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As in a Film: The Vocation of Mary

A new article in the series “As in a Film,” on the central event in human history: the Incarnation of the Word.

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Two thousand years ago in a remote village in Palestine, in a small brick house embedded in the rock, the greatest event in human history took place. Although we may not have

traveled there, that small site (which would never have made it into books of history) has been the focus of the imagination of generations of Christians. And countless artists, with more or less success, have tried to capture it in their works.

We ourselves have so often heard the dialogue between the young woman named Mary and the archangel Gabriel, sent by God (cf. *Lk* 1:26-38). We reflect on these words every day when we recite the Angelus, because it is the culminating point in the covenant between God and mankind.

A praying heart

We can enter with our imagination into a new day there as dawn is breaking. It is a warm spring morning and silence still reigns among the narrow streets of Nazareth, interrupted only by the footsteps of an early riser, the trotting of a donkey, or a dialogue in

a low voice. Like other mornings, Mary has risen early. Before going to the well to fetch water, she likes to set aside a few minutes for prayer. She is eager to lift up her heart to Yahweh and thank Him for the gift of a new day. Her prayer rises up to heaven “in a broad and peaceful flow,”^[1] without the sound of words. She prays the *Shema Israel*^[2] and likes to use the psalms of King David as a guide.

Mary knows that memory is an essential element of the Chosen People’s faith. The sacred writers constantly exhort the people of Israel to keep alive the memory of divine providence.^[3] “Our Mother had meditated deeply on the words of the holy men and women of the Old Testament who awaited the Savior, and on the events that they had taken part in. She must have marveled at all the great things that God, in his boundless mercy, had

done for his people.”^[4] Accustomed since childhood to conversing with Yahweh in the intimacy of her heart, Mary reflects on his fatherly protection and on how his plan of salvation has been unfolding since the beginning of time. And she also prays insistently for the coming of the promised Messiah.

Despite her youth, Mary has learned how to remain silent in order to contemplate the divine presence in her soul. She likes to ponder in her heart the great and small events in the unfolding of divine Providence.^[5] That is why we aren’t surprised that the angel Gabriel, when he appeared before her to make the greatest proposal possible to a creature, found her recollected in prayer.^[6] “There is no better way to pray than to place oneself like Mary in an attitude of openness, with a heart open to God: ‘Lord, what you want,

when you want, and how you want.’
That is, a heart open to God’s will.”^[7] —

The humility of the one full of grace

The divine messenger greets Mary with reverence and warmth: *Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you (Lk 1:28)*. The sacred text states that *she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be (Lk 1:29)*. Our Lady is not surprised by the visit of the angelic being, but she is overwhelmed by the words with which he addresses her: “The messenger greets Mary as ‘full of grace’; he calls her thus as if it were her real name. He does not call her by her proper earthly name: ‘Miryam’ (= Mary), but by this new name: ‘full of grace’.”^[8] — The name that Yahweh has wanted for his Mother from all eternity, the one that best describes her, is revealed to her.

Our Lady, in contrast, sees herself as so small before the greatness of the Creator! But it is precisely Mary's humility that makes God fall in love with her and makes her the object of his predilection: "Mary's secret is humility. It is her humility that attracted God's gaze to her. The human eye always looks for grandeur and allows itself to be dazzled by what is flashy. Instead, God does not look at appearances. God looks at the heart (cf. *1 Sam 16:7*) and is enchanted by humility. Humility of heart enchants God."^[9]

Gabriel continues delivering his message: *Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of*

Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end (Lk 1:30-33). “Ne timeas Maria! Do not be afraid, Mary! Also today we can consider as addressed to us those words: do not be afraid. Saint John writes something surprising in his first letter: ‘whoever fears has not yet been perfected in love’ (1 Jn 4:17), which Saint Josemaría translated as follows: ‘the fearful person doesn’t know how to love’ (The Forge, no. 260). Lord, we want to know how to love you, to grow in love.”^[10]

The young woman, who has heard about the messianic promise since childhood, understands very well the heavenly messenger’s words. And although she has promised to give her soul and body entirely to God, she discovers now that she has been chosen, among all the women of Israel, to become the mother of the Messiah. As usual, Mary employs all her faculties to discern the divine

will. She strives to understand how to make God's request compatible with the desire to be entirely His in her heart: *Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband" (Lk 1:34)*. She does not doubt that the divine plan will be fulfilled. Mary has always sought to do Yahweh's will, but she wants to understand how Providence will resolve events and how she can respond with generosity and wholehearted adherence. Mary responds "not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience."^[11]

Waiting for a yes

Gabriel continues: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God (Lk 1:35)*. And he adds surprising news: *And*

behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible (Lk 1:36-37). The angel resolves Mary's questions. The fruit of Mary's womb will be the work of the Holy Spirit. These simple words contain the first revelation of the Blessed Trinity in the New Testament. And our Lady is the first creature to give assent to this truth, which forms the central point of Christian dogma. Saint Augustine said in a homily that Mary, before conceiving in her womb, conceived Jesus in her heart: "Christ is believed in and conceived through faith. First faith comes into the Virgin's heart, and then fruitfulness comes into the mother's womb."^[12] —

The angel offers Mary a sign by referring to her cousin Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, a priest who lives in Ein Karem. Elizabeth too has

received a great divine grace and is about to give birth to a son, even though she is barren and long since past the age of being a mother. Mary realizes that Elizabeth, besides needing her help in the final days of her pregnancy, is the ideal person to confide in and share the wonder that Yahweh is about to work in her womb and her life.

Then comes a moment of silence. It is only for a few seconds, but it seems as if time and eternity merge in that small room. The entire history of salvation depends on Mary's reply, the redemption of millions of souls, from Adam to the last person on earth. The angel waits expectantly for her consent.^[13] Mary closes her eyes for a moment and withdraws into prayer. Now she understands how the events in her brief life have been leading up to this moment, and all the pieces in her life, every talent and grace received, and also the

suffering, take on new meaning as she listens to this divine proposal. Mary knows that it will not be easy; she thinks of Joseph and also senses that many people will misunderstand her situation. But she well knows that God is able to resolve every trial and obstacle, as He did for his people during the journey through the Sinai desert. Mary does not feel worthy of such an immense gift, but she is happy to see once again how the Lord has a predilection for the *anawin*, for the least and most needy. “She stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently hope for and receive salvation from Him.”^[14]

If you hadn't opened the door...

Mary of Nazareth opens her eyes, now with a smile on her lips. Surprise and tenderness are reflected on her face as she responds: *I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it*

done unto me according to your word (Lk 1:38). “At the enchantment of these virginal words the Word became flesh.”^[15] Mary has said yes, and although apparently nothing has changed, the Son of the Most High has been conceived in her womb. “At that moment the greatest miracle took place: God became man.”^[16] The heavens break out in celebration. Gabriel’s joy is so great that he seems to leave without saying goodbye: *And the angel departed from her (Lk 1:38).*

This scene reveals to us God’s immense love for his creatures, but also how He counts on our human response to carry out his salvific plans. Mary helps us see to what extent God loves and respects human freedom and desires her cooperation so that the redemption may be accomplished in all souls. “In you too, O Mary, we see today the strength of human freedom. After deciding on so great a plan, the angel

was sent to you to announce the message of the divine decision, asking for your consent. And the Son of God will not come down into your womb until you give the consent of your will. He was waiting at the door of your will for you to open to the One who wanted to come to you. He would never have entered until you opened the door by saying: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word’ (Lk 1:38). The eternal Godhead knocked at your door, O Mary. But if you hadn’t opened the door of your will, God would not have taken on human flesh.”^[17]

Our gratitude to our Blessed Lady for having said yes to God’s call will never be sufficient. In *Christ is Passing By*, when reflecting on “the wonderful affection which so many Christians have for the Mother of Jesus,” Saint Josemaría remarked: “I have always seen this affection as a

response of love, a sign of filial gratitude. For Mary is closely tied to the greatest sign of God's love: the Incarnation of the Word.”^[18] —

^[1] — *The Way*, no. 145

^[2] — *Deut 6:4-6: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

^[3] — Cf. *Ps 78* and *Deut 4:9*.

^[4] — *Friends of God*, no. 241.

^[5] — Cf. *Lk 2:19,51*.

^[6] — *Holy Rosary*, commentary on the first joyful mystery.

^[7] — Francis, Audience, 18 November 2020.

^[8] — Saint John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 8.

^[9] Francis, Angelus, 15 August 2021.

^[10] From the Father, Notes from a meditation, 25 March 2023.

^[11] Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, no. 56.

^[12] Saint Augustine, Sermon 293, PL 38, 1327.

^[13] A passage that beautifully captures this moment is found in the works of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who had a deep devotion to our Lady: *Homilies on the Excellencies of the Virgin Mother* (Homily 4, 8-9: *Opera omnia*, Cistercian edition, 4 [1966], 53-54). It is included in the liturgy of the hours for December 20.

^[14] Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, no. 55.

^[15] *Holy Rosary*, commentary on the first joyful mystery.

[16] From the Father, Notes from a meditation, 25 March 2023.

[17] From the Prayers of Saint Catherine of Siena, Virgin and Doctor (OR, XI, Annunciation 1379; ed. G. Cavallini, Rome 1978, pp. 123-129).

[18] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 140.

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