

Today's Solemnity of the Annunciation commemorates the moment when God's great messenger, the Archangel Gabriel, sought out the collaboration of the one chosen and prepared in advance for the unique role of bearing Godself into the world, the Blessed Virgin Mary: she, from whom He would assume our condition, so that His atonement for the sins of the world could be offered on our behalf; and so that we, in turn, could participate in His divinity as He participated in our humanity.

At the Archangel's appearance, his peculiar greeting (*kecharitomene*) reveals that Mary is found *already* to be possessed of the fullness of God's grace (that is the meaning of the Greek term). The Lord is with-her in a singular way; and she is, therefore, to remain without fear for her sacred task: for she is to be known for all generations as most blessed above all. When she utters man's yes to God's yes to man, the Holy Spirit enables her, while a virgin, to become a mother unlike any other: she becomes the New Eve, obedient where the other had been rebellious – the true mother of all believers.

How can it be that the designers of the liturgical calendar should permit such a high feast in the somber heart of Lenten penitence? Is it a mistake? Let me explain why not, in three ways: practical, cosmic, and theological.

On a practical level, the feast of Christ's conception in the Virgin's womb must take place 9 months before His birth at Christmas, hence March 25th. Hereafter, Scripture tells us Mary rushes to tend to her cousin Elizabeth who, though called barren, is now in her 6th month with child – the precursor, John the Baptist – at whose birth, the Blessed Virgin attends. This feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist we celebrate on June 25th.

The birth of the Precursor, John the Baptist and the birth of the Saviour, Christ our Lord, then mark the Summer and Winter Solstices; and the Summer Equinox, in turn, is marked by the death of John the Baptist. On a Cosmic level, such dates were pre-selected to solemnize in Christian fashion the movements of the celestial bodies – the sun, the moon, the stars – so that the Annunciation marks the beginning of Spring in the northern hemisphere – the Vernal Equinox – when the sun passes the equator & our days and nights resume the harmony of equal length: the sun rising precisely in the east & setting precisely in the west. By arranging her feasts thus, holy Church effects her holy commission: for the sanctification of time & space, itself – the harmonization of God's whole Creation, into which we introduced disharmony through the abuse of the gift of freedom, which we used to turn from Him, to sin. It is the Catholic Church which championed science: because she believes the fingerprints and traces of God Himself are to be found everywhere in His Creation, by which He shares with us His benevolence and abundance of life. Even there, we seek His Holy Face.

The third reason is theological. How can St. John, the Evangelist, see in Christ's crucifixion also His glorification – when all we can see is defeat and set-back (however temporary)? How can the Lord advise anyone wishing to save his life to lose it? How can the farmer cast his precious investment of grain into the dirt, letting it die there and be buried? How can the Church consider the mourning of Lent an appropriate juncture to celebrate the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary? Apart from this clever alignment of dates, the Church – by inviting us to celebrate a “Christmas-related” feast in the heart of Lent – is trying to show us something even more

profound! This “coming to meet us” of God at Christmas & this “lifting up” of Jesus in His Passion, Death & Resurrection are BOTH part of the **same** movement of God: exiting out-of-Himself *and* triumphant return to Himself, carrying all that He has saved. Theologians call this the *exitus-redditus* of God: He goes out-of-himself and returns-unto-Himself, not empty handed but carrying the harvest.

Scripture says the Word of God is alive and active, that God’s Word does not return to the Father empty. It is a doing-word, it accomplishes what it commands. This Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. Jesus is, in coming into this world, the ‘yes’ of God to the desperate cries of mankind, still in bondage to sin; but He is also the ‘yes’ of mankind in our own flesh on the Cross to the Heavenly Father. Because He is God and man, in Him are united both God’s yes to man *and* man’s yes to God. These two yeses echo back to each other across the millennia.

The first yes is the *fiat lux* of God’s first speaking in Genesis: Let there be light. ‘*Fiat*’ is a yes that makes something happen, like saying “May it be” or “Let it be done”. God utters His, first. Then there is the return, the echo of this yes in Jesus’ own exhalation of pure obedient love on the Cross. But there has to be another yes – a smaller one, to be sure, but a most essential one if any of this is to occur. And this is the yes of man to this grand scheme, a yes uttered on our behalf by the little maid, Maria. *Fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum*: let it be done unto me according to your word.

With this little-yes-turned-great awaits another ‘yes’, more essential yet (on a personal level) – if any of this is to mean anything at all for each of us, individually. And that is our own personal yes to our Savior and His yes to us in Jesus and Mary’s unique and necessary roles in salvation: can we join our voices with their heavenly harmony of willingness to love without counting the cost? Can I, receiving within me, like Mary, the enfleshment of God in holy communion at Mass, utter absolutely my true yes to Him, like she did, out of love, without fear, trusting in His providence. Then let it be done to me according to your Word!

May it be done to me according to the Word! Today’s is the most important yes any creature ever uttered – its consequences, epochal, history-defining. We date every other event (BC and AD) with reference to this great ‘yes’ which we celebrate this glorious day. This great Solemnity, therefore, observes no Lenten fast, but rather, great festivity: churches everywhere would be full of flowers and incense, bells tolling, family feasts at table, joyful greetings & good wishes. But hopefully, also, full of hearts: full of children of God & of Mary, reborn in baptism, uttering their own ‘yes’ in response to God’s magnificent plan to rescue us, to ransom us with His own Son, the child in Mary’s womb.