babes from womb to womb, thus the first miracle was the occasion of a second, more wonderful one.

7. Be careful not to hope that the great things announced by the angel were to be brought about by him, however. If you wish to know by whom they will be accomplished, listen to the angel say, ‘For with God no word will be impossible’.* It is as if he would say, ‘These things which I now faithfully promise will come about not by my power, but by his who sent me, for with him no word is impossible’. Indeed, how could any word be impossible to him when he made all things by his Word?* And I am struck also that when he said this the angel did not say ‘for with God no deed will be impossible’, but ‘no word’. Can he have said ‘word’ in order to let us understand that whereas men can easily say what they like, even when they are not able to put their words into effect, so just as easily and even incomparably more easily, can God do what men can only express in words? Let me clarify: if it was as easy for men to do, as to say, what they want, then it would also be true to say that with them no word is impossible. Now, since there is a saying, as true as it is well-known, that there is a great difference between saying and doing, at least for men, not for God, it follows that to God alone there is no word that is impossible, because doing and saying, saying and willing are all the same to him. For example: the prophets were able to foresee and foretell that a virgin and a barren woman would conceive and give birth. But they were never able to bring about this conception and this childbearing. But God, who gave them the power to foresee, could then easily prophesy by them whatever he wanted and can now, when he wants to, just as easily do what he promised. In God there is no difference between word and intention, for he is truth; nor is his act distinct from his word, for he is power; nor do means differ from deed, for he is wisdom. That was how it was that no word was impossible with God.

8. Virgin, you have heard what will happen, you have heard how it will happen. You have a double reason for astonishment and rejoicing. Rejoice, o Daughter of Sion, and be exceeding glad, Daughter of Jerusalem.* And since you have heard joyous and glad tidings, let us hear that joyous reply we long for, so that broken bones may rejoice.* You have heard what is to happen, I say, and you have believed. Believe also the way you have heard it is to happen. You have heard that you will conceive and bear a son;* you have heard that it will be by the Holy Spirit* and not by a man. The angel is waiting for your reply. It is time for him to return to the One who sent him.* We, too, are waiting for this merciful word, my lady, we who are miserably weighed down under a sentence of condemnation. The price of our salvation is being offered you. If you consent, we shall immediately be set free. We all have been made in the eternal Word of God, and look, we are dying.* In your brief reply we shall be restored and so brought back to life. Doleful Adam and his unhappy offspring, exiled from Paradise, implore you, kind Virgin, to give this answer: David asks it, Abraham asks it; all the other holy patriarchs, your very own fathers beg it of you, as do those now dwelling in the region of the shadow of death.* For it the whole world is waiting, bowed down at your feet. And rightly so, because on your answer depends the comfort of the afflicted, the redemption of captives, the deliverance of the damned; the salvation of all the sons of Adam, your whole race. Give your answer quickly, my Virgin. My lady, say this word which earth and hell and heaven itself are waiting for. The very King and Lord of all, he who has so desired your beauty,* is waiting anxiously for your answer and assent, by which he proposes to save the world.* Him whom you pleased by your silence, you will please now even more by your word. He calls out to you from heaven, ‘O fair among women, let me hear your voice’.* If you let him hear your voice, then, he will let you see our salvation. Isn’t this what you have been wanting, what you have been weeping for and
sighing after, day and night, in your prayers? What then? Are you the one who was promised, or must we look for another?* No, it is you and no one else. You, I say, are the one we were promised, you are the one we are expecting, you are the one we have longed for, in whom your holy ancestor Jacob, as he was approaching death, put all his hope of eternal life, saying, ‘I shall wait for your salvation, Lord’.* You are she in whom and by whom God our King himself before all ages decided to work out our salvation in the midst of the earth.* Why hope from another for what is now being offered to you? Why expect from another woman what will soon be shown forth through you, if you will only consent and say the word? So, answer the angel quickly or rather, through the angel, answer God. Only say the word and receive the Word: give yours and conceive God’s.* Breathe one fleeting word and embrace the everlasting Word. Why do you delay? Why be afraid? Believe, give praise and receive. Let humility take courage and shyness confidence. This is not the moment for virginal simplicity to forestall prudence. In this circumstance, alone, O prudent Virgin, do not fear presumptuousness, for if your reserve pleased by its silence, now much more must your goodness speak. Blessed Virgin, open your heart to faith, your lips to consent and your womb to your Creator. Behold, the long-desired of all nations* is standing at the door and knocking.* Oh, what if he should pass by because of your delay and, sorrowing, you should again have to seek him whom your soul loves?* Get up, run, open. Get up by faith, run by prayer, open by consent!

9. ‘Behold,’ she says, ‘I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word’.* Humility is always found in company with divine grace, for ‘God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble’.* To prepare the throne of grace, therefore, humility replied. ‘Behold’, she said, ‘I am the handmaiden of the Lord.’ What is this humility so sublime that it resists honor and refuses to vaunt itself in glory? She is chosen to be the mother of

God, and she calls herself a handmaid. Surely this is a not insignificant sign of humility, when glory is proposed not to forget humility. It is no great thing to be humble when we are cast down, but honored humility is a great and rare virtue. If, miserable little man that I am, the Church should be deceived by my appearances and should honor me in any way, however slight (God allowing this for my sins and those of others), would I not immediately forget who I am and believe myself to be what men, who do not see my heart,* think I am? I believe public opinion, forget to look to my conscience and, not measuring honor by virtue, but rather virtue by honor, I think myself all the holier in that I occupy a higher post. You often see in the Church men who, having risen from low estate* to noble rank and from poverty to riches*, puff themselves up all of a sudden and, forgetting their original baseness, are ashamed of their own kith and kin because they are poor. And you see men greedy for money swoop to any church honors and soon come to flatter themselves they are holy because they have changed their robes if not their minds. They persuade themselves that they are worthy of the dignity they have attained through their ambition and—if I dare to say so—they owe more to their money than to their merits. I will say nothing of those who are blinded by ambition, and for whom honor is fodder for their pride.

10. But here and there I see—and it gives me greater sorrow—people who, having scorned the pomp of this world, learn greater pride in the school of humility, and under the wings of their meek and humble Master,* give themselves grander airs and become far more impatient in the cloister than they ever were in the world. And what is even worse, there are many in the house of God who cannot endure being slighted whereas, had they remained at home, they would have had to be slighted. Many who would have merited no honors in the world, where they might aspire to them, now hanker to be honored here where honors are by one and all despised. I see still others—which ought to