

The Annunciation,
by Fra Angelico –
Diocesan Museum,
Cortona (Italy)



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²⁸ And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ Then the Angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of David His father, ³³ and He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ But Mary said to the Angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

³⁵ And the Angel said to her in reply, "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. ³⁶ And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; ³⁷ for nothing will be impossible for God."

³⁸ Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the Angel departed from her (Lk 1:26-38).

Mary and Her Virginity: Gateway of the Saviour

By her extraordinary love for virginity, Mary Most Holy merited to be the Mother of God, showing to future centuries the fecundity of this virtue and how it confers strength and courage and even forms heroes.

I - ALL MOVEMENT ENDS IN REST



Conceived in sin, it is inherent to man to suffer fatigue; the animal side of our nature easily tires. After a day's labour—whether manual or intellectual—we feel the vital need to rest, especially if we rise early. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, free from original sin and all stain, wanted to assume certain defects of human nature¹ experiencing fatigue, as in the episode in which we find Him sleeping in the boat (cf. Mt 8:24-27), or seated beside Jacob's well (cf. Jn 4:6).

Fatigue, this daily reality, evokes the wise and precise observation of St. Thomas of Aquinas,² that all movement ends in rest.

It is normal to see young people run about with verve and energy, but as they grow and mature they acquire the desire for leisure and tranquillity. The human spirit seeks peace amid the intense regimen of activity to which it is subject over the course of life. Humans aspire to stability and ease; this is what makes us want to own a property on which to build a house, where we can live free of cares.

1) Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. *Summa Theologiae*, III, q.5, a.3; q.14, a.1.

2) Cf. *Idem*, I, q.79, a.8.



Men frequently strive to perpetuate their memory,
leaving something concrete in this world that will cross
the ages and last for generations

Pyramids of Egypt

People also frequently strive to achieve something that will perpetuate their memory—leaving something concrete in this world that will cross the ages and last for generations. The Egyptians, for example, stood out among the peoples of Antiquity for Providence having granted them science, just as He gave theology and the true religion to the Jewish people, philosophy to the Greeks and law to the Romans. The greatest proof of the excellent knowledge they cultivated and the desire to perpetuate their fame are the pyramids, which may date as far back as 2500 BC and which still inspire awe today, for the method of their construction remains a mystery.

Our Lord did not erect buildings

In contrast, Our Lord Jesus Christ never erected a single building, nor did He have a home, as He declared: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Lk 9:58). But He still marked history and divided it into two parts!

He is the God-Man, Who contains the absolute criterion, the paradigm of everything, including how to perpetuate a work. What



The monument He constructed is immaterial, but it was made to survive the ages, for it is founded on His Covenant: “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church” (Mt 16:18)

St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

did He do? He bequeathed us His words, later recorded by others, it is true, but above all He recruited disciples, formed Apostles and transformed them into men united to God. The monument He constructed is immaterial, but it was made to survive the ages, for it is founded on His Covenant: “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church” (Mt 16:18).

Israel seeks stability after many long and unsettled centuries

It is precisely this human yearning for a secure and stable situation that appears in the first reading (2 Sm 7:1-5,8b-12,14a,16) of this Fourth Sunday of Advent. Over the course of their tumultuous history, the Hebrews endured constant instability: from the beginning, due to a great famine upon the earth, the patriarch Jacob went with his family to Egypt, where his son Joseph was administrator (cf. Gn 47:1-6), and there his descendants multiplied. But when a Pharaoh ascended to the throne “who did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8), they were forced to “serve with rigour” (Ex 1:13), for this ruler feared that the mighty and numerous people of Israel would ally themselves with the enemies of Egypt, while he also shrewdly noted that they were a

precious source of manual labour for his kingdom (cf. Ex 1:10; 14:5). Oppressed and reduced to slavery, the Israelites lived in Egyptian lands for over four centuries³ until the emergence of Moses, who brought them out of Egypt by divine order, crossing the Red Sea dry-shod, while Pharaoh's troops were swallowed up by the waters. The Israelites then wandered the desert for forty years, without reaching their goal, since they had revolted against the Lord (cf. Nm 14:32-35). Whoever follows the sacred narrative with a map will be able to trace out—not without some distress—the route they travelled...

When they finally reached the Promised Land, they met with untold obstacles and uncertainties until the time of David, the second king of Israel. David discerned God's plan in his

Gustavo Kraij



From its beginning, the history of the Hebrew people
was marked by instability

Crossing of the Red Sea – Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

3) Exegetes have hotly debated the length of the Israelites' first stay in Egypt without, however, reaching a definitive conclusion. Here the author confines himself to the facts in the Pentateuch (cf. Gn 15:13; Ex 12:40-41), not exploring the details of the question.

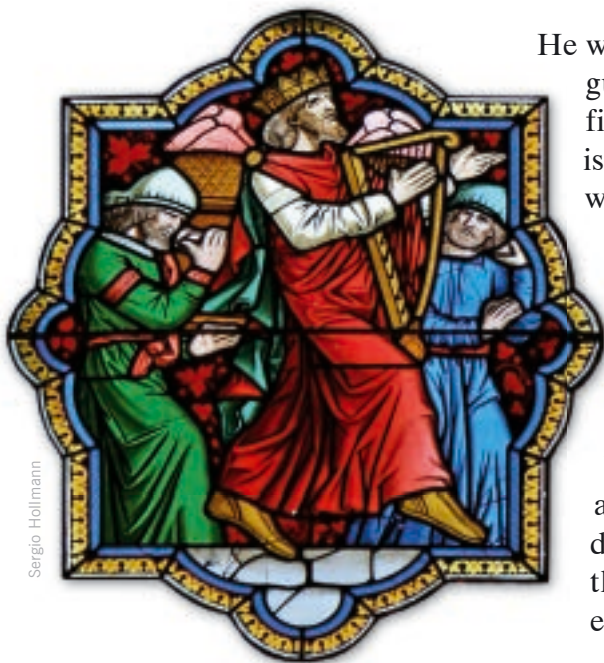
regard and acknowledged being the object of His infinite largesse. At the Lord's command, he left the pastures to be the commander of the Chosen People, as today's first reading relates (2 Sm 7:8b). He also sought repose and, with divine assistance, freed himself from the enemies that surrounded him and finally settled in his palace. But being a righteous man, who kept his sights set on higher things, he desired more for God than for himself, and said to the prophet Nathan: "Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent!" (2 Sm 7:2).

There was, in fact, no solid construction to house the Ark of the Covenant, and David was anxious to build a Temple—to replace the tent that had sheltered it until then—as a way of expressing his gratitude to God. He wished to acknowledge everything received from Him, giving stability to this figure of God which, from the time of Moses, had continually accompanied the people.

The Ark was so holy that only the priests could touch it. Anyone else who placed a hand on it would be instantly struck dead. This occurred when David had the Ark brought from Baalejudah to his city: the oxen pulling the cart upon which it was resting stumbled, and the Ark was about to fall. To prevent this, a man named Uzzah put forth his hand and steadied the Ark, and immediately fell dead, struck by God's wrath (cf. 2 Sm 6:1-7). The Ark was a sign of God's Covenant with Israel, a pledge that the Lord would fulfil all His promises; ultimately, it symbolized God's presence among men.

A promise that surpassed David's generosity

In reply to David's proposal, Nathan counselled him to follow his heart (cf. 2 Sm 7:3); but that same night, the word of the Lord came to the prophet, revealing that David should not carry out his plan. As God is the absolute master of everything, He could construct for Himself a temple for His glory, without the help of creatures. Nevertheless because of David's good desire, He would grant him much more than a temple or a palace;



Sergio Hollmann

The Ark was a sign of God's Covenant with Israel, a pledge that the Lord would fulfil all His promises

David dances before the Ark of the Covenant – Cologne Cathedral (Germany)

He would establish a most distinguished house for David, confirming his royalty and promising him posterity: “And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm. I will be a Father to him, and he shall be a son to Me. Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before Me; your throne shall stand firm forever” (2 Sm 7:12,14a,16).

God showed David—who wanted to erect a material edifice—that the perpetuity of a work stems from the Covenant made with Him. Without this, any

action, even if executed with human intelligence, perspicacity, and expertise, will not endure over centuries. Therefore, this Covenant must never be forsaken, for God regards it with affection and with holy jealousy, as expressed in today's Responsorial Psalm: “Forever I will maintain My kindness toward him, and My Covenant with him stands firm” (Ps 89:28). The relationship between God and David was so strong that He, knowing everything as present, contemplated in David—as He had seen from all eternity—the Saviour Himself, born from his lineage after many generations.

The Gospel for the last Sunday of Advent focuses on this particular house and on this descendant promised to David, in a Liturgy rich in images that prepare us for Christmas.

II - MARY, HOUSE OF GOD AND FRUIT OF THE COVENANT



he house erected by God for the tranquillity of David is a Virgin from his lineage, named Mary. She is the House of God beyond all compare; it is she who brings true stability and the fullness of peace. She is the award of the Covenant that the Lord established with David, its most extraordinary fruit. After her will come the One Whose personality is not human, but rather divine, Who is both creature and Creator, Our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of Mary Most Holy.

The short passage of St. Luke now to be considered is well known.⁴ But the Gospel's succinct phrases always offer marvellously new facets, like a kaleidoscope which contains only a few coloured fragments yet, no matter how many times it is turned, it never forms exactly the same image twice.

A God Incarnate calls for a horizon of a fitting stature

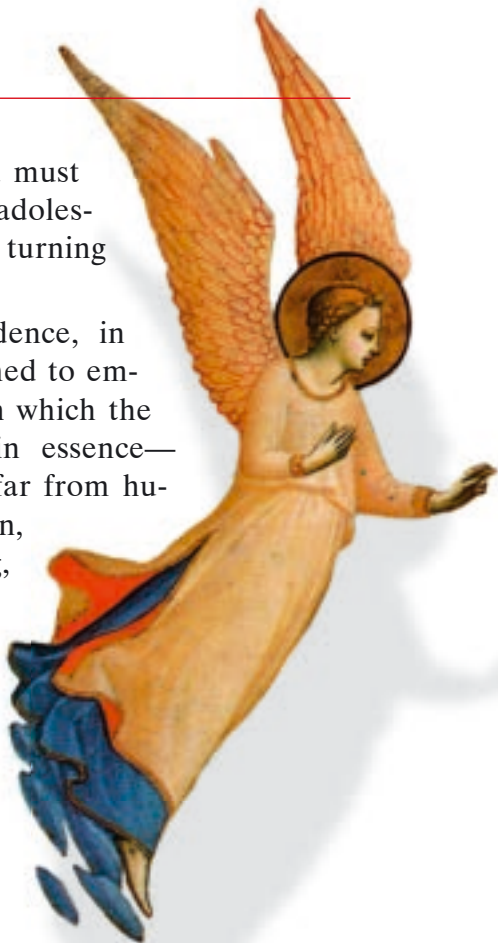
²⁶ The Angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a Virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the Virgin's name was Mary.

Nazareth was a tiny village, located in a slight depression amidst the rolling mountains of Galilee. Its houses, not built at the bottom of the valley, but along the tops of the cliffs, on the slopes of Mount Neby Sain, lent the landscape a charming and delightful note. This hill, the highest of all those surrounding the city, boasts a marvellous view. "It is surely," comments Filion, "one of the most beautiful and touching [vistas] that one can enjoy in Palestine. [...] In every direction, expanses of land, sky, and water compete for attention; on every side there are valleys, mountains, towns or villages, and the immensity of the

4) For other commentaries on this same Gospel, see: CLÁ DIAS, EP, João Scognamiglio. Can Mary Re-establish the Order of the Universe? In: *Heralds of the Gospel*. Nobleton, ON. No. 53 (Mar. 2012); p.10-17; Gospel Commentaries for Solemnities of the Annunciation of the Lord and the Immaculate Conception, both in Volume VII of this collection.

sea. [...] What a spectacle! Our Lord must have prayed many times during His adolescence and youth on this sublime altar, turning His gaze to the sea!”⁵

This detail reveals that Providence, in choosing an unimportant village, wished to emphasize the poverty and anonymity in which the God Incarnate—Who is Humility in essence—chose to spend a prolonged period, far from human eyes. To accomplish such a plan, He could have opted for a low-lying, sunken area, yet He preferred to live in an elevated place, with an open landscape, for His divine nature demands that His assumed human nature enjoy a horizon more suited to His stature as God!



Mary had the greatest possible plenitude of grace

²⁸ And coming to her, he said, “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.”

With the words “coming to her,” we are led to picture the Angel entering where Mary was recollected within her house, most certainly in prayer. What does the Angel say? “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.” We may presume that this was not the verbatim phrase, for it was likely much more extensive; nevertheless, let us focus on the words “full of grace.”

Taking into account that everything transpires very differently in the economy of grace than in the human economy, we should consider that the Blessed Virgin received, from her conception, the highest degree of grace that a human creature can receive. And what an admirable degree this was! If we unite

5) FILLION, Louis-Claude. *Vida de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo, vol. I: Infancia y Bautismo*. Madrid: Rialp, 2000, p.206-207.

all the grace of the Angels and the Blessed which have existed and will exist until the end of time, in their consummate degree, the result will not equal Our Lady's initial superabundance. Furthermore, it must be remembered that, from the moment of her creation, she possessed infused knowledge, as well as all piety, all the virtues and all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, so that her first act of will was one of love of God. As she progressed, this charity also grew: at each moment, her love was most perfect and complete. She reached the greatest possible likeness to God, and at the next moment she advanced even more, always encompassing the fullness of grace that was possible for her to contain at that instant.

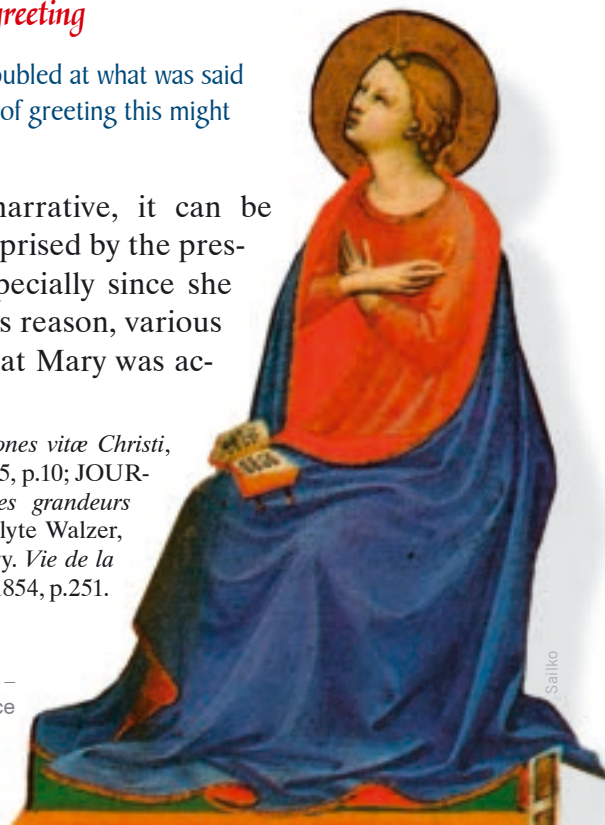
Why and how, then, did the course of this life draw to a close for the Blessed Virgin, since, conceived without original sin, she suffered no illness and, consequently, had no *causa mortis*? Our Lady was impelled to leave the earth due to the quantity of grace poured into her soul. She exhausted the capacity to receive, so to speak... She could contain no more grace.

The profound meaning of a brief greeting

²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

From the Evangelist's narrative, it can be gathered that Mary was not surprised by the presence of the angelic visitor, especially since she was in a state of prayer. For this reason, various authors⁶ concur in affirming that Mary was ac-

6) Cf. PS.-BONAVENTURE. *Meditationes vitae Christi*, c.4. Buenos Aires: Santa Catalina, 1945, p.10; JOURDAIN, Zéphyr-Clément. *Somme des grandeurs de Marie*, vol. II. (Ed.2). Paris: Hippolyte Walzer, 1900, p.267-268; LE MULIER, Henry. *Vie de la Très Sainte Vierge*, vol. II. Paris: Pilon, 1854, p.251.



customed to these heavenly beings, who by no means perturbed her; she was only troubled by his words. As the Angel was an ambassador of God, she understood that it was the Lord Who had ordered that this greeting be conveyed. Perhaps she had even already seen Gabriel, for he did not introduce himself, as he did in the apparition to Zechariah (cf. Lk 1:19).

By virtue of her predestination as Mother of the Creator, it is clear that the title of Mother of all creation also befits Our Lady and, as such, she was associated with the order of the universe and the unfolding of history. Thus, she knew the Scriptures most perfectly and had a clear notion of events and prophecies, starting with the fall of the Angels in Heaven and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. She was aware of the imminent coming of the promised Messiah.

It is very likely that she was reflecting on the Messiah, according to the opinion of St. John Eudes: “The uncreated and Incarnate Word is the Son and the fruit of the Heart of Mary, before being the fruit of her womb. [...] This adorable Word willed that His holy Mother beget Him by spiritual generation, before engendering Him by corporal generation; [...] so that His temporal generation might have greater relation and conformity with His eternal generation; and so that His Blessed Mother might possess greater likeness to His Divine Father; and so that the Heart of the Mother might be a living image and most holy echo of the Heart of the Father.”⁷ Thus, Mary was enraptured in envisioning the figure of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to the point of imagining His gestures, demeanour, mentality, and voice, and the good He would do; she was only ignorant of who His Mother would be and sought her on the horizon, trying to idealize her characteristics as well.

Now, Mary’s unease shows the profundity of her spirit and how she not only considered the immediate significance of what was said to her, but the meaning of the words and all their consequences, both in her regard as well as within the historic-

7) ST. JOHN EUDES, apud ALONSO, CME, Joaquín María. *El Corazón de María en San Juan Eudes, vol. I: Historia y Doctrina*. Madrid: Co. Cul., 1958, p.151-152.

al context. With her peerless theological knowledge, she would have immediately correlated the angelic greeting with the divine maternity, pondering how she stood before that which she had deduced...

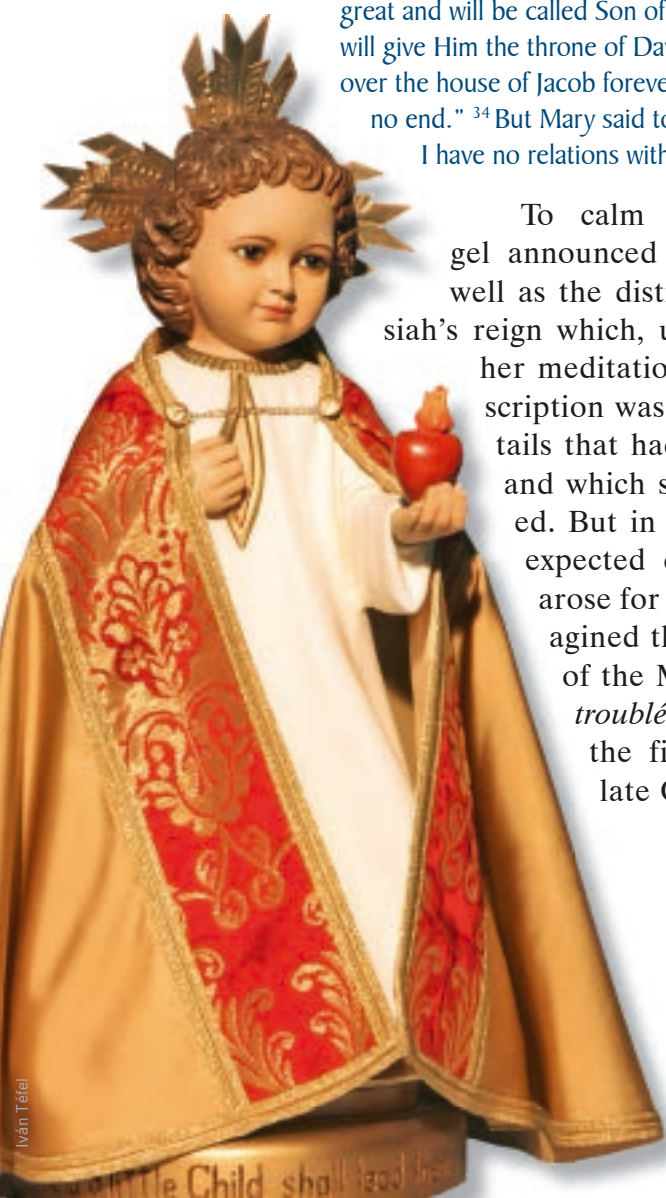
Guarding her virginity at all cost!

³⁰ Then the Angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of David His father, ³³ and He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ But Mary said to the Angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

To calm Mary's disquiet, the Angel announced what would take place, as well as the distinctive features of the Messiah's reign which, undoubtedly, coincided with her meditations. Perhaps the Angel's description was even wanting in certain details that had not been revealed to him, and which she had already contemplated. But in the transmission of this unexpected communication, a difficulty arose for Our Lady: she had never imagined that she could be the Mother of the Messiah! A sole fear left her *troublée*, perplexed. Indeed, from the first instant of her Immaculate Conception, from among the

Envisioning the figure of Our Lord Jesus Christ in her meditations, Mary would become enraptured

The Child Jesus – Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary, Caieiras (Brazil)



multiplicity of graces with which she had been endowed, shone an extraordinary love for the state of virginity and a sublime call to the perfect practice of chastity. In the very first moments of her existence, possessing the use of reason, she had made a vow of virginity and, when she entered the Temple, while yet a child, she had dedicated herself to God as a Virgin.

The Gospel text is very careful to underscore that Our Lady in no way objected to God's plan, and merely formulated a question. Actually, if she had manifested any other fear or raised doubts about any point, she would not have been worthy to be the Mother of God. Rather, she sought a clarification concerning how this ineffable mystery would be realized. Hers was an attitude very different, for example, from that of Zechariah, in his question regarding the birth of St. John the Baptist: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (Lk 1:18). Because of his disbelief regarding the Angel's words (cf. Lk 1:20), he remained mute until the circumcision of the Precursor.

The Blessed Virgin was promised in marriage to Joseph, as is read in verse 27; that is, the preparations for the wedding feast must have already been underway. And while commentators debate this particular, we do not waver in affirming that St. Joseph was not only distinctly informed regarding Mary's intent, but that he was in entire agreement with it, the two having discussed the matter, and having reached the conclusion that God had prepared them for this: that both preserve their virginity for their entire lives, until death. The "I have no relations" expresses this; otherwise, she would not have questioned the Angel, and would have been led to believe that the Messiah would be born from the conjugal union with Joseph.

This case was something entirely out of the ordinary, for virginity was not an appropriate option for men or for women in those times—with rare exceptions, such as St. Elijah. If a childless marriage was interpreted as a lack of God's blessing, not marrying was even more so. However, Our Lady inaugurated a new way and she found an ideal spouse. Her prayer was answered; he would protect her virginity and she would protect his.

On one hand, Mary did not want to deny her consent to the divine message transmitted by the voice of the Archangel; on the other, she wished to preserve her virginity at all cost, fearing lest she offend God, or even lest she become unworthy of this privilege, not so much because of what it meant for her, but rather for God's glory. This was what prompted her perplexity...

Virginity, a virtue loved by God

³⁵ And the Angel said to her in reply, "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.
³⁶ And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; ³⁷ for nothing will be impossible for God."

Some authors say that Our Lady had not even imagined, on that occasion, that "the Holy Spirit" was the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, for Revelation regarding this mystery had yet to be made. This author does not hold the same opinion, for he believes that Mary already knew of the existence of the three Persons in God and, when the Angel mentioned the Holy Spirit, she clearly understood his true meaning. The first part of the answer alone—contained in verse 35—sufficed for Mary Most Holy because, more than anyone else, she believed in the absolute power of the Most High; while her faith did not require it, the heavenly ambassador gave her proof: her cousin Elizabeth had conceived in her old age.

God knew of the outstanding love for the virtue of chastity, especially of virginity, that He Himself had instilled in the Blessed Virgin in creating her. Thus, He not only had to send the Archangel St. Gabriel to transmit a message—"You will be a Mother,"—but also to instruct the Angel as to what would take place, so that he would resolve the problem that would arise in the depth of her soul, to avoid alarming her.

We see how esteem for virginity is accentuated, not only in the person of the Virgin Mary, but in the other two persons



involved in the Annunciation: St. Gabriel and God Himself! He, the Omnipotent, upon becoming incarnate, wished to preserve in every way the virginity of His Most Holy Mother, demonstrating that, while He created man and woman with a view to marriage, He loves virginity, in itself, much more than matrimony.

*Virgin, Mother
and slave...*

³⁸ Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the Angel departed from her.

Upon hearing the explanation of the Angel, Mary makes an act of complete submission to God's will. We pray these words every day in the *Angelus*, but perhaps without delving into their deeper meaning. In those times, slavery was the

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38)

The Annunciation (detail) –
Museum of Fine Arts, Dijon (France)

most deplorable condition possible for a human creature, the dirtiest opprobrium, for, according to Roman law—to which Mary was subject—the slave was considered *res*, that is, a thing, destitute of rights. Fully aware of this, she called herself the slave of the Lord, placing herself in the hands of God, Who, with complete liberality, awaited her response.

Thus, without breaking her vow in any way, Our Lady conceives a Son. The Son of God becomes her Son, as St. Ildephonsus sings in inspired words: “Only she is Virgin and Mother of the God-Man, one and the same Christ. Begetting just one Son in both natures, so that one alone will be Son of God and Son of Man, and the Son of Man will not be distinct from the Son of God.”⁸

The virginity of Mary Most Holy is this Divine Son’s gateway to the world, for she remained Virgin before, during, and after giving birth! How beautiful is the virtue of chastity, how admirable the state of virginity! This proves how erroneous is the notion that virginity is unproductive; it is, on the contrary, fertile. Innumerable historic facts attest that virginity confers strength and courage, and even forms heroes. “There is nothing more sublime”—St. Bernard exclaims—“than fecund virginity and virginal fecundity: they are two stars that mutually embellish one another with their rays. It is a great thing to be a virgin; but to be Virgin and Mother transcends all measure.”⁹

Our Lady, a Virgin, becomes Mother of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and, consequently, Mother of all Angels and all men who embrace the way of sanctity over the course of the ages. They will be called children of Mary!

8) ST. ILDEPHONSUS OF TOLEDO. *De virginitate Sanctæ Mariæ*, lect.VI. Toledo: Arzobispado de Toledo; Instituto Teológico San Ildefonso de Toledo, 2012, p.209.

9) ST. BERNARD. Sermo in dominica infra octavam Assumptionis, n.9. In: *Obras Completas, vol. IV: Sermones Litúrgicos (2º)*. (Ed.2). Madrid: BAC, 2006, p.407.

III - AND THE TEMPLE WAS MADE FLESH!

At the moment of her acceptance, when Mary pronounced her “*Fiat*,” the promise that God made to David, based on an indissoluble Covenant, was fulfilled in a marvellous and superabundant manner, beyond all imagination, and the royal line became eternal. The Father granted humanity the Temple par excellence! This is how God treats His true friends, sons, and servants; He rewards those who, having a clear notion of their dependence on Him, render Him all that belongs to Him: He always grants much more than they offer Him!

King David believed that he was giving God his all by dedicating a temple to Him; but the Lord wanted the offering of his lineage. Indeed, God Himself had already prepared a most choice posterity for him. And in entrusting it to the Lord, David merited to be the forefather of the Saviour, namely, of God Himself.

The Blessed Virgin had aspired to be the slave of the Mother of the Messiah; God, however, ordered an Angel to invite her to a much greater slavery... slavery to Him! As soon as she received the message of the Angel, Our Lady understood that this Son, while hers, should be returned entirely to God, for He was the Son of God and, as she also belonged to God, the Son belonged much more to Him than to her. Therefore, she had to conduct Him, in all things, in complete accordance with the Father’s will with regard to this Son’s destiny... It was further revealed to her that He would suffer a terrible death on the Cross. And Mary consented to everything for love of God, knowing that He wished to redeem mankind in this way!

Stability is found in holiness

This also applies to us, who have come from God and must return to Him. The fact that we seek stability flows principally from the reality that we were created to serve, praise and honour God, and by this means to save our soul, in order to live with Him and contemplate Him face to face for all eternity.



Francisco Lecaros

Mary was the Ark of the New Covenant, and Jesus the Temple par excellence

Our Lady with the Child Jesus, by Fra Angelico – National Gallery of Parma (Italy)

In today's Liturgy, God calls us to sanctity and desires our *fi-at*, like that of Our Lady, a radical, ardent and enthusiastic surrender: "May it be done to me according to your word." Only by correspondence to grace and fidelity to faith, that is, by being holy, will we obtain stability, and be "God's temple" (1 Cor 3:16), always beautiful and well ordered, just as Our Lord Jesus Christ-Man, is God's Temple in a sovereign manner. ✧

