

ANNUNCIATION

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Y the fall of our first parents, mankind was doomed to misery and death and the gates of Heaven were closed against the human race. God, seeing that humanity, in the person of Adam and Eve, had freely rejected Him and His graces, was infinitely offended. As man could not compensate this infinite transgression to his Maker, God in His boundless mercy and compassion promised Adam and Eve a Redeemer. For ages man lived in the hope of the coming Saviour, as it was the only means of salvation before the advent of Jesus upon this earth. The holy Prophets, inspired by God, preached and exhorted the people to live good, holy lives in expectation of their Deliverer. During the years of anticipation they prophesied concerning the manner and events that would lead up to man's Redemption, declaring, among other things, that the promised Redeemer would be born of a Virgin. In the heart of many a fair maiden of Israel, there dwelt a secret hope that she would be chosen the mother of the Saviour. The people of Israel, being under the bondage of the Romans and ridiculed and degraded by them, expected the Messiah to come in regal pomp and glory; they pictured their future King as a great monarch possessing illimitable power. They thought His birth would be heralded by great signs and manifestations, that His sceptre would crush the Romans and that He would bring back to the Jewish race its lost prestige and honor. They looked for Him among the princes of the people, believing that He would be born in the royal purple and attended by the dignitaries of this earth. Hence, it is not surprising that the entire Jewish race doubted the birth of their Saviour in the stable of Bethlehem.

God, seeing that the preparation was complete and that the nations of the earth were at peace, deemed that at last the moment had come—that moment most important and significant for time and for eternity . . . the moment in which the Eternal Word was made man. The wisdom of the Most High did not single out one of the noble daughters of Jerusalem renowned for her exploits or her position, but sought out in the little village of Nazareth at the foot of Mt.

Thabor in Lower Galilee, an obscure virgin, who, as she was the most perfect in all virtues, was also the most simple. The Lord, in the holy Canticles speaking of the humility of this most humble virgin, said: "While the king was at repose, my spikenard sent forth the odor thereof." St. Antoninus, commenting on these words, says that "the spikenard, inasmuch as it is a small lowly plant was a type of the humility of Mary, whose odor ascended to heaven, and drew even from the bosom of the eternal Father, into her virginal womb, the Divine Word." Our Lord wishing the greater glory and merit of His mother would not make Himself her Son without first obtaining her consent. The human race scarcely comprehends and realizes the debt of gratitude it owes to Mary;—we who are condemned to death await Mary's answer, the price of our salvation is offered to her; on Mary depends our life, our hope and our salvation.

In his sublime tract on the Annunciation¹ St. Thomas discloses four reasons why it was necessary and fitting that it should be announced to the Blessed Virgin that she was to conceive Christ. First, to maintain a becoming order in the union of the Son of God with the Virgin and that she should be informed in mind concerning Him, before conceiving Him in the flesh. Secondly, that she might be a more certain witness of this mystery, being instructed therein by God. Thirdly, that she might offer to God the free gift of her obedience, which she proved willing to do, saying: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." And fourthly, to show that there is a certain spiritual wedlock between the Son of God and human nature. Therefore in the Annunciation the Virgin's consent was besought in lieu of the entire human race.

Consider at length the heavenly messenger sent by God to Mary and the profundity and wisdom in each and every word of his tidings of salvation to fallen man. When Mary, the humble Virgin, was in her poor dwelling praying to God with great earnestness that He would send the promised Redeemer to save her people, behold the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her. He salutes her, saying: "Hail full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women." (St. Luke, I, 28.) He delivers his message with the greatest reverence, and with a tact and skill far surpassing that of any mundane intermediary or diplomat.

The Celestial visitant addresses her with words no other mortal had ever merited. "Hail full of grace";—Hail, O Virgin, replenished

¹ *Summa Theologica*, 3a Q. XXX, a. 1.

to overflowing with God's grace, above all the Saints! "The Lord is with thee,"—united to God by the most intimate bonds of love, because thou art so humble. "Blessed art thou among women,"—not only above women of thy own nation, but above the women of the entire human race, because thou hast not incurred the stain of any sin upon thy spotless soul, either original or actual, that thou mayest be the fitting abode of the Incarnate Word. What did the humble Mary answer to this salutation so full of praises? She made no reply, but she was disturbed thinking on the exalted words of the heavenly Messenger. "And when she had heard, she was troubled at his saying and thought within herself what manner of salutation this should be." (St. Luke I, 29.) There is no doubt the eulogistic language of the Angel covered Mary with confusion, such extraordinary words were a shock to her humility and modesty. Some writers would have us believe that this uneasiness of mind was due to the appearance of the Angel in human form, but the words of the text are clear and banish all credence in such a supposition on the part of Mary, for she was troubled not by his appearance but by his speech. The text tells us that "she thought within herself," *i. e.*, she reasoned with herself with full deliberation. However, the trouble of her soul did not interfere with the use of her faculties and perhaps certain fears excited her in regard to the designs of God in her behalf. Such holy fears can be attributed to Mary's deep humility; the more the Angel exalts her, the more she esteems herself unworthy of such a dignity and considers her own helplessness and nothingness. Mary was well acquainted with the prophecies foretold concerning the Messiah. She knew that He was to be born of a virgin and that the time of His coming was near at hand. Hence, we can readily see why the humble maid of Nazareth was astonished by such words directed to her. It might have occurred to her then perhaps that she was to be the mother of God, but such a thought could not possibly enter the mind of one whose very life was the essence of obscurity and humility.

The Angel, inspired by God, immediately perceives what is passing in her mind and hastens without further delay to relieve her of all anxiety. In the second part of his address the Angel makes known to her the object of his mission. In order to prepare this spotless Virgin gently for the mystery of the Redemption of man, he addresses her by the more familiar name of "Mary," thus showing that she was not unknown to the angels of the heavenly court. He bids her have no fear or surprise at the great titles with which he had saluted her. For if thou art so unworthy and humble in thine own

eyes, God who exalts the humble, has destined thee to find the grace lost by man. Thou hast found favor with God, thou art beloved of God, and to such an extent, that from the very moment of thy conception, He adorned thee with greater graces than all the children of Adam; He has preserved thee from the stain of all sin and He has chosen thee among all others to be the mother of the long-expected Messiah. "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son; thou shalt call His name Jesus." Thus the great mystery of the Incarnation is about to take place, for the word "Behold," signifies that if Mary will give her consent she will immediately conceive, and when her days are accomplished shall give birth to a Son. As she will really be His mother she it is, who, in preference to St. Joseph, His foster father, will impose upon Him the most significant name of Jesus, which means Saviour. Such words were sufficient to remove all doubts from Mary's mind, for, being well versed in the Scriptures, she remembered the words that were spoken by the Prophet Isaias over seven hundred years before; they indicated to her that she was the virgin referred to and that God had chosen her to be the mother of the promised Messiah. The words spoken by the Prophet and the Angel are identical, except in this, that the Prophet says: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, or God with us"; and the Angel says: "Behold thou shalt conceive, and shalt bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus"; thus inferring that Mary is the virgin to whom the Prophet alluded and that the Emmanuel or God with us, is none other than Jesus, the Saviour.

Mary, not comprehending the mystery that was to take place in her, fears lest she should break her vow of virginity, and not knowing the will of God in her behalf, decides to ask the Angel with all modesty and humility. She inquires: "How shall this be done, because I know not man?" The Angel again comforts Mary in the third part of his address and explains to her that God in His Omnipotence will preserve her by a mysterious conception without any detriment to her virginity. "And the Angel answering said to her: The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." Then the humble and modest Virgin Mary, wholly annihilated as to self and inflamed with the desire of uniting herself more closely to God, abandons herself to the Divine will and answers: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it

done to me according to thy word. And the Angel departed from her." Human words cannot express the state of Mary's soul after the Angel left her; only God Himself knows the ecstasy of joy in Mary in possessing her Lord and God in her virginal womb. Surely invisible angels from the heavenly court hovered around that humble dwelling in adoration and worship of their Lord and God. When Mary uttered the words: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to Thy word," instantaneously the Holy Ghost descended upon her and the great mystery was accomplished: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us"; the Son of God became also the Son of Mary. Who could compose a more gracious, more prudent and complete answer than the humble Virgin Mary? All the wisdom of men and angels could not invent such an expression of love to their Creator. How momentous for the destiny of mankind was this reply! The heavens reverberated with joy and the earth was flooded with the graces and blessings of God once more, for fallen man was redeemed and the gates of Heaven were open to him.

How unlike Lucifer was Mary, when exalted above all the angels and saints in heaven. Every word uttered by the Angel was a tribute of honor far greater and higher than any on earth, yet there is no smile, no self-complacency on her part. She was silent and wrapt in recollection and prayer; she is timid as it were of her own greatness and beauty. The more she is praised, the more she retires into herself and her lowliness allows her to do nothing rashly. The chief reason why Mary found favor with God was her deep humility and the realization of her own nothingness. St. Antoninus says, "the humility of the Virgin was her most perfect . . . preparation to become the mother of God."² How incomprehensible the wisdom of God! As man lost His grace by the first woman, so it was the will of God that a woman would regain the grace for him in the person of the Virgin Mary. God made our salvation depend upon this humble creature and in her act of consent implied humility, submission, obedience and the first step in that long and painful path on the way to Calvary. This does not mean, however, that God in His Divine plans was bound by the will of a creature, and that man would not have been redeemed if Mary had not consented. St. Thomas says that the Redemption of mankind through Mary should depend upon

² *Glories of Mary*, St. Alphonsus Liguori—New York, 1888, p. 420.

the consent of Mary because her consent was decreed from all eternity and therefore was received as essential in the design of God.³

What mother would accept such a commission regarding the life and destiny of her Babe? To bring Him into the world in a loathsome and despicable stable with the bare necessities of life; to arise in the middle of a cold wintry night and fly off to a foreign country leaving behind relatives and friends because at that tender age the life of her little Babe was endangered! And just when Mary and Joseph were attached to Him and He was making them happy in their peaceful home in Nazareth, Mary's heart was again troubled when on her return from the Temple He was lost and for three days they sought Him in vain. But all this was only a prelude in the life of her Baby Boy; the great event of His life was the painful and excruciating agony and death on the infamous gibbet. Mary knew all these incidents in the life of the Messiah from the prophecies and also that her maternal heart would be pierced seven times and bleed for the sufferings of her Divine Son, yet she endures all for love of God and for love of us. Oh! what a sublime act of self-abasement to God; she yields herself with blind and childlike trust to the will of God and to the work of man's Redemption.

God did not forget His humble handmaid; He studded her crown of glory with many priceless gems, the greatest being her humility. Mary is infinitely inferior to God, but immensely superior to all creatures; and if we cannot find a Son more noble than Jesus, likewise we cannot find a mother more noble than Mary. The Angelic Doctor teaches that the nearer a thing approaches its author, the greater the perfection it receives from him;⁴ therefore, Mary being the creature nearest to God, has partaken more than all others of His grace, perfection and greatness. The Blessed Virgin could receive no greater dignity than the motherhood of God. We may wonder why the Evangelists who recorded the glowing accounts of St. John the Baptist, the Apostles, Mary Magdalene and the great Apostle St. Paul, have been so brief in their descriptions of the privileges of Mary; but it was enough for them to say of her that she was the Mother of Jesus, because by that answer: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord," Mary merited more than all creatures could merit by their works. St. Bonaventure says, that God could make a

³ *Summa Theologica*, 3a. Q. XXX, a. 1, ad 2am. "The prophecy of predestination is fulfilled without the causality of our will; not without its consent."

⁴ *Summa Theologica*, 3a. Q. XXVII, a. 5.

greater world, a greater heaven, but could not exalt a creature to greater excellence than by making Mary His mother. But let us hear Our Blessed Lady herself describe the height to which God elevated her: "He that is mighty hath done great things to me." The holy Virgin never disclosed the innumerable favors conferred upon her by God because they were so great they were ineffable.

In the Annunciation Mary reveals three glorious virtues that are characteristic of her hidden life with Christ. The first is her sublime humility. It is worthy of note that God in selecting Mary to be His mother did not regard so much her virginity and innocence as her unparalleled and most profound humility. She is the heavenly Queen and the model of all walks of life. If we make a cursory reading of the lives of the saints, we will find that the basis of their sanctity and holiness of life was founded on humility and self-abasement. The more they considered their nothingness the more they advanced in wisdom and union with God.

The second virtue is the strong and unswerving faith, which, with prudence and purity, she displays in the few short words she uttered. There is nothing frivolous and loquacious about her. When the Angel made known to Our Lady the unapproachable dignity and glory of becoming the Mother of God, she modestly asks how this is to be accomplished. This question does not proceed from slowness of belief, or lack of confidence in her Creator. She believed firmly, but she had made a vow of virginity to God and she asks if the offering is to be accepted. Her query was filled with staunch faith, sagacity and chastity, in a word, a high-mindedness that was indicative of a creature raised to such a dignity.

Lastly Mary crowns all by her magnificent submission to the will of God. When the Angel explained to her that her vow of virginity would not be broken but glorified by a virginal motherhood, she does not hesitate an instant. We must admire the nobility of Our Lady's heart; she consents to God's will without any thought of the consequences which this consent would have for herself. It meant for her the first step on the hard and painful path of the Messiah. But blind to all else, she regards only the plans of God and the salvation of man and she gives her consent. "It gave existence to a Man-God, made her the Mother of God and us, God's children, for at that very moment Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became Incarnate in her chaste womb, and began that precious and glorious life of incomparable moral excellence, unsurpassed wisdom

and ineffable holiness; that life overflowing with mysteries, which embraces, strengthens, ennobles and perfects all other lives, that life which brought God into the world in a manner in which He had never been there before. It certainly is a mystery, the depths of which cannot be fathomed by the human mind, nor embraced within the affections of the human heart. And yet it was in the hands and in the wonderful heart of Mary that God laid our Redemption; it was on the consent of this beautiful and sublime creature that He made all depend; we were not to have Jesus, not to be redeemed without her. She broke the seal and opened the way to God's plans for our salvation. Like the floods of the river, the waters of salvation descended grace upon grace . . . the Grace of Graces, Christ Himself."

We can never praise, honor and thank Mary enough for the great part she played in our salvation. We can endeavor to show our love and respect for her by leading lives more in conformity with the life of her Divine Son, by putting into practice and imitating her in the virtue of humility; for Our Lord takes up His abode in the hearts of the humble. We should take Mary as our guide and protectress through life. Ever staunch and true to the faith, she lives a modest and hidden life with God. She might have demanded and received worldly fame and praise from the people, being the Mother of the Saviour. Mary never took advantage or used her exalted position to receive the honor and applause of the world; although occupied in active life, she did not let labor interrupt her union with God. She kept herself always in the background, in the shadow of her Divine Son; we might say, she was the stage upon which Jesus acted and effected man's Redemption.

There are numerous forms of prayer in the Church rendering Mary our love and praise but there is no form of prayer so powerful and efficacious as the Angelic Salutation. We can readily see why Our Blessed Lady is so pleased when her devout children recite the Hail Mary. Its secret power lies in the fact that it is not of human but divine origin, its author being God Himself; it was first spoken upon this earth by the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she was to be the Mother of God. There is no prayer that will render Our Blessed Lady so propitious to us, so ready to hear our petitions, so willing to take into her spotless hands our cause, and to plead on our behalf with her Divine Son! It is an unfailing means of grace and an inexhaustible source of heavenly favors. It is the golden key to her maternal heart comprising the three unsurpassed qualities of

praise, of thanksgiving, and of petition. If we say the Hail Mary with fervor, devotion and attention, meditating the while on the great mystery that was accomplished by this Angelic Salutation, we will grasp what the Annunciation of Mary meant for the human race. God did not create Mary for Himself alone, but has given her to the angels for their Queen, to men for their Deliverer, and to the demons for their Conqueror.

Ad Crucem

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Thou, fate of crime—yet, choice of God the Son,
Standard of Saints and prize of victories won,
True hope, for us, is found alone in Thee;
Ensign of truth and emblem of the free.

In every life—shadow of Love Divine;
Salvation's claim, in Christ, is also Thine,
Bearing all Love, oh living, fateful tree,
The sweetest fruit of immortality.

Glory of God and joy to all the world,
Unconquered banner, fearlessly unfurled,
Accurst in Hell and feared by Satan's hordes,
On Judgment-Day this sign shall be the Lord's.