

+ ANNUNCIATION

March 25, 2020

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My very dear sons,

For twenty years now we monks of this abbey have lived under the protection of Our Lady of the Annunciation and reaped the spiritual fruits of such a happy patronage. What better model could there be for contemplatives than that of the Virgin of Nazareth, hidden in prayer in her modest home, awaiting God? There is the sense that, were we to accomplish nothing else in our lives and this during the whole history of our community, the mere fact of living up as best we can to our official motto—*Ecce, Fiat*, inspired by the words of the Virgin in response to the great and holy Archangel—would be enough of a program for time and eternity.

Of course, we are men. Our manner of humility and obedience is that proper to monks. Following an intuition that knew a great development in the high Middle Ages, as men we take the notion of ‘chivalry,’ already a specifically Christian notion, and situate it on an even higher plane, striving to become spiritual knights in service, not only of God, in direct imitation of the Lord, but also of the greatest of ladies, *Our Lady*, Notre-Dame. Some in our time, no doubt, will evince a smile before what is perceived to be a childish notion, but the chaos into which the very worldly find themselves sinking—more each day, now, especially under the effect of an epidemic—only proves the need to embrace nobler ideals than those of contemporary society. Our formerly Christian world has become a living illustration of the parable of the blind leading the blind. Life, even on this poor earth, does not have to be the dismal existence it has too often become, the blind life of people grasping after the mirage of money and of health (those ever fading things...). We can and must, on the contrary, enter into the spiritual adventure lived so fully by the legions of Saints, and thereby escape the fatalism and despair that come with a secular view of the universe closed in on all sides like a prison. The thought of serving the Queen of Heaven raises souls to a freedom unknown among the materialists of our time and of other ages.

The service of Our Lady, first of all, is the service of the culture of life as opposed to the abyss of spiritual darkness hidden behind the smiling façade of those who promote the killing of the most innocent human beings, whether hidden in their mothers’ wombs, or, sometimes, even after they have somehow survived the abortionist’s deadly weapons and have been delivered. Yes, even open infanticide is now acceptable to some ‘true believers’ of the culture of death.

The service of Our Lady is the also—it must be said—the the adequate solution to the problem posed by radical feminism, an ideology stemming from a profound misunderstanding of the vocation of women. In the beautiful book recently published by Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal Sarah, *From the Depths of Our Hearts*, there is a quote from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, giving the Blessed Virgin Mary as the true model of femininity, speaking of “Mary, with her dispositions of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise, and waiting,” which [reference to Mary] “places the Church in continuity with the spiritual history of Israel.”¹ The above mentioned dispositions, so

¹ CDF, *Letter to the Bishops*, May 31, 2004, n. 16.

important for human existence in general and for the Church in particular, correspond quite closely to the qualities of soul and even the very bodily attitude of the Virgin of the Annunciation, as envisaged by the great Christian mystics and artists.

The service of Our Lady today, in a vastly different context than that of the High Middle Ages, when the Christian expression, “Our Lady,” was born, the service of Our Lady in this present time of turmoil represents a powerful factor in the elaboration of a new civilization, a new Catholic culture that has already begun to shine though timidly. This occurs especially amid a new generation of young people who are pursuing a religious or priestly vocation with the determination not to yield to destructive modern tendencies that are the poisoned fruit of what Pope Saint Pius X referred to as “modernism,” to what Pope Saint John Paul II referenced in a similar sense as “the culture of death”, and which Pope Benedict XVI characterized as “the dictatorship of relativism.” As with the charred walls of Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris, our broken and smoldering Western civilization, born of the Gospel and of the grace of the one true Church of Christ, must be restored to its original beauty, in the service of Our Lady. It will happen, one way or another. Why not here?

All the same, we must remember that the Annunciation we are honoring today on our road toward Easter is the First *Joyful* Mystery. Between the joyous beginnings of the Christian story and the glorious accomplishment of the great promise spoken of by the prophets of old—the subject-matter of the Glorious Mysteries—a terrible and dramatic drama must be played out. A great battle—the greatest of them all—must unfold, one in which the very heart of Mary, her delicate and Immaculate Heart, must be pierced through and through. There is no easy path here. So, how does the monk consecrated to the Queen of Heaven see his role in this battle?

In fact, the possibilities are many. In some cases this battle waged by contemplative souls is manifest for all to see. Saint Francis received in his very body the terrible wounds suffered by Christ, as did Saint Padre Pio closer to our time. Bernini’s marble sculpture, entitled the ‘Ecstasy of St. Teresa,’ depicts the transverberation of the Saint’s heart by an angel. Ancient texts relate to us how Saint Antony of the Desert was set upon by a hoard of devils, which beat and wounded him mercilessly. There are also the unseen, interior trials and spiritual dark nights that are beyond description. All of these crosses carried by contemplative souls, it must be noted however, have less to do with some sort of stoic courage than with the depths of Divine Love that pushes ardent souls, especially those living a monastic life, to undergo such trials out of a burning charity.

The current health crisis that is paralyzing American society and affecting Roman Catholics across the world, where the faithful are not able even to attend Holy Mass and receive Communion (something unheard of in past times), may have a silver lining. It is to be hoped that in this hard time the faithful will learn again the ways of humble submission of the Virgin of Nazareth, in order that a new current of true renewal sweep through the Church. What we really need is a new epidemic, a pandemic even of sanctity, providing a new generation of saints to meet the challenge of our strange and deadly epoch. The worst part of the current season of illness is, no doubt, the specter of fear. But there is no need to fear. As Archangel said it, “Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God.”² Amen.

² Lk 1:30.