

The Annunciation ¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Tuesday April 9, 1861

Today is your feast day, my Sisters, your religious feast. **The Annunciation is the feast of the Servants of the Most Blessed Sacrament**, your feast before the Good Lord. Externally everything was as usual; that's fine. However, there's a continual feast in heaven and for any soul dedicated to the Blessed Sacrament.

The angel found the Blessed Virgin alone. She had no witnesses, because the house in Nazareth was divided into two parts. It lay against a cliff. There was a part that was more withdrawn, where the Blessed Virgin prayed. Then there was the front part of the house, judging from what has been said. What was she doing? Surely, she was at prayer. When God wants to give any grace, this happens during times of prayer. So also with the Blessed Virgin. We always picture her in silence and prayer. That is the state of a virgin living an interior life.

What must she have been praying about? About the coming of the Messiah. She must have been reviewing all the ardent desires of the patriarchs and prophets, repeating their words, calling for the Messiah who was coming to save humankind. That must have been the substance of her prayer. Without knowing exactly, we can say this, since God always prepares souls for the grace he wants to give them. Mary was to be the last desire, the last act of love that would summarize all the others. This is what she was doing, when, in the ardor of her prayer and her love, the angel came to announce the Incarnation.

All the saints tell us that when Zachariah was offering incense in the Temple (cf. Lk 1:9), he was praying for the coming of the Messiah. His prayer was so great and beautiful, that the angel came to announce that he would have a son who would be the forerunner of the Messiah.

The angel appeared to the Blessed Virgin under a human form, since the angels take on a bodily form to come on earth. Since they have no body, they borrow a shape as God wills. And so, the angel came to announce that the Son of God himself would become man, taking on a human form. The Blessed Virgin did not know that this was an angel. However, pure souls always sense, even without seeing, when something is from God or from the devil. The Blessed Virgin reacted, trembling out of modesty – as St. Ambrose says, a virgin should always fear the presence of a man. After this reaction, the angel said: **Hail, full of grace** (Lk 1:28). As a sign of respect, he dares not mention her name; that would hint at familiarity. Politeness, like respect, does not allow a name when greater respect is called for. Why? One feels unworthy. The name of Mary is so great, so holy, that after the name of Jesus comes the name of Mary. We feel free to add the name of Mary, because the Church told us so. The angel explains what that name signifies: lady, full of grace. The angel chooses the greatest and the most consoling title for the Blessed Virgin: *Ave, gratia plena – I greet you (Hail), full of grace*. You can imagine that he bowed profoundly to the ground. Mary was to become queen, by becoming the mother of God. That is why the angel Gabriel, great as he was, bowed down.

The word *Ave* is very beautiful. Our Lord also used it when speaking to the holy women when he had risen: *Avete*, the plural form: *I greet you* (Mt 28:9). The angel continues: *full of grace*. This had never been said before, since all creatures were conceived in the state of sin. This means that in the Blessed Virgin was the fullness of grace. Her will was full of grace and strength, her body was full of holiness.

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We do not say that a jar is full when it is only half full. Imagine the ocean. Our mind cannot capture a full picture of the sea. Our sight is lost in the distance, as though looking at the air that goes up into the sky. The Blessed Virgin is greater than the ocean. She had to be full of grace, since she is the reservoir of God. All the streams of grace pass through the Blessed Virgin; she is the treasury of God. Therefore, it has to be immense, so that we could all have our share. The angel, in spite of his great intelligence, did not add any other description – God alone knew it. He simply added: ***Dominus tecum – (the Lord is with you)***. What does this mean? You are pleasing to God, you are his heaven. Our greatest consolation is to know that the Lord is with us; then, we have no longer any reason to fear.

Benedicta tu in mulieribus – blessed are you among women (Lk 1:42). Why? Because she is pure, completely pure, the strong woman promised to Eve. Besides, she will be mother of the Messiah. I firmly believe that is why she said: *All nations will call me blessed* (Lk 1:48). Can there be a greater happiness than being the mother of our Lord?

The Blessed Virgin was troubled perhaps for two reasons. When the angel came, she was troubled out of modesty and purity; secondly, after he had spoken, out of humility. She says nothing at all. She is modest, with eyes lowered, to the point that the angel trembled more than the Blessed Virgin and his message was divine. He was announcing the salvation of the world – the union that was to take place between God and human nature. Seeing that she was troubled, the angel said: *Do not be afraid, do not be troubled* (Lk 1:30). He calms her. One sign of all heavenly visits is this; initially there is a fear that is not easily described. Something like the fear we have before a king, or like the apostles when our Lord performed great miracles, such as when he walked on the water (cf. Mt 14:26). This is what distinguishes a heavenly visit: it begins with fear, a feeling of respect and humility; then God immediately brings calm. He pacifies the soul. Do not be troubled. When our Lord appeared to the disciples who were in the boat, they were afraid; and our Lord told them: *Nolite timere – do not be afraid, it is I* (Jn 6:20).

The angel brought calm to the Blessed Virgin. He had not yet said anything about his message; ***Behold you will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of David his father, and he shall reign over the house of Jacob, and his reign will have no end*** (Lk 1:31-33). He was announcing the Messiah to the Blessed Virgin who listened carefully, silently, so true it is that she was giving us a real lesson in politeness, humility, and respect. In silence, she allowed him to finish what he had to say. When the angel praised her, she did not protest; You are mistaken, I am not full of grace. Within herself she remained humble. Silence is better than words, since self-love often slithers into external things. And the angel had much to say. The Blessed Virgin could have stopped him after the first few words, What is your message for me? She did not want to lose her virginity. When the angel was finished, he waited. He needed the consent of the Blessed Virgin, heaven itself was in suspense: the heavenly Father was giving his Son, and the Son was waiting, as was the Holy Spirit, to become the divine instrument. What modesty in the Blessed Virgin!

With timidity, she would speak the whole truth: ***How can this be? I made a vow of virginity*** (cf. Lk 1:34). Never would she renege on that. If to be the mother of God meant that she would lose her virginity, she would not agree: *Quomodo fiat illud? – (How can this be?)* The angel does not say: You will get married. She was already married to St. Joseph, they lived as brother and sister. He did not say, You will give birth like other women. The angel understood well what was very clear, that the title of virgin took precedence even to that of divine motherhood. Wherever God finds purity, he blesses it, it is the most beautiful of all crowns. The Blessed Virgin had the anointing of purity when she said: I will never agree if I cannot fulfill my vow. How happy the blessed Trinity must have been! God had found a pure soul!

My good Sisters, this is what we have always told you. Remember that the royal virtue of the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament is purity of life and of love. Her virtue is purity itself. The other virtues have

some implications of sin. Penance presumes a weakness and rebellion, humility presumes a pride while purity of heart goes directly to God. If God is truth and love, he is purity by essence. He calls himself light, and light is pure.

The angel answered Mary: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and his power will overshadow you; hence, the one born of you shall be called Son of God* (cf. Lk.1:35). Notice what the angel says: the Holy Spirit... what will he come to do in the Blessed Virgin? He is already there, since she is pure, but now God will come to her in another manner, in person, Why? He will come there to work, it is the Holy Spirit who will form the body of our Lord with the most holy blood of the Blessed Virgin. He will create the soul which will be united to this body, he will be the divine instrument; His power will overshadow you. The incarnation of the Word will take place in mystery. Since you, (Mary), will be so beautiful, God will cover you with humility. No one will know what is happening, not even the chaste Joseph. The holy one to be born of you shall be called the Son of God, because he shall have no father on earth. Now she is at peace, for she will be virgin and mother. With that clarification, she has no more objections. Notice that the Blessed Virgin makes no acts of humility, she could have said so many things, like, I am not worthy. She spoke of only one thing – her virginity. She could have said: Give me a bit of time, a few days to prepare. The Good Lord knows very well what needs to be done. The world will be saved and God will be glorified.

Since she does not envisage her holiness in personal virtue, Mary says this: **Behold the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word** (Lk.1:38). At that very moment, the divine Word was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Son of God became the son of Mary. The incarnation had taken place, and the natural world had a new face. The human race became more privileged than the angels, since the Son of God had taken a bodily form. When a king marries a young girl from a certain family, her entire family shares in the dignity. Now we are superior to the angels and they are inferior to us, due to the redemption. This led to the downfall of the angels, when they saw how human nature would be honored by the Son of Man's union to it through his incarnation.

Let us reflect on these beautiful words. Notice the simplicity, the prudence of the most Blessed Virgin. Receive grace with humility and with gratitude, avoid false humility, the poor of heart are grateful. When you receive Communion, if you want to be humble, truly humble, you must prepare yourself. When a friend knocks at the door, one does not say, Wait, while I prepare myself. Be humble if you want; but when God comes to visit you, never refuse a gift, a grace, a benefit, simply because you are not disposed the way you would like to be.

The Blessed Virgin says: *Ecce ancilla Domini – Behold the handmaid (servant) of the Lord.* It seems that she should have begun with a different word. *Ecce – (Behold)*, all is ready, here I am, at the service of God. How beautiful! You do not understand the beauty of this Latin word, *Ecce*. When the Church presents the sacred Host to you before Communion, she says: *Ecce agnus Dei – Behold the Lamb of God.* This is an act of faith and of piety. When St. John the Baptist pointed out the Lamb of God to his disciples (cf. Jn.1:29), he pointed with his finger using the same word, *Ecce*, like the Blessed Virgin. When Pilate presented our Lord, dressed in purple robes, on the steps of the praetorium, he said: *Ecce homo – (Behold the man)* (Jn.19:5). He shows Jesus to the people, using the same word that the Blessed Virgin herself used.

Do you know what is implied in this word *Ecce*? The gift of self. Now, what title will the Blessed Virgin give herself? Here we see her gift. If she were to use common language, she would have said: Behold the mother of the Son of God. But she does not take it. Why? Because it is too glorious and the Blessed Virgin is too humble. She has this right but does not take it. Why doesn't she take this title? First of all, out of humility, but there was another reason. It was necessary for her to make an act of faith: *Ecce ancilla Domini*. The angel tells her that she will become the mother of the Son of God, giving him a

body, the earthly part of his nature. Our Lord's soul would be created by God, by the Holy Spirit, placing this soul in the body that came from the flesh and blood of the Blessed Virgin. She calls herself the servant of the Lord.

She goes further. He is her creator, her God, and she adores him in his divinity. She recognizes him as her master, her king. She takes the title used when talking to a king, and leaves aside the glory of her divine maternity. It is only a glory, not a virtue. She takes the title that indicates her functions, she will be the first disciple of the Word made flesh. This will be her external practice until Jesus has the strength to do so Himself. What is more, you needed a queen, a teacher. Here is your queen: **Ancilla Domini**. This is your title, and there is none more beautiful. If the Blessed Virgin had found a more beautiful one, she would have used it. There is none more perfect to express respect, love, dedication. How beautiful! To serve God is to reign.

The Blessed Virgin had the best part. She was never the slave of anyone. She protected her liberty, consecrating it entirely to God. In the same way, my Daughters, you are not at the service of anyone, including ourselves, we would not agree to it. You are not at the service of any person on earth, God called you to something higher. In this way, you have the same functions as his mother, the same rights, and the same joy of self sacrifice. The divine motherhood is given only to the Blessed Virgin. As Servants you have another quality. The Blessed Virgin was the servant of Jesus Christ whom she conceived and cared for as a child. You, on the other hand, are servants of Jesus Christ glorified in the most Blessed Sacrament. She was the first, so as to form others. Adore well with the spirit of Mary. In the presence of Jesus, you will have value only in so far as you offer yourself through the hands of Mary. **Therefore, hold on dearly to your beautiful title.** This is a new name, never used previously. You are the first. It is not yet public but it has been blessed by the Sovereign Pontiff. One day, you will be proud to have this blessing in writing from Pius IX, when the Good Lord will have glorified him.²

How modest is the Blessed Virgin! **Let it be done to me according to your word.** She does not repeat the glorious things that are happening to her. Let it be done to me according to your word since this is God's command. Since faith is in the revealed Word, and since the Church did not yet exist, God came to the Blessed Virgin through the authority of his minister, an angel. God acts through the angel, since the evangelist says: *the angel Gabriel sent by God* (Lk 1:26). When the Blessed Virgin went to greet her cousin, St. Elizabeth said: *Beata qui credidisti – Blessed are you for having believed, because all that has been told to you will be fulfilled* (Lk 1:45). She made an act of faith, as we do, when we believe the word of the Church. The angel was the intermediary, the spokesperson of God.

Why didn't the Son of God come personally? To make an act legal, three persons are involved: the one who makes the act, the notary, and a witness. For a divine act, there had to be a minister, the first among the angels, St. Gabriel. Besides, God was teaching us that he wants us to honor those whom he sends. You understand, of course, that the Good Lord is too beautiful, too great in himself, He sends one of his angels to test our faith.

There you have it, my Daughters, your beautiful feast. Notice that the Church does not call it the incarnation, but the annunciation. It goes to the source – the annunciation is the root, while the incarnation is the fruit. When the angel had finished, he had nothing else to say. He greeted the Word made flesh in the womb of Mary, he greeted the Blessed Virgin for the third time, and he adored his God and master. And all the angels who accompanied him – for sure the house of the Blessed Virgin was full of angels – all adored the Word made flesh. Once Mary had spoken her important consent, they prostrated themselves to adore the Word who had become human, who was made flesh. That was the first adoration, made by the angels. I'm mistaken: the first was made by the Blessed Virgin. She felt him in

² Pius IX was beatified by Pope John-Paul II in Rome, on September 3, 2000.

her womb and, like his first servant, she adored him; then came the angels. When will we see all this?... the Good Lord will show it to us in heaven. If only you could see that little house of the Blessed Virgin! I saw that poor little house myself, that window, that little bowl. This can be seen at the *santa casa* – (*holy house*) which is in Loreto (Italy). It is not beautiful, but poor and small.

Finally, the word *Fiat*... When God willed to create the world, he spoke this word: *Fiat, let the earth produce at the command of God* (cf. Gn 1:11). The Blessed Virgin used the same word. The Holy Spirit is ever the same in his words as in his actions. The angel left and said nothing more. He dared say nothing more, once the Blessed Virgin became the mother of God. It was enough to bow down to the ground, adore with great reverence, and leave. [...]

Points for Reflection:

This meditation is typical of those that follow. We find here a kind of Ignatian meditation with composition of place, identifying the persons, paying attention to the words, becoming one with the sentiments of the persons, and drawing a concrete lesson. Following the French School, we find a focus on the texts from Sacred Scripture, delving into the sentiments and thoughts of the people involved in order to share their state. What aspect of this meditation impresses you most?