

## Chapter 2: The Annunciation

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### 1. Introduction

**COMPARING** Mariam in the Koran and Mary in the Bible has been the subject of many publications. Our aim is not to set out to prove one or the other of these religions wrong. Our duty consists only in demonstrating the characteristics of our Christian faith and making the acquaintance of Mary, through the Word of God and the teaching of the Church

Mary is different from all other human beings through her Immaculate Conception; she remained a virgin even after conceiving Jesus, and was raised to Heaven, body and soul. She is a virgin mother, who bore the Son of God in her womb, conceived not of human seed, but by the power of the Holy Spirit; hence her glorious name of Mother of God. Mary is also our mother, because, through Christ, we have received the grace of adoption. We should love her as her children, seeking her advice and help when in distress, for Christ does not turn down her pleas.

## 2. Reading and Understanding the Gospel:

### The Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>He went in and said to her, "Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, <sup>30</sup>but the angel said to her, "Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. <sup>31</sup>Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name Him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David; <sup>33</sup>He will rule over the House of Jacob forever and His reign will have no end." <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>"The Holy Spirit will come upon you," the angel answered, "and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, <sup>37</sup>for nothing is impossible to God." <sup>38</sup>"I am the handmaid of the Lord," said Mary, "let what you have said be done to me." And the angel left her.

#### 2.1 Explanation

We are in the town of Nazareth, in the region of Galilee, not in Jerusalem nor in the Temple. We know well that we cannot compare the marginalization of Galilee with the religious importance of Jerusalem. We are meeting a person of simple social status: a virgin who is betrothed; we are not meeting a priest employed in offering incense in the Temple, like Zachariah. For the incarnation, God has chosen the weaker vessel (a woman), a marginalized location (Galilee), and modest social status. All of this indicates a predilection on God's part, love for the humble and the poor.

Verse 1:28: "Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you." The greeting of the Angel to Mary helps us to understand that she is filled with the blessings and grace of God. The angel spontaneously reassures her and says that God will protect and support her in a free act of grace. He tells her that she is to bear a child who will be the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David. The Annunciation is Christological, announcing the birth of the redeeming Messiah into our world.

Verse 1:34: “But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?” Mary’s question is rational since she is officially betrothed to Joseph, but the marriage has not yet been consummated. How could she conceive a child without lying with a man? Her question points to the impossibility, humanly speaking, of such a thing happening, without a miraculous intervention from God. The angel tells her that the power of the Most High will overshadow her, just as God’s glory overshadowed the dwellings of His people in the exodus with Moses (Ex 40:35). Mary will conceive by the Holy Spirit and the child to be born will be called the Son of God.

It was not easy for a young Jewish girl to defy social traditions. A betrothed girl who was pregnant was considered an adulteress, deserving of being stoned to death. God, in His glory, did not deny her freedom, nor deprive her of her free will. Her answer – “I am the handmaid of the Lord” (v.1) – was a free expression of her total and unconditional willingness to take on this venture. Her past experience in her life of faith had taught her obedience to God’s will and commandments, despite the mystery that shrouded her future. Her “Yes”, her “Fiat”, was the beginning of the blessings to be showered upon humanity. The unity between the divine and the human began in that moment. Jesus became incarnate in the womb of Mary: redemption was in the making. By her reaction, Mary was an expression of the faithful “remnant” of the Jewish people, one who listened closely to God’s precepts and who acted according to them in her life.

## **2.2 Summary and Practice**

The Annunciation teaches us humility, for God loves the humble and comes to their rescue. God wants us to trust His Word, which touches the deepest places in our hearts and fills them with love, granting us peace and warmth not to be found anywhere else. Like Mary, in discovering the call of God in our inner selves, in meditating upon the holy scriptures, by seeking Him in prayer, we can come to know today the will of God and hear His voice through the Bible under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Each one of us can change the course of human history when we express obedience to the will of God. Each one of us is like Mary: the Holy Spirit comes upon us in Baptism and we are able to become holy if that is our desire. Baptism does not deprive us of our freedom, but grants us redemption and holiness when we pursue a life of repentance and obedience to God’s precepts.

Let us then take Mary as our real “heavenly Mother”. Let us love her as her real sons and daughters. Let us follow her command at the Wedding of Cana in Galilee: “Do whatever he tells you!” (Jn 2:5). St Bernard proclaimed: “Never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided.”

### **3. Theological and Spiritual Teaching: Mary in Church Teachings**

The Church is aware of the great importance of the role of Mary, Mother of Jesus, because she was there at the beginning of the earthly life of Jesus and at the birth of the Church. At the birth of Jesus, the Evangelist recounts how the Magi saw the “Child and His Mother”. Many historians tell us that pilgrimages to Mary’s grave began very early, and that belief in her Assumption to eternal life with her Son in Heaven spread rapidly.

Mary was conceived free from Original Sin: Saints of the Early Church, called the Church Fathers, meditated on her life and her vocation, and came to realise that the body that had carried the Son of God in the womb could not be stained by sin. They came to understand, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that the Lord had kept her free from her birth of all tendency to do wrong. This was not of her own volition, but a blessing from the Lord. She had shared, in advance as it were, in the redemption that her Son brought, for she had not fallen prey to the sin that stained the human race, though she was human like us. Mary is Mother of Jesus and Mother of the Church: on the Cross, Jesus said to Mary, pointing to the Beloved Disciple at her side: “This is your son!” and to the Disciple: “This is your mother!” These words are cherished by all believers, for Jesus made his mother theirs. This is why the Church has meditated a great deal on the life of Mary, that we might learn, as did she, to keep in our hearts the words of Jesus and to meditate upon them. The Church prays to Mary and asks for her intercession, knowing that Mary is today and forever at the side of her Son, loving and praying for us.

Mary is the Mother of God: this is the most important of all Marian beliefs. There have been many misunderstandings on this topic. The Church does not intend to say that Mary gave birth to God before all times, which would imply that she was a goddess. The declaration consists in saying that Mary gave birth to Jesus in the “fullness of time” and that he was both true man and true God. Thus, as she is the mother of Jesus, God and Man, we can call her also Mother of God.

Mary was raised body and soul to Heaven: how could the body that bore God be left to corruption? Early Christians said that the Lord did not allow the body of Mary to rot. For this reason, we believe that she is the image of the Church and all of humanity, who will be invited by God to share His glory and who shall not be left prey to corruption and dust.

### **4. Reading and Meditation:**

#### **A Reading from St Ephraim the Syriac (c.306-c.373)**

Awake your strings, O harp, in praise of the Virgin Mary. Raise your voice and praise the life of the miraculous Virgin, daughter of Sion, who gave us “the Life of the World.”

Two women, innocent and humble – Mary and Eve – were equal in everything, but later one was the cause of our death and the other the cause of our life.

Your divine birth, O Lord, has conferred a birth to all humanity. This humanity gave birth to you according to the flesh, and you, you have been born according to the Spirit. Glory to you who became a child so that everything might become new!

This harp of the Holy Spirit will play the most beautiful melody when she praises Mary, who is Eden’s paradise coming from God; in there is no deadly serpent, but there is found the tree of life who brought the exiles back to Eden.

Mary carried “fire” in her hands, and the flames in her arms; she nursed with her breasts the one who nurtures the whole world; who can tell of her benefactions?

The Word of the Father came from the Father’s heart, and in another heart he took form; he passed from one heart to another; and these two pure hearts were filled with his presence – Blessed be the One who lives in us!<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> St Ephraim, Hymn to the Virgin Mary.