

The Annunciation – Our Model for Saying Yes to God
(Malta Spiritual Outreach – March 7, 2018)

Let us pray:

Holy Spirit, You spoke to Mary through an angel to invite her to participate in Your plan of salvation. Though she questioned *how* it was possible for her to become the mother of the Messiah, she *never* questioned *that* it was possible. Though she risked rejection from Joseph and from others, yet she gave you her “yes.” Her great *fiat* – let it be done unto me in accord with Thy word. With the help of Mary’s prayers, may we become fully willing to say “yes” to *our* part in giving Christ to the world. Encourage us when we don’t understand what You are asking of us. Bless us with the grace of hearing Your call, and the courage to trust in Your plan. Let it be done unto us according to *Your* will.

Ever-blessed Virgin, Queen of the Universe, Mother of Mercy, Mother of the Church, and refuge of sinners: Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

The Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord celebrates three things: first, the angel Gabriel’s appearance to the Virgin Mary as reported in the first chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel; second, his announcement that the Blessed Virgin had been chosen to be the Mother of Our Lord; and, third, Mary’s great “Yes;” in Latin, her *fiat* – “let it be done.” Her willing acceptance of God’s holy plan and her participation in it. Originally a feast of Our Lord, celebrating the true day of His Incarnation, the Annunciation is now celebrated primarily as a Marian feast. The feast of the Annunciation dates back at least to the fifth century. And, by the seventh century, the date of the feast, which is determined by the date of Christmas, was set at March 25, exactly nine months before the Nativity of Our Lord. When, as this year, the Solemnity falls during Holy Week, it is celebrated the Monday after the Octave of Easter.

In her great declaration of “yes,” Mary signaled her cooperation in God’s plan of salvation. Mary’s journey would be the same as that of her Son. For Jesus lived His life on earth constantly and consistently doing the will of the Father. This is demonstrated most dramatically during Jesus’ agony in the Garden, when He prays, “Father let this cup pass me by, but *not my will*, but *yours* be done.” And this is what Jesus teaches us that we, too, are to do: live our lives seeking out and then doing the will of God. When Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, He includes the petition, “Father, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We are invited by Jesus to do the will of the Father, just as Mary was. And we, like Mary, are invited to respond to His invitation by saying “yes.” “Yes,” to a relationship which is more powerful than any other relationship in our lives.

But it is an offer, an invitation, which must be freely accepted. Freely accepted, just as Mary did; accepted with love and by placing all of our trust in the submission of our wills to the will of the Father. Through the angel’s message, God seeks just such acceptance from all of humanity. And it all starts with Mary’s saying “yes.” A new creation; a new beginning; in which we are all invited to participate, by saying “yes.” “Yes” in belief, and “yes” in following. Jesus calls us to believe and to follow. Freely surrendering our wills to that of the Father, just as He did; just as Mary did. As one Dominican theologian, Father John Walsh, put it: “It was not a matter of Mary’s will *doing* the will of her Son, so much as Mary’s will *being lost* in that of her Son.” That is how we know that we are truly following in His footsteps. It comes about with a complete conversion, and a willingness to live a lifestyle that

reflects His love. In saying “yes” we make our own an embrace of Jesus’ salvific mission -- the salvation of souls: first our own, and then as many souls as we can bring along with us.

Jesus selected from among His disciples those who would be His closest friends, the Apostles. He bade them to follow Him, but they did so in an imperfect way --- often confused, often fearful. Only Mary could see the will of the Father and live a life of perfect discipleship. And in doing so, Mary would see realized in her life the prophecy of Simeon: that a sword would pierce her heart. In this sense, it would not be inappropriate to see Mary as a martyr, as one who witnesses to their faith in Jesus as the Christ by their very lives. Doing the will of God would characterize Mary’s entire life. Her final words recorded in Scripture are the words spoken by her to the servants at the marriage in Cana. “Do whatever he tells you.” These words are meant not only for the servants. They are addressed to us as well. “Do whatever He tells you.” Do the will of Jesus, which is the will of the Father. Say “yes.” This is the surest and safest and, indeed, only road to heaven.

And – if I might digress for a moment -- it is not only in Mary’s “yes,” that we have as a model. We also have Joseph as a model. For the angel also appears to Joseph. Joseph is disturbed, because the woman to whom he has been betrothed is found to be with child before they are legally wed. For all intents and purposes, this looked like adultery. Being a righteous man, Joseph intends to legally end his betrothal to Mary quietly. But an angel comes to Joseph in a dream. The angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, for the child that she has conceived has been conceived of the Holy Spirit. The angel instructs Joseph to name the child Yehóshua, a name meaning “God saves,” because He will save His people from their sins.

There is not one recorded word of Joseph in the Bible. But, where Mary accepts the angel’s invitation to become the mother of Jesus, by her words “*be it done unto me according to thy word,*” Joseph silently accepts the angel’s invitation to become the legal father of Jesus by taking Mary into his home as his wife. He obeys the angel’s command to call the baby Jesus. Joseph expresses his great *fiat*, his “yes,” by his actions, rather than by his words.

And so both Mary and Joseph, without regard to the great risk each of them runs by accepting this child from God in so unconventional and, indeed, unprecedented manner, by following the will of God, by saying “yes,” become the parents of Jesus, and in a very real sense, the first two disciples.

On March 3 of this year, Pope Francis announced that a new celebration be added to the calendar of the Universal Church – a commemoration of Mary, under the title “Mother of the Church.” It is to be celebrated each year on the Monday after Pentecost. The title “Mother of the Church” was first given to the Blessed Mother by Blessed Pope Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council. In his letter of decree, Cardinal Sarah, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, wrote, “ ... Mary is the mother of the members of Christ, because with charity she cooperated in the rebirth of the faithful into the Church, ... Mary is at once Mother of Christ, the Son of God, *and* mother of the members of His mystical Body, which is the Church. Coming on the day after Pentecost, the day traditionally recognized as the day on which the Church was born, one cannot avoid the association of Mary with the Pentecost experience of the Apostles. Cardinal Sarah pointed out that Mary, too, had a mission, which began in the Upper Room as she prayed with the Apostles in anticipating the coming of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus, her Son, had promised. Pentecost was the birth of the Church – the Mystical Body of Christ. As mother of Christ, the Head of the Church, it naturally follows that Mary is also the Mother of the Church. How different the

Pentecost experience must have been for Mary. James and John had sought places of honor in the Kingdom. Peter denied Christ three times. Thomas doubted His Resurrection. In contrast, Mary stood at the foot of the Cross, when all of the Apostles except John, fled in fear. The Apostles, her Son's friends, were fearful. Finally, with the onrushing of the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles were now emboldened, cowards no longer. Now they came to be where Mary always was: not only doing, but living, the will of the Father. Lost in the will of the Father.

As the angel announced to her, Mary was *kecharitomene*, full of grace. *Kecharitomene* – a word used only this once in all of Scripture. *Kecharitomene* – a unique word for a unique lady. For by virtue of the saving power of God Mary was full of grace from the moment of her Immaculate Conception. But more than that, according to Greek grammar, the word implies Mary to have been, to be, and to always continue to be, filled with the absolute fullness of God's grace.

Mary lived a life of sinlessness by virtue of her cooperation with God's grace. Her cooperation first and most importantly manifested in her great *fiat* – her “yes” – her willingness to live, from that moment on, a life of perfect conformity to the will of God. Hence the Church's firmly held belief that Mary was not only sinless from the moment of her conception, but remained sinless her entire life. For the very definition of sin is doing something against God's will. But Mary, *endowed with the same free will that God gives to each of us*, voluntarily lived a life that was always in conformity with the will of God. Always saying “yes.” In doing so, Mary provides the perfect model for us to always strive to live our lives in conformity with the will of God by emulating her willingness to always and everywhere say “yes” to God.

When Pope Benedict visited the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, he offered this prayer: “Mary, Mother of the ‘Yes,’ you listened to Jesus, and know the tone of His voice and the beating of His Heart. Morning Star, speak to us of Him, and tell us about your journey of following Him on the path of faith.”

As the Episcopal priest Fr. Mike Marsh has observed that, “Between [Mary's] ‘How can this be’ and ‘Let it be’, the impossible becomes a reality, the never before heard of will forever be spoken of, and the veil between divinity and humanity will fall.”

As Pope Benedict observed, the only way God can redeem man, who was created with free will, is by means of a free “yes” to His will. For in creating freedom, God made Himself in a certain sense dependent upon man. God's power is tied to the freely spoken “yes” of a human being. Mary said “yes.” The question that we, as professed Christians, as followers of Christ, is whether we, too, will follow Mary's example and say “yes.” It is a question that we must ask ourselves each and every day. And we say “yes” by obeying the Commandments and living the Beatitudes.

In His Incarnation, God chooses to dwell among men in a new way, and Mary's “yes”, and our “yes,” are what it takes to bring this about. Amid the cacophony of everyday life, may we listen for and embrace the symphonic call of her Son. May we respond with the same faith, trust, and love as Mary – by saying “yes.”

In conclusion, I invite you pray with me the great prayer of the Annunciation, the Angelus:

The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

And she conceived of the Holy Ghost.
Hail Mary . . .
Behold the handmaid of the Lord.
Be it done unto me according to Thy word.
Hail Mary . . .
And the Word was made flesh.
And dwelt among us.
Hail Mary . . .
Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.
That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray:

Pour forth , we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may, by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.