

# PART 1

---

## *The Joyful Mysteries* *(Mondays and Saturdays)*

### **A Mystery in History: Fatima and the Miracle of the Sun**

In May of 1917, the Mother of God appeared to three young children in Fatima, Portugal. At the time, Jacinta, Francisco, and Lucia were seven, eight, and ten years old, respectively. After praying the Rosary with the innocent, childlike faith that Jesus praised (Mt 18:3), Mother Mary appeared to them and referred to herself as Our Lady of the Rosary. She would appear to them five more times, encouraging them to pray the Rosary for an end to World War I. But when the people of their village heard about what they had seen, the adults doubted and scoffed. So the Blessed Mother promised a miracle that would convince the people that the children were telling the truth.

On October 13, 1917, more than 70,000 people showed up to see if there was really going to be a miracle. They were not disappointed. The sun moved in the sky, changed colors, and then seemed to move closer to earth. The rain-soaked ground was immediately dried. Eyewitnesses said the sun was easy to look at

without squinting, and some said they saw an image of the Virgin Mary. The whole crowd fell to its knees; many eyes filled up with tears. Numerous sick or infirmed people were healed, and many skeptics were convinced.

It is interesting to notice that in the book of Revelation, Mary is described as the woman “clothed with the sun” (Rv 12:1). In 1930, the Church confirmed that the events that occurred in Fatima were, in fact, a miracle, and Francisco and Jacinta have since been canonized as saints. There is much more to this visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to the children of Fatima, but for us it’s important to emphasize that Mary encouraged us to pray the Rosary daily and affirmed its power.

# THE ANNUNCIATION

## *The Paradox of a Virgin Mother*

### What is the Annunciation?

Read Luke 1:26–38.

The word *annunciation* simply means to announce something. In this case, it's the announcement of the most important event in history: the long-awaited coming of the Messiah. As we read in John's gospel, this is when "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14). This is what we call the *Incar-nation*, that is, the *embodiment* of the divine and eternal Word, when God the Son acquired a human nature and came to live a life that was fully human. Maybe you haven't thought about it in this way before, but the moment when "the Word became flesh" was not the time of his birth in the stable of Bethlehem. It was the moment of his conception. And that moment is captured for us in the first chapter of Luke's gospel.

The archangel Gabriel came to Mary and announced to her God's plan for the redemption of the world (the angel's three visits to Joseph are recorded in Matthew's gospel, chapters 1 and 2). This was God's plan to make salvation possible for all people. And that plan included Mary, if she was willing. It would be *in* her that divinity would unite with humanity; it would be *from* her that divinity would receive a human body; and it would be *through* her that divinity would enter into space and time to become one

of us, and to be with us. This is the single most important event in human history. And it happened, near as we can tell, in about the year 5 BC.

But wait—doesn't BC stand for "before Christ"? If he was born in 5 BC, how could he be born five years before himself? The answer to that is complicated, but it has to do with the fact that the system of dating years that we use now is actually off by four to six years. The ones who created this calendar did so long after "the year of the Lord" (the English translation of *Anno Domini*, or AD), and so although they did their best to try to count back to Jesus' birth, they missed the mark. But Luke was not off the mark; he knew his dates, and he tells us that Gabriel came to Mary with this announcement, "in the days of Herod, King of Judea" (Lk 1:5). This is Herod I, and he died in what we would call by our calendars 4 BC. So Mary conceived Jesus no later than 4 BC, and when you factor in the other events that happened after Jesus' birth while Herod was still alive, it seems reasonable that Jesus Christ was conceived, and then born, in the year 5 BC. According to the Western tradition, the annunciation took place on March 25, and the birth of Jesus took place exactly nine months later, on December 25.

In the Nicene Creed, we say that Christ "came down from heaven." This line may seem like a no-brainer, but it's very important. In the history of the Church, there have been those who have wanted to argue that Jesus Christ was not the Word made flesh but really just a mere human who earned God's favor through obedience. This is a heresy called adoptionism, because it is speculated that God adopted Jesus as his Son at his Baptism, which means Jesus was not the Only Begotten Son who shared the divine nature with the Father and the Holy Spirit. To be clear, that idea is a heresy. The words "came down" (along with that fun word *consubstantial*) were put into the Creed to emphasize that Jesus Christ is not someone who started out as a mere human and elevated himself.

Actually, he is the opposite: he started out as God and humbled himself to descend to us and become one of us.

Not only that, but he was willing to veil his glory, and temporarily limit his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence to be truly human. After all, he could not experience the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the human condition and still be all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere at once. He did not lose or give up these divine attributes (because he did not become any less divine). Nevertheless, he was willing to “empty himself” (Phil 2:6–7), meaning voluntarily limit himself, or in a way, set aside these divine powers, so that he could grow, learn, suffer, and die “for us men and for our salvation” (see also Luke 2:52). Have you ever heard that rhetorical question, “Can God make a rock so big that even he himself can’t lift it?” The answer is he did—not by making the rock bigger but by making himself smaller. You see he was so almighty, so all-powerful, that he even had the power to limit himself. Of course, it was only the Son who limited himself and became incarnate, not the Father or the Holy Spirit.

To be perfectly clear, the annunciation was not simply the announcement of God’s intervention—it was also the *start* of it. The angel did not tell Mary something that would happen later. He was telling her what was going to happen that day, assuming she agreed. Of course, she did agree to it, and our Lord was conceived in her womb immediately. And it should go without saying that if the human life of Jesus Christ began at his conception, that means that all human life begins at conception. To say otherwise is to deny the meaning of the annunciation and question the Incarnation.

## **Where was Mary?**

As we think about these meditations on the mysteries, let’s consider each scene and try to see it through the eyes of Mary. If we can

imagine where she was, what she saw, and whom she encountered, this can become a visual backdrop for our meditation when we are praying the Rosary.

It was six months after Mary's relative Elizabeth had conceived John (so we know Jesus was six months younger than his cousin the baptizer). Mary was in her hometown of Nazareth, in Galilee. Most of the paintings of this scene, such as my personal favorite from Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli, show Mary sitting alone, reading the scriptures. We know from tradition that she was a very faithful Jewish girl who had been dedicated to God by her parents, though we don't know if she was really reading the scriptures when the archangel showed up.

When the archangel appeared, he greeted Mary with what has become the first line of our Hail Mary prayer: "Hail [Mary], full of grace, the Lord is with you . . ." Mary's name was added for clarity and emphasis, and so that it could become a prayer for us. But Gabriel actually just called her "full of grace." This meant that she was unique among all of humanity (not counting her Son), in the sense that she was, what my Wesleyan friends would call, entirely sanctified. She was (and is) perfectly pure, and fully formed as a woman of God; she had "come to share in the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). She was the only mere human ever to be in a state of perfect grace since the fall.

Since Mary was uniquely pure, she was not burdened with the effects of the fall of humanity (we'll talk about this later) and so she had no original sin to hinder her free will. We all have free will, but Mary's will was truly and fully free, freer than the rest of ours. This is important because Mary's participation in God's plan had to be voluntary. God was not going to force Mary to play her part. She had to accept it freely, and she did. After asking a couple of questions, she was ready to say, "May it be done to me according to your word."

The Latin word that is translated “May it be done” is *fiat*. If you’ve ever heard about Mary’s *fiat*, that’s what this was. It was her moment of submitting her own will to the will of God, and it is in this that she became the perfect example for us to follow. Her own Son, Jesus, would follow in her footsteps by submitting his human will to the divine will in the Garden of Gethsemane. But the point to think about now is that Mary is the first person of the new covenant who truly and willingly cooperated with God to bring about salvation. We can each do this on a small scale. It’s called *synergy*, “working together” with God for our own salvation, as St. Paul said: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12–13, NRSV).

By saying “yes” to God’s plan for salvation, Mary reversed what Eve did in the Garden of Eden when she said “no” to God and disobeyed. In fact, many writers throughout the history of the Church have pointed out that the Latin version of Eve—*Eva*—when reversed spells *Ave*, the Latin word that begins the Hail Mary. Eve was tempted by a fallen angel, but Mary was greeted with reverence and humility by an archangel. And although death came into the world through Eve, life came into the world through Mary. As St. Irenaeus wrote in the late second century, Mary untied the knot that was tied by Eve, so that through Mary even Eve might be saved.

## **What does it tell us about Jesus?**

The concept of a Virgin Mother is a paradox; it seems like a contradiction, and it can only be accepted by faith. In this case, the paradox is also a miracle. Jesus’ conception was a direct work of God, suspending the usual laws of nature as we perceive them and breaking through into the world of time and three-dimensional

space. And the result is that Mary had the unique dual vocation of virginal celibacy and married motherhood.

Mary was a virgin when she conceived, and she remained a virgin even after the birth of Jesus. In fact, she remained a virgin all her life. We call this her *perpetual virginity*. Sometimes she is referred to as Mary, *Ever-Virgin*. She is the eternal Virgin Mother of Christ. But to be clear, she really did give birth to a real flesh-and-blood baby. Although there was some speculation in the early Church that maybe Jesus came out of her like a beam of light, the Church Fathers agreed that she did really give birth (though they could not agree on whether she felt the pain of childbirth, based on Genesis 3:16, but see Revelation 12:2). Nevertheless, even though she gave birth as every mother does, she remained a virgin. How is this possible? St. Jerome said it was possible in the same way that the resurrected Jesus could enter a room when the door was locked. It was a miracle.

The important point is that Jesus was Mary's only child. It's true that the New Testament mentions some "brothers" of the Lord (and two of these even wrote the letters of James and Jude), but the word for "brothers" here has a broad meaning, and would include any relatives of the same generation, such as cousins. The proof that Mary had no other children is that Jesus, speaking from the Cross, entrusts her to John—which he would never have done (or legally been able to do) if she had other children. Mary was able to be completely devoted to her one and only Son, Jesus, and in this, she is once again a perfect example for us to follow.

As *Ever-Virgin*, Mary is ageless. You hardly ever see paintings of an old Mary. This has as much to do with her incorruptibility (another topic we'll get to later) as her perpetual virginity. But according to the early Church tradition, she lived to be around eighty-five years old. To be clear, neither our salvation nor even Mary's assumption and coronation depend on her remaining celibate. None of that would have been ruined if she had had other



children after Jesus, because that's not a sin; it's just as much a simple historical fact as anything symbolic or with deeper meaning. The point is Mary's own dedication to God (beginning with her parents dedicating her) is parallel to Jesus' dedication to God, beginning when she presented him to God in the Temple.

Whenever we see in scripture a story about an older or apparently barren couple conceiving a child, the point there is that this is God doing something. It's not left up to chance or nature, and it's not accomplished by human strength or ingenuity. It is a work of God; it is a miracle. So if that's the case for those biblical babies who have two parents, how much more is it the case for Jesus, who was conceived not by a human man but by the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the immanent (up close and personal) presence of God. This is the same Holy Spirit who hovered over the void at creation, the same Holy Spirit who hovered over the tent of the presence of God in the desert, the same Holy Spirit who hovered over the tabernacle in the Temple; this is the Holy Spirit who hovered over the Virgin, resulting in the conception of Jesus Christ, and the same Holy Spirit who comes down to hover over the altar to turn the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The fact that Jesus' conception is a miracle, the paradox of the Virgin Mother, shows that God had taken the reins, and was intervening to do something decisive.

But we should be careful here. When John's gospel tells us that the Word *became* flesh, it does not mean that divinity changed into humanity (in the way that the bread and wine change into the Body and Blood). In fact, it doesn't mean that divinity changed at all. Divinity was united to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, but in his incarnation he did not become any less divine. He started out fully divine, and remains eternally fully divine. He acquired a real human nature at his conception, and from that moment in history, he remains eternally fully human.

The presence of God was with the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament story of the Exodus, and the Ark held the words of God on the tablets of Moses. Similarly, Mary is the Ark of the New Covenant, because the presence of God was with her, and her womb held the Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Perhaps one point of all this is to emphasize what should be obvious: that in the coming of Jesus Christ, God was intervening in human history. The coming of Christ *is* divine intervention, and is the most important event in history.

### **What aspects of this mystery should we imitate?**

In the annunciation, God invited Mary to have an important role in the salvation of humanity. But Mary had a choice. And when she said “yes” to God’s will and God’s plan, she became the perfect saintly example of those who do God’s will and cooperate with his work in the world. To imitate this mystery is to say “yes” to God.

### **MEDITATION**

*Mary is the Virgin Mother, who remains a virgin as a mother. She is the Untier of Knots and the Ark of the New Covenant. God prepared Mary to be the mother of his Son long before she conceived him in her womb.*