to have despised
The raging woman; prudent, because he reveals dreams closed,
And stores grain for the seven-year famine to come.
Egypt judges that he is the salvation of the world.
But with a changed king the commonwealth takes motion:
For this Joseph so great, so venerated, who had deserved
All praises, falls from the heart of a posterity that forgot.
I pass over many things. At last the Lord, as He had commanded
Concerning His people, we seek Judaea’s shores,
The Law received in the desert: that the one God alone
Is to be worshipped is handed down, and images are forbidden us to make;
Nor are any stars to be worshipped — we lovingly venerate Him alone.”

“Do not refuse that there are many gods, guest,”
The elders soon said; they recall the altars of Apis and Isis;
They confirm idols full of manifold deity
That indeed do wonders, often foretell futures,

Punish the guilty, help their worshippers.

"Vain superstition that Apis is venerated, and Isis,"
He replies; "the demon of his own will mixes himself in those statues,
Nor, as he pretends, is he drawn by any charm.
He is free indeed, but wishes divine honours
Thence to be attributed to himself; wishes to mock your nation
While he does marvels using deceitful signs.

Grant that you say the heavens are a figure
Signifying the birth of a certain virgin once —
Nothing such should be thought written in heaven's books.
For a twofold order was set in things: one
Serves nature, of which we must confess
That it is written in heaven; the provident mind of the Most High
Wished to reserve for times pleasing to Himself things to be wrought
Above nature's accustomed powers as miracles —
Which heaven does not know, nor the order set in the heavens.
Believe: the time is, nor slow, when One born of a virgin
Will be revealed as man, to whose Law
All Egypt will wish to subject itself, images expelled.
Already neither Apis the ox nor the woman Isis will be venerated."

On these and other things it is to be thought that Joseph
Discoursed in learned speech of true Religion
With the elders of Thanais; nor would I believe that you,
Blessed Virgin, were silent through all the seven years
With the neighbours, but taught them of the sacred Law —
What things would come, and what they should hold to be believed.
Whence it is probable that many were then disposed
To receive the Faith, when after the Lord's death
It is carried to them, after you were left among the Jews.

Distinction III: The return from Egypt; the house at Nazareth

(col. 754) When God willed to call the Child back out of Egypt,
According to the prophetic voices, He first reveals
The mystery to you, just Joseph: now for the third time in sleep
An Angel appearing announces: "Take the Mother
With the Child; let the Hebrew land be sought again.
For death has carried off him who was preparing by death
To destroy the Child." Joseph rises glad; soon he tells the vision.
Glad was his wife, glad the Child; yet not without a certain
Sadness, for it is a grief to leave the friends you know:
Then the force of blood and of country is sweeter within.
Then the sad neighbourhood visits those about to depart;
They urge them to stay with them, and promise that nothing shall be lacking.
When they cannot hold them, they go with them a long way,
Until the long distances of the road compel them to turn back.

Then come mingled groans and wailing, tears in turn,
And many sighs; they say farewell; right hands
Are joined with right hands; embraces and kisses, such as
They give to grateful hearts, no one will be able to tell.
How you then went on your way, a Child of seven,
Is doubtful; to be carried by either parent
You do not seem fit enough; how would a tender foot
Bear the rough and long expense of the road? And yet
You would not have set your limbs safely enough upon the ass.
Did a little cart perhaps carry you, O Virgin, and Jesus,
Which your skilful husband had lately fashioned for such uses?
Or does grace pour strength into the body beyond its age,
Or does He travel the road by shorter stages?
Nor is the power of the Angels to be thought wanting as a minister.
Who would grant to see such travellers on the way,
And to enjoy their converse? How the pleasing speech
Of Jesus would have satisfied him! For the age of childhood
Is wont to be quick to ask of whatever it did not know before.
If He sees or hears painted birds in the woods or in the air
Warbling their notes from a sweet-sounding throat,
If great eagles, or if any beast is seen
In the wide glades, or a reptile, or if He saw
The fields shining, adorned with comely flowers,
Or, in a time of rain, the bow of the covenant,
As though wondering at all things, He asks both His parents.
He has many reasons for this childlike asking:
He wills to be seen to have taken true flesh,
And He wills so to admonish His parents, from things perceived,
To seek things beyond sense with a lofty heart.
Outwardly He asks, but He alone teaches within.

At length, after many and various chances of the road,
Safe, with God as their guide, they enter the land of Israel.
The man, hearing that Archelaus, an enemy, was reigning there,
Feared to go thither, and withdrawing seeks Galilee,
Warned so again in sleep
By an Angel’s word. At length the little town of Nazareth
Is near, and is seen as in a kind of mist.
“See, our village, sweetest Son!”
Stretching out her right hand toward it, and turning her face
To the Child, the Mother says rejoicing: “This gave you a joyful
And flowering birthplace; from the flowering one, therefore,
You will take the foretelling name, that is, of the Nazarene.”
He claps His hands gladly, and looks again with a gesture.
And Joseph too rejoices: “Hail, sweetest land,”
He brought out with tears, in a great love of affection,
“Hail, holy kindred of our parents!”

Of what kind that generation truly was, we have it thus.
Anna, shining from the sacred stock of the priests,
Was of Bethlehem; to her Joachim was joined,
To whom the royal line gave descent, and Nazareth his birth.
Anna, though at first barren, yet afterwards,
So the divine power willed, brought forth Mary
As a blessed offspring, and left her, weaned,
In the Temple on Sion, to be taught the sacred Law.
And Anna, after the death of Joachim, married Cleophas, who
(col. 755) Was your brother, just Joseph; and he willed to betroth to you
Mary, the daughter born to Anna of her husband.
Of Anna by Cleophas was born a second Mary,
And her husband Thaddaeus is said to have begotten four sons:
These are James the Less, and Joseph, with Simon and Jude,
Who are called the brethren of the Lord, because they were His kinsmen.
Of Anna again a third husband, Salome,
Who came third, is said to have begotten one Mary;
Of whom, James the Greater, and you, virgin John,
Were born brothers, Zebedee being your father,
To whom the fisherman's art gave a frugal living.
Such was Your kindred, O Christ, on the side of Joseph and of Mary.
No doubt there were more: some part had died,
Some part had not yet been born; nor did one little village bring them all forth.

The common folk, happier at the first meeting, cry
That Joseph has come with the Child, that Mary has come.
O what embraces, what joys, how many tears here
Did tender love wring out! They spread feasts, they applaud,
And the whole day itself is filled with varied talk.
What journey befell the pilgrims, what land was their host
For the whole seven years, under what lot it was passed,
They ask together, and learn the answers in turn.
Late they make for their homes; salutations and blessing are given,
After thanks have been rendered to God with a devout and loving heart.
Here a contemplation worthy of us pilgrims is given,
Who seek the heavenly fatherland: when we have reached it,
How great will be the sweetness of the heart, what jubilation of mind,
How great the applause of all who dwell there?

Very many things, I believe, did Jesus do, and did thereafter,
Joined in chaste fellowship with Joseph and Mary,
Which are not written; not the whole world (I believe John)
Would contain the books to be written of them one by one (John 21:25).
Let our meditation, then, by itself affirm nothing rashly
About things unknown; it will be enough modestly to use
The topical reasoning of conjectures,
To infer what the mind can from the things written, though not themselves written,
With devout study; so sure Faith reveals uncertain things,

Such as were done, or could have been done.
Do you believe that this child Jesus is God, the blessed?
A woman rules Him by a mother's right; and Joseph
Is her husband: do you believe that the man is the head of the woman?
How great, do you think, and how wonderful the things a skilful
Contemplative mind will be able to draw out of these,
So that its affections are caught up by holy love,
And the mind too, held in suspense, is astounded at such sights!

To the city of Jerusalem the festal Pasch
Came yearly; both parents go up thither
With the Child (this is read as certain); and to two lustres
Jesus had added two years when He remained
In the Temple; in the midst He questions all the learned
Of the sacred Law; His answers were an astonishment.
Found, He returned, subject to both His parents (Luke 2:41–51).
From these few things it would be lawful to draw out many,
Such as there is no need to believe, but no need either to reject.
If He was subject to you, O Virgin, and to you, Joseph,
Christ, what does such a subjection mean, I pray?
Did He not render you service, and was He not
In your midst as one who duly ministers?
Often the fire, often the food He dutifully prepares;
He washes the vessels; He carries water from the spring near by;
And now He sweeps the house, gives straw or water to the ass;
He carries to the neighbours the work His Mother herself has woven.
The father's craft of the carpenter is often given Him to practise
In various woods; hence He Himself was called the carpenter (Mark 6:3).
The toothed saw is drawn to and fro through the cleft
Wood; they bore the bench with an auger, and plane the windows;
The line or the rule corrects whatever seems
Rough, or not straight enough; and three-legged stools are made,
With tables, chests, carts, ploughs, or four-horse wagons;
Perhaps little boats, fit for the fishermen
On the lake of Genesar, which is called the Sea of Galilee,
They join together; pitch smears them, or liquid bitumen;
With moss and nails the gaping parts are joined;
They fit the rudder to the stern, the sails to the mast.
You who recall such things: the more servile they are, the more they are
(col. 756) Full of mystery; take away from Christ how much
He was for us, and these things plainly suggest His kind humanity.
Let the proud, then, be ashamed and sorry,
To whom the labour of men is a horror, and who think leisure
The highest honour: what honour to the free,
If they enjoy their bread without the sweat of the brow,
Above all, bread begged with fraud and guile?

Jesus once finds His father alone, at rest,
While he keeps the Sabbath, and while the Virgin, staying
Apart behind a closed door, prays; the boy said with a coaxing mouth:
“My father, I pray, do not hide from me your birth,
Your race and your life.” The old man rejoices, and at once
Catches the boy into his arms, and warms Him in his lap:
“Son, by my father Jacob, Cleophas and I were begotten
In the flesh; Heli is called my father by the Law, because
His brother had raised up seed to him by his wife;
For so the Law, as it was promulgated, commanded it to be done.
Further, Jacob was begotten by the illustrious King David
In a long line; David is born of Abraham the Patriarch,
Though a long line of those between came after;
To these the promise was long ago made by the Lord
That in their seed the nations should be blessed,
And all Israel shall be saved in this seed.
From a boy I am taught to know the justices of the sacred Law,
Its precepts too, to revere the Lord,
To worship Him alone, to flee idols, to be kind to everyone
Who is my neighbour, and to render what is just to my brother.
My father often impressed these on me, my mother too:
‘Since God alone is God, let Him alone be feared and loved.
Since He is true, do not take His name
In vain; since He is good, keep the Sabbaths for Him alone.
Honour your fathers; be no slayer, no adulterer,
No thief, no lying witness; beware of coveting
The wife, the goods, the handmaid that belong to others.
Be content with your lot; learn to live by your own
Labour; commit yourself wholly to God.
So, a stranger, you can hope for the blessed life
Promised to the fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
And David, from whose illustrious stock you shine.’
While my mind, like wax, and fresh in a pure breast,
Was being sealed with such words, at once the whole present world
Grew worthless to it, and it reached out for heavenly things.
I spurn jests, my son, games and sports, and the alluring
Enticements; and, as you yourself see, I keep to my labour
And pray often; while my age had grown great in these things,
My kindred, wondering at this life of ours, say:
‘Joseph, you must take a wife (so the Law requires of you);
So we ask, your family, after our fathers’ custom; and David’s
Royal nobility wills it: you must obey.’
I resist: my spirit shrinks from being softened by a woman’s
Touch; it is the flesh that desires embraces; and these people
Do not think that I am feigning such things; they know not
That when the pleasant Spirit is tasted, all flesh loses its savour.
So for long my celibate life pleased me well enough,
Nor did I envy the life of my brother, a husband.

A man may not always be what he wills, I will confess it,
Dear child: at the Lord’s command I took Mary as my spouse,
By right my Lady, and your Mother.
Nor do I grieve: the rest you may learn from her.”

The boy asks with a coaxing mouth, and presses her to tell all.
Meanwhile Mary is seen to open her chamber;
Her whole face shone with an honourable brightness:
It is hard for a devout heart not to betray itself in the face;
The heart filled with divine light flashes out, like
A lamp alight; let the face of Moses be witness.
The man rises reverently before her, and set her
At his right hand; she takes Jesus, and places Him between them;
She asks what their talk is; she hears;
And so replies: “Never, divine Son, did I,
A virgin, desire a husband; but since you ask why I was betrothed,
I will tell you the truth of it, which my husband already knows.
In the city of Jerusalem, on the height of Sion, stands
The Temple; there is as much the royal seat as the Law.
There my holy mother gave me over to be taught,
Joining me to other virgins of the seed of the Kings,
(col. 757) And of the Priests; for so the custom had grown, to give them
To the Temple to be brought up more holily. Why?
Because the Messiah was to be born of such a stock.
We divide our times: one part goes to labour;
Our labour was to spin, and to weave various vestments,
The sacred garments of the Priests; to each was given
Byssus, twice-dyed scarlet, linen and silk;
Another part is given to the study of the Law, to be learned,
And to unlocking the dark and sacred figures of the prophets;
One part goes to prayer and to the singing of psalms;
The time that remains is granted to sleep and food.
Holy Elizabeth, my kinswoman, often in the Temple,
And her kindly husband, both barren, were wont to visit me often,
And to admonish me with much and learned talk:
‘Daughter, most illustrious offspring of our stock,
See that you adorn it with the beautiful nobility
Of the virtues; be our honour and our comely light.
Grant us, barren as we are (so You justly will, O God),
To be able to see a blessed fruit from this maiden,
Of whom be You the ruler, guardian, teacher and lover.’
The Priests, others of the scribes, the elders,
Such as just Simeon, and Anna of eighty years
Among the holy widows, were wont to bring us,
Unmarried as we were, such words in praise of virginity:
‘Believe it: the prophet Isaias foretold to you: Behold,
A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name

Emmanuel (Isa. 7:14), which sounds God with us. That is:
O, if such a virgin shall be found among you!
As the dawn rising, wet with dew, makes
The birds of heaven resound with varied chattering,
For with a foretelling voice they greet the fountain of life,
The sun at hand, which gives them their measured songs,
So the Sun of Justice, soon to rise, from whom all life
Shall be renewed, fills heavenly men;
Hence we hear so many songs of the divine prophets.'
Kindled by such admonitions, I resolve to remain
A virgin, if God should not decree otherwise; hence now
I shrink from mixing with those who play, I shrink from
Speaking what is base, or from what is unseemly in gesture or act.
But after the marriageable age had come upon us,
Virgins of the sacred stock, the care of the Priests
Compels us to marry: they say that she is accursed by the Law
Among the people of Israel who has left no seed.
What should I do? What words should I give? I commit myself
Wholly to the will above; this hope alone is left me;
And with the fear of God I consent to take a spouse.
Joseph himself is given me as husband, who, beyond what I could ask,
Behold, accords with my ways in holy and chaste modesty.
He was known to me before because of our kindred, and because on the Feasts,
As the custom was, coming to the Temple, he used to cherish me with his talk."

Very much remained: to set out the causes
Of such a marriage, with the honour of virginity kept,
And the sacred mystery which Gabriel, sent from on high,
Announces, and which, just Joseph, you learned in sleep.
By chance a stranger came upon them, and so the talk begun
Is broken off; but the Letter supplies it below,
Handmaid of Phronesis, with whom Allegory agrees;
The Moral sense joins them, and Anagogy together:
Now these voices, now those, discern with skill.

Distinction IV: The Annunciation, and the doubt of Joseph

(col. 757) Among the ancient fathers this custom had grown up,
For the sake of reverent religion: when the bride was given to the bridegroom,
Before the solemnities were performed with festal rite,
One space of time ran on between the covenants of marriage,
In which the bridegroom might come to know the ways of the bride,
And in these days they might entreat
The power and help of God for a worthy offspring to come,
And for a long and peaceful life together:
So did Tobias and Sara, and so did lesser folk.
This you knew, illustrious Joseph, this the learned Mary knew;
Hence, first betrothed in the Temple, afterwards you enter beneath the roof

At Nazareth into the devout fellowship of your dear spouse;
Your chambers were apart; you came together then
(col. 758) While food was taken, or the house was set in order within,
While devotion mingled together the converse of the heart.
Yet more often, O Virgin Mary, you prayed shut away,
Dwelling with yourself, that your conversation might be in heaven.

It was the time of spring; some mark it as the eighth day
Before the Calends of April, on whose evening Israel
Kept the Pasch, as they say. The Virgin enters divinely
Into the secret place of the mind; she raises herself above herself;
She is caught up on high, she flies above all the heavens;
All created things are silent; she enjoys the divine darkness;
No phantasm disturbs so great a quiet;
The mind, driven by God, goes out beyond itself, and speaks silently,
Within, and deeply inward, so that reason, joined to it,
Does not hear within; this peace surpasses every sense.
Here is the whisper of a gentle air in which God is seen (3 Kings 19:12);
Happy this sleep which reveals wondrous dreams;
Sober drunkenness, living death, light and overshadowing.
Some then reckon the Pasch on the twelfth and one day before the Calends
Of April; so reckoning compels them to say,
If the birth of God, if His death and His age be numbered.
But the things to be believed remain, be this reckoning or another.

Rising at length from this sleep, and seeing again the bodily
Light, the Virgin, sober to herself, as she comes back to herself,
Groans, and then gives herself to pray for the salvation of men:
“Kindly Father, who have so often pitied the labours of men,
Have pity now, I pray, for the time of pity
Has come, in which the dread gate of death is to be broken,
In which You will open the heavens; O that You would rend them!
Drop down dew, you heavens, and let the clouds rain the Just One,
And let the earth bud forth a blessed Saviour (Isa. 45:8).
The songs of the sacred prophets run together alike:
He is near, He whom every nation desires
Will come: make haste, delay no longer, I pray.
Already the sceptre is taken from Juda; already Daniel’s
Vision is to be fulfilled; already a virgin shall be a mother;
Already a woman shall compass a man, Emmanuel.
So Simeon, so Anna, the old ones, said but lately,
And Zachary, the man, and Elizabeth, his aged wife,
While the secret places of the divine Temple held me.
A mystery exceedingly great: who could know it?
Who will grasp it? But sure faith must be given to the prophecy.”

At such a point of time, gliding down from on high,
Gabriel, shining before him, all in festal joy, because

He is sent to bear such a salvation,
By which grace is given to heaven and peace given back to earth,
Which joins the lowest things to the highest, and God becomes man,
Enters the Virgin’s chamber with flashing light,
With a beautiful face indeed, and comely attire.
As a spirit easily fits to itself a body
Of air, conformed to the thing to be declared,
So to Moses, so to Abraham, so to many of old
The Angel made himself known; consider his nature: the air,
Thickened, takes on various figures, as the rainbow
Draws a thousand beautiful colours from the sun opposite.
The Virgin trembles: she trembles at the angelic light shining now
More than is wont, and at his beauty, since he had come
To tell the birth of Him beautiful above the sons of men,
And shone with exceeding comely array and face.
Add that the dusk of the coming night could be
Suspect to her, though the last hour of the world,
In which Jesus came, is rightly marked as toward evening.
What? That Satan himself wills to be believed an Angel
Of light, and this the Virgin knows; yet above all things it frightens
Her humble mind when he says Ave, when he says Full of grace,
When he says The Lord is with thee, and Blessed among women.
Troubled, she thinks within herself what manner of greeting this is.
As a poor handmaid, if she should chance to see marriage with the supreme
King coming to her, fate bringing it about,
Not knowing how she should become his wife; if a messenger sent to her
By the King should seek her consent beyond all hope,
So great a condescension would trouble her.
But Gabriel consoles her as she trembles, and teaches her
How without a man the Holy Spirit, overshadowing,
Will fulfil this secret: grace will overcome nature.
“Give your assent, O Virgin; do not refuse;
(col. 759) Not unpleasing to God is what he says; believe it; to Him who wills,
Grant your willing; Gabriel looks to you; the whole
World waits, heaven, earth and the abysses.
Dare, great of soul, for great Faith works.”
She dares; and now Faith, such as love forms,
Makes her soul the bearer of the Word, as she uttered with her mouth:
“Behold the handmaid of God; be it done to me according to the word sent.”
In the first instant of the words Mary
Suffers a certain ecstasy, as it were a sleep, out of which
Is suddenly formed the new, and the newest Adam,
And the immense God is bent into the smallest limbs.
Wonder at this turning of things around from the first origin;
Wonder at this new marriage, where the Godhead weds
The clay of the human race; the virgin becomes thenceforth
Fit for the embraces of no man, for this body,

A sacrament to the Lord, serves for His uses alone.
When Gabriel heard the faithful answer, he knew
That suddenly, by power, in the chamber of the virgin womb
The Word was made flesh (John 1:14); he adores it, bowing down,
And seeing his commands fulfilled, he went from her,
Glorifying the Lord; a great heavenly company
Goes with him rejoicing, and a crown of melodious hymns:
“Glory to the Lord in the heavens, and good peace on earth.”
And the new Mother herself sings new joys with a grateful heart,
Glad; already she turns over the Magnificat with herself.
In this hour of the Pasch the child Jesus offered Himself freely,
The price of the human race, and was made Priest,
And Head of the Church, Shepherd, or supreme Pope,
And anointed as supreme King. Consider Mary,
How her mind finds a way to join sad things with glad:
Ever knowing of her Child the death to come,
She grieves; virtue gladdens her, and the foreknown glory
Of her Son, while exile presses on her. Let us imitate her,
That sad things may not break our spirits, nor glad things unnerve them.

But further: what should the Virgin do? Should she not reveal so great
A mystery to her spouse? Suppose she tells him: how will he believe?
Suppose she hides it: how can she, since she seems pleasing to God,
And to her spouse, to whom the thing will at last lie open,
At least when they enter the sacred covenant of marriage
With solemn rite? For they will not join their covenant in secret;
The kindred will come, the whole neighbourhood will see;
At which time, if perchance her swelling womb were seen,
Both would become the shameful songs of the crowd.
What? That it is neither fitting nor lawful for her to go to her kinswoman
Elizabeth, with child, unless her husband had first consented?
And he will not give his consent unless he knows the cause.
It must be told, then, what gave the conception; he himself
Will give faith to his spouse, and take away the scandals that were doubted.
While the first secrets of the marriage bed held Cecilia
With her spouse, we read that with a bold venture from God,
Wishing to keep her virginal modesty whole,
She said to her spouse: “Most dear youth, I tell you:
A holy Angel of God, believe me, stands by me as my guardian;
Beware of touching me (he will slay you) with polluted love;
Remain chaste you too; and he will love you as he loves me.”
He believed, and afterwards confirmed his chaste vow with his blood.
Was not your venture greater, O Mary, and your hope?
Trusting that he would be a most holy man for you,
And that the power of God would be with you in such a case.

The festal day was come on which the people keep their Sabbaths.
So, after her custom, the bride sat with her bridegroom

In a quiet and secret place, where they spoke together
In converse of the sacred teachings of the Law.
Then the Virgin, poising her face with her accustomed look,
More suppliant than wont, turns it simply to her spouse, and says:
“Illustrious Joseph, to whom I am betrothed by the Lord’s will,
I have a secret which it is fitting to reveal, and that you
Should share it; let us magnify God with one
Mouth, with like vow and equal reason;
A beloved bride may speak whatever she pleases.
You have heard often, Joseph, and often there was such talk
Among us, that the King will come soon,
Born of the stock of David, to save His people mightily,
And that a Virgin will conceive a child, and bear Him;
All Israel longs for this.
(col. 760) Lately I too was praying, poor little one that I am,
And dust and ashes, while I judge myself as one to be cast down;
Yet He in whose eyes the humble have pleased,
Who lifts up such from the dust as He wills,
Who gives rest to the weary, bread and clothing to the needy,
Who makes the barren woman to dwell joyful in her house, a fruitful mother (Ps. 112:9),
Has so, I will confess it with thanks, regarded me; and He
Has done great things to me, whose name is blessed.
He chose me freely, believe it, Joseph, to bring forth
The Messiah, with the honour of virginity kept;
An Angel has already brought these commands of God to me,
And the Spirit has already made me with child with a sacred offspring.”
At these words the aged hero is suddenly astounded,
And shrinks back: “What do you say? Who will be with you, I pray, from now on?
Depart from me, my Lady; I am not worthy of this honour.”
As Peter, when he saw the miracle of the many fish
Shut in the nets, was compelled by amazement to cry out:
“Depart from me, Lord, for I am a most sinful man” (Luke 5:8);
So we read that the bereaved widow, because she said to Elias:
“What have I to do with thee? Art thou come that my sins
Should be remembered, and my son should die?” (3 Kings 17:18).
So the man takes himself to his chamber, and shut himself in alone;
His trembling heart tosses in the varied surge of cares.
Since he was a just man, and would not expose his spouse (Matt. 1:19)
(For he thought it unjust to take such a one to wife),
But fearing scandal, he willed to leave her secretly, being by his deed
Just on both sides; while he turns over within himself such
A strife of mind, sleep falls upon him; an Angel stands by,
Strengthening him he speaks, and reveals the sacrament:
“Illustrious Joseph, son of David, fear not;
But by the right of sacred marriage join Mary to you;
Whatever is born in her is of the Holy Spirit;
She will conceive a son, whom you shall rightly call Jesus;

He, saving His people, will forgive their sins" (Matt. 1:20–21).
The Virgin, I think, watched and prayed, and this vision from heaven
Was given to her spouse for her prayers and merits,
Free of suspicion that a man had framed those words,
For sleep binds the outward senses.
Then the Spirit breathes from on high where He wills, and opening
The ears of the understanding, the images being driven away,
Shining with divine light, He reveals secrets
Of the past, the present, or the future.
Behold, Joseph knows within that something divine
Is born of the Virgin, and that she is to bring forth the salvation
Of the human race, where the Godhead is fittingly made known;
For God alone can blot out sins.

Splendid Virginity, shining with snowy splendour,
Equal to the angels, sharer and friend of their beauty,
Whose purpose it is never to have felt what kind of pleasure
Is the flesh's, stained with a shameful touch,
Hesitates, after Joseph receives the angelic commands;
For she was present to Joseph, to whom she speaks thus:
"What have I to do with you, kindly Joseph and Mary,
What with marriage, which goes to the use of offspring?
What are its uses but things contrary to your vow?
For there a mutual giving over of the two sexes is made.
Either, then, you must abandon marriage,
Or me; how will you both obey Faith?
Would such a giving over be empty, or a lie?"
"Empty it will not be at all, most pure Virgin,"
Answers learned Phronesis, daughter of the supreme King,
Gliding down from above, and gently embracing the breast
Of the man as he lay; "nor will the union be a lie, nor empty,
Between lawful persons of different sex,
By which a mutual power over either body will be given,
And it will keep the manner of an undivided life;
Not that it should go on afterwards to the carnal act:
The vow will stand in the way, as it would be seen if any
Virgin and man, after she has married the virgin with words
Of the present, are agreed and can make a vow
Together that nothing carnal shall be sought afterwards.
Nay, if this condition goes before the consent,
Is it lawful and fitting, if the use is not prejudiced?
And the Law of the Church guards against snares and dangers;
Some things are lawful by right which it is not expedient to do.
(col. 761) Rarely is the tinder of sin found extinguished,
And not without a divine gift; and hence such an agreement,
Such a living together, what a great net would it prepare
For enticements, and would often make men break the vow!

But neither in other marriages does God will to bring forth offspring
By the Spirit alone, without a man, as here:
It is born already, believe it, and it shall be called your offspring too.
Why? Because it is made of the body of your spouse, which is
Yours by right; the Holy Spirit raises up for you a kindly seed
In place of a brother; hence you are held the legal
Father of the Infant; nursing alone will not make you
His Father, nor yet the mingling of your own flesh.
Rejoice, Joseph, for it will be lawful for you one day to say of the Lord:
Behold my son; what more divine, I pray,
What more sublime and more glorious has any age brought forth?
Are not Son and Father names of great love,
And the image of a singular tenderness?
This praise, founded on the title of father, binds you
To keep the Infant with His Mother from now on.
Does such a cause of marriage seem small to you:
That your wife may enjoy your bread by the sweat of your brow,
And that you may be her faithful guardian at every
Moment of time, the witness of her virginity,
Who ought to be believed, and can be?
Your trembling too will profit posterity:
They will conclude that you, a just man, would never have taken
A violated spouse, but would have punished her by the avenging Law.
Add that Isaias' words will hold good in you:
Behold, he says, the young man shall dwell with the virgin; bridegroom
And bride shall rejoice (Isa. 62:5). You are these, Joseph and Mary.
What? That the new birth of the Infant was to be hidden
For the sake of his wife's good name? For when would the faithless
Common people of the Jews believe that a Child was born without seed
Of an unmarried woman? Nor would the impious spare the Mother.
Add that Satan was to be deceived. The other causes
I pass over, why Mary was to be joined in marriage
To you above all, virgin Joseph, a just man, whom old
Age does not yet break, nor make unfit
For caring for the offspring with the Mother; you are not without
Labour, nor without Faith; no lust tickles you;
Neither before nor after the birth will you desire to know
Your wife, for it would not be lawful to profane the sacred temple
By breaking vows; and the offspring is one.
This will be enough for the married, with the honour of virginity,
Fair Virginity." While Phronesis speaks such things,
Virginity assented, and sleep soon leaves the man's limbs.

Distinction V: Joseph takes Mary as his wife: the marriage and its meanings

(col. 761) Joseph, rising from sleep, did what he was commanded,
And took Mary his wife with words of the present,

And would not know her until she brought forth
Her firstborn Son, and he gave Him the name Jesus (Matt. 1:24–25):
Not that he knew her after the birth (far be the thought);
For until here denies that the time will ever come.
Lest the Scriptures give you stumbling-blocks, take care to render them
Step by step, after the manner of the Doctors of old.
If the Angel bringing these things is believed to be Gabriel,
Reason does not shrink from it; why should he not have been
The constant minister of both? The discerning of spirits gives it,
And an inward savour, that the vision is not empty.
I believe that the earlier words of Matthew are to be recounted:
When Mary, the holy Mother, was betrothed to Joseph,
Before they came together she was found with child
Of the sacred Spirit (Matt. 1:18); her husband found her so,
As has been set down before. What such a coming together was
I know not, if it was not the solemn and festal rite
After the custom of her people, as at Cana in Galilee,
Where Jesus Himself was present, and His Mother with many,
Gladdening the guests with the wondrous fruit of the vine.
What people, I ask, approves marriages made in secret?
That people joins them openly; such a coming together, then,
Is here called a taking. No marriage was ever more joyful,
More to be celebrated together with sacred rite.
(col. 762) For royal nobility marks out the parents;
Join to them priests, patriarchs, join prophets,
An ancient progeny; add the neighbours, glad
In a seemly poverty; the very fear of God
Surpasses all treasures; to these belong worship and an honest living.
They come together eagerly, whom the hero himself had summoned.
Obeying the angelic warnings, he first made with the Virgin
A virgin vow, reverently adoring
God in this Mother; he holds her as his Lady, and knows it unlawful
Thereafter to be enticed by the tinder of lust: know her as consecrated.
He gives himself as her guardian, witness and faithful companion.

Such is the song of the Letter, with which Allegory sings in concord:
No otherwise, O Pope, you are given to the Church in the place of Christ
As her spouse, in the stead of the holy Shepherd; to violate the chaste one,
Believe it, is a crime; but you must guard her,
Given you under the divine Law; or else yield the See,
If your state brings scandals or schisms to your subjects.
This we have felt today; let us mark the time and the place.
Phoebus in his own circles had completed the years
One thousand once, a hundred four times, and seven and ten,
And July, travelling through twice ten and twice three days,
Had given them in the sign of the Lion: then the nourisher
Of the pestilent schism, Peter de Luna, unwilling to yield,

Is cast out from the Papal See with one voice,
While the city of Constance holds the holy Council.
Baldassare had been cast out; the other had already yielded.
This monster was three-headed, like Cerberus or the hydra;
Now no strife breaks the one fold.
This we have read: the Bridegroom remains, and one Shepherd will be acknowledged
In the Church, whom the whole world may obey.
O Virgin, bring this about by your prayers and powerful merit;
And the Church herself, I hope, will yearly consecrate honours,
Most pleasing to you, to your marriage and to your spouse Joseph,
With the honour of virginity together with fruitful offspring.
Was not an octave once so dedicated to your Nativity?
Inspire this first; endow us with such a gift.

Kindly Mother of the Redeemer, to whom, by a law from on high,
Joseph, a just man and a virgin, was wedded, a virgin with a virgin,
Grant us to pay due and worthy honour, with festal worship,
To your marriage; make us all, our filth washed away,
Able to be joined to God, who by the covenant of Faith
Betroths pure souls, and fills them with a divine offspring.
The chaste love of the mind finds no name
Sweeter, which pierces the heart and melts the marrow,
Than that of bridegroom and bride, which the Canticles of Solomon sing.
But if the mind is beset with foul affections,
You may fear danger in handling so tender a song.
The animal man is most common; the spiritual
Is rarer; this could have moved the earlier Fathers.
Should a popular rite have to celebrate this sacred
Marriage? The impure crowd, wanton and foolish,
Can scarcely handle chaste things chastely;
It raves when it rejoices, rages when it is angry, knows no mean.
Do not heap up Sabbaths for the people; it uses them ill.
The custom of the Church is sober; and so that ancient
Temple of Chartres, memorable, built of old in place of the Druids' shrine,
Whose title is of the Virgin who shall bring forth,
Began to keep this marriage in this manner with festal custom;
And let holy devotion follow the example.
After the Gospel Missus est, in right order, come
And Joseph rising, and Mary rising:
The Missus of Wednesday, after the comely feast of Lucy,
Is read as the third; and on the Friday following
The clergy give the middle one, and the ninth usage holds Thursday's.
At Paris a temple was built with wondrous labour;
There is a double ring there, to which a double little gem
Is set in thin gold, which, O Virgin, they say
You fitted to your fingers; there is a girdle hidden there;
It is uncertain whether your husband gave you these as pledges at your betrothal.

Happy the marriage in which there is offspring and faith!
It is to you a sacred thing, which signifies three mystical
Kinds of marriage: for He, born of the eternal Father,
Willed to join our nature to Himself;
Bearing it in His Person, He mingles the properties of both;
And Christ weds the Church with His own blood,
(col. 763) The Lamb, in the sight of Faith, foreseen from the first beginning
Of the sinning world as bloodied by death.
And God Himself weds the soul which grace forms,
Which becomes the bearer of the Word, becomes Virgin, Daughter and Mother.
A threefold Patriarch figures the threefold marriage:
First Abraham, after him Isaac, Jacob the other; and they
Took you as brides, Sara, Rebecca, and Rachel
With Lia: you, Sara, are called the coal; and Rebecca,
Much receiving; you two signify each life,
Rachel the contemplative, you, Lia, the active.
As fire joined with coal makes as it were one thing,
So the Godhead kindles the flesh and unites it; and thence
Isaac, laughter, arises. What bride received more things
From her bridegroom than those Jesus gives the Church:
So many Sacraments, virtues, blessed gifts?
Hence are born brothers of different lots, Esau
And Jacob: this one good and simple, but the other, savage,
Persecutes him; goodness is ever hateful to the wicked.
And to this Jacob there are as many virtues as Patriarchs.
You, dear Joseph, you, Benjamin, the youngest child,
Signify discretion, growing in the first,
And charging the other virtues to keep measure.
Benjamin is the contemplative; at his birth
His beautiful mother Rachel dies, because the very
Mind of the contemplative fails, and keen reason
Passes over into an affection not its own; it rises above itself,
And passes into lofty ecstasies; this her sister Anagogy knows:
A bright darkness is seen, a shining cloud.
The spirit cannot utter the secret it feels within;
Experience alone knows it and teaches it.
Spirit and soul are divided (Heb. 4:12): Magnificat is the voice
Of the soul, but the spirit is said to rejoice;
Fittingly, O Virgin, your song set the two apart.
Like fire, which divides things of different kinds,
And drives together into one things of the same kind mingled with them:
For you see the hearth draws glass out of raw herbs;
This is plain in lime; many fiery liquids show it;
So the little rod of incense smoke rises;
So the force of love compels the soul, which is marked as the earthly
Part of man, bound to the members of the body,
To rise suddenly to its spirit; it flies, leaving the lowest things;
Wholly it wills to cleave wholly to the divine Spirit,

Pure seeking the pure; the compunction of the heart, believe it,
Supplies the fountain, by which a cleansing washing is made,
Fervent with mourning, and watered with flowing tears.
Hence comes the contemplative ecstasy and the kindly rapture,
Which practice follows, zealous and busy for the salvation
Of another, and then turns itself about many things.
Within, a tranquil peace remains, because the mind often
Returns into the selfsame, and always beholds divine things with its eyes,
Lit up from heaven from the eternal mountains;
And, often working, it consults the primal art.
“A rare race of men on earth,” you will have said: “this is
The life of the angels.” So it is; but look about you:
What does Lawrence speak amid the fires, with his flesh
Burned; what did Vincent do;
What holy Anthony, beset by the crowds of the city?
They had a deep quiet, lifted on high;
Grace steadies the heart, and makes it firm with a wondrous strength.
Such, I should believe, were you, O Virgin Mary,
When after the conception you made for the hill country of Juda,
Serviceable to your aged kinswoman: you were made mystically
Martha and Mary together, and Lia and Rachel in one.
Must not Joseph, often handling and working at the carpenter’s things,
Be thought to have drunk in from above the scents of heaven,
While sure faith said to him: God is hidden
In this blessed fruit of the virgin womb,
Which fruit is his own, created from the flesh of his wife?
Hence Joseph is to be called Father, as it were by the right of the Law,
And Jesus is his true heir; nor does adoption alone
Give this title; it is otherwise when an adulterous offspring appears
Without the just consent of the husband; it cannot be said
That the husband should nourish the offspring, or that it has the right to succeed.
There is another thing which cannot be grasped except by a pure heart,
And which asks to be spoken with chaste words and mouth:
(col. 764) When the consummation of marriage is made, the two
Become one flesh, and the man becomes as it were wholly flesh;
But in the marriage which we call spiritual,
The flesh itself loses its savour; God and the mind become
One spirit, and thence a greater and purer delight
Is felt, the worthier the object is to which the worthy power
Is joined, unless, alas, the burden of the flesh weigh it down.
The Lord is a jealous God, and wholly lovable of Himself;
He wills to give Himself as Bridegroom to the soul, and makes it
The bearer of the Word, and deigns to have it as His delights,
Such a bride as He sang from the mouth of Solomon.

But you will ask whether the marriage of Joseph and Mary
Is a great Sacrament, figuring You, O Christ,

The Bridegroom of the Church, since there was no carnal
Union; but God is held to be conformed in flesh
To the members of the Church; or whether perhaps a fleshly offspring
Would have sufficed to be the sign in this marriage?
Whence came a bond never to be loosed except by death,
In which bond the virgin becomes a mother, and the Son is born:
So the Church brings forth, and does not cease to be a virgin.
Further, as the Lord would not leave His Mother
Without a guardian, so He forbids the one Church He loves more
To remain in need of a guardian,
Who is her first Father, and vicar of the kindly Bridegroom.
Moreover, King David himself, living chastely
With his Sunamite wife, whom, though loved, he did not know (3 Kings 1:4),
Rightly signifies the marriage of Joseph and Mary;
Yet not equally, for I would not have anyone believe
That Mary so lived together in her spouse's bosom;
The reverence due to the Mother dissuaded such a thing
More than any dread of lust,
Or because Joseph was still young; for youth,
They say, is drawn out to fifty years,
Within which the virginal birth could have a covering,
Which it would not have had so if the man
Were in old age; and hence the prophet says: The young man with the virgin (Isa. 62:5).
Was a maiden to be joined to a corrupt man,
She who in her old age was committed to John alone?
All the more, believe it, is the blasphemous mouth of Helvidius to be spat upon.
So the virtues of old age in him made men think Joseph
An old man; or else lest a carnal
Suspicion should hold anything carnal of you, O Mary,
Until your virginity should be fixed in the hearts
Of the faithful; hence there is less mention made of Joseph:
Grace does not show itself all at once to the world.
Now it is fitting otherwise, while it is believed throughout the world
That yours was a virgin union without stain,
Clean, seemly, careful, like to heaven, and honourable.
Alas, how unlike are the ways that this lost age has!
Hence the sister, the Moral sense, cries out: "I beg you, beware;
Flee living together with women, for a living fire
Lies hidden within; why is tow put into the fire?
Believe me, even under the habit of Religion
Blind love rages, the more deceiving and alluring
The more quickly, I think, it hides its shameful dishonour.
Devotion at first believes itself safe; words and gestures,
With which wantonness is joined, give the sense,
And so little by little it is ensnared by a foul love.
Then, shame driven out, they give themselves to crimes;
They commit horrible things: what will a shameless harlot not do?

They say the laws of nature hold nothing shameful,
And they think it liberty if they dare whatever pleases;
Yet that they may hide their sins they feign harsh things outwardly:
The sect of the Flagellants teaches this; the Beghards taught it;
Philosophers of this kind were once called the Cynics.
But neither ought decency to be violated by the married."
So far these things; let the Letter now tell the Gospel.

Distinction VI: The Visitation

(col. 764) And Mary, rising up in those days,
Went into the hill country with haste; when she came under the house
Of Zachary, her kinswoman deserved to receive greeting from her (Luke 1:39–40).
As I reckon, the man first took you, blessed Virgin,
(col. 765) As his wife, before you came beneath your kinswoman's roof,
And before any swelling in your womb became known:
Your good name required this, and the good name of your illustrious husband.
And if, when you were with child and soon to bring forth,
As he was about to be enrolled and to pay the coin,
Your anxious husband willed to take you with him
To the village of Bethlehem, full of crowds and cold,
What then, when you were newly wed, a delicate maiden?
How should the just man, when a longer road was to be gone,
Leave you alone, and without a companion?
What? That the sacred Pasch either was, or was soon to come,
When every male is bound to be at Jerusalem?
So it can be concluded sufficiently from these things
That the faithful guardian of his Lady, lately made aware
Of so great a secret, gave himself to her as her companion too.
First you seek the Temple; then you take care to visit your kin,
Newly made fruitful, who are two thousand paces away
From the city of Jerusalem, where is the lot of Benjamin, and which
Is the kindly metropolis of the whole kingdom of Juda.
Be it so that Joseph for some cause remained
At Nazareth; yet he knew beforehand of the Virgin's going,
And joined to her the faithful company of kinsfolk;
Not that, jealous, he fears any crime,
But he will not give an example to maidens who wander alone.
O with what joy, with how great a sweetness
Of devout heart, does she look about at all things in the Temple
Where the Virgin had spent the whole flower of her age!
I should believe that she sees here her companions, and the ministers she knew
Of the Levitical race, Gersonites, Caathites
And Merarites, and many near her in the flesh;
She goes over again within herself all the things she remembered as pictured before;
She rises to adore the Lord whom she magnifies, to whom
She is eager to pay devout thanks with a full heart.

And as she first comes to the threshold of Zachary, her aged
Kinswoman meets her, who had stayed within,
Hidden for six months; and when the voice of your greeting,
O Virgin, was heard, at once the infant leaped
In her womb; Elizabeth is filled with the kindly
Spirit; she cries out with a loud voice to the maiden,
Saying: “Blessed art thou among all women,
Be thou happy, and blessed the fruit of thy womb.
And whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord
Is come to me? For behold, as soon as the voice of thy greeting
Sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb
Leaped for joy; and rejoicing, clap thy hands, blessed art thou
Who hast so believed, because those things shall be accomplished in thee
That were spoken to thee by the Lord.” And Mary answers thus:
“My soul doth magnify God, and my spirit hath rejoiced
By kindly right in my Saviour; and He on high
Hath regarded His humble handmaid; for behold, from this
All shall call me blessed, because He that is mighty hath done great things to me;
And His mercy is from generation to generation upon all that fear Him;
He hath done great things mightily in His strength;
He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart;
Exalting the humble, He hath put down the mighty from their seat;
He hath filled here the needy, and sent the rich away empty;
And He hath received His servant Israel, being mindful
Of His mercy, as He had foretold of old
To our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever” (Luke 1:41–55).

I should like to know what the Virgin did through all those months;
For she stayed three, in which you too, O Zachary, used signs,
Glad to have gained your kinswoman as companion.
Or did you set down in writing what was laid up in your heart?
O how often, O Virgin, does your aged kinswoman recount to you,
As she lies on her bed, weighed down with womb and years,
The order of the things that were done; old age delights in talk;
You sit on a lowly seat, hanging on the mouth of the speaker:
“How great is the Lord, and how worthy of praise, I pray,
Who alone has done such wonders for us!
For now, now, an old and barren woman, I am to be a mother
By an old man; you are with child by the Spirit alone, a Virgin.
This I knew, indeed, without your telling it; I do not see
Your womb swelling; God it is who reveals secrets.
The many foreboding voices of the prophets of old fulfil
What they sang: the promised redemption of the people will come.
(col. 766) This Zachary, this I too were wont often to ask;
Nor were you used to doubt it. You see how great
Was the virtue of the old man, which cares more for the common good,
Obedient to God, whose commands it trembles at,

Who does the justices of the Law and avoids complaints.
While Zachary was praying, and in the order of his course
Was placing the holy incense in the Temple, the honoured face
Of Gabriel is seen, and the voice is heard that this same thing
Had been heard; doubt strikes his tongue:
For he becomes dumb; the whole people outside are amazed.
And what fear, do you think, came upon me, what anguish and horror,
Until he unfolds the mystery by nods and by a tablet,
And makes known that an infant will be born of us, who
Will drink no wine nor strong drink, but the virtue of Elias,
Shining in him, will appear wonderful even to the end.
How severe he will be in food and clothing
You know, and how mightily a shining and burning lamp (John 5:35).
I conceived, as you see (yet in sin); this infant
Of mine, promised to be sanctified from the womb,
Felt at our meeting what was done at once:
He felt it, and the rejoicing of my heart was made bright.
Many things remain for me to tell you, kinswoman,
Such as my husband, a divine Doctor and Priest of the Law,
Taught, the rites and sacred worship.
It is not fitting that we use the senses only in the Temple;
There is need of the mind, under how great a veil
The sacrificial rites signify things not yet made plain;
They will form very many unformed ways of life.
Does not the swine signify lust and the muddy
Enticements of the flesh? Therefore it does not come into our use;
So the hare and the fox, so the owl is forbidden for food.
Whoever has translated them fittingly finds in things forbidden,
In things allowed, some reason for our ways.
The vestments are mystical, and the adornment of the ark of the covenant;
So art, nature and painting offer many books;
He is dull who does not give himself even to one.
O, if the Lord would call me back to my former years,
Such as I was when the secret places of the Temple held me,
With what care, and how great an ardour of knowing,
Would I give myself to study! Some things I know; I should know very many.
Let youth know beforehand of how great a price wisdom is,
Lest it grieve in old age, and be sorry for time gone by.
But there remains a great thing, dearest, to magnify,
Yet it surpasses praises, and flies beyond all tongues:
Who will grant me, my most dear kinswoman, when the Son
Shall have been born of you, to clasp Him in my arms,
To lift Him in my hands, and hold Him close to my whole breast,
To do the office of a nurse, to press kisses on His brow,
And that He may play in my lap, and the infants of an age
Play together, yours and mine? But the fates frighten
An old woman; and so my waiting is not certain.

Live exceedingly blessed, you who shall see what I long for,
And more, when their age shall be grown greater."
The Virgin kindly rejoices with this longing,
Though grieving within, because she knows of the death
To come; she would rather keep such secrets
To herself; she knows that old age must be cherished with glad things,
That old age is itself a sickness, and the hurt must not be hurt,
Nor a woman with child burdened with troublesome words.
The Virgin rises to render service to her kinswoman;
She herself brings the food, and urges her to eat when she lingers,
Tasting first, cheerful in words and with a serene face.

And now the day of the birth was coming to the barren woman, to the eighth;
The whole neighbourhood runs together vying with one another, applauding;
So from your hills, Juda, they are all there together;
They wonder, rejoice, and congratulate both parents.
Perhaps you, O Virgin, carried the child in your arms,
Showing Him with eager applause: "See how great
Is the beauty of the infant, how pleasing the glory of His face!"
I believe too that the company blesses you, with child;
For Jesus Himself already makes a swelling in your womb.
And you perhaps, Joseph, were there, giving yourself as companion
To your wife on her return, after you had kept
The sacred Pentecost after the manner of the Law in the citadel of Sion.
"Happy are you in such a wife and offspring," they say;
(col. 767) Some praise in you, O Virgin, the simplicity of the dove,
And that your face and bearing speak modesty,
Because that beauty does not burn the slippery hearts of the men
Who see it, but tempers the heat in them;
As if a cool dew breathed inward from your face.
Very many joys open out on every side:
The voice of praise, the jubilation of the heart, song and hymn.
O Gabriel, your promise is plainly true: Many
Shall rejoice in his nativity (Luke 1:14): the joys of his life,
For his merits, be spiritual for us!
"What, think you, shall this child be?" they say. For the very hand
Of the Lord shows itself in the child by open signs:
See, strength of body beyond nature is seen,
Or perhaps some use of reason is in him.
Whence his father, singing to himself: "And you, child," he says;
"A perfect formation befits the perfect one; the wonderful
Lord does wonderful things; grace overcomes nature;
The constellation of heaven claims no right here.
This child, a dweller in the desert, lived above man."
On that day the child is circumcised, and they
Give him the name of Zachary; his holy Mother wills
That he be called John; his father confirms it in writing;

The Holy Spirit fills him; at once, his mouth loosed:
“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,” he says, “for He
Hath visited and redeemed His people, and hath raised up for us a horn
Of salvation in the house of David Himself, as of old
He spoke by the mouth of His prophets;
Salvation from our enemies, who hated us;
That His holy grace might be with our fathers,
And He might remember His holy testament,
The oath which He is read to have sworn to Abraham our father
That He would grant us, that we, His holy
And just servants, in everlasting liberty,
Might be, fear driven away, free from the onset of the enemy.
And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High; thou shalt go
Before His face, and prepare His ways;
And so saving wisdom shall be given to the people,
And the remission of sins shall be made complete;
Through the bowels of His mercy He visits us from on high,
Rising upon us; He comes to give light to those who sit
In darkness, and in the shadow of death, in its blind prison,
To direct our steps in the way of peace” (Luke 1:57–79).

The Virgin returns, and stays at home, and turns over within herself
Now what Zachary sang, now what she had heard
From the voices of various people, leaving out not a tittle nor an iota;
She ponders it in her heart, and does not reveal all things everywhere,
Here or there; one man, her husband, knowing it is enough.
Live, blessed Joseph, to whom such mysteries are opened;
You go before your Lady in service, and she calls you lord;
Each rejoices alike in the honour of the other.

How the mind becomes the bearer of the Word, Anagogy teaches.
For when Gabriel announces to the holy mind, that is,
When the inmost prompting suggests that it is to bring forth
The Word of the Lord, which the high power of the Most High
Will make it conceive, making it fruitful with a holy seed,
Synderesis consents to him; it is a Virgin, being without part
In blood and flesh, and no man has known it.
Its husband is the understanding, whose power never
Reaches to this birth; but grace herself suffices
To make the highest part of the mind the bearer of the Word,
Which gives itself to grace as a passive minister.
This conception is the type of yours, O kindly Mary.
But the lower part of the soul, which is not so virgin,
Which of itself is barren, and which can often
Be corrupted, Elizabeth fittingly signifies.
She brings forth the fruit of virtue; you would rightly call it John,
For there is grace in it. Look again:
As the virgin, with child, announces salvation to the corrupt one,

She rejoices; so the highest part of the mind consoles,
While it becomes the bearer of the Word: it comes down to the lowest part,
Gladdening it with a blessed offspring of good ways.
So the greater part comes serviceable to the lesser;
So the contemplative life brings help to the active.
Further, if the presence of the Virgin brings such
Joyful dowries to both the parents of John,
(col. 768) What is it lawful to meditate of you, illustrious Joseph,
As done in all the six months after the Virgin's return,
At whose end Jesus is born, as the Letter hands down,
And signifies the place, telling what Grace says?

Distinction VII: The Nativity

(col. 768) There was peace, and the dread wars of Mars had ceased;
The empire of Augustus had now grown for forty-two
Years; the whole world is enrolled
By his Edict (Luke 2:1); such a peace, and so great, of the divine
Gift had long before been promised by the holy Prophets.
Each one goes to be enrolled in his own city;
Hence Joseph, since he is just, wills to obey the King
Who commands, though he be wicked and lawless.
By this example the wicked neck is put to shame
Which, refusing to be subject, teaches errors: that among peoples
Without the Faith there is neither just possession
Nor kingdom, as if grace took away the right of nature.
Surely the Lord wills to hand over just empires
And kingdoms to the unjust, which He transfers, takes away and adds
As He pleases; His will stands for title and for right;
But the just alone receive the greater gifts.
Though his wife is now near her delivery, he goes on;
And her Infant does not at all weigh down her who is with child;
Rather He lightens her: for He carries her who carries Him.
They entered Bethlehem, which, by interpretation,
Is said to be the house of bread; and the kindly one considers within herself
That what Micheas had said before is soon to be fulfilled:
Out of thee shall come forth the Leader who shall rule My people Israel,
And his going forth shall be from the days of eternity (Mich. 5:2).
Though nature be without reason of her own,
She is ruled by the divine art, which is never deceived.
Hence the bird makes its nests, the bee its honeycombs, fittingly;
How much more does grace weigh all things toward their ends,
The means which profit! Joseph comes, and becomes lord;
Cyrus, exposed to be destroyed by the teeth of wild beasts,
Climbs to empire; drowning saves Moses;
Behold, Joseph, coming to Bethlehem, fulfils the oracles.
So from end to end grace rules wisely,

Mightily and sweetly (Wis. 8:1), in a wondrous order
Disposing each thing, and turning all things to good.
Let this be your hope, this your counsel, your whole trust;
Whatever you do or purpose, pray that it direct you.
There is no doubt, O Virgin, that you had many kinsfolk at Bethlehem
On your mother's side; yet the love of poverty
Makes you use a lodging, and the place being too narrow,
And an example is given that this world presses upon us.
It was the evening which gives the first light after the Sabbath,
Which use is wont to call the day of the Lord, or of the sun,
In the month of December, now the eighth day before the Calends.
The Virgin withdraws into the lodging, and shuts herself in alone;
Joseph gives way; both ask for a happy
Issue of the birth; God wills this, and none the less they pray.
And near you, O Virgin, are fire, a bath and swaddling-clothes;
A manger for a cradle; God alone stands by you.
Many thoughts came into the man's mind, as meditation will:
He wonders that his wife feels no distress of childbirth,
Nor shows that she bewails any pains;
The colour in her face is lively, nor is there a livid
Pallor on her cheeks, as in women with child; her bearing, her step, is brisk.
He sinks into a light sleep; and with silent gliding
And a sacred embrace, Grace soothes his friendly breast,
Grace, whom divine love begot and grateful love
Brought forth, veiling her; hence she is skilfully called Grace;
Her face is exceedingly beautiful, her bearing kind,
Her robe purple; her mouth breathes heavenly love.
She seemed to him to speak words not at all like a dream:
"Do not wonder, Joseph, if the Great and Almighty
Wills mightily to work great things, and can.
For I, Grace, am above nature, and I exalt myself above the judgment
Of justice; I am stronger than her
Common law; to make my own Laws
(col. 769) I hold my right. You may see how many wonders the world has,
At which no one wonders enough; but use is wont
To think praise and price belong to rare things only.
If nature, lower than I, makes so many things, and will make them,
In the heaven, on earth, in the sea and in all the abysses,
Why will it not be lawful for me to bring about a virgin birth,
From which all pain is absent, and no modesty is broken?
The sun has begotten a ray, the ray has passed through the glass;
It has shone through the grape; you will see nothing broken thereby.
Further, know that justice, without which peace would not
Be present on earth, must first be appeased.
Tenacious of the truth, her sentence of death stands
Against the human race, just, for the crime of its parents.
This Little One, who will soon be born, must be made

Justice for you, the wise and holy Redeemer (1 Cor. 1:30).
Lay aside your cares; bless the Lord with gladness.
To sanctify the Virgin's conception at its very instant
I both could and would, redeeming her more perfectly
By forestalling her fall than by raising her up when fallen.
She was all fair, never subject to any fault.
Far be it that the serpent, crushed by her, should earlier
Have crushed her head under the foul foot of sin;
Far be it also that she should ever have been a member of the devil.
By grace I supply the justice which Adam lost;
There is scarcely a greater in me; though I am not wont to take away
All penalties, no anguish of childbirth will press upon her.
Why? Because there was no lust in her conceiving."

Meanwhile the chill night travels the middle of its course (Wis. 18:14);
Then from the closed gate of the Virgin came forth the Infant,
The almighty Word of God, blessed, from the royal throne (Wis. 18:15).
At once His holy Mother, alone, wraps Him in swaddling-clothes,
And lays Him in the manger, and is the first to give Him the worship due to God.
The Infant wills to give, like us, His first cry,
A mournful one; He wails; and as soon as the man hears His wailing,
He is loosed from his peaceful sleep, and enters gladly
To you, holy Parent; rejoicing with you, he adores
The Child that is born, his knee bent, and the Lord;
And he clasps Him to his breast to cherish Him, as you give Him into his arms.
Here sense fails, reason is astounded, and all the light
Of the mind grows dark, while I try to see you, O man,
In such a service; I know not what to say; I find
No words to tell your praises.
Do you not guard the Word of God, see Him and hear Him,
Handling Him with your hands, and lift Him gladly in your arms?
Let each think here what he will: I persuade myself that none
Among the beloved of the Lord lived before him
Who so often felt the tender loves of Christ.
You, John, received the secrets of the Lord on His breast,
But this once only: how often does the just man enjoy this honour!
O blessed company, joining together you, O virgin, and Joseph,
And Jesus! O who will be able to see such sights,
If not with his eyes, at least with a faithful mind?

While the little One newly born gladdens you both,
While with gentle care you study to cherish Him as He weeps,
The shepherds come into Bethlehem with swift running;
They seek where the new Infant is born in it.
They come to the lodging, either by some guide,
Or by an instinct, or some sign given from heaven.
Here is a little cave, where an ox and an ass are tied
To the manger; in the midst Jesus lies on His back,

And a swaddling-band binds Him with tight folds.
The hero wonders first at the murmur and the noise
Of the crowd coming, which knocks and cries: “Has
A woman given birth within? We ask; let us see.
Tell us, good man, if you yourself know anything.”
For Joseph had gone out to them. “Come in, see,”
He answers; they come, and see the Child, and adore.
“Whence comes this?” the man asks the shepherds. “O you
Happy ones,” they say, “O blessed in such offspring!
Let all the people applaud, let all the folk rejoice together!
Behold what the angelic vision foretold to us.”
“What vision, and of what kind, I pray?” As the man asks, all
Wish to tell it; at last the word is given to one;
He begins, while they vie with one another in their eagerness to see the Child.
“There is a fertile and broad field, rich for pasture,
(col. 770) Lying three miles off; there is a great flock in it,
Which we were guarding, watching in the depth of night,
At the time of the solstice, when the sun passes into Capricorn;
An Angel stood by, and a light shone round about all,
Flashing bright; we tremble, and are astounded with great fear.
The Angel said to us: Fear not;
For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy,
That shall be to all the people: for this day is born to you
The Saviour of the world, Christ the Lord, in the city of David.
And he added a sign, such as we now see openly;
And suddenly there was a voice of a great heavenly company,
Of the army, which praises the Lord and resounds:
Glory to the Lord in the heavens, and peace restored on earth
To the human race, to those whose will is not perverse” (Luke 2:8–14).
Those to whose ears the word came wonder at such things;
Mary keeps all these things in her heart,
And Joseph keeps them, and together they go over what they have heard.
The shepherds depart; they praise and glorify
The Lord for all these things which it befell them to see (Luke 2:18–20).
Someone will perhaps believe that the grateful company of the shepherds
Sent gifts from their flock, either for the honour
Of God, or because they pitied those in want:
Not gold, like the Kings, but honey, milk or butter,
Fleeces, or wool to spin, or sheep and tender lambs.
And what do we do? Is it not fitting to glorify
And to praise the Lord, for us to whom a greater knowledge
Of the Religion of Christ has been granted?
Let this Child be born in our heart: let Faith
Be the seed, let the Spirit be the Father, let grace and hope
Be the midwives; the highest part of the mind,
Remaining inviolate, is the Mother, the daughter, the virgin,
When the mind, bearing the Word, brings forth anew from itself

The divine Word by meditating. It will suffice
To cover it with little cloths, if the golden robe is wanting;
For it shines of itself and needs no adornment;
Yet it does not refuse ornament when it is freely given;
It rejoices more in a robe woven of sacred words
Than if it were painted by the Poets alone.

Grace distributes her gifts in many ways among all;
Yet hear how grace reproaches the ungrateful:
“I call you, mortal man; answer me as I call;
I am Grace; see how great the things are that I have brought you.
You were to be redeemed, for you were lost, an exile, and set
Under the empire of strait death; but God alone,
Eternal and on high, could pay this price,
Whom you would have tried in vain to grasp or to see.
I brought it about that He should become like you, made in time:
The Immeasurable is measured, and a little one, and to be seen,
He is set before you, covered with the sackcloth of your flesh,
And is given you to be handled. If His wisdom
Seemed formidable before, accusing the wicked;
If the condemnation of justice, terrifying,
Troubled you; if then His power shook you
With dread of cruel torments,
Justly condemned as you were: remember now to breathe again.
See, wisdom becomes infancy, becomes as it were one who cannot speak;
Further, justice is condemned, is brought to judgment,
That it may pay the penalties as though guilty of every crime;
By my judgment, through me, the supreme power is laid low;
I give the Law to the just man, I bind the mighty with chains;
In short, I shut up the word in the mouth of the wise.
To me as victor, then, the triumph is given by right.
Ungrateful man, if such a grace is not
Pleasing to you, what if I have repaid you with many greater things?
You were poor: to make you rich the Rich One became
Needy (2 Cor. 8:9); a wonder if such riches,
And an infinite treasure, are not enough!
I do more: I bring it about that your heavenly mind
Can be the Mother of the supreme Word by the holy Spirit.
These things are yours; but I seldom see the signs shine forth
Of the Infant born, because neither the swaddling-clothes of the virtues
Nor the bands of discipline bind you, nor will you
Be bowed down to the lowest place, nor make yourself like the Child:
You will be held high, rich, pompous, great.
Look back; see the Infant and both His parents;
(col. 771) Pour out your prayers to them; ask for the Son who is born to you
This day; for it is not the way of a child to remember
Anger, rancour or hatred; nor will the Mother of tenderness,

The Mother of love, be harsh toward you;
Nor is Joseph envious; you will suffer no repulse.
More safely, if Judgment presses upon you, terrifying
With dread, appeal, seek me; my court will receive you;
You will be saved if you condemn yourself of your own accord;
And Joseph and Mary will plead your cause;
Nay, Jesus will take your part instead of the Judge.
While I sit, make haste; if I withdraw, the cry will be
In vain, believe me. Be under my laws also:
Do you wish me to spare you and give you pardon? Give pardon to others.
Imitate the shepherds of the flock, that you may be a watchful guardian;
Your flock here gathers all your senses and motions.
Attend with the ears of your heart to what the heavenly crowd
Sounds in its melodious hymn; and take care likewise that your life
Agree with your voice: let there be no discordant symphony."
Grace, who may be thought to have warned man fully enough,
Added: "When the Circumcision of the Infant shall be done,
With tears and with a strong cry, He will take,
In the light near at hand, the name of salvation, which is Jesus,
Without which no salvation lies open to man on earth."

Distinction VIII: The Circumcision and the Holy Name

(col. 771) Now the eighth day from the Child's birth was hastening
To shine, now the first, the Calends of two-faced Janus,
When the Virgin spoke thus to you, just Joseph, standing by:
"My husband, my lord, this Infant must be
Circumcised, that He may be made like His brethren,
That He may set free those bound by the Laws: let Him be under the Law,
Though He be the Lord, subject to no Law."
She had spoken, and the Virgin turns her kind face
To the cradle of her Son, in which He
Was by chance resting in a light sleep. "Sweetest Son," she said,
"Now Your blood must be shed, and Your tender
Flesh cut with the knife; You will be laid bare,
Wounded with a sharp wound, and will bear the unkind cold.
Your beautiful face will stream with tears; with grieving
Wailing, and with a strong cry too, You will fill
The ears of those who stand by; the sharp sword of lamentation
Will pierce me, me, and break a mother's heart.
Yet we must obey, whatever be Your will,
Abba, Father. Do you now, my holy husband, call
The ministers of the law; let it be done, and there will be no delay, believe me."
The just man answered with a trembling voice; grief
Strikes a trembling into him, by which he is troubled; he pities
The lot of his beloved wife, of the Child, and of the Mother.
He goes out mourning, and turns over very many things in his meditation.

But after the Mother remained shut in alone with Him,
Then she gives full rein to tears and words:
“What shall I say, or shall I be silent? When, most pure Son,
I see You, innocent, without sin, paying the guilt
Of the human race, the accursed guilt of our first
Parents! Could You not, kindly Creator,
Have kept them from falling at the first, as if they had not fallen?
Could You not have saved them, fallen, otherwise
Than by the blood and the dreadful pains of Your Son?
O Gabriel, I remember that you spoke salvation to me:
Behold, I am pressed down with grief, because He who is free of every crime
Bears in His tender body the dread penalties of sin.
But so He wills it to be done. What then? What murmurs
Should I make against His will, though bitter grief presses me,
And wrings sighs from my soft heart?”
Meanwhile the Child’s sleep is loosed; then, opening
His eyelids a little, seeking the light, He sees near Him
His Mother standing by, who at once, bending down,
Seeks His face, and gently presses kisses on His brow,
And sheds tears with which the Infant mingled His own.
O heart surpassing the hardness of solid adamant,
Which so great an image of tenderness does not soften!
The Virgin, noting that the hour is at hand in which she must give Him up,
Cherishes the Infant, gives Him milk, bathes Him, makes Him ready,
(col. 772) Presents Him; He is carried out, and the name Jesus is given Him.
The Mother gives warning of this beforehand; the Angel had said it to her,
And had said it to her husband, because the sweet name of Jesus
Was to be the cause of salvation; at which, O Virgin, you check
The groans that rise in you; contemplation lifts up
Your heart, and you rejoice that salvation comes to the whole world;
Eternal joys make up for a few sorrows.
The Romans of old built you a temple, Salus;
The true Salus, salvation, is Jesus, without whom no one will be saved.
This name was your standard, Paul, throughout the world,
By whose power the rebels against Faith were laid low.
Jesus is the jubilation of the heart, the exultation of the mind,
And the triumphal name that conquers the wicked
Battle-lines of sins: Jesus, then, be Jesus to me!
O deign to say to Your servant: I am thy salvation (Ps. 34:3).
At this name Jesus, in the heavens, on earth and in the abysses,
All things bend the knee (Phil. 2:10); every temptation flees away.
O Joseph, to be celebrated, to whom an Angel revealed such a name
In sleep, how often did the name Jesus sound sweetly
From your mouth, as you spoke with a friendly word!
How often was your heart refreshed with how great a sweetness!

Grace, mistress of nature, today blesses
The beginning of the year; these are to us a New Year's gift
Exceedingly great, not such as vain superstition
Was wont to give in turn; grace now gives us
A name of great salvation, together with the sacred blood.
"Render, then, return; give Him what He asks of you;
For it is your heart, believe me, that He asks; give your heart to Him who asks.
Who, ungrateful, would deny what has been given? No one.
Let Jesus withdraw into Himself the dear possession of the heart, His blessed portion.
Add that my throne, in which I, Grace, dwell,
Is this child Jesus, whose bearer Joseph stands by.
Draw near to Him, and seek me from Him without fear;
Dare; why do you shrink back? Beware of being unbelieving.
Bend the knee of the heart; let it be simple, let it be faithful,
Loving peace, humble, trembling at the words of the Lord:
To fill such a heart, believe me, is a great delight."

Perhaps Joseph was meditating on what Circumcision signifies
Mystically, which knows how to cut away the superfluities of the heart.
For the Prophet forbids the heart to be uncircumcised (Jer. 4:4).
He sees in his mind that mourning Contrition, or Compunction,
Brings the knife, as the Moral sense teaches, and that kindly Grace,
The Priest, sends her to cut away vicious ways;
How, is well known. After this he sees Allegory
Cut off the errors of the heart with the sword of Faith.
Higher and better is the Circumcision which
The agent intellect works in us, using
Its power of abstraction, as with a chisel or a sword cutting away
The parts of matter, that it may set apart what is spiritual
From place, and phantasm, and, laying bare the phantasm
Received within by motion, may draw off with strong force
The material conditions from the forms,
As where, when, how much, or of what kind, or in what relation.
But this power of abstraction is often made dull
By the flesh; yet fervent meditation sharpens it,
If the twofold Circumcision has been made first,
Which custom gives, and Allegory.
The maker of a statue shows you a worthy pattern,
Who out of a shapeless log forms a beautiful image:
He himself adds nothing; there is only a taking away
Of many parts, and a beautiful image results.
So, as a material to which you wish to give a beautiful form,
Take the confused or rude phantasm of being,
Such as you easily keep in your heart, and that which enters first;
Add nothing; the form lies hidden within;
Scrape away, see to it, whatever is not perfection
Of being, enclosed in this word, which the wandering
Concept brings with it, as when we say: to be created,

And to be dependent, to which potency is joined, time,
Or privation, where, of what kind, relation, how much.
Draw these away with the chisel of the power of abstraction;
At once the most beautiful form of being will break forth,
Cleansed from its unshapely bark, bare, its foul wrappings
Removed, and all that befalls a being;
You will behold that it is one, and pure, and altogether
(col. 773) Eternal, and having nothing that can be caused, of things
The beginning, the end, the exemplar, the form, the seal.
Yet this concept, or image, is not a clear vision,
But abstract, as it were circumcised of all
That denotes imperfection; if you lay bare the name
Of being as I have taught, it then belongs properly to the one
True God and to Him alone; and you will say that He Is:
Substance is called an infinite sea.
The tetragrammaton signifies the same name properly,
For it bears no relation to any created things.

Joseph, having contemplated these things within himself, wishes, I think,
His spouse to share them: what would he not share with her?
She indeed, more learned in these things, approves them, adding:
“Being abstracts, as you say, while the mind forms itself an image;
But love grasps the form of the good, and does not
Remain within itself, nor is it stayed by the image of being;
It longs to go out of doors, and wills to be wholly
Transformed into the beloved, wills to pour itself out wholly.
For love is strong as death, as a flaming fire (Cant. 8:6);
And as gold, glowing in a kindled furnace, melts,
And becomes able to take on every form,
And does not stay in its own, so the mind, set on fire
With longing from above, is ever moved, melted,
Until it rests in the end, in the first good, the beloved.
This goodness, indeed, is the spiritual furnace
Of that fire with which the whole mind ought to burn
In the love of God, because He alone is good; and
Goodness is His own name, which Jesus fittingly
Denotes, a name sent down from high heaven.
Love and reason proceed as it were in reverse order:
Reason likens being to itself, but love wills to be made
Itself like the good; this, I think, the song of love marks:
My beloved to me, and I to him (Cant. 2:16): we are made like each other;
For the understanding gives itself to me, but love gives me to it.
Nor is love a discursive motion, as reason
Wills to be; it is enough if it rests in the one beloved.
Then there is rest for it; then the creature is at rest in sleep;
It presses itself with its whole weight into its solid centre.
Let Circumcision, then, be powerful through the force of love;

Let it be joined to Faith; let there be love. The power of reason
Is not so praised, for its searching gave over many
To a reprobate sense (Rom. 1:28); it was granted them to know
That God is the first being, that He is the mind excelling all things;
Yet they would not glorify Him according to His merits, nor render praises,
Nor the worship of latria by living well;
Nay, ungrateful, they took away their own liberty, teaching
That it must obey fate,
Or that all things float by chance and accident,
Bereft of the Laws of God; and so, with shame driven out,
They made their ways abominable and accursed,
Following the wicked devices of their heart,
And ended in an evil end. But love strives to be
Obedient to God; it shrinks from searching into many things, believing,
Faith bearing witness, that God has done whatsoever and all
That He willed, in the heavens, on earth and in the abysses;
Without whom not a sparrow falls, nor a branch from the tree.
He is our Father, an ample reward to those who seek Him,
Though for His own sake He is wholly lovable of Himself.
This simple Faith fixes itself on the one good.
Though reason be weak, though it stay outside, love, strong,
Enters the inmost places of the beloved; it trusts and dares,
And no longer thinks of Him as supreme Lord, but as friend.
But others have such a want of reason and of love
Toward divine things that they grasp nothing spiritual,
And are sunk in a life like the brutes'.
The poison of carnal love also causes this frenzy,
That they think souls are either nothing or perishable.
Yet because our intellective power is capable
Of the eternal Godhead, it concludes, and believes itself
Everlasting, and unworthy to lay itself under the law of the flesh.
This is opened if there be a circumcision of the heart,
Above all through the cautery of heavenly love,
And if mourning be added, tearful and anointing,
And sweetening the heart, which consolation smooths."
(col. 774) "It is enough now, my Lady," Joseph broke in; "see, throughout the world
Some rumour is heard; I see what it is:
A wandering report, sure indeed, of the coming of the Magi
Flies with its wings, now this way, now that."
Meanwhile the Mother gives the Child milk and bathes Him.
The wound of the foreskin was not yet healed
In the Child's flesh; this cut portion of skin is said
To have remained on earth; another denies it, because Christ,
He says, rose wholly with flesh and blood.
We confess that whatever there was rose again whole,
Making up the nature of man: the skin taken away
And the blood poured out, if they were such, believe that they were taken up again.

On these and other matters let the mind be sober, and do you
So hold that no tenderness of devotion takes away from Faith.
Such counsel the Letter gives, and then goes on.

Distinction IX: The Magi and Herod

(col. 774) Jerusalem, royal seat of Judaea,
And study of the Law, and Temple rightly to be honoured,
Stood from the time of learned King Solomon.
Now a foreigner, Herod, held the sceptre —
Whence Father Jacob's true oracles seem fulfilled
Concerning the Messiah's coming, longed for by the people.
He had indeed come; nations of the East,
Taught from Balaam — who is remembered as Job's friend —
Who preparing to add curses upon Israel turned them
Into blessings, compelled by God's mighty power.
From Jacob, he sang, a shining star shall rise;
The star was formed as herald of a new King.
The Kings see it, come into the holy city;
While they stop they ask where He is born
Who is King of the Jews. This question troubles the city;
You, cruel Herod, are too disturbed —
Fierce lust of ruling is continually anxious.
What the city's ruler is, such are the inhabitants —
Or so they are, or so they pretend.
Ask the crowd for a reason — you will find none;
The mob is more movable than wind.

A throng of priests and a great troop of scribes
Come when summoned and give answers to the asker:
Christ will be born in Bethlehem of Judaea's town —
As divine Micah uttered with his voice.

Those who seek to trust too much in human help
Lose the divine: the star, hidden in the city,
Is seen outside; bright, it goes before the Kings
Until it is seen to stand over the Child's house.
They rejoice greatly. Earlier the cruel king,
Having called them secretly, false, had said: "Go,
Seek concerning the Boy, that coming I may devoutly adore."
You lie — fiction of fraud for you — for you seek to destroy,
Not to worship the Infant; so a hypocrite pretends to seek the truth,
Wishes to overthrow what is found.

The Letter hands down that shepherds found Joseph.
No mention is made here — but how shall he be thought
To have remained without share in this honour, this mystery —
Especially the Kings, who did not suddenly yield
Concerning the forbidden return, for a vision was made in dreams?

What? That he was fit for receiving gifts
And for storing them — or does the Mother alone seem left
With the Boy, when wandering fame through the whole city
Resounded that powerful Kings had come
On dromedaries with fair and rich array?

What? That a most great shining star was seen by many —
Which star, the sign accomplished, returns to the former matter
Whence it was formed.

Do you not wonder, Joseph, at such honours with yourself?
Do you not rejoice with the Mother who suffered many sad things before?
I think you ask what this veneration wills.
The Virgin answers, mindful of earlier seers:
“My husband, my lord, believe the nations are to be saved,
And Faith’s cleansing will wash their hearts;
First-fruits come; among miracles none
Greater was foretold, and it will be fulfilled in the whole world.
A Church also will be made of the nations — but the Synagogue
(col. 775) In great part a wandering error has blinded.
Kings will desire to heap riches and wealth;
They will add ornaments to Temples with ample dowries;
They will bring many gifts which will teach many mystical things.”

Night comes, and just Joseph a great wonder
Snatches the mind into excess, and he meditates with himself
Shut away alone in a humble and chaste little bed.
He inquires whether perhaps the Magi come taught by study of reason,
Or by treatment of the Law in the stars —
For a star of radiant brightness led them.
Yet a Magus is so called because he has known magic arts.
He falls into sleep little by little while he weighs such things.
Aged parent Nature seemed to speak fair things,
And a star-bearing head which the zodiac circle adorns for her,
And seven orbs and as many planets;
She holds in her womb the seeds of all things;
Seeds are elements for her, which she tempers, and which
Heaven’s influx reconciles; mixed thereafter
She continually brings forth species distinct through all.

“Do not, bright Joseph, lead a doubtful mind,
Asking perhaps whether by my forces I made that star
Which stood here — whether, I guiding, this cohort of Magi
Came seen by reason’s light.
Know I do nothing such in heavens or in air;
I know I have formed my funereal comets
And flame-bearing torches like radiating stars
Which they wonder at suddenly sliding through voids.
This has another motion, this an unequal lasting;

Around this Boy (nor do I deny) many things are done
Which surpass our laws — to seek out causes
Is not ours; it is necessary to obey the commanding Lord.
Nor is human will subject to us;
Free, now there, now here it turns as it wills.
Therefore experience cannot gather certain Laws
While it looks back at human acts under itself.
Why? Because neither heaven nor I caused those.
Add that a human end is held above me —
Blessing glory spoken, to which grace alone is guide,
Not I, nor am I sufficient to dispose the means.
But otherwise was man's first formation —
For I remember through all things the Lord gave me
As officious to him; He commanded me afterwards to be rebel to him.
But He gave greater things than our power can avail
When it pleases to repair, and He wills him to be redeemed.
This mystery, I confess, I do not know; for it is His star,
Not mine, that draws the Kings; a Virgin has brought forth without seed,
A parent without pain; and light has been given to the shepherds;
At Rome oil flowed forth, and the Temple of Peace has just fallen.
This order is not mine, set in the earth or in the heavens;
Grace remains, who is above me: seek her; let her teach you thoroughly."
Amid these words she glides away; and Joseph, wide awake,
Teaches his wife the whole order of it, and goes over it again;
She approves the visions, and added strength to them with her own mouth.
After this, when she perceived that the lawful time of the days
Was at hand, which the Law numbers as forty from the birth
Of the Child, she speaks to her husband: "You know that it is fitting
For us to visit the Temple, and not without gifts; for the Infant
Is the firstborn; He must be redeemed;
Not that the censure of the Law constrains Him or me;
It pleases us to be subject of our own accord; and let our offering
Be like that of the poor; let us teach humble ways."

Distinction X: Simeon and the Presentation

(col. 775) Simeon once received a reply from above:
Death will not seize you unless you have first seen the Christ.
When Christ came, what did grace suggest? He hears
Heavenly grace, radiant image of goodness:
"Receive the Boy in your arms; bless, saying,
'Now You dismiss me, Lord, in peace, according to
Your word, O holy One, for I am Your servant, kind One.'"

(col. 776) "For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples —
A light for revelation to the nations,
And the glory of Your people Israel."

The old man therefore, though limbs weighed with weakness,
Moves with vigorous heart; he seeks the Temple, adorns gladly
Now these, now those places of the Temple; eager he urges
That others do so, because soon the Ruler will come.
He looks out from the shrines and through the Temple's courts
When the Promised will come; at last he saw proceed
From Bethlehem's city you, Virgin, Joseph, and the Boy
With a holy throng of neighbours and kin.
The Holy Spirit from the Temple disclosed to him: This is He.
He leaps forth and jubilates; he cannot contain himself; and youth
Of an eagle is seen; the mind is renewed in the Lord.
There a doubled pair of turtledoves, or young of a dove,
Is given for the Boy — for Him who is sacrificed
The throat is broken with twisted neck by the nail.
Blood also poured stains the divine altars;
Feather, little bladder, and ashes are cast into black.
The new childbearing Virgin saw and groaned, knowing
This to be a figure of the Boy who will suffer for us.
Redeeming, man, you gave five cycles.
Perhaps of the priests from the holy lot of the blessed
Then were present — with you, Boy, venerable John,
Man Zechariah, and his once-barren spouse;
Aged Anna the prophetess, eighty years old, had come.
And of Jesus they speak to all with much speech.
Then Simeon brought to you the Mother, Virgin Mary,
With prophetic voice: "This Boy is set for the fall
Of many, and for many will be redemption
From the people Israel; but He will be a sign which it will befall
To speak against; a bitter sword will pass,
Believe, through your soul, Mother — so hearts will be laid open."
The Virgin keeps each thing in her heart and reviews
Sayings and deeds together; she confers sad things with glad.

And you, Joseph — for it was not fitting not to remember.
Custom was in the Temple to use distinct seats
For virgins and for married women; I ask in which seat
The Virgin sat on such a day — I think associated with the married,
Herself humble, covering secrets; and Elizabeth her kinswoman
Is busy to assign her a nearby place.
Some agree; envy perhaps brands certain ones;
Riches — many of the people reckon alone to be cultivated.
After Joseph and Mary fulfilled the Law
They returned into Galilee, to their city Nazareth.

"What do you think, Lady, Simeon's saying wills for itself —
'He will be for a sign which shall be contradicted'?
Especially because a certain vision foretold to me
That this Boy would be the cause of peoples' salvation.
My husband, my lord — virtue contrary to vices

Holds the straight in the middle, but of vices
The extremes are twisted; no agreement of the false
With the true, nor what Faith's nature takes,
Nor does a swollen eye see, nor one bleared with crime.
Judaea seeks signs; Wisdom pleases the Greeks;
Greece will reckon Christ's words folly,
And the signs which it joins the Jews will call scandals.
If scarcely any reason is rendered of bodily things
Unless God illuminate, no one will grasp heavenly things.
This Infant will be called God's Son — O how many
Philosophers together and Jews, seeing such
A body which I bore, which we both carried,
Will say: What has God to do with flesh? What Son can there be
For Him, since He is simple, eternal, and one?
But when they say born of a Virgin and without
Touch of any man — that the Infant wailed,
The milk I gave Him, that you nourished Him —
You see Faith's foolish scandals if lights are lacking,
No otherwise than if a night-raven should strive to discern
The sun's shining lights with dark sight,
Or if someone should look at the moon through dense rainy clouds —
(col. 777) Colours deceive while it itself radiates.
Every foul cloud of passion is the mind's eye;
Varied passion pays back varied judgment.
Practice — especially reason — judges, as there is
In desire now this pull, now that.
Hence eye is drawn by eye, as orbs by orbs."

What? That, dear Joseph, you felt much murmur
Already rising in the people that this our Boy will be King —
(col. 778) And I look into the day on which the Infant is set in the Temple.
February the month was entering, in which by celebrated custom
The people with torches used to cleanse Rome gladly —
Vain superstition; when Rome received Faith's light
Changed, it yielded to festive honour.
Of the Virgin and Joseph, of the Boy, of Simeon and Anna —
A partner they do not wish to reign; not ample power.
In Jerusalem's city you know what trouble was made.

"But behold, O my husband, I see our native nearby
Little town Nazareth — let there be an end of words now;
Mutual conference on these things will be afterwards."
"It pleases," says the man; "I see our kin running together;
Glad they come to applaud us
For the childbed and your Boy and the return."
So it was — O how the mind is unknowing of coming lot;
Things that are now joys will become sad mourning.

Meanwhile fierce Herod, reckoning himself mocked
By the Kings' answers, rages mad.
"Shall another therefore reign? And shall I be driven from Judaea's kingdom?
It shall be otherwise — I will destroy boys by death
In all Bethlehem; this pleases, those dwelling in the region."
So he first proposed; but to go to Rome
The accusation made of his known ones urges.
Meanwhile Joseph is commanded to go to Egypt
With Mother and Boy, as we described before.
So the Lord wisely used fierce Herod;
For He knows how to turn the deeds of the wicked into goods.

The king returns and commands cruel orders through all
Bounds of Bethlehem's land; no boy reaching two years
And under is left free of death; and the sword raged equal
Even into the reigning one's own sons — hence Caesar:
"I would rather be Herod's pig than his son." Alas — who will be able
To describe such a crime, who by speaking to equal mothers' pain?
Boys are snatched from mothers' embrace, and those
Nursing at the breast a crueller sword digs;
They brain others, dash bodies on rocks;
They rejoice to stain milk with mothers' innocent blood;
They tear some limb from limb; a wicked foot crushes those;
And it was pleasure to have laughed at mothers' tears and just griefs
And prayers and humble gestures.

What do you want for yourself, Caesar — ambition of earthly kingdom?
There is no counsel, there is no prudence against God —
Believe; God constrains all things by pleasing end.
Someone here will have said mothers' unhappy fates —
But they are happy; for a longer age
Would not have profited as much as accelerated death conferred.
Behold your word, Simeon, is already verified:
This Boy Jesus becomes hard ruin of many —
Hard indeed in body; live you glad, souls.
For Jesus did not come to grant peace to the lands,
But a sword by which kind peace is sought.
Happy boys whom Circumcision first made pure;
Now their own blood consecrates them.

O how horrid is the lot for wretched mortals
When by evils it is right to lose the life of goods with impunity —
For anyone it is right to slaughter fierce tyrants.
Why does wicked, fierce Herod live?
But it is not right — for yourself, kind God, You reserve vengeance;
You know by which ministers You appoint it is to be exercised.
But if one shuddering meditates these bodily deaths of boys —
How much fouler that tyranny
Which seeking to slaughter newly begotten souls

Laughs, and with example's sword cuts, wicked, trampling
Under feet — now smothers these, now strangles those —
While a new word-born mind is commanded to transfer itself
To Egypt's darkness — that is, divine mist to be guarded;
Images fall, phantasms yield;
Joseph himself directs — that is, discretion of step —
Lest the donkey of wanton flesh fall headlong.
Meanwhile Satan rages, who destroying many
Cannot destroy the Boy laid up in an unknown region.

Thus far these things while I turn the mind's eyes backward —
That a popular custom which could scarcely have been wholly removed
Is turned at the end to better use.
So Augustus's first things given to your chains, Peter;
So to Janus feigned dedications can take
Virtue's colour — therefore a wholesome rule is given us:
While popular hearts fill manners
With vain superstition to which error is more familiar —
When you cannot easily remove, teach to change
With good end; let them have better direction of heart.
O how wide this rule lies open, which could return
Countless vicious acts as virtues.
While someone receives coins administering Sacraments
They cry "Take away — all things are full of Simon!"
Who would number how many names usury gives to things?
Whatever is vain to them, or whatever displeases sharp
Judgment, they strike, condemn with mortal crime —
Yet more things can sometimes be done by meriting
Such, if there was prudent direction of heart.
Nor yet let it be our measure to hand over each of these.
But I return — Rome is not now to be cleansed by the former,
Nor thereafter are mute idols to be venerated for her
With lit torch; already the waxen has yielded, adding
Honour to the Church; the name candle of the day
Multiplied gave, splendid with flaming light
Which brings joy, which figures mystical use —
By fire force, brightness, heat are appropriated:
Force from the Father, brightness from the Begotten, sweetest heat
From the sacred Breath; let there be force of virtue in you;
Let wisdom shine in the mind; let love's heat
Creep in affection; let holy devotion flash
With bright examples, if the Law is fiery in hearts.
For Jesus and His parents left us religious enough
Examples when each year they are reported
To visit the Temple at Jerusalem.
The Boy was twelve years when He remained
Through three days in the Temple; He returned subject to both.

Distinction XI: The return from the Temple; the hidden years

(col. 778) I should like to know, illustrious Joseph, illustrious Mary,
While Jesus was returning from the Temple to the town of Nazareth
By a road stretched out more than twice six miles,
What talk you had with the Child, for you were not silent.
Who would grant that your three-way converse were known to me?
As Jesus walks in the midst between both His parents,
Hand linked to hand, His most sweet Mother asks again:
“Son, what have you done to us? Lost for three whole days,
What words were yours, what deeds?
Tell us, please; for the road is lightened by talk.”
“My first care, Mother, was to visit the Priests and the Scribes
In the Temple; I ask many things about the Law,
Many about the rite of the sacrifices; whether they hope
That the King Messiah will come soon, whose son
He will be, and in what place He will be born, and in what year,
Rich or poor, what His life, what His end.
Each tells, as he was taught, what the Prophets sang
In various books; I prove, then, by their own sayings
That the Messiah has come and lives in their lands.
They wonder, look at one another, and having
No solid answer, they press me to answer.
Intent on such things you found me, careful Mother,
Among them. The rest of the time I spent with those I knew,
Whom kinship makes our relations, and I was fed by them;
I ask what our John, a dweller in the desert, is doing in his years,
My equal in age, whose life has a heavenly form.”
“But us, gentle Child, an anxious care was consuming,
(col. 779) Me with your Mother, lest the savage impiety of a tyrant
Should seek you again, dearest, to destroy you.
What, think you, did we do, when on the first night of the day
One house received us both, without you, Son?
For it is the custom for the men to go apart from the women,
But the children were free to go this way or that.
Here I believed you were going with your Mother, she with me.
‘Was He not with you?’ we ask, and complain each to the other.
One night is made a vigil for us, and we weep as we pray.
At first light we rise quickly, and it is our care
To seek you among our kinsfolk, now these, now those,
And not finding you the whole day, Son,
When the third light rises, we make again for the city.
Alas, exceedingly sad, we both pant, worn out
With going; but finding you takes away the grief with gladness.
We pray you, Son, do not do so again.”
“Nor shall I; I will stay at home and obey you,”
The Child answers. Then Nazareth was near Him.
They entered the house; supper must be made ready for them;

There was no water within; it must be fetched from the spring near by.
At once the obedient Child took the little pitcher;
He hastens to the spring, though tired. Gabriel, what
Do you think within yourself, seeing these things? For behold, God
Serves and waits upon the earth, before whom the whole company
Of the King of heaven trembles, and suppliant venerates and adores.
What will you say, slothful pride of man, deigning
No service, and, lazy, bearing no labour?
Moreover, the Lord Jesus offers to children a beautiful example
Of religion, and of the humble subjection to be given to parents,
And of frequent service.
And here the careful concern of parents may see no less
With how great zeal their children ought to be kept
Lest they perish in body; and that the salvation of the soul
Is to be sought with a greater and more anxious care.
Further, in this mirror let the devout heart meditate
What it seeks, what it does, when it turns aside into anger;
When God is lost by it, and Jesus flees away
From the feigned heart, or the heart proud of its virtue.
Then turn about, and seek Him through the heavenly places,
Creeping with the feet and the hands of the mind; let a great fear
Press you, and an anxious grief; beset all the saints;
Be importunate, and do not leave off though often repulsed.
Rush, as one out of your mind, now to these, now to those:
“Show me where my Beloved is fleeing, and give Him
Back to me; it is not lawful for you; O languor, O horror!
See, I die, laid at your feet; nor do I leave them,
Unless He return whom I bore as Mother, from the womb of the mind,
Of the sacred Spirit; He is wholly lovable.
Woe to you, swollen mind, because you cast such a One from you!
I repent, alas, alas! Will repentance give Him back?
Where shall I seek? What shall I do? If I do not find Him in the temple
Of heaven, whither shall I flee, or where shall I rest, dying?
Tell me again, I pray, kindly Joseph; I beseech you, Virgin;
I adjure you both: be mindful of your former
Cares, and of the longing that tortured you both,
And how many turnings about, how many questionings were made among all,
Seeking Him late, when He willed to turn aside a little
From you who sought Him, that perhaps you might know
How to have pity: the wretched pity the wretched.
So, Joseph, as he would have seemed harder to you,
As you sought the Child, if anyone had been found to have hidden Him,
And to have been unwilling to help, be you gentler to me;
Condescend to my devout prayers, if I ask what is right.”

The Child advanced in age, in wisdom and grace before
God and men (Luke 2:52), and in these He went forward;

And so He bore Himself until He came to thirty years,
Continually honouring Joseph as His Father,
Living with him, so that all the people think him His Father.
Luke asserts this (Luke 3:23), and the word of Philip notes it
To Nathanael, saying that he had found the Christ
Of whom Moses wrote, of Nazareth, the son of Joseph (John 1:45).
As John was eager to lie hidden in the desert,
So the care of the home hides Christ until this time:
True virtue does not will to show itself suddenly.
But Joseph, bent with age, supports and guides
(col. 780) His limbs with a staff; no labour befits him;
The man, worn with years, sits at home. Once, when kindly
Jesus sat down near him in the place,
He first restrains him as he wishes to rise,
Then speaks: “Beloved Joseph, most faithful guardian,
While your age allowed, my minister, rightly to be honoured,
The work must now be done for which I have been sent into the world;
I shall not be able to sit at home, nor to be at your side as your companion,
As I have done till now; you would not be able to bear the labours
Which I shall have, nor the hardships of the roads,
Nor perhaps the envy which will follow my good deeds.”
Joseph weeps, and draws sighs from the depth of his breast:
“Then it is better to die,” he says; “the one hope of my life,
You were our comfort. What will life profit
Henceforward, since there is one mortal Law for all,
But it comes nearest to the old? And what more mortal thing
Should I desire? What should I love, if it is not lawful to live with You?
But I fear, Lord, most holy Son (since You
Deign to honour me with this name), I fear the many wicked
Men of Judaea and of Galilee too,
Among whom both the true word and virtue are hated,
Which alone please You; if You try to reprove their life,
If You try to form good ways in them, alas,
Soon wicked envy will wish to destroy You, as it did the men of old.”
“And it will wish it, I know,” Jesus answered; “see, we perceive,
O aged parent, that now all this people
Of Nazareth loves us; but know that the time will come
When the Pharisees, in this our Synagogue,
Twisted with rancour, when I read the prophetic words of me,
That the Lord has sent me and anointed me (Luke 4:18),
Will seek to throw me headlong down from this mountain (Luke 4:29).
But the mountain will yield to me; I shall leave my footprints on the mountain;
The nature of the stones will show itself softer than man’s.
These will twist my miracles, spurn my teachings,
And say: Physician, remember to heal yourself (Luke 4:23).
Very much I pass over in silence; but whatever it be, I must
Fearlessly carry out what the divine will has decreed.

Let there be labour and grief, affliction, wounds, a prison,
Cold, let there be the Cross: the Lord must be obeyed.
Death too must be borne by the devout; patience conquers,
And much tribulation crowns with the kingdom of heaven.
Bear with an even mind whatever must be borne,
And do not refuse, Father, to agree with me, or with the Lord."
So He spoke, and, consoling him as he lamented with a tearful voice,
He left him, and foretold that his quiet rest was swiftly at hand.
Upon this his most holy wife came in; she asks:
"My husband, my lord, what is the matter?" For she perceived his grief
By his lamenting, and the tears rolling down his face.
He is silent, and at last, as his voice was able,
He recounts, with sobs mingled, Christ's sad foretellings.
She grieves with him in his affliction; yet she makes her face serene,
And gives him gentle words; she presses her griefs deep in her heart;
For she knows that a kindly word helps the sad.

Distinction XII: The death of Joseph; prayer to Saint Joseph

(col. 780) That day had come which by death should prepare for you
Everlasting life, just Joseph; by the Law, Christ, the offspring,
Is there with His holy Mother, whom you had served
Dutifully; with calm face they console you as you go.
Though natural love had filled their faces with tears
Welling up within: for it is right enough to believe
That Jesus wept for His Father as he died, and the kindly Virgin
For her spouse. On the bed of her faithful, beloved guardian
She falls forward, embracing his chaste limbs;
She gives kisses to his lips: "My husband," she cries, "are you going?
Do you forsake me, and leave a widow who will suffer dread things?
Yet let the will of the Lord be done; beloved, farewell;
Fear nothing; the Lord will set you in a peaceful seat."
At once Joseph himself rested in a precious death.
Mary, made a widow, puts on the garments of mourning.
They render devout funeral rites in the town of Nazareth;
All the people weep for the man who had lived without complaint,
Good to all in common, a most holy hero,
(col. 781) The sure and most illustrious offspring of King David.
Yet the day of his death is not certain enough, for various people
Mark it variously, to be kept as their devotion leads:
It is February, it is March, and it is December:
The ninth day of the first, with the nineteenth of the second;
Of the other, the tenth, and by some the ninth is marked.
So, whatever be the day, his death is to be honoured by us.
As the chaste turtledove, if she be widowed of her mate,
Flies alone, seeking again the dry branches on the tree,
And instead of song sounds with a chaste and groaning lament,

So the Virgin grieves, the love of the companion of her life broken off,
Groaning, and weeping for her husband with a modest lament.
But once, when her Son perceived that she was sad,
He speaks to her consoling her, and reveals very many secrets,
And goes over briefly the order of things to come:
“Mother, dearest to me above all, do not
Heap up causes of sorrow for yourself; but look with the inner eye
Of the mind, with the light of Faith, what applause
And jubilations to the college of the earlier Fathers,
Who lived well, the departing soul of my friend, your guardian,
Gave, as it entered limbo, announcing, as indeed it knew,
That salvation is near:
For the Saviour is at hand; I am sure salvation.
Further, do not think yourself, Mother, alone,
Without a guardian; I now take up the care of disciples;
A very great number will stand by me; already holy
Women will rejoice to give themselves as my ministers.
You hear how our kinsman, the devout John,
Who has dwelt till now in this desert, has begun a new
Baptism in the river of the Jordan; by whose Baptism
I shall be washed, that there may be power in the waters to renew spirits;
He will show me to the people, and point me out with his finger, and say:
Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world (John 1:29).
For the kindly Spirit stood above in the form of a dove,
And remained upon Him while He was dipped in the waters:
I saw, indeed, and knew; the open heavens bear witness.
I am the voice of one crying in the desert (John 1:23): let all the people prepare,
And make straight the hills for the Lord who comes;
Let each one repent of his wickedness, for behold, the kingdom of heaven
Draws near; the axe is laid to the trunk (Matt. 3:2, 10).
And he will often bring these and more, which will win
The hearts of his hearers; a people will join itself to me of its own accord.
He will be shut in prison: cruel Herod will will it,
Whom fear and envy were driving with bitter goads.
Thence my word will go out publicly to all
The lands of Judaea, through the Sabbaths, through the Synagogues.
Yet first I myself will remain in the desert
Twice twenty days; the spirit will lead me there
To be tempted by Satan, who, troubled, with raging anger,
Will turn over very many things with himself in perplexed reasoning:
Is this God, who has been able to bear fasting
For so many days? of whom many have said such great things,
That He will come and violently despoil our hell?
But if He is God, how is it that He is now hungry? I will go
To tempt Him; there will be with me as companions three plagues,
Three furies of Erebus: gluttony first, then pride,
Swelling in the mind, the other the wicked desire of things;

They will hide their foul faces under the beautiful image
Of the virtues, under a deceitful and feigned comeliness.
I am, gluttony will say, the due sustenance of the flesh;
The second will say: Trust in God: what is holier than this?
The third: that a rich man shall be lord over the whole world.
With these monsters I was able to overcome our first parents;
Can I not overthrow this man too, like the others?
So Satan to himself; but the struggles will be in vain;
He will go away pierced by the sword of the divine word.
Then, beloved Mother, I have many things to do in the space
Of three years, of which you will be the witness;
For you will be present, with me as your guardian, from now on;
You will see me at last with your eyes ascend into the heavens;
And Joseph himself will ascend, to reign with me for ever;
You will reign together with us, when your life has been run;
Name, praise and honour will be given you through the ages."
The Mother falls down, and, cast upon her knees, renders
Thanks, and says again: "Your will be done, my Son.
(col. 782) I must take comfort, since I shall see Joseph again, and you."
And let us, worshippers of Christ, venerate and love such a one,
And pour out to him such prayers in suppliant song.

Prayer

Illustrious Patriarch Joseph, high offspring of David,
Lover of justice, to be numbered with the famous Prophets,
Shining with virginal splendour, guardian of Mary,
Witness, nourisher, and faithful minister of Christ,
Sharer of the mystery which former ages
Did not know: you carried in your hands the Word of life
Which was made flesh; He who rules the world with a nod
Deigned even to become subject to you of His own accord.
You are the husband, you the lord of the Mother of the Lord of lords.
Great pilgrim once upon the earth, now you reign
Happy in the fatherland of heaven, secure, and free
Of every terror; labour and anxiety are far away.
We beseech you, attend to us, and in your kindness
Look with your eyes on us wretched ones, whom such great dangers trouble;
Be to pilgrims a patron, a leader, a helper;
Refresh the weary; take away so many stumbling-blocks of the roads;
Direct the blind, raise up the fallen; let the best grace
Be given us as leader, and let the most firm staff of Hope be present,
Peace in believing, and sweet meditation of the heart.
Let us overcome the temptations of Satan, of the world and of the flesh
With you as protector; and do not shrink from sinners,
For whose sake such a condescension arose from the Lord
Toward you and your spouse, the Mother of God.
So act, for the heaping up of the merits and the praise of your own.

That you were a stranger, a mystical Gerson once,
Entangled in many cares, we pray you to remember;
From the things you suffered, learn to have mercy;
Be compassionate; alas, a dark Egypt holds us
And tortures us; be our saviour like that other,
The excellent Patriarch Joseph, who stored up the corn
With foresight; O now, now refresh those perishing of hunger;
This hunger destroys our souls, not our bodies.
Another Joseph is praised, illustrious because he is read
To have taken care to bury Christ in his own sepulchre;
And another was worthy to be called by the surname Just;
James, son of Alphaeus, with Simon and Jude:
Hence they were brethren, kinsmen and companions to the Lord.
But this our Joseph, how often and how many services
Did he render You, O Christ, while You lived! He was just in very many ways,
Just in every blessed share of the virtues.
Let his Justice be ours, a protection for us;
For his merits let salvation be made for us, for us.
There is another, the Cypriot Joseph: he, selling his goods,
Laid them at the feet of the first Disciples,
And his surname was one that offers comfort (Acts 4:36–37).
O our Joseph, we ask you, be our comforter.
You are called Joseph, the increasing, because the path of the just
Grows even to the perfect day (Prov. 4:18): make us grow
By the steps of the virtues, until the Lord is seen.
Glory does not take away nature, it perfects it,
Making more worthy the things that were worthy before.
If, then, nature and grace gave you such gifts on earth,
While you were a dweller there, that the Lord of the heavens
On high deigned to be subject to you,
What does glory give now? How great, O how great is the trust,
How great the power of obtaining, because when the husband, the Father, prays
His wife and Son, it is held as a command.
To whom would not this saying seem blasphemous, I pray,
Unless he weigh what the condescension of heaven
Was on earth, and what wonders grace has worked?
Between persons that are alike there is a bond of love;
Of Joseph, reason persuades its own conclusion: that the face
Of Jesus must be thought to have been like his in form.
If not, how would he have been believed His Father?
How would the Mother’s honour have been kept in every way,
If you suppose a difference of face between the Son and the Father?
Grace often wills to be made in accord with nature.
Is not James the Less said to have been the brother of the Lord,
Very like Him, which grace, not the flesh, brought about?
(col. 783) Lately a man proved in austere Religion,
While he travelled a road toward the end of the dark night,

Troubled by winds and rain together, and by losing his way,
Remembered you, Joseph and Mary,
Praying for a lodging: at once a village near by appears.
By this sign we can hope for a haven of salvation.
Many bodies, when the Lord Jesus died, are said
To have risen from the tombs and come into the holy
City (Matt. 27:52–53); whether you, just Joseph, blessed Patriarch,
Were one of them, whether you gave yourself to be seen
By your sorrowing wife, I decide neither
In this matter; it is enough to have stirred faithful souls.
It is certain that he is worthy to be venerated with great honour
On earth, whom immense glory holds in heaven.
For he is with You, O Christ, Your minister,
And the most illustrious spouse is with his kindly bride.
Does an equal seat place Your virgin parents together?
Yet in this matter our meditation is simple:
The honour of the Saints safe, we will that the others have theirs,
Whom no contention about the first place wearies.
Great Joseph, as to a great and powerful patron,
We ask with longing: bring help, have mercy on us;
May the heavenly fatherland receive us at last with you.

While such a prayer was being made with a faithful heart,
He sees visions shining within with flashing rays:
As fire flashes suddenly when the clouds collide,
The flaming rift gleams, and the people believe the heavens open.
Under such a ray Anagogy catches up the mind
Into the empyrean heaven; it sees how the Angel fills it;
Not alone now, but very many human spirits
Are joined to him, who reign, having gained the fatherland.
Therefore our trust of obtaining is greater,
The more intercessors grace gives.
I meditate in my heart something, wonderful to say;
Let devotion put it off: did you not, O Virgin, live long
On earth as a wayfarer, after your Son had ascended
The stars, and the holy Fathers, among whom the Patriarch
Was your spouse, Joseph, once your most faithful guardian?
Did you not devoutly send him prayers, devoutly greetings,
Often, which he beholds with gladness
More clearly in the Word? Did he not perhaps visit you again
Swiftly from heaven, gliding down to the lowest lands
After the manner of the angels? Why should it not be lawful to believe this?
As with Martin, whom you, whom Thecla, whom Agnes
Visited while he lived on earth; and this befell many
In this world for the consolation of a wretched life,
Or for teaching, or as a pledge of the life
Soon to come, or against the wiles of the devil.

Devotion adds to these that the songs of love
Of the bride with her bridegroom, which Solomon sings,
Fittingly belong to you, Joseph the bridegroom, to you, Mary the bride.
How happy he who goes over them with a pure heart!
Sweeter than honey and the honeycomb to the mind,
Such as it is better to taste than to utter in words.

The end.

The following words were noted in the outer margin of the copy from which we corrected this, with some things corrected by the hand of the most Christian man John Gerson himself, 1418, on 27 July, the commemoration of Saint Anne, at Rattenberg, when he was compiling the Consolation of Theology.

Argument

According to the order of the history, not as it is written in this poem.

Kindly Joseph, the Josephina, a song for your name,
Tells how the Angel's vision reveals the virgin conception;
How you join marriage with festal rite;
How your spouse goes and returns through the hill country at your will;
(col. 784) How you give the worship of latria to the Infant born, and add the name Jesus;
How you then receive the Magi; how afterwards you present the Child
In the Temple, and then flee into Memphis. The seventh year
Had passed there; you return. Thence you find the Child of twelve
In the Temple. Afterwards you rest in a peaceful end.

The end.

From Dom Guillaume Scissoris, Carthusian, formerly a scholar of Navarre, these verses were received at Lyons in May 1424.

As you, Gerson, skilled in human and divine Law
And eloquence, have sung in our ears with a sweet throat
The Josephina, lofty in its meaning:
How hard were the labours which the one house
Of little Jesus and His mother Mary, with Joseph, endured,
While it fled the tyrant who was aiming deadly weapons
At the death of the Child; while it seeks the dark night;
While it makes for Egypt, while it lives among that people;
While it seeks again its native soil; with how great skill
Joseph ruled the Son with the Virgin, how just a guardian
He was to both, you have written excellently, until Jesus
Was grown, and Joseph gave his soul to the stars.
There, at the end of Joseph, there the Josephina came to rest.
Virgin Jesus, virgin Joseph, and virgin Mary,
Now the household of heaven, now the highest power of the world,
Then poor, then dwellers on the earth (for in sacred song
He sets out how the land was a hard host to us),
Repay in turn: call John into your kingdom;
Grant, I pray, your company; let him be yours.

The Josephina will lead you, most learned Gerson, to heaven,
Which shines so beautifully with you alone as its author.