



INTRODUCTION

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph; and the virgin's name was Mary. Gabriel said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But Mary was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said . . .

Luke 1:26–38

Is there a more beautiful word for a human being to utter than the word *Yes*?

I used to teach language arts and so was always urging students to discover and use words that reflected the beauty of the people, places, and things they were describing. Words of vitality. Words of poetic vibrancy. Words that leapt off the page and brought their described realities to life.

If you teach science, is there any moment more delightful (and I know this must happen *all* the time) than when a student opens his or her mouth and out comes a word like *phosphorescence*? Or when a math student questions whether the most beautiful number is “*e* to the *i* pi power”? What reality could be described by such a marvelous phrase?

I remember sitting in social studies as a middle school student. As everyone around me learned about the American Revolutionary War, I sat writing the word *Ticonderoga* over and over again in the margins of my notebook—what a word!

Alphabet, parabola, ferrocarril (have you ever heard a fifth grader try a double trill in Spanish?), *onomatopoeia*. Our lives as teachers are filled—sometimes sparingly (especially after recess!) but always potentially—with words that are saturated with the beauty of the realities they are describing. Somehow, through the mysterious power of language, these words reflect that beauty back to us.

Yet, for all the beauty of the human vocabulary, an entirely new power of language that communicates the deepest reality of the human soul is revealed in the story of the recreation of the universe—at the annunciation. This encounter in the Gospel of Luke between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, in which she fully surrenders to the plan of God revealed by the angel, makes us stop and think: Can any human word,

no matter how poetic in rhyme or grandeur, match the simple beauty, radical affirmation, and universe-changing power of the word Mary's soul uttered to Gabriel, so many centuries ago?

Yes.

Just for a moment, think about the times in your life when you have had to choose whether or not to use this word. Is there any moment more potentially creative, more potentially explosive, more life-affirming, more open to disappointment, more risky than a moment shared between two people that requires the use of that one simple word? A question is asked, exposing the vulnerability of one to another. A need is expressed. A desire made known.

"Will you help me?"

"Do you believe me?"

"Can you forgive me?"

"Do you love me?"

When such questions are posed, a period of charged silence—potential energy—gathers between the questioner and the one questioned, just as it did between Gabriel and Mary. In that silence, the mind races through imagined consequences. It weighs the costs and gains of assenting or withholding. The heart listens for echoes from its sometimes unplumbed depths as the demands of the question probe desires and fears, virtues and vulnerabilities. And, beneath and amidst all the commotion of mind and heart, the will attempts

to absorb it all. It wavers back and forth, now attracted, now hesitant, now horrified, now excited by the possibilities.

And for a few tense moments, or days, or weeks, as this inner dynamic runs its course, on the outside—in the space between questioner and the one questioned, between Gabriel and Mary—there is just silence. An unknown outcome awaits.

In a home in Nazareth, Gabriel's invitation hangs in the air. It's as if the whole universe is holding its breath. And then, is there a reality more beautiful than the one that next wells up from Mary's soul?

Surely you can recall times in your life when you have allowed the little word *yes* to escape your lips. And so you know well all the unintended consequences—from the positively ecstatic to the utterly miserable—that the utterance of this little word unleashes; all the unforeseen, sometimes completely absurd, sometimes downright painful, places this word will take you.

The annunciation consoles us here. Undoubtedly, Mary knows all too well what we are experiencing. For how little of her future was clear that night when Gabriel's invitation unfolded before her? Just think of all that she could not possibly have discerned that evening as the angel's invitation hung in the air. How would she explain her yes to Joseph, or her parents, or her neighbors, who wondered at her swollen belly, knowing that she and Joseph had not yet become husband and wife?

Perhaps you have had moments when you wondered how to explain yourself to others; perhaps the choice of your vocation of teaching was met with some surprise, or with predictions of financial demise, or early burnout. However discouraged you might have felt, your circumstances could not possibly have been more complicated than Mary's as she explained what had happened to Anne and Joachim, saints though they may have been.

And the drama only intensified from here. Surely Mary could not have foreseen, on that quiet night in Nazareth, that soon she would be hoisted onto the back of a pack mule in the middle of the night, panicked and pregnant, and whisked off to a foreign country in a scene that would make the whirlwind of our classrooms seem but a passing breeze.

Still, whether our yes was to the invitation to teach or (as it was with Mary) to something more momentous, what unexpected displacement this little word has unleashed in our lives.

As Mary's story unfolds quietly, as we glimpse it in the background of the gospels and tradition, it seems certain that the consequences of her yes only grew more complicated. From the exhilaration of the Magi or the wine stewards at Cana, affirming her yes; to the terror of Herod's murderous threats or the anxiety of losing her twelve-year-old for days in the Temple. Surely neither the peaks nor the valleys could have

been foreseen by Mary the night of her initial assent. The joys and struggles that follow our yesses are never really known beforehand, are they? And perhaps this is best, for if they were, would it be any surprise if none of us ever said yes to anything at all?

At one startling point, Mary wishes to see her son, now grown and a religious teacher of some popularity. She sends word into the house where he is teaching, requesting his presence. Word is brought back to her that, when Jesus heard her request, he responded, "Who is my mother? Here are my mother and brothers" (Mt 12:48–49).

What did that feel like for the one who always said yes to him? How could she have known on that first night, Gabriel's invitation hovering before her, that her yes would expose her at times to such apparent rejection? Jesus was always off doing the incomprehensible, and so many days, she must have been barely hanging on. She was charged by the angel that night in Nazareth to care for him, yet he seemed in this moment, and so many others, to respond incoherently, to go off and do his own off-the-wall thing, not to need or appreciate what his mother was offering.

Perhaps this sounds like a certain someone, or someones, with whom you spend eight hours a day, five days a week?

What did Mary feel at perplexing times like this? Perhaps, in that moment outside that house, the

already-skeptical and gossipy villagers relaying Jesus' words with a scowling laugh—"He said, 'Who is my mother?'"—she felt that she no longer understood what was being asked of her. That maybe after all, she didn't have what it took to keep up with her yes.

Perhaps, this day, and time and time again throughout her life, challenges crept in: *I didn't know it would be like this. I didn't know it would demand this much.* Perhaps (and I would never suggest this to any Christian readership other than an audience of teachers) there were days when the thought briefly crossed her mind: *I know I said yes to caring for him, but today he is driving me nuts, and I am ready to call down fire and brimstone upon his dear head!* (Just maybe, I am projecting some of my own experience in the classroom here.)

And yet, amidst all the perplexity and soul-testing challenges that constantly confronted Mary in the years of her son's public ministry, we must also acknowledge one thing more. For the gospels and tradition reveal one thing more at every turn and without fail. That somehow in the midst of all this unpredictable commotion and constant disorientation, amidst what could have only felt like days of little progress or even backward direction, for some reason—possibly that can only be explained by grace—one word kept welling up inside this woman, and maybe even in her own disbelief, one word kept escaping from her mouth—that

most beautiful word, which first welled up in her soul in her home in Nazareth. *Yes.*

I'll trust. This will make sense at some point. From the beginning, this was God's initiative, not mine. So, yes. I will be there. I'll be with him. Again and again and again. Even to what seemed at the time to be the bitter end. Her son—the fruit of her yes—is on the road to Calvary, the cross laid heavy across his shoulder. Are we so surprised to find her even here, at his life's end, at this gruesome point? Emerging from the crowd, a lifetime of daily yesses to all the twists and turns, which were forged in her courage and faithfulness that knew no bounds, she silently demands that Jesus meet her gaze. And when at last he does, Mary's tear-streaked face is miraculously speaking the one word that summed up her entire life. And Jesus' shoulders heave the cross upward as he, too, is filled with only yes.

This is the woman—the saint—whom we honor with the title Queen of Saints. By their words, witness, and works, saints—like the saints who inspired the reflections of the educators in this book—are educators par excellence. They teach us what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

Mary stands first among them. What does she teach us about discipleship? From what we have said above, we learn from her that to be a disciple of Christ is not to be someone graced with a clear and certain vision of our future and all the consequences of our yesses.

Mary, it seems, was not afforded this. To be a disciple of Christ is not to be blessed with daily tasks of predictable constancy, always convenient (or even sane) requests, or uninterrupted peace of mind. To be a disciple of Christ is not even to lay our well-worked heads and bodies to sleep each night in the sure and certain knowledge that today has been a success. No reading of Mary's life could lead us to surmise that this is how her evenings always ended.

Surely Christian joy was the deepest reality of Mary's life. Yet just as surely, this joy was not immediately available at every moment and must at times have seemed completely out of grasp or even lost. And even as any "dark nights of the soul" wore on, just as surely dawn would break again in Nazareth each morning. Mary would rub the sleep from her eyes. Possibly in those first moments of wakefulness, her mind would begin to race, wondering what more could possibly unfold this day. And her heart some mornings would feel a pang of worry or anxiety or a gasp of fatigue at what uncertain surprises and demands her yes would reveal today.

Yet, perhaps, on those mornings, the memory of the annunciation would return—that quiet, still night when Gabriel appeared and offered his invitation "Will you?"—and Mary would come to recognize yet again the secret of all the saints: *It was not only me who answered that evening. I heard the invitation, sat in*

the silence, and opened myself as best I could, as much as grace would allow, to the will of God. And then I remember God's voice lifted mine, and together we voiced that most beautiful word—Yes.

Here is one lesson that Mary and all the saints after her teach us: our lives and the invitation to discipleship that lies at their core are God's from beginning to end. As we have been called to educate, to care for students, to witness the love of God to them, in the midst of all the demands and sacrifices, surprises and joys of that call, we are called first and foremost to trust that God is with us. All is unfolding in God's plan. The saints exhort us to believe this totally. When we do, there can be only *yes*.

This book is a collection of reflections on the lives or sayings of several saints, many of whom were either educators themselves or founded communities dedicated to education. By their words, witness, and works, these saints teach and encourage us to open our lives as educators—with a constant, persevering, and joyous *yes!*—to the ways God is transforming us into instruments of grace for our students and colleagues. These reflections are written by a faith-filled community of educators in the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE)—teachers, principals, administrators, and members of the ACE academic and pastoral team who direct the formation of teachers and principals. We hope these daily reflections provide

spiritual nourishment for any educator striving to open themselves to God's wondrous designs in the midst of the busyness of the school day.

Our lives, the lives of our students, and the lives of the members of our school communities are not unfolding according to our plans; they are unfolding according to God's plan. Let us open ourselves with Mary and the Communion of Saints so that God's voice might renew within us that most beautiful word.

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REFLECTIONS

Saints are people before they are saints, and they may be made of every sort or kind of person; and most of us will choose between these different types according to our different tastes.

A saint may be any kind of person, with an additional quality that is at once unique and universal. We might even say that the one thing that separates a saint from ordinary people is his or her readiness to be one with ordinary people. In this sense the word ordinary must be understood in its native and noble meaning, which is connected with the word order. A saint is long past any desire for distinction; a saint is only the sort of superior person who has never been a superior person.

G. K. Chesterton



SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUESTIONS

The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature.

A colleague and friend of mine who researches science education has been in hundreds of classrooms and talked with hundreds of students. I'll never forget one interview he shared with me of a young boy who was asked to describe his science class. The boy bemoaned, "Science class is a bunch of answers to questions I never asked."

As teachers, we often love our subject so much that we can't wait to impart our knowledge to our students. And woe to the courageous student who interrupts our lecture to ask "Why?" or "How do we know this is true?" Can't they just accept the wisdom we have offered?

We know better, of course. Good science teachers eschew telling students what to believe, instead challenging them to ask questions, seek answers, and construct their own meaning about God's creation.

Fortunately, the Church gives us examples of those strong in the faith, like Albert the Great, who constantly questioned and explored the world around them. Long before Albert was a bishop or a Doctor of the Church, he was much like our students (and hopefully

us)—curious about the world and full of questions. Albert learned about the world around him not just from books but by actually observing and experimenting with nature. He saw God in both the mystery of and the answers to the questions that intrigued him.

Albert's philosophy is instructive not just for scientists but for all teachers. If investigation is an aim of natural science, then our teaching must invite students to question nature and creation, to feed their innate curiosity, and yes, at times, even to question what we teach.

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SAINT ALBERTO HURTADO

SERVING OUR “LITTLE BOSSES”

Christ is without a home! Shouldn't we want to give him one, those of us who have the joy of a comfortable home, plenty of good food, the means to educate and assure the future of our children? "What you do to the least of me, you do to me," Jesus said.

Alberto Hurtado Cruchaga, affectionately remembered throughout his home country of Chile simply as “Padre Hurtado,” is a Jesuit saint whose radical love for and commitment to children on the margins of society continue to serve as a powerful model for all educators.

When Alberto was four years old, his father died and his once-comfortable family was cast into poverty. His mother was forced to pass her two young sons from relative to relative as she struggled to pay her family's debts. In the midst of the vulnerability that had come to define the contours of young Alberto's life, he received a scholarship that enabled him to attend San Ignacio al Bosque, a prestigious Jesuit school for boys in Santiago. Through Alberto's teachers and mentors, God kindled within the young man the flame of his vocation, not only to the Jesuit priesthood but also to a life of humble solidarity with those in poverty, especially children.

As a Jesuit, Alberto collaborated with local women to found Hogar de Cristo (“Christ’s Home”), a network of shelters, hospices, and educational centers for economically marginalized men, women, and children throughout Chile. He also purchased what would become an iconic symbol of his ministry: a green pickup truck, which he would use to bring homeless children to Hogar de Cristo. He called the children his *patroncitos* (his “little bosses”), signifying by this title their dignity and his deeply felt duty to serve their needs.

Because of his refusal to ignore children on the margins, the work of Saint Alberto Hurtado grew into one of Chile’s largest and most comprehensive social service organizations. May we as educators embrace a preferential option for our most economically, cognitively, and socially marginalized students. May we, like Padre Hurtado, dare to call them our *patroncitos*—our little bosses.

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