

+ ANNUNCIATION

March 25, 2021

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My very dear sons,

The Annunciation or “announcement” to Mary, proclaiming God’s decision to make her the very Mother of God in the mystery of the Incarnation, is not only a scene from the Gospel and a mystery of the liturgical year; it is not simply an exquisite and larger-than-life icon of God’s majesty and loving kindness—though it is all of that (it is certainly all of that); it represents something more, more even than an encounter between Heaven and Earth in the fullness of time, at the dawn of Salvation; it is really a kind of school, a school of supernatural life—and, perhaps, just the school, the very school, the Church and the world stand in great need of these days. So, what can we learn at this school?

To begin with, starting from a more external aspect of our human existence, the Annunciation teaches us about courtesy. In an age of rampant vulgarity and barbarism, when an honest person can hardly watch a movie or listen to contemporary music, the conversation between this young woman, the immaculate Virgin from little Nazareth, and the great Archangel is an incomparable model of respect and civility, of tact and consideration, of self-effacement combined with a true candor that does not hide in the shadows, but opens the heart to the other—in this case an angelic “other.” There was a time when young people, for example in the city of Florence in the time of the poet Dante, treated each other—especially women—with the utmost modesty. It can be done. One would hesitate to characterize the attitude of Saint Gabriel as “chivalrous” (since he is an angel and not a man), but any knight or gentleman could learn a great deal by studying his manners. Were we all to use such courtesy, animated, not by worldly ambition, but by pure Christian motives; we could, almost with this one method, transform our world into a place more harmonious and full of peace. And, so, we should do this: we should learn again natural and supernatural courtesy at the school of the Annunciation.

A second lesson to be learned at this school, not unrelated to the first, might be the proper roles of men and women in society and especially in the family, something that is manifestly misunderstood in our day. There are myriad aspects to consider here, but I shall underline one in particular. In the Annunciation and, more generally, in the whole episode surrounding the announcement of the Archangel, Mary simply trusts Joseph’s fidelity and ability to understand things, even though the fact of the Incarnation will strain the poor man’s natural capacities to their limits and beyond. In other words, she does not make frantic efforts to explain to him about her being with child. She allows God to take care of the supernatural mystery that has descended upon them both (in very different ways), something that will happen in Saint Joseph’s own “annunciation” by means of a dream. The Virgin of Nazareth, though immensely more enlightened by God, allows Saint Joseph to play his proper role as head of the family to be, respecting the proper vocation that is his. God fills in the gaps! This respect of proper roles will continue as the just man, Joseph, has to face the need to flee to Egypt and to provide for the Holy Family in a foreign land, before returning home after the tyrant Herod has disappeared.

Moving forward in our education, the next class we could take in this wonderful school of the great Announcement we have been considering, follows from the previous one. It is the necessity we are in to

accept the helping hand of the supernatural, of our life of faith. We Americans, especially, along with Europe and much of the modern world, are terribly tempted by a kind of practical atheism, a pragmatic naturalism that seeks to explain everything in terms of scientific causality. A contemporary physicist, a Catholic, has written some most fascinating books over the past few decades in an effort to show to his fellow scientists why modern physics has encountered such major obstacles, placing modern science on the brink of intellectual bankruptcy (though the world is kept in ignorance about this). This great scientist and thinker, who has had a brilliant academic career, points to the need to go back to the kind of vertical causality that a Saint Thomas Aquinas would see as essential in understanding the world, a type of causality that leads to the affirmation of God. Modern physics has limited itself to a horizontal approach, dealing almost exclusively with measurable observations and a mathematical analysis. There is a need to appeal to higher things, to a first principal, to God. What could be fuller of this sense of the transcendency of God, of the “vertical” causality of things, than the supernatural scene of the Annunciation? The upward gaze of the Catholic physicist remains in the realm of nature, but correctly conceived, it lends itself to being lifted up to a supernatural understanding of the world. And this happens when God’s grace enters the picture beyond the fact of natural realities. Our Lady’s attitude of prayer and interiority, combined with her perfect virtue growing in the soil of the Immaculate Conception, teaches us better than any book the existence and beauty of the supernatural order.

Finally, for the pupils of the Annunciation, who are able to do “graduate studies,” there is a whole philosophy and theology to be learned, opening into a deeper and richer understanding of the universe God has created and our own lives within it. This “graduate course”, so to speak, will provide us, among other things, with a proper ecclesiology, a proper understanding of the Church; avoiding both the pitfall of “fossilization”, where everything consists merely in set liturgical books and canon law without life, and also, on the other hand, the error of a progressive ideology that wants to revolutionize the Bride of Christ, failing in this to maintain an organic continuity with the great Catholic Tradition of two thousand years. Well, to know more, you yourself will have to enroll in this Academy of the Annunciation.

As we enter the second twenty years of our existence, the monks of Our Lady of the Annunciation of Clear Creek Abbey intend to remain in the school of this mystery, ever learning things both ancient and relevant to our own time, imitating in this the wise man described by our Lord: “Therefore every scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven, is like to a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure new things and old.”¹ Navigating the troubled waters of a society wracked with political divisions and the persistent effects of a pandemic that has become a bitter taste of pandemonium, can be challenging even for religious. But that only makes us all the more determined to continue to live and to grow, ever taking as our guiding star the motto, borrowed from Our Lady of the Annunciation: *Ecce, Fiat*, Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to Thy will. Amen.

¹ Mt. 13:52.