

Homily: The Annunciation
(March 25, 2011)

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the most beloved and well-known prayers in Christian history next to the Our Father, is the Hail Mary, or in its Latin version the Ave Maria. Let me remind you of the words:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

This beautiful prayer is actually made up of two halves each arising out of two different sources, the first biblical and the second from a long tradition of Christian devotion.

The first part of the prayer is even more subdivided in that the first sentence comes from Gabriel who was sent by God to Mary. This is what we call the Annunciation – God announces his plan of salvation – and it is the solemnity we celebrate this evening. The second sentence comes from the lips of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, who spoke them with joy upon seeing Mary come to visit her while they were both pregnant.

Since we are here to celebrate the Annunciation let us concentrate on these two sentences: *Hail Mary, Full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.*

These simple, yet profound words recorded in Luke’s Gospel contain two joyful salutations which were eventually brought together some time in the sixth century to form the first half of the prayer as we know it today.

Being salutations it means that the Ave Maria is not so much a prayer of petition or praise; it is not even a prayer of thanksgiving or a confession of faith – at root it is simply a greeting, the angel saying “hello.”

And yet, it is much more than this. Gabriel’s statement that Mary is “full of grace” suggests not only the deep theological understanding of gift and favour, but also the idea of someone who possesses great beauty and charm.

As the Dominican theologian Fr. Paul Murray notes it is another way of saying, “‘when I meet you, in some sense I am encountering God.’ It suggests a meeting of real joy, a way of saying to someone we love, saying to Mary in this case, ‘What a delight, what a great pleasure it is to meet you.’”

St. Thomas Aquinas, in a homily devoted to this prayer remarked that, until the moment when Gabriel greeted Mary in this way, “it was unheard of that an angel should show reverence for a human being.” He further explains that when the angel “paid reverence to Mary by saying *full of grace*” he was in effect saying, “I bow to you because you surpass me in fullness of grace.”

So what could bring about such high esteem from this being created in glory? Well, it arises from the very reason Gabriel was sent to Mary. His honouring of her is rooted in the message that God has asked him to announce, the message which contains within it, a remarkable invitation extended to no other human being any time anywhere.

The Annunciation is the result of God’s choosing this simple, humble, teenage woman to be the Ark of the New Covenant. Within her the Son of God will be conceived

and from her flesh will he take his own. Through Mary God will take part in the miracle of birth which will bring about the salvation of humankind.

Having announced God's plan Gabriel, along with all of heaven and earth waits with bated breath for her decision. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, addressing Mary in his homily on the Annunciation captures this anxious moment:

The angel is waiting for your answer: it is time for him to return to the God who sent him. We, too, are waiting, O Lady, for the word of pity, even we who are overwhelmed in wretchedness...by one little word of yours in answer shall we all be made alive...Speak the word, and receive the Word; offer what is yours, and conceive what is of God; give what is temporal, and embrace what is eternal.

One thing we should notice, a point which comes across in this sermon is that Mary's choice is a free one. Though she has been elected by God before all time, she nonetheless is granted the liberty of will.

The poet Denise Levertov picks this up in her poem entitled *The Annunciation*. She writes: "But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage. The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent. God waited....This was the minute no one speaks of, when she could still refuse." Let us be clear. If Mary had said "no" then there would have been no incarnation, no nativity, and no....

Yet, fortunately for creation Mary assented. She said "yes" as Levertov writes, "...to carry in hidden, finite inwardness, nine months of Eternity...Then bring to birth, push out into air, a Man-child needing, like any other, milk and love – but who was God." By choosing obedience she becomes not only a key and vital part of our salvation, but in a

sense she is a gateway to eternity for all who believe – through her the divine will come to creation.

This is why the archangel pays her such reverence. And yet some segments of the Church in its more recent history (by recent I mean the 16th century) has paid such disrespect to her whom evoked such reverence from God's archangel and from Scripture - seems a shame to me.

Still, Mary's decision shows forth a multitude of virtues given her by God – humility, obedience, faith, compassion and many more – virtues that she selflessly chooses to exercise in response to God, for the good of the world. These, along with her decision are evidence for Gabriel and for us of the grace that God has bestowed upon Mary.

Similar grace has also been bestowed upon us, perhaps not to the same degree but nonetheless just as real and inviting. Each of us has experienced our own annunciations; each of us has been invited by God, like Mary to open ourselves in vulnerability and faith to the Holy Spirit so that, overshadowed by divine love, we may conceive the Word of Life.

Of course we do not bear the Word bodily as did the Virgin and Theotokos but all the same we bear Christ in a way that is at once spiritual and substantial. He whom the Virgin possessed in her womb, we possess in our hearts. He whom she conceived and bore physically, we bear in our spirits as we seek to grow in holiness and faith – living out the kingdom principles, proclaiming the Gospel, offering the sacrifice of the works of love.

There have been and will be many moments in each of our lives when all of heaven will wait with bated breath for our response to God's invitation. Lent is an extended such moment in which God calls us to renew our "yes" by turning away from sin and toward his grace. It might also be for some of us, the invitation to say "yes" for the first time.

Wherever you are at, by doing so, by saying "yes" to God with Mary you open yourself to the same Spirit who plants and renews the Seed of the Word who is Christ, in the womb of your heart where it will bear fruit to eternal life and the salvation of your soul.