

## TWO WHO BELIEVED

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YOU COMPLIMENT A PERSON by comparing him with the Blessed Virgin. You do him a disservice too, no doubt. What happens usually is that you end by contrasting in terms of comparison. You can compare Raphael and Lucifer, for example, up to a certain point: both share the angelic nature. But from that point on, you are treating of up and down, black and white, virtue and viciousness. You may compare no more.

Our beloved "Virgo singularis" is truly incomparable. By reason of her Immaculate Conception alone, and without considering at all her unutterable fullness of grace or the mystery of the Divine Maternity, we have solid grounds for a holy hesitation in comparing anyone with her.

But surely it will not be irreverent if we contemplate, *en passant*, a certain virtuous similarity in the unrehearsed reaction of the Blessed Virgin to an altogether unexpected visitation of an angel sent from God, and an identical reaction of the holy patriarch Abraham in circumstances very similar. The reaction in both cases is one of burning faith and unhesitating obedience, both welling, not from the surface, but from the untroubled depths of a soul delicately oriented to the divine.

The story of Abraham is one at least dimly recalled from those Sunday-school Bible History classes of lamentable memory. What child could fail to laugh heartily when he read that when God came down to speak with Abraham, the patriarch, "fell flat on his face."<sup>1</sup> Reverence for, and fear of God were not things we were keenly attuned to, most of us, in those days. Abraham, at any rate, implored of God a son to fill the emptiness of his posterity. God, for His part, promised Abraham not only a son but, "I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: if any man be able to number the dust of the earth, he shall be able to number thy seed also."<sup>2</sup> Abraham believed. But to Sara, his wife, it was laughable. "They were both old, and far advanced in

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 17:3.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 13:16; for the same promises cf. also: 15:5; 17:6; 22:17.

years, and it had ceased to be with Sara after the manner of women. And she laughed secretly saying: After I am grown old, and my lord is an old man, shall I give myself to pleasure?"<sup>3</sup> Plainly, it made no sense, just as it would make no sense to Zachary in the later years. But Abraham rejoiced. Mere indisposition of matter is no obstacle to God, Abraham knew that. He rejoiced in his heart. It had deeply grieved him to have no son. Still, we shall see that, as yet, Abraham did not know what real grief was.

In the fullness of God's time, accordingly, the man-child was born, and his name was Isaac. Now the name Isaac, in Hebrew, means laughter. The Fathers, in commenting upon this, note with good-humor, but with evident satisfaction, that this was Abraham's husbandly rejoinder to the skeptical Sara. Zachary would receive a much more severe reproof.

This is that same Isaac that, for some, lives in memory as the aged father who was tricked on his deathbed by his son Jacob in that passage that so disturbs everyone who reads it without a commentary. But there are others who will never forget that it was Isaac who voiced one of the most pathetic questions son ever asked father, a question that has stopped the heart-beat of men reading it to this day, that must surely have broken the heart of Abraham.

"After these things, God tempted Abraham and said to him: Abraham, Abraham. And he answered: Here I am. He said to him: Take thy only begotten son Isaac whom thou lovest, and go into the land of vision: and there thou shalt offer him for an holocaust upon one of the mountains which I will show thee."<sup>4</sup>

The very next word that we read is breath-taking. "So Abraham rising up in the night, saddled his ass."<sup>5</sup> The one word expresses, as it was intended to express, instantaneous result. Not one hint is there, directly stated or obliquely implied, that the numbed heart of Abraham had one single thought but this: obey. The innocent question of Isaac when they had reached the appointed place would not be able to shake that resolve. "My father. And he (Abraham) answered: What wilt thou, my son? Behold, saith he, fire and wood: where is the victim for the holocaust?"<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 18:11, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 22:1, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 22:3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 22:7.

Some will recognize in Isaac here the type of Our Saviour. For these, the whole incident projects into graphic outline the enormity of God the Father's tragic love for men: Abraham's son He would spare; His own He would not.

This line of thought, however, we leave to another day. What claims our wonder here is the reaction of Abraham. In the way that a mother might say, "Bobby needed some new shoes, so I took him downtown with me," Abraham heard the command of God to sacrifice his son, so he got up to do it.

Is it not appalling, this command of God? Is it not unreasonable? O ye of little faith! Surely, obedience is here, as plainly as the sun in the sky; but more impressive yet the principle and font of that obedience, faith, a vibrant faith that scandalizes us, so pure is it. The word of God is good. The word of God is holy. Blessed be the most high God. "If we have received good things at the hand of God, why should we not receive evil?"<sup>7</sup> Was the sacrifice of noble Melchisedech himself more pleasing to God?<sup>8</sup>

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It is the striking fact that the only man in the entire Old Testament whom Our Lady is known to have mentioned by name is the holy Abraham. In the triumphant canticle of joy, the *Magnificat*, she exclaims to Elizabeth, "He hath received Israel His servant, being mindful of His mercy: As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever."<sup>9</sup> Her allusion is to the promise of God made to Abraham immediately following the sparing of Isaac. "By my own self have I sworn, saith the Lord: because thou hast done this thing, and hast not spared thy only begotten son for my sake: I will bless thee, and I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand that is by the sea shore: thy seed shall possess the gates of their enemies. And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice."<sup>10</sup>

Now the blessed Mary had devoutly meditated on the Holy Scriptures until her soul—preserved always, let us not neglect to note, from the debilitating effects of sin—was penetrated through and through with their spirit and their taste. The Holy Scriptures have been given to us for this, that we may model ourselves on the virtues delineated in them. Principally, these

<sup>7</sup> Job 2:10.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Genesis 14:18.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:54, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 22:16-18.

virtues are expressed in the life of Our Lord Jesus, but they are reflected too in the earlier figures, the patriarchs, the prophets, the holy women of the Old Testament. It is to say nothing, then, to conclude that the Blessed Virgin had actuated in her soul the virtues she had read of in the Old Testament, and that among these a profound and clear faith in God was fundamental. She could not possibly have missed the significance of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his will to God, rewarded as it was by the promise of God to him and to his posterity, a promise to which she explicitly refers in the *Magnificat*.

With notable thanks to St. Dominic's Rosary, we are all as familiar with the Annunciation as if Mary were our younger sister and the appearance of Gabriel had occurred in our own front parlor. The charm of the scene has enchanted the hearts of artist, priest, linotype operator and housewife all, continuously through the centuries. Meditating upon it, one scarcely knows where he may leave off marvelling at the beauties that shine from the scene. A man like St. Bernard, if we may judge from the lyrical accents of devotedness and filial love of his sermon on the Annunciation, part of which we read in the second lessons for the Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary which we celebrate on September 12, might well get no farther in his meditation than the second word of the first "Hail Mary." Indeed, a loving soul might be stopped short at the very first word. When has it been known for an angel to address a mere human being with such reverence and deference? Elsewhere in the Scriptures, when we read of an angel communicating some heavenly direction to a mortal, it is always with a certain realization of the basic superiority of the angelic nature to the human, or at least with consciousness that as the ambassador of Almighty God he participates in the august authority of God. There is crispness in his tone. What he has to say he says succinctly and with authority: act. But here Gabriel, who only shortly before had delivered a somewhat similar message to Zachary (and had struck him dumb for his lack of faith), approaches Mary gently, with a certain tentativeness, a certain wonder at the virtue of this young woman: "Hail Mary."

But who shall ever exhaust the beauty of the picture, or penetrate fully all it contains? Each one will perhaps be intrigued by a different grace, will love most a certain virtue. One will extol her modesty, another her humility, another her constancy, another her obedience. It is her faith that attracts us

now. Her faith she manifested in a way perhaps less striking than Abraham. It shocks us more that a man should be asked to slay his son in sacrifice to God and should obey unquestioningly than that a young virgin should be asked to become the Mother of God and should accept simply. The one touches close to the emotion in us; to appreciate the drama of what was involved at Nazareth demands study of its elements. This mystery was painted in more subdued shades; the concepts are foreign, more intricate. God, a pure spirit, to become man; on the human level to have no father, on the divine, no mother; He Whom the universe cannot contain to enclose Himself in the womb of a tiny virgin; a virgin to conceive, her son to be God; the planter simultaneously the one planted, and this in the flesh of an immaculate virgin. Small wonder that Gabriel was delicate and reverent: this was God's lily.

Moreover, Abraham was asked to do something he could understand. Not that he saw the reason. Not that he understood why God should promise him a full posterity and then require him to sacrifice the only son. There was a contradiction to be sure; his faith shouldered it aside.

At Nazareth there was also contradiction. "And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus."<sup>11</sup> Not for a moment did Our Blessed Mother doubt the truth of what the angel was saying. But she did have a tremendous difficulty. How reconcile this announcement of the angel with her vowed virginity? Her "How shall this be?" was in no way a profession of doubt, nor yet a demand for a sign: it was the simple statement of her wonder. She had read the verse of Isaias: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel."<sup>12</sup> She believed, therefore, that it would happen; it was the how of it that puzzled her, for not even Isaias had known that. How could a virgin conceive, remaining the while a virgin? that was the problem for her as for us. No such seemingly impossible enigma had confronted Abraham. He understood fully the principle of sacrifice. Cain and Abel had even known it. That God should demand his boy as a sacrifice was hard, very hard—but there you have it: *fiat*.

"And the Angel answered and said unto her. The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall over-

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:31.

<sup>12</sup> Isaias 7:14.

shadow thee: therefore also the holy that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God."<sup>13</sup> The simplest answer in the world, if you like; the most staggering too. The virgin birth is no more the mystery to us than it was to Mary. It was *omnino inaudita*; it was unthinkable—not even Satan guessed; it was incomprehensible; whatever you will—it was that and more.

But Mary's answer was: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word."<sup>14</sup> Jesus God lived in her.

". . . the intention of Divine Providence was that in default of this consent the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation would not have taken place—she gave her consent, St. Thomas says, in the name of all mankind" (III, q. 30, a. 2).<sup>15</sup>

Is it to any practical purpose to speculate as to which act of faith was more excellent, that of Abraham or that of Mary? It seems not. It must be apparent that, on the basis of the obscurity of the truth accepted, of its significance in the Redemption of man, and of the sinless perfection of her soul and its faculties, it must be apparent, we say, that the faith of Mary was remarkable, altogether unique. Still, the act of faith that Abraham made was glorious. Who will not shake his head to think of it, who not wipe the perspiration from his forehead? It was glorious.

Our hearts return irresistibly to the Virgin. If the Incarnation was to be offered for acceptance to one little virgin, and exactly once, without any previous preparation or warning, and "in default of this consent the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation would not have taken place," the gratitude of all mankind to Our Blessed Mother—who will express it?

"And blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 1:38.

<sup>15</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, R., O.P., *The Mother of the Saviour* (Herder, St. Louis, 1949) p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 1:45, Elizabeth to Mary.