

# Excerpt from "The Mystical City of God" by Bl. Mary of Agreda

## The Lives of St. Joachim and St. Anne

But little is known in this age of the world concerning the parents of Mary, the mother of God. It has pleased Almighty God to leave the lives of those illustrious persons shrouded in an impenetrable veil of mystery. Nor is this to be wondered at, when we remember that the same silence, or nearly so, is observed in the Sacred Scriptures with regard to their immaculate daughter, the mother of the God-man. All of Mary's life that the inspired writers have left on record only serves to indicate rather than describe the miraculous character which distinguished it from all other biographies of the children of men. So it is with the lives of her holy parents, St. Joachim and St. Anne. Little more is found in Scripture concerning them than the mention of their names in the genealogy of our divine Saviour, and the simple record of the eminent dignity to which they were called. And yet how clearly they stand before us, enshrouded as they are in the sublime mystery of their exalted state! How clearly do they stand out from all the other sons and daughters of the patriarchs, illumined with the reflected light of the divine maternity that was to form their daughter's crown in time and in eternity!

The posterity of Adam spread abroad in great numbers, and, going out, the just and the unjust multiplied exceedingly; and the saints redoubled their cries and supplications for the coming of the Redeemer, while the wicked, by their crimes, rendered themselves unfit for receiving such a favor. The people of God, and the triumph of the Word who was to become incarnate, had already reached the term decreed by the divine will for the coming of the Messiah; the reign of sin had so enslaved the children of wrath that their wickedness knew no bounds, and hence it was that the fitting time for the remedy had come. The just by increasing their merits had increased the glory of their crowns; the prophets and patriarchs knew, by the extraordinary joy arising from the divine light, that the salvation of their Deliverer and His awful presence were at hand; and redoubling the fervor of their prayers, begged of God that the prophecies, and the promises He had made to His people, might be accomplished. And they represented before the throne of divine mercy the long and heavy night of sin in which they had lived from the fall of our first parents, and the darkness of idolatry in which all the rest of mankind lay, buried.

When the old serpent had infected all the universe by his poisonous breath, and seemed to enjoy undisputed possession of mortals; when themselves, departing from the natural light of reason, and that which the old law had written on their hearts instead of seeking the true Divinity, set up many false ones, without reflecting that the confusion arising from so many gods was contrary to perfection, good order, and tranquillity of soul; when by these errors, malice, ignorance, and forgetfulness of the true God had already prevailed, and that mortal languor or lethargy which benumbed the world was so much neglected, that the blind and miserable victims did not even open their mouth to ask for a remedy; when pride sat enthroned, and the number of fools was infinite, and the proud Lucifer would fain drink tip the purest waters of the Jordan; when God was most offended by all these insults and least honored by men, and when the attribute of His justice had most cause to reduce all created things to their original nothing.

Such was the moment when the Most High (according to our ideas) turned His eyes on the attribute of His mercy, and made the law of clemency weigh down the balance of His incomprehensible justice, choosing to be more softened by His own goodness, and by the cries and the faithful service of the just and the prophets of His people, than exasperated by the manifold offences and perverse ways of all sinners. He determined then to give, even in that dreary night of the old law, some assured pledges of the day of grace, sending into the world two radiant lights, to announce the coming dawn of the Sun of Justice, Christ our Saviour. These two lights were St. Joachim and St. Anne, whom the divine will had prepared and created that they might be according to His own heart.

St. Joachim had his house, his family, and his parents, at Nazareth, a small town of Galilee. He was always just and holy, guided by a special grace and a heavenly light. He penetrated several mysteries of Holy Writ and predictions of the ancient prophets, and by fervent and unceasing prayer begged of God the fulfilment of his promises; and his faith and his charity penetrated the heavens. He was very humble in himself, pure, and of great candor and simplicity, and holy in all his ways; a grave and serious man, of incomparable meekness and modesty.

St. Anne had her home in Bethlehem. She was a maiden fair, chaste, and humble ; and from her childhood, holy, modest, and endowed with every virtue. She was also favored with frequent inspirations from on high; she was ever occupied in the contemplation of things divine, without neglecting her household affairs, in which she was most assiduous. By these holy occupations she attained the highest perfection of both the active and contemplative life. She had an infused knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, and a profound understanding of their hidden mysteries; she was incomparable in the infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Filled with these gifts, she prayed continually for the speedy coming of the Messiah; and her prayers were so agreeable to the Lord, that, like the spouse in the Canticle, she merited the response of having wounded His heart, and hastened that happy time; for, without doubt, the merits of St. Anne contributed no little to anticipate the advent of the Word, holding, as she did, the highest place among the saints of the Old Testament. This strong woman also prayed fervently that the Most High would vouchsafe to give her in marriage a spouse who would assist her to keep the divine law and become more perfect in the observance of its precepts.

While St. Anne was thus supplicating the Lord, His divine providence decreed that St. Joachim prayed in like manner, to the end that both petitions might be presented together before the tribunal of the Holy Trinity, where they were heard and accepted. It was forthwith appointed by a divine ordinance, that Joachim and Anne should be united in marriage, and become the parents of her who was to be mother of the Incarnate God.

For the execution of this decree the holy archangel Gabriel was sent to make it known to each. He appeared in corporal form to St. Anne when she was in fervent prayer, petitioning for the coming of the world's Redeemer, the Salvation of mankind. She saw this celestial prince so radiant in glory and in beauty that she was troubled with a holy fear, accompanied, however, by an interior joy which his presence caused her by reason of the lights which he communicated to her soul. The saint prostrated herself with profound humility to honor the ambassador of heaven; but he prevented her from so humbling herself, and encouraged her as one who was to be the ark of the true manna, the thrice-blessed Mary, mother of the Eternal Word; for the Lord had revealed that hidden mystery to the holy archangel, when He sent him on this embassy; although the other angels of heaven did not yet penetrate it, because this revelation or illumination was made immediately by the Lord himself to the archangel Gabriel only, and neither did the archangel reveal it then to St. Anne; but having demanded her attention, he said to her: "Handmaid of the Lord, may the Most High bless you and be your

salvation. His divine Majesty hath heard your prayers, it is His will that you should persevere in asking the coming of the Redeemer, and He decrees that you should receive Joachim for your spouse; he is a just man, and hath found favor before God, and you may go on with him in the observance of His divine law and His holy service. Continue your prayers and supplications, and have no other care, for the same Lord will decree the accomplishment of your desire. Walk in the narrow way of justice, raise your heart and mind to the things of heaven, pray always for the coming of the Messiah, and rejoice in the Lord, who is thy salvation."

Thereupon, the angel disappeared, having left St. Anne much inward light for the penetration of various mysteries of the Sacred Scriptures, filled her soul with consolation, and renewed the fervor of her spirit. The archangel neither appeared nor spoke to St. Joachim in corporal form as he did to St. Anne; but the man of God heard himself thus addressed in a dream: "Joachim, blessed be thou among men; persevere in thy desires, and practise justice and perfection. It is the will of God that thou receive Anne for thy spouse, for the Almighty hath filled her soul with benedictions. Have care of her, and regard her as a precious gift from His bountiful hand, and thank His divine Majesty for having confided her to thee."

In virtue of this divine embassy, Joachim demanded the most chaste Anne for a wife, and the marriage was celebrated, in accordance with the will of God, but yet without either party disclosing their secret to the other, until some years had passed, as will be seen in its own place. The holy spouses dwelt at Nazareth, and there walked in the ways of God. They rendered themselves pleasing to the Most High, and were irreproachable in His sight, because of the plenitude of grace that made all their works perfect. They, every year, divided their revenue into three parts. The first they offered in the Temple of Jerusalem, for the worship of the Lord; the second they distributed to the poor, reserving the third for the proper maintenance of their family. God increased their temporal goods, because they employed them with much charity and liberality. Peace was inviolable between them; they lived in perfect conformity one with the other, without noise or disturbance of any kind. The most humble Anne was submissive in all things to the will of Joachim; and the man of God was ever eager to anticipate the wishes of St. Anne, nor was it in vain that he trusted himself entirely to her guidance. In such perfect charity did they live, that all their life long they had but one and the same will. Being united in the name of the Lord, His holy fear never abandoned them: St. Joachim never failing to obey the command of the angel to honor and cherish his wife.

The Lord prevented the venerable St. Anne with blessings of sweetness communicating to her the most sublime gifts of grace and of infused science, to prepare her for the great happiness she was to enjoy, in being the mother of her who was to bring forth that same Lord. And as the works of the Most High are perfect and complete. He, consequently, made her the worthy mother of the most perfect of creatures, who was to be inferior to God alone in sanctity, and superior to all pure creatures. These holy spouses passed twenty years without having a child, which at that time, and among that people, was considered a great shame; thence it happened that they were often assailed by the taunts and reproaches of their neighbor; for it was thought that those who had no children had no part in the coming of the expected Messiah. But the Most High chose to afflict them in this way in order to dispose them by so great a humiliation for the extraordinary grace he meant to bestow upon them, and gave them the patience necessary to conform implicitly to His divine will to the end, that they might sow in tears and in prayers the blessed fruit they were one day to reap. They begged it from the depth of their hearts, agreeably to the express command of Heaven; and they made a particular vow to the Lord, that, if He gave them a child, they would offer it in the Temple, and consecrate it to His service as the fruit of His benediction.

This vow was made by the particular inspiration of the Holy Ghost, who ordained it so that she who was to serve as a dwelling for the only Son of the Father, should be offered, and as it were, made over by her own parents, to the same Lord before she received being. For if they had not bound themselves by a special vow to offer her in the Temple before they had yet known her, they would afterwards have suffered inexpressible pain in separating from a child so sweet and so lovely, and would have offered her perhaps with reluctance, because of the great love they bore to her. By this offering, the Lord not only satisfied, according to our ideas, that species of jealousy which He already had, that none other but He should have any claim on His blessed Mother; but His love was also in some sort compensated for the delay in His coming.

Having persevered for a whole year in these earnest supplications, according to the order they had received from the Lord, it came to pass that St. Joachim went to the Temple of Jerusalem by a divine inspiration and an express command, there to offer prayers and sacrifices for the coming of the Messiah, and to obtain the desired fruit. Being come with others from his own neighborhood, to offer, in presence of the high-priest, the customary gifts, a priest called Issachar sharply rebuked the venerable old man for offering his gifts with the others, being barren. Among other things, he told him: "Joachim, why dost thou present thyself to offer sacrifice, being a useless man? Separate thyself from the others, and go thy way hence; anger not the Lord by thy offerings and thy sacrifices, for they are not pleasing in his eyes."

The holy old man, confused and ashamed, humbly and lovingly besought the Lord, saying: "My Sovereign Lord and my eternal God, Thy command and Thy will brought me to the Temple; he who holds Thy place therein hath despised me; my sins have merited this affront; I receive it then for Thy sake; despise not, O Lord, the work of Thy hands." Thereupon the afflicted Joachim going forth from the Temple (to outward appearance calm and tranquil), went to a country house which he had; and for some days, which he passed in solitude, addressed his sighs to the Lord, and prayed to Him as follows: "God of eternal majesty, from Whom is all being, and the entire reparation of the human race, prostrate in Thy divine presence, I beseech Thine infinite goodness to look with pity on the affliction of my soul, and hear my prayers and those of Thy servant Anne. Thine eyes penetrate all our wishes; but if I deserve not to be heard, reject not my humble spouse. Lord God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; turn not away Thy clemency from us, and permit not, since Thou art Father, that I be numbered with the reprobate and the outcast in my offerings, as being useless, because Thou givest me no progeny. Remember, O Lord, the sacrifices and oblations of Thy servants and Thy prophets the fathers of my race; and be mindful of those works of theirs which found favor in Thy sight. And since Thou commndest me, Lord, to supplicate Thee with confidence, as the almighty and all-bountiful God, grant me what according to Thy good pleasure I desire for in beseeching Thee I obey Thy holy will, in that Thou hast promised to hear my prayer. But if my sins impede Thy mercy, remove from me whatever is displeasing to Thee. Mighty art thou, O Lord God of Israel, and canst do whatsoever Thou wilt. Hear my prayers, poor and miserable as I am, for Thou art infinite and wont to have compassion on the humble. Where shall I find a refuge, if not in Thee, who art the King of kings, the Lord of lords, and the great Omnipotent! Thou hast loaded Thy children and Thy servants with blessings in their generations, and Thou ledest me to desire and to hope from Thy bounty that which Thou hast done for my brethren. If it be Thy gracious will to grant my petition, I will offer in Thy holy Temple, and consecrate to Thy service, the fruit of succession that I may receive from Thy bountiful hand. I give up my heart and soul to Thy divine will, and I have always desired to turn mine eyes away from vanity. Do with me whatsoever Thou wilt, and comfort our souls, O Lord, by the fulfilment of our hope. From the throne of Thy Majesty regard this miserable dust, and deign to raise it up, that it may adore and glorify Thee, and may Thy holy will, not mine, be done in all things."

Thus did Joachim pray in his solitude.

Meanwhile the holy ambassador declared to St. Anne that it would be pleasing to the divine Majesty for her to ask a succession of children with that pious intention and that fervent desire to obtain it. And the holy lady, finding that it was the will of God, and of Joachim her husband, prostrated herself before God in humble submission and confidence, and prayed in this manner: "Most high Majesty, Lord, creator and preserver of all things, whom my soul honors and adores as the true God, infinite, holy, and bountiful, I will speak and make manifest in Thy royal presence my necessity and my affliction, although I am but dust and ashes. Lord God eternal, make us worthy of Thy benediction, giving us a pure and holy offspring whom we may present in Thy Temple. Remember, Lord, that Thy servant Anna, mother of Samuel, was barren, yet, through Thine infinite bounty she received the fruition of her desires. I feel an inward motion which incites me to ask a like favor at Thy hands. Hear then, most sweet Lord, mine humble prayer, being mindful of the service, the oblations, and the sacrifices of my fathers, and the favors wrought in and for them by the might of Thy omnipotent arm. I would present Thee, O Lord, with an oblation that would be well pleasing in Thy sight but the best I can offer Thee is my soul, my powers, my senses, and the being Thou hast given me. And if, vouchsafing to regard me from Thy eternal throne, Thou givest me a child, I consecrate it to Thy service from the first moment of its existence. Cast Thine eyes, O Lord God of Israel, on this vile and poor creature, comfort Thy servant, Joachim, hear our humble supplication, and be Thy holy will in all things accomplished."

These were the prayers offered up by St. Joachim and St. Anne, but it is not possible for me to describe the exalted idea which I have of the sanctity of these blessed parents; neither is it necessary, for what I have said will give some conception of it. If we would rightly estimate the perfect holiness of those great saints, we must consider the high destiny and the sublime ministry for which God designed them, who were to be the immediate progenitors of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the parents of His most holy mother. The prayers of St. Joachim and St. Anne reached the throne of the Most Blessed Trinity, where, being heard and accepted, the divine will was manifested to the holy angels, and these celestial spirits having learned the decree of the Most High, the archangel Gabriel, adoring and honoring the divine Majesty after the manner of those pure and spiritual substances, bowed down before the throne of the Most Holy Trinity, whence came forth a voice intelligible to him, and it said: "Gabriel, illuminate, vivify, and console Joachim and Anne, our servants, and tell them that their prayers have reached our presence, and our clemency hath heard them. Promise them that they shall receive a fruit of benediction by favor of our right hand, and that Anne shall conceive and bring forth a daughter, to whom we give the name of Mary."

Several mysteries and secrets which belonged to this embassy were revealed to the archangel St. Gabriel, receiving the commands of the Most High, in regard to which he descended from the empyrean sky to perform his mission. He appeared to St. Joachim while the latter was at prayer, and told him, that his prayer and his alms and sacrifices having found favor with God, his wife should conceive and bring forth a child of benediction, whose name was to be Mary; that she was to be from her infancy consecrated to God in His holy Temple. "Thou wilt go up to Jerusalem," said the heavenly messenger, "and in testimony of the truth of these good tidings that I now bring to thee, thou wilt meet thy sister Anne at the Golden Gate, as she will go to the Temple for a purpose similar to thine."

St. Anne was in like manner apprised by the archangel of the great favor that was to be bestowed upon her. Filled with a holy joy, she went by divine inspiration to the Temple to return thanks, and at the Golden Gate she met her holy spouse, St. Joachim, as the angel had foretold. They both returned thanks

to the Author of all grace, and offered gifts and particular sacrifices with that intention. They then returned to their home full of heavenly consolation, discouraging, on the way, of the miraculous favors they had received, and the great things foretold by the angel of the daughter that was to be born to them. It was on that occasion that they revealed one to the other the order they had separately received from the same angel to espouse each other for the greater glory of God. For twenty years they had kept this secret one from the other, and only revealed it when the angel promised them the succession of such a daughter. They afterwards renewed their offerings in the Temple, whither they went up every year on a certain day, with special offerings, further sanctifying the day by prayer, by alms-deeds, and by thanksgivings.

St. Anne's prudence made her keep the secret, even from St. Jonchim, that her daughter was to be the mother of the Messiah. At the holy father knew nothing more about her all his life, except that she was to be a great and mysterious woman; but the Most High failed not to make the great mystery known to him a few moments before his death.

The divine Wisdom had prepared all things to separate from the corrupt mass of human nature the mother of all grace. The allotted number of the patriarchs and prophets were already complete, and the mountains raised whereon that mystical City of God was to be placed. His right hand had prepared the incomparable treasures of His divinity, to portion and endow her. A thousand angels were ready to guard and protect her, and to serve her as their lady and royal mistress. He prepared for her a royal line of ancestors; He gave her parents holy and perfect beyond all the men and women of that age, for had there been any greater saints or more fit to be the parents of her whom He chose for His own mother, there is no doubt but the divine Majesty would have chosen them.

He disposed them for their office by numberless graces and blessings, enriched them with all virtues, and illumined their minds by divine wisdom and the various gifts of the Holy Ghost. They having been apprised of the admirable daughter who was to be given them, the work of the first conception, which was that of the pure body of Mary, was executed. The age of her parents, when they were married, was, that of St. Joachim forty-six, and that of St. Anne twenty-four. Twenty years had passed since their marriage without their having any children, so that the mother was forty-four at the time of her daughter's conception, and the father sixty-six. The conception was according to the common order, but owing to St. Anne's sterility, might be considered miraculous, being also free from every species of imperfection.

At the moment when the soul was infused into the body of our divine lady, it was so appointed that St. Anne, made suddenly sensible of the presence of the Holy Ghost, was moved by such an interior joy, that she fell into a sublime ecstasy, during which she received a knowledge of the highest mysteries, and praised the Lord by new canticles of joy. These blessed effects remained all her lifetime, but they were greater during the nine months of her holy pregnancy, when she bore in her womb the treasure of heaven.

The auspicious day at length arrived when St. Anne was to rejoice the world with the birth of her who was sanctified and consecrated to be the mother of God. This delivery took place on the eighth day of September, the nine months after the conception of the most holy soul of our queen and mistress having been accomplished. She was born pure, fair, and full of grace, clearly indicating her entire exemption from the law of sin. St. Anne received her divinely endowed daughter into her arms, and offered her to the Lord with tears of joy and fervent thanksgivings. And the angels of our Lady's guard, with myriads of others, adored their queen, and paid their homage to her as she lay in her mother's

arms, and chanted a celestial hymn, which St. Anne heard in part. At the same moment the archangel Gabriel was sent by the Most High to announce the glad tidings to the holy fathers in Limbo.

It was a precept of the Law in the twelfth chapter of Leviticus, that if a woman brought forth a daughter, she was considered unclean for two weeks, and remained sixty-six days in a state of purification (but only thirty-three if she had given birth to a male child); which having accomplished, she was to offer as a holocaust, at the door of the tabernacle, a yearling lamb for males or females, and a pigeon or a dove for sin, consigning the same to the priest, that he might offer it to the Lord and pray for her; by which offering she was purified. The delivery of the blessed Anne was as privileged as became the dignity of her divine daughter, whose purity was reflected on her mother. Hence she had no need of conforming to the law of purification, yet she obeyed it to the letter. The sixty-six days of the purification being passed, St. Anne went to the Temple inflamed with divine ardor, and bearing her beloved daughter in her arms; she presented her at the door of the tabernacle with the offering which the Law required, being accompanied by an innumerable multitude of angels, and had some discourse with the high-priest, the venerable Simeon, who, being always most assiduous in the Temple, enjoyed the singular privilege of receiving the blessed Mary as often as she was presented then; although the holy pontiff did not always perceive the dignity of that divine queen, still he felt inwardly convinced that the child was to be great before God.

St. Anne offered the lamb and the dove, with some other gifts, with great humility, beseeching the high-priest to pray for her and for her daughter. His divine Majesty had nothing to forgive either mother or daughter, in whom grace was so abundant; but He rather saw new merits in their profound humility, since, being both holy, they believed themselves sinners, and as such presented themselves before Him. And thus the holy St. Anne entered the Temple with her daughter in her arms, and offered her to the Most High with tears of joy and tenderness, being the only one in all the world that knew the value of the treasure deposited in her care.

The three years that the blessed Mary was to remain with her holy parents having elapsed, St. Anne was admonished in a vision that the time appointed for her being taken to the Temple was now at hand, and that Joachim and she were to conduct her thither. Tender mother as she was, this news filled her pure soul with joyful emotion, and she thanked God with all the fervor of her heart.

On the day appointed, the holy parents, Joachim and Anne, accompanied by some of their relatives, departed from Nazareth, bearing with them the true ark of the covenant, the most pure Mary, to consecrate her in the holy Temple of Jerusalem. They arrived at the Temple, and going in, St. Anne and St. Joachim took their daughter and mistress by the hand, and after praying, all three, with great fervor and devotion, the pious parents presented their beloved daughter, who also made an offering of herself at the same time. Before ascending the steps which conducted to the apartment where the royal daughters of Juda dwelt in the shadow of the altar, Mary asked permission to take leave of her parents; which having obtained, she turned to St. Joachim and St. Anne, and kneeling down asked their blessing, kissing their hands and requesting the favor of their prayers. The two saints blessed her with many tears, and she walked all alone up the steps without turning her head or giving any further indication of sorrow on departing from her parents.

St. Joachim and St. Anne returned to Nazareth much poorer than they came, and penetrated with sorrow for being deprived of their treasure; but the Lord indemnified them for her absence by many signal consolations.

Little more is known with certainty concerning the illustrious parents of our Messed Lady. Some writers affirm that they were still in the flesh at the time of her betrothal to St. Joseph, but others of as great celebrity and as great authority in the Church hold the contrary opinion. Those who maintain that the blessed Joachim and Anne lived till after the birth of the Messiah, base their opinion on the fact that the Church, according to St. Bernard, celebrated the feast of no saint (with the single exception of the Maccabees) who had departed this life before the commencement of the Christian Era. St. Joachim died on the 9th of March, it is generally supposed, and St. Anne on the 26th of July. But even these dates are by no means certain.

It so happened, that, by the mysterious decrees of God, the feast of the blessed St. Anne was celebrated in the Church many years before that of St. Joachim her holy spouse. In fact, the primitive Christians cherished a special devotion to the mother of Mary, which devotion has ever since been perpetuated and greatly encouraged among the children of the Church who love and honor her august daughter. Various cities and countries glory in possessing portions of her sacred body. The ring with which St. Joachim espoused her is preserved in a church in the Eternal City dedicated to the blessed mother of Mary. Innumerable miracles have been wrought by the intercession of St. Anne in every part of Christendom, and shrines and pilgrimages established in her honor both in Eastern and Western countries. In all the Christianized countries of America, the name of St. Anne is held in honor, not by Catholics alone, but even by some sects of Protestants. The Episcopalians have churches bearing her name in many of the principal cities of British America and the United States. In Lower Canada there are several shrines and pilgrimages consecrated to St. Anne and societies established in her honor. The feast of St. Joachim is now celebrated on the Sunday within the Octave of the Assumption. His relics are still preserved in the Church, most of them in various cities of Italy. His head is said to be in the church of the Maccabees at Cologne.

Much might be here said in praise of these glorious saints, so highly favored in the mysterious decrees of Providence, but what we have related of them sufficiently establishes the fact of their preeminent holiness.