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The pure white dove at the bottom right corner of *Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth*, painted by Francisco de Zurbarán, looks out into the audience as if to invite the viewer to enter into the painting, and join Jesus and Mary in a mysterious moment of intimacy. The dove, who represents God the Holy Ghost, does more than offer an invitation; He offers a multifold lesson in history, sorrow, sacrifice, and prayer, to anyone who will slowly consider the work of art before them.

Francisco de Zurbarán was a Spanish painter who was born and baptized in the year 1598 in Fuente de Cantos, in the region of Extremadura. His parents encouraged him to develop the artistic gifts that God gave him. In 1614, when he was sixteen years old, they arranged an apprenticeship for him in Seville. Two years later, in 1616, at the age of 18, he signed his first painting (the Immaculate Conception) which has, unfortunately, been lost. By 1622, he was established as painter and, as his fame spread throughout Spain, he became known as an "outstanding interpreter of the asceticism and spirituality of Spanish culture."[1]

Zurbarán was born thirty-five years after the last session of the Council of Trent, in the wake of the Protestant revolution, when the Catholic Church desired to rekindle and spread the Faith. Although the printing press had been around for 160 years, in the year 1600, the literacy rate in Europe was only between 12 and 53%[2]; In order to spread the Catholic Faith, the Church employed the centuries-old means of teaching through images full of symbolism and mystery. "The Council [of Trent] firmly resisted Protestant objection to the use of images in religious worship, insisting on their necessity in the teaching of the laity."[3] Therefore, the Church sponsored works of art, and in Spain numerous religious orders and churches commissioned Zurbarán, of whom history says to be "one of the most uncompromisingly Catholic and serious painters the world has seen,"[4] to paint religious works.

The style of Zurbáran's painting is called the Baroque which began in Rome c. 1590, spread throughout Europe, influenced architecture, sculpture and painting, and ended around 1720. The Baroque grew out of the the idealized interest in mankind of the Renaissance but was more naturalistic in its execution. It "involved such an acute sense of observation that no other age or style in Christian art has been able to exceed it in truthfulness."[5] The Baroque style is dynamic, full of movement, and brilliant colors. It is theatrical and sensual. It is an "exploration of human nature, the realm of the senses and the emotions."[6]

As an artist of the Baroque, Zurbarán painted, not just for the sake of beauty, but also to lift to God the hearts and minds of the faithful. An image of a holy subject, can bring God to life

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in the viewer, ". . . for as the anonymous author says in the *Caten Graecorum*, 'As often as the knowledge of transcendent things is remembered, the miracle is renewed in the mind'"[7] Zurbarán used the naturalistic elements of the Baroque to help the viewer relate to the mystery, understand the lesson in his painting, and grow in devotion because, "although piety consists in the fervor of the soul, and is interior and spiritual, yet many sensible things concur to its aid and improvement.[8]" "As the arts are a most powerful means of evoking and guiding the human emotions,[9]" the emphasis on the subject's emotion in Zurbarán's painting elicits an empathetic response from the viewer which serves as a bridge by which they can travel the emotional memory of their past to arrive at an experiential knowledge of the mysteries of God presented on canvas.

When we look at the painting we must view it with our minds and hearts open to the movements of God, curious about everything we see. If we come to art expecting to know what we will find, we will miss more than we learn. If, however, we are vigilant in our observations and still while we watch, the art will slowly reveal its lesson to us.

Grace builds on nature. To arrive at an understanding of the higher, intangible things, we have to begin with the information about the natural world that we take in through our senses. "For this reason, the Word was made flesh, so that the intangible might become tangible, and therefore knowable."[10] An image of Jesus is an extension of the Incarnation and a holy painting is a bridge between earth and heaven. "God became man. . . that God might be loved more familiarly by appearing in the likeness of man, that both senses might be blessed in Him, *i.e.,* that the eyes of the mind might feast on His divinity, and the fleshly eye on His humanity."[11] Likewise, through our sense of sight "the artist brings before us the reality of the unseen world by means of the seen, the visible objects are regarded as symbolic or emblematic of invisible and unchanging truth."[12]

The Blessed Mother, dressed in red, is the focus in Zurbarán's painting *Christ and the Virgin in the house at Nazareth*. Her face is flushed with sorrow, Her eyes swollen from crying. She looks tired. Three tears stream down Her face. She is engrossed in thought while She rests Her head on Her left hand, elbow leaning on Her thigh. Behind Her head is a faint halo, just enough to remind us of Her sanctity, but not so bright as to distract us from Her humanity.

She takes a break from mending the white garments in Her lap, and looks over at Her youthful Son, Jesus. He has pricked His finger while weaving a crown of thorns. Thorny twigs lay at His right foot which peeks out from under His blue robe. His head is bent and His attention is focused on the small drop of blood on the tip of His left index finger, which He holds in His right hand.

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Four angels are seen in a glimpse of supernatural light above Jesus, which casts shadows throughout the house. Between Jesus and Mary is a desk with an open drawer that has a keyhole, though the key is nowhere to be seen. On top of the desk are two pears, and three books, one of which is opened.

There is an uncovered window above Our Lady's head, which reveals a surreal, cloud-filled, night sky. In front of the window is a column, which seems out of place in the humble home of the Holy Family. To Our Lady's left, there is a black Greco-Roman vase, which holds an arrangement of white lilies in bloom and opened pink roses.

In the foreground, on the floor at the left foot of Our Lady are two doves. One is pure white and looks out to the viewer, the other, which has black markings on its back, shows its profile as it looks towards Jesus. At Our Lady's right foot, is a basket out of which blue and white garments spill while they wait to be mended. To the left of the basket, there is a small earthenware bowl, glazed in red. Visually speaking, the painting is beautiful, the composition is balanced, the colors are harmonious, and the figures are attractive. The real wealth of the image is deeper. The real wealth is in the richness of metaphor and symbolism.

The doves, for example, are alive with meaning, and as our understanding of the painting grows they reveal new insights which help to deepen our understanding of the lesson presented in the image. They call to mind the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the temple and the Purification of Mary. Our Lady was "preserved from original sin in view of the merits of Her Divine Son,[13]" and pure in every way. Though She had no need to to be purified, in Her humility and in perfect imitation of Her Son, She submitted with docility to the Law of God. To satisfy the Law, Our Lady made the required sin offering (which is represented by the dove with black marks on its back) in the court of the unclean, before She received the rite of purification. The holocaust, represented by the pure white dove, was offered in thanksgiving after the completion of the rite of purification.

"A sacrifice is the offering of a victim by a priest to God alone, and the destruction of it in some way, to acknowledge that He is the Creator and Lord of all things.[14]" The sacrifice of the doves, the "innocent birds! emblems of purity, fidelity, and simplicity,[15]" is a metaphor for the sacrifice that Our Lady, the Co-Redemptrix, offered in union with the sacrifice of Her Son on Calvary. In order for Her sacrifice to be complete She had to suffer destruction in some form, but Her destruction was not physical like the destruction of the Old Testament holocausts and sin offerings. Her destruction was the psychological and emotional agony of the white martyrdom prophesied Her in the mysterious words of St. Simeon ". . . And Thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed.[16]" "The Blessed Virgin Herself told St. Matilda, that on this announcement of

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St. Simeon, 'all Her joy was changed into sorrow.'"[17]

The sacrifice of Mary was not a one-time event, like the offering of the doves at the Presentation in the temple. As long as Her Son, Jesus, was to be offered as the Victim for our sins, Her sorrow and sacrifice continued. "She, Whom God willed to be the Queen of Sorrows, and in all things like Her Son, had to see always before Her eyes and continually to suffer all the torments that awaited Her; and these were the Passion and Death of Her beloved Jesus.[18]" The open book on the table reminds us of the Messianic prophecies regarding Jesus, that our Sorrowful Mother kept in Her Heart all the days of Her life. Perhaps the pricked finger which Jesus now examines recalls to Her mind the words of the Psalmist, "They have dug My hands and feet, they have numbered all My bones.[19]" We notice in the painting that the bare right foot of Jesus peeks out from under His blue robes, St. Alphonsus says of Our Lady that "when She beheld His sacred hands and feet, She thought of the nails which would one day pierce them, and then, as Mary said to St. Bridget, 'My eyes filled with tears, and My Heart was tortured with grief.[20]'"

The depiction of Our Lady, Refuge of Sinners, in Zurbarán's painting shows Her at work mending freshly washed garments in Her lap, as tears run down Her face. These garments represent the baptismal robes of Her children which have been torn by sin. Her hands are productive, and so is the sorrow which She offers to God from Her Mother's Heart in atonement for our sins. "The purification of the soul is penance and this the Blessed Virgin underwent, not for Her own sins, since She had none, but for those of others, just as Christ did.[21]" Holy Mother the Church knows that sorrow is healing and purifying and in the Collect for the Gift of Tears (*Pro petitione lacrimarum*) she says, "Mercifully pour into our hearts, O Lord God, the grace of the Holy Ghost, which by sighs and tears, may wash away the stains of our sins and obtain for us, by Thy goodness, the forgiveness which we desire.[22]"

In keeping with the Baroque's interest in the human experience, Jesus and Mary sit together in Their humble home surrounded by the mundane. The halo above Our Lady's head is almost invisible, while the angels in the stream of light above Our Lord are obscure – just a suggestion. Zurbarán has deliberately de-emphasized the halo and angels in order to call our attention to the the very real human emotions of Our Lady, and the human nature of Jesus, Who "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man.[23]"

Notice that in the painting, the Virgin is cloaked in red while the Christ Child is dressed in blue. Borrowing from eastern iconography, in which "red is the color of divinity, blue of humanity,[24]" Zurbarán dresses Our Sorrowing Mother in red which suggest to us that She and Her Sorrows are held by the Divinity. It is through Her loving acceptance of the

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suffering and sorrow that God asks of Her that He draws close to Her, for "blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.[25]" In an empathetic exchange, She mingles Her tears with those of the Man of Sorrows. Her sorrows become His and His sorrows, Hers. As Her human emotions are blended with those of the Man-God they are made divine in the same way as the drops of water added to the wine during the Canon of the Mass are transformed into the Precious Blood of Christ at the moment of Consecration.

In the five centuries since Francisco de Zurbarán completed this painting, (c. 1640), countless souls have viewed and contemplated the image, *Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth*. Because it touches on the eternal mysteries, there is no limit to insights and truths about our Faith that are embedded in the painting, and its lessons have not been exhausted. Nicholas Poussin, another painter of the Baroque said, "Things which partake of perfection should not be looked at in haste, but call for time, judgment and intelligence. The means employed in their appraisal must be the same as those used in their making,[26]" which is to say that it takes as much time to understand a painting as it does to paint it.

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[20] De Liguroi, St. Alphonsus. p. 497.

[21] A Lapide, Cornelius. p. 267.

[22] *1962 Roman Catholic Daily Missal (*Post Communion from the votive collect for the Gift of Tears). 2004. Kansas City, Missouri. Angelus Press. p. 1533

[23] *The Douay Rheims Holy Bible*. Philippians 2:7. p. 201.

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