

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 21, 2014

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The Annunciation is associated with *beginnings*. Before our liturgical year began on or around December 1st, and the calendar year on January 1st, The Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary was the day things began. You can make the case. The conception of Our Saviour is a better starting point than an arbitrary fourth Sunday before Christmas! As Saint Bernard reminded us, the day Mary said *yes* is the day the human race made a new start.

Anthropologists tell us other great heroes of ancient time were said to have been born of a virgin. They argue such stories are part of the protocol honoring a great man. There are even some theologians who climb on that bandwagon. They speculate Our Lord's mission would not have been lessened had it been stated He was the product of a natural conception. The Catholic response is that the stupendous miracle is not the virgin birth but that Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and earth, *should be born at all*. And that, by God's unchangeable plan, this woman was to have *the same relationship* to the members of Christ as she has to Christ Himself.

The part played by Our Lady in the whole work of salvation, and in the inner life of every Christian, is something Catholic theology has understood even more clearly over the centuries. That should not surprise us. In fact, we should expect it to happen that way. Our deeper appreciation of Our Lady's role comes from the Word of God in Holy Scripture. But it is not scripture simply read but as it is proclaimed over the course of the centuries in the Holy Mass. You cannot separate Word and Sacrament. Together they nourish the faith of the community guided by Peter's successors and acted upon by the Holy Spirit whose office is the Church.

Advent offers us a particular angle. It gives insight into what St Paul meant when he declared, "In the fullness of time God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." In Advent we appreciate how the Blessed Virgin's role was connected to all that had gone before in the annals of the Old Testament. What becomes clear is her relation also to all souls in every age who call upon her Son as Lord. Quite simply, "the fullness of time" meant *when there was Mary*. God waited for Mary! All the preparations, inspirations, graces, and prefigurations of twenty centuries were summed up in her.

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The prophet Isaiah probably did not understand the way his prophecy would be fulfilled. When he said, “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,” Isaiah was talking about this girl from Nazareth. One day in her hometown, Mary said, “He hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden.” *Regarded!* Mary is the flower springing out of the root of Jesse, the final point in the work of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the prophets and holy men and women of ancient Israel. Think of it! All the advances made in the souls of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Ruth, came to perfection in the soul of Mary. The archangel Gabriel could declare Mary, “full of grace” because *in her* every valley was filled, every mountain and hill brought low, and the way of the Lord was paved smooth before Him. “The fullness of time” meant *when there was Mary*.

You and I spend a lifetime of Catholic faith and practice to do that same thing: having every valley filled and mountains brought low so that the way of the Lord into our hearts is smooth before Him. That is what we mean when we pray Christ “When He comes will find in us a mansion prepared for Himself.” No wonder Catholic Christians have a maxim: *to Jesus through Mary*. All the longing and preparation of the Old Testament was fulfilled in her. Think of Mary then as she headed to Bethlehem because of that enrollment and tax required by Caesar. Riding a donkey led by good Saint Joseph, the Blessed Virgin bore in herself quite literally and wonderfully the mystery of God’s Full Presence. How exciting is that! Mary shows us how to surrender our wills to the Lord. And Almighty God always has a vocation for any man or woman who does just that.