

The Gospel of Luke

A Spiritual and Pastoral Reading

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MARY, A DISCIPLE OF THE SON (1:26–38)¹

In this gospel passage we notice a contrast between the promises of the angel and Mary's response. This contrast is manifested in the form and content of the words spoken by the two protagonists. The angel says to Mary: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever" (vv. 30–33). It is a long statement, and it opens unprecedented possibilities. The child that will be born to this humble girl from Nazareth will be called Son of the Most High. It is not possible to conceive of a higher dignity than this. After Mary, seeking an explanation, asks her question, the angel's revelation becomes even more detailed and surprising.

Mary's reply to this is a short sentence that does not speak of glory. It does not speak of privilege but only of willingness and service: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me

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according to your word" (v. 38). The content is also different. Presented with the prospect of becoming the mother of the Messiah, Mary does not exalt herself but rather remains modest and expresses her acceptance of the Lord's plan. Mary does not boast. She is humble and modest. She always remains the same.

This contrast is meaningful. It makes us understand that Mary is truly humble and does not try to be noticed. She recognizes that she is small before God and that she is happy to be so. At the same time, she is aware that the fulfillment of God's plan depends on her response, and that therefore she is being called to accept it with her whole being.

In this circumstance, Mary's behavior corresponds perfectly to that of the Son of God when he comes into the world. He wants to become the Servant of the Lord, to put himself at the service of humanity to fulfill the Father's plan. Mary says: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord"; and the Son of God upon entering the world says: "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God" (Heb 10:7). Mary's attitude fully mirrors the statement of the Son of God who also becomes the son of Mary. Thus, the Madonna shows that she is in perfect accord with God's plan. Furthermore, she reveals herself as a disciple of his Son, and in the *Magnificat*, she will be able to proclaim that God has "lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52), because with her humble and generous response she has obtained great joy and also great glory.

As we admire our Mother for this response to God's call to mission, we ask her to help each of us to welcome God's plan into our lives with sincere humility and brave generosity.

FULL OF GRACE (1:28)²

Today we are contemplating the beauty of Mary Immaculate. The gospel, which recounts the episode of the Annunciation, helps us to understand what we are celebrating, above all through the angel's greeting. He addresses Mary with a phrase that is not easy to translate, which means "filled with grace," "created by grace,"

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“full of grace” (cf. Luke 1:28). Before calling her “Mary,” he calls her full of grace, thus revealing the new name that God has given her, a name that is more fitting than the name given to her by her parents. We too call her by this name in each Hail Mary.

What does “full of grace” mean? That Mary is filled with the presence of God. And if she is entirely inhabited by God, there is no room within her for sin. It is an extraordinary thing, because everything in the world, regrettably, is contaminated by evil. Each of us, looking within ourselves, sees dark sides. Even the greatest saints were sinners, and in reality all things—even the most beautiful things—are corroded by evil: everything, except Mary. She is the one “evergreen oasis” of humanity, the only one uncontaminated, created immaculate so as to fully welcome—with her “yes”—God come into the world, and thus to begin a new history.

Each time we acknowledge her as full of grace, we give her the greatest compliment, the same one God gave her. It is a beautiful compliment to give to a woman, to tell her, politely, that she looks youthful. In a certain sense, whenever we say “full of grace” to Mary, we are telling her this too, at the highest level. In fact, we recognize her as forever youthful, because she never aged through sin. There is only one thing that makes us age, grow old interiorly: not time, but sin. Sin ages, because it hardens the heart. It closes it, renders it inert, withers it. But she, being full of grace, is without sin. So she is always youthful; she is “younger than sin” and is “our youngest little sister.”³

The Church today calls Mary “all fair,” *tota pulchra*. Just as her youth does not lie in time, her beauty does not consist in her outward appearance. Mary, as today’s gospel reading shows us, does not stand out in appearance. Coming from a simple family, she lived humbly in Nazareth, a village practically unknown. And she herself wasn’t well-known: even when the angel visited her, no one knew of it; there were no reporters there that day. Nor did Our Lady have a comfortable life. She had worries and fears. She was “greatly troubled” (v. 29), the gospel says, and when the angel “departed from her” (v. 38), her troubles mounted.

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However, being full of grace, she lived a beautiful life. What was her secret? We learn what it was by looking again at the scene of the Annunciation. In many paintings Mary is depicted as seated before the angel with a small book in her hand. This book is the scriptures. Mary was accustomed to listening to God and interacting with him. The Word of God was her secret: close to her heart, it then became flesh in her womb. By dwelling with God, in dialogue with him in every circumstance, Mary made her life beautiful. What makes life beautiful is not appearances, not what is fleeting, but a heart directed toward God. Today, let us look joyfully at her, full of grace. Let us ask her to help us to remain youthful by saying “no” to sin, and to live a beautiful life by saying “yes” to God.

DON'T BE AFRAID (1:30)⁴

Let us try to listen to the voice of God who inspires courage and bestows the grace needed to respond to his call: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). These are the words addressed by God’s messenger, the archangel Gabriel, to Mary, an ordinary girl from a small village in Galilee.

Mary's Disturbance

As is understandable, the sudden appearance of the angel and his mysterious greeting: “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28), strongly disturbed Mary, who was surprised by this first revelation of her identity and her vocation, which as yet had been unknown to her. Mary, like others in the sacred scriptures, trembles before the mystery of God’s call, who in a moment places before her the immensity of his own plan and makes her feel all her smallness as a humble creature. The angel, seeing into the depths of her heart, says: “Do not be afraid!” God also reads our inmost heart. He knows well the challenges we must confront in life, especially when we are faced with the fun-

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damental choices that determine who we will be and what we will do in this world. It is the “shudder” that we feel when faced with decisions about our future, our state of life, our vocation. In these moments we are troubled and seized by so many fears.

And you, young people, what are your fears? What worries you most deeply? An “underlying” fear that many of you have is that of not being loved, well-liked, or accepted for who you are. Today, there are many young people who feel the need to be different from who they really are in an attempt to adapt to an often artificial and unattainable standard. They continuously “Photoshop” their images, hiding behind masks and false identities, almost becoming fake selves. Many are obsessed by receiving as many “likes” as possible. Multiple fears and uncertainties emerge from this sense of inadequacy. Others fear that they will not be able to find emotional security and that they will remain alone. Many, faced with uncertainties regarding work, fear not being able to find a satisfactory professional position, not being able to fulfill their dreams. A large number of young people today, both believers and non-believers, are full of fear. Indeed, those who have accepted the gift of faith and seriously seek to find their vocation are not exempt from fears. Some think: Perhaps God is asking or will ask too much of me; perhaps, by following the road he has marked out for me, I will not be truly happy, or I will not be able to do what he asks of me. Others think: If I follow the path that God shows me, who can guarantee that I will be able to stay the course? Will I become discouraged? Will I lose my enthusiasm? Will I be able to persevere for the rest of my life?

In moments when doubts and fears flood our hearts, discernment becomes necessary. It allows us to bring order to the confusion of our thoughts and feelings, to act in a just and prudent way. In this process, the first step in overcoming fears is to identify them clearly, so as not to find ourselves wasting time and energy by being gripped by empty and faceless ghosts. And so, I invite all of you to look within yourselves and to “name” your fears. Ask yourselves: What upsets me? What do I fear most in

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this specific moment of my life today? What blocks me and prevents me from moving forward? Why do I lack the courage to make the important choices I need to make?

Do not be afraid to face your fears honestly, to recognize them for what they are, and to come to terms with them. The Bible does not ignore the human experience of fear nor its many causes: Abraham was afraid (cf. Gen 12:10ff); Jacob was afraid (cf. Gen 31:31; 32:7); and so were Moses (cf. Exod 2:14; 17:4), Peter (cf. Matt 26:69ff), and the apostles (cf. Mark 4:38–40; Matt 26:56). Jesus himself, albeit in a different way, experienced fear and anguish (cf. Matt 26:37; Luke 22:44).

Discernment is indispensable when searching for one's vocation in life. More often than not, our vocation is not obvious or evident at first but rather is something we come to understand gradually. Discernment, in this case, should not be seen as an individual effort at introspection, with the aim of better understanding our interior make-up so as to become stronger and acquire some balance. In such instances, the person can grow stronger but is still confined to the limited horizon of his or her possibilities and perspectives. Vocation, however, is a call from above, and discernment in this context principally means opening ourselves to the Other who calls. Prayerful silence is therefore required in order to hear the voice of God that resounds within our conscience. God knocks at the door of our hearts, as he did with Mary. He longs to establish friendship with us through prayer, to speak with us through the sacred scriptures, to offer us mercy in the sacrament of reconciliation, and to be one with us in the Eucharist.

“LET IT BE” SIGNIFIES HOPE (1:38)⁵

Let us contemplate the one who knew and loved Jesus like no other creature. The gospel reading that we heard reveals the fundamental way Mary expressed her love for Jesus: by doing the will of God. “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven

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is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt 12:50). With these words Jesus leaves us with an important message: the will of God is the supreme law that establishes true belonging to him. That is how Mary established a bond of kinship with Jesus even before giving birth to him. She became both disciple and mother to the Son at the moment she received the words of the angel and said: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). This “let it be” is not only acceptance but also a trustful openness to the future. This “let it be” is hope!

BRINGING THE PRESENCE OF GOD (1:39)⁶

Like Mary, never tire of “going out,” of going in haste to encounter and bring others the presence of God (cf. Luke 1:39). She brings the presence of God because she is in profound communion with him. “Blessed is she who believed” (Luke 1:45), Elizabeth says to her. Mary is the icon of faith. Only in faith does one bear Jesus rather than oneself. As we strive to follow the path of the works of mercy, we are called to renew ourselves in faith. To bring the Lord’s presence to those who suffer in body and spirit, we must cultivate the faith, a faith that is born of listening to the word of God and seeking profound communion with Jesus.

THE VISITATION (1:39–45)⁷

In the gospel mystery of the Visitation, we can see an icon of all Christian volunteer work. Let me present you with three attitudes shown by Mary as an aid to interpreting the experience of these days and as an inspiration for your future commitment to service. These three attitudes are listening, deciding, and acting.

First, listening. Mary sets out after hearing the word of the angel: “Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son.” (Luke 1:36). Mary knows how to listen to God. It is not simply about hearing, but about listening attentively and responsibly.

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The second attitude of Mary is deciding. Mary listens and reflects, but she also knows how to take a step forward: she is decisive. This was the case with the fundamental decision of her life: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Finally, acting. Mary set out on her journey and “went with haste” (Luke 1:39). Despite the hardships and the criticisms she may have heard, she didn’t hesitate or delay, but “went with haste,” because she had the strength of God’s Word within her. Her way of acting was full of charity, full of love: this is the mark of God.

In volunteer work too, every act of service we provide, even the simplest, is important. Ultimately, service is an expression of openness to the presence of Jesus. It is the experience of love from on high that set us on our way and fills us with joy. World Youth Day volunteers are not only a “workers” but also evangelizers, because the Church exists and serves to evangelize.

Once Mary had finished assisting Elizabeth, she went back home to Nazareth. Quietly and with no fuss, she left in the same way that she came. You too, dear volunteers, will not see all the fruits of your work here in Krakow. . . . Your brothers and sisters whom you served will bear those fruits in their lives and rejoice in them. That is the “gratuitousness” of love! Yet God knows your dedication, your commitment, and your generosity. You can be sure that he will not fail to repay you for everything you have done for this Church of the young. I commend you to God and to the word of his grace (cf. Acts 20:32). I entrust you to Mary, our Mother—the model of all Christian volunteer service. And I ask you, please, to remember to pray for me.

MAGNIFICAT (1:39–56)⁸

Today, the solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the gospel reading introduces us to the young woman of

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Nazareth who, having received the angel's message, leaves in haste to be closer to Elizabeth in the final months of her miraculous pregnancy. Arriving at Elizabeth's home, Mary hears her utter the words that have come to form the "Hail Mary" prayer: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). In fact, the greatest gift Mary brings to Elizabeth—and to the whole world—is Jesus, who already lives within her; and he lives not only through faith and through expectation, as in many women of the Old Testament; from the Virgin, Jesus took on human flesh for his mission of salvation.

In the home of Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, where sadness once reigned for lack of children, there is now the joy of a child on the way, a child who will become the great John the Baptist, the precursor of the Messiah. And when Mary arrives, joy overflows in their hearts, because the invisible but real presence of Jesus fills everything with meaning: life, family, the salvation of the people. Everything!

This joy is expressed in Mary's words in the marvelous prayer that the Gospel of Luke has conveyed to us and which, from the first Latin word, is called *Magnificat*. It is a song of praise to God who works great things through humble people, unknown to the world, as is Mary herself, as is her spouse Joseph, and as is the place where they live, Nazareth; the great things God has done with humble people, the great things the Lord does in the world with the humble, because humility is like an open space that leaves room for God. The humble are powerful because they are humble, not because they are strong. And this is the greatness of the humble and of humility. I would like to ask you—and also myself (but do not answer out loud—each of us can respond in our heart): "How is my humility?"

The *Magnificat* praises the merciful and faithful God who accomplishes his plan of salvation through the little ones and the poor, through those who have faith in him, who trust in his word as did Mary. Here is the exclamation of Elizabeth: "Blessed is she who believed" (Luke 1:45). In that house, the coming of Jesus through Mary created not only a climate of joy

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and fraternal communion, but also a climate of faith that leads to hope, prayer, and praise.

We would like to have all of this happen today in our homes too. Celebrating Mary most holy assumed into heaven, we would once again wish her to bring to us, to our families, to our communities, this immense gift, this unique grace that we must always seek first and above all the other graces that we also long for in our hearts: the grace that is Jesus Christ!

By bearing Jesus, Our Lady also brings us a new joy full of meaning; she brings us a new ability to traverse with faith the most painful and difficult moments; she brings us the capacity to be merciful, to forgive each other, to understand each other, and to support each other.

Mary is the model of virtue and of faith. Today, in contemplating her Assumption into heaven, the final fulfillment of her earthly journey, we thank her because she always precedes us on the pilgrimage of life and faith. She is the first disciple. And we ask her to support us, that we may have a strong, joyful, and merciful faith. May she help us to be saints, to meet with her, one day, in heaven.

GREAT ASTONISHMENT (1:40)⁹

The gospel highlights the figure of Mary. We see her when, just after having conceived in faith the Son of God, she makes the long trip from Nazareth, in Galilee, to the hill country of Judah, to visit and help her cousin, Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel had revealed to her that her elderly relative, who did not have children, was in her sixth month of pregnancy (cf. Luke 1:26–36). That is why Our Lady, who carried within her a gift and an even greater mystery, goes to see Elizabeth and stays with her for three months. In the meeting between these two women—one old and the other young—it is the young one, Mary, who offers the first greeting. The gospel says: “she entered the house of Zechariah

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and greeted Elizabeth” (Luke 1:40). After this greeting, Elizabeth feels enveloped in great *astonishment*—don’t forget this word, astonishment. Elizabeth feels enveloped in great astonishment that is echoed in these words: “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me” (v. 43). And they embrace and kiss each other, joyfully, these two women. The elderly woman and the young one, both pregnant.

To celebrate Christmas in a fruitful manner, we are called to pause in “places” of astonishment. And what are these places of astonishment in everyday life? There are three.

The first place is the *other*, in whom we recognize a brother or sister, because since the birth of Jesus, every face is marked with a semblance of the Son of God. This is so above all when it is the face of the poor, because God entered the world poor, and it was to the poor, in the first place, that he allowed himself to draw near.

Another place of astonishment—the second place in which, if we look with faith, we actually feel astonishment—is history. So many times we think we see it the right way, and instead we risk reading it backwards. It happens, for example, when history seems to us to be determined by the market economy, regulated by finance and business, dominated by the powers that be. The God of Christmas is instead a God who “shuffles the cards”—and he likes doing so! As Mary sings in the *Magnificat*, it is the Lord who puts down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty (cf. Luke 1:52–53). This is the second type of astonishment, astonishment in history.

The third place of astonishment is the *Church*. To look on her with the astonishment of faith means not limiting oneself to consider her only as a religious institution, which she is, but to feel her as a mother who, despite her blemishes and wrinkles—we have so many of them!—allows the features of the beloved bride purified by Christ the Lord to shine through. A Church that is able to recognize the many signs of faithful love that God continuously sends her. A Church for which the Lord Jesus will never

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be a possession to be jealously protected; those who do this err. The Lord Jesus will always be the One who comes to meet her and for whom she waits with trust and joy, giving voice to the hope of the world. She is the Church that calls to the Lord, “Come Lord Jesus,” the Mother Church that always has her doors open wide, her arms open to welcome everyone. Moreover, Mother Church goes out from her own doors to seek with a mother’s smile all those who are far away and bring them to the mercy of God. This is the astonishment of Christmas.

At Christmas, God gives us all of himself by giving his Only Son, who is all his joy. It is only with the heart of Mary, the humble and poor daughter of Zion, who became the Mother of the Son of the Most High, that it is possible to rejoice and be glad for the great gift of God and for his unpredictable surprise. May she help us to perceive the astonishment in these three wonders—the other, history, and the Church—through the birth of Jesus, the gift of gifts, the undeserved gift who brings us salvation. The encounter with Jesus will also enable us to feel this great astonishment. We cannot experience it, however, we cannot encounter Jesus, if we do not encounter him in others, in history, and in the Church.

“BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVED” (1:44–45)¹⁰

“Blessed is she who believed” (v. 45). With these words Elizabeth anointed Mary’s presence in her house. Words that were born of her womb, that came from within; words that managed to echo all she experienced with her cousin’s visit: “When the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed.”

God visits us in a woman’s womb by moving the womb of another woman with a song of blessing and praise, with a song of joy. The gospel scene bears all the dynamism of God’s visit: when God comes to encounter us, he moves us inwardly; he sets in motion what we are until our whole life is transformed into

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praise and blessing. When God visits us, he leaves us restless, with the healthy restlessness of those who feel they have been called to proclaim that he lives and is among his people. This is what we see in Mary, the first disciple and missionary, the new Ark of the Covenant who, far from remaining in the reserved space of our temples, goes out to visit and accompany the gestation of John with her presence. She also did so in 1531: she hastened to Tepeyac to serve and accompany the people who were gestating in pain, becoming their Mother and that of all peoples.

With Elizabeth, today we too wish to anoint and greet her by saying: "Blessed is she who believed" and continues to believe in the "fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (v. 45). Mary is thus the icon of the disciple, of the believing and prayerful woman who is able to accompany and encourage our faith and our hope in the various stages through which we must pass. In Mary, we have the faithful reflection "not [of] a poetically sweetened faith, but [of] a strong faith above all in a time in which the sweet enchantments of things are broken and there are conflicting contradictions everywhere."¹¹

Certainly we must learn from that strong and helpful faith which characterizes our Mother, learn from that faith that is able to enter our history so as to be salt and light in our lives and in our society.

The society we are building for our children is increasingly marked by signs of division and of fragmentation, casting many aside, especially those who find it difficult to obtain the minimum necessary to lead a dignified life. It is a society that likes to boast of its scientific and technological advances, but that has become blind and insensitive to the thousands of faces who have fallen behind on the path, excluded from the blinding pride of the few; a society that ends up creating a culture of disappointment, disenchantment, and frustration in so many of our brothers and sisters, and even anguish in so many others who find it difficult to remain on the path.

It would seem that, without realizing it, we have become used to living in a "society of distrust" with all that this entails

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for our present and especially for our future, distrust that gradually generates states of apathy and dispersion.

Faced with all these situations, we all must say with Elizabeth: "Blessed is she who believed" and learn from that strong and helpful faith that characterized and characterizes our Mother.

JUSTICE AND TENDERNESS (1:53)¹²

There is a Marian "style" to the Church's work of evangelization. Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In her, we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves.

Contemplating Mary, we realize that she who praised God for "bringing down the mighty from their thrones" and "sending the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53) is also the one who brings an openhearted warmth to our pursuit of justice. She is also the one who carefully "treasures all these words and ponders them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Mary is able to recognize the traces of God's Spirit in events great and small. She constantly contemplates the mystery of God in our world, in human history, and in our daily lives. She is the woman of prayer and work in Nazareth, and she is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from her town "with haste" (Luke 1:39) to be of service to others. This interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others, is what makes the ecclesial community look to Mary as a model of evangelization. We implore her maternal intercession that the Church may become a home for many peoples, a mother for all peoples, and that the way may be opened to the birth of a new world. It is the Risen Christ who tells us, with a power that fills us with confidence and unshakeable hope: "See, I am making all things new" (Rev 21:5).

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BUILDING ON MEMORY (1:68, 72)¹³

We might wonder: What is the Lord asking us to build *today* in our lives, and even more important, upon what is he calling us to build our lives? In seeking to answer to this question, I would like to suggest that a stable foundation upon which we can tirelessly build and rebuild the Christian life is *memory*.

One grace we can implore is that of being able to remember: to recall what the Lord has done in and for us, and to remind ourselves that, as today's gospel passage says, he has not forgotten us but "remembered" us (Luke 1:72). God has chosen us, loved us, called us, and forgiven us. Great things have happened in our personal love story with him, and these things must be treasured in our minds and hearts. Yet there is another memory we need to preserve: it is the memory of a people. Peoples, like individuals, have a memory. Your own people's memory is ancient and precious. Your voices echo those of past sages and saints; your words evoke those who created your alphabet in order to proclaim God's word; your songs blend the afflictions and the joys of your history. As you ponder these things, you can clearly recognize God's presence. He has not abandoned you. Even in the face of tremendous adversity, we can say in the words of today's gospel that the Lord has visited your people (cf. Luke 1:68). He has remembered your faithfulness to the gospel, the first fruits of your faith, and all those who testified, even at the price of their blood, that God's love is more precious than life itself (cf. Ps 63:4). It is good to recall with gratitude how the Christian faith became your people's life breath and the heart of their historical memory.