

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2015

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In the Tuscan city of Pistoia a little parish church has a Luca Della Robbia work with the loveliest depiction of the Visitation we might ever see. I have never seen it except in coffee table books. But if I ever get back to Italy, Pistoia is on my short list.

In the glazed terra cotta sculpture are two women. The older is kneeling and gazing up at the younger. The old age lines are there in the face of the much older Elizabeth, which contrasts with the face of Mary, who is little more than a girl. The look on the face of the older woman is of wonder and love, and the girl gazes down at her old kinswoman without embarrassment because so innocent and pure. Elizabeth is grasping her younger cousin eagerly, and Mary's hand rests lightly on the old lady's shoulders.

Luca Della Robbia has not sculpted an intergenerational family event. Nor is it his take on the mutual support group of two expectant mothers! These are the two most honored women in history! The younger one will forever be known as Mother of God. And the older woman will give birth to a boy about whom God's published verdict is, "No one born of woman is greater than he."

We all know the story. Mary had gone to visit her older relative, and we are told she went "with haste." "*With haste*" means much. Mary did not wait a few weeks to be sure she really had conceived a child! The Blessed Virgin Mary was a true daughter of Abraham. She "believed God and it was counted unto her for righteousness."

This girl had recently been told the most monumental news. But "*with haste*" also means Mary's first thoughts were *not of herself*. She had just learned from the archangel Gabriel that her old relatives, who had long ago given up hope of having a child, were now expectant parents. So Mary went to share Elizabeth's joy, not boast of her own. How different that is from us! We try to outdo each other with our stories. We only half-listen, waiting for a pause to interject what has happened to us. "I can do you better." That is what we say. Not so Our Lady.

Della Robbia has captured a marvelous and holy moment. Elizabeth had been surprised by the unexpected visit of her young relative. But just as it began to sink

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in what a pleasant surprise to see lovely Mary, Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb. In a flash of intuition Elizabeth got to the heart of the matter. Her son John had been prophesied to be herald of the Messiah. So he could only be leaping for joy because *the Messiah was here*. And since no one else was present, *Mary must be the mother of the Messiah!* If that sounds like a long piece of reasoning, it can happen instantly when it is the Holy Spirit Who connects the dots. As a result, Elizabeth burst out with words that have passed the lips of untold millions of Catholics down the ages. "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." Remember too "*with haste*" means Mary doesn't even *appear* pregnant, and she had *not yet said a word*, (except perhaps a greeting not recorded, something along the lines of, "Hi, Elizabeth, I'm here.")

Notice too that Elizabeth's humility is as striking as Mary's! Her own joy at long-last being an expectant mother (and the pleasure of sharing such good news with her young relative), takes a back seat. It is swallowed up in a greater joy centered on Mary. It is Mary for Elizabeth and Elizabeth for Mary, and all because of Christ present and invisible. That is the beautiful moment captured in the Della Robbia depiction at Pistoia. These two women, one elderly and the other still a girl, share a joy we can scarcely imagine. The source of their joy is hidden in Mary's womb. Christ is not yet born, yet He has already made all the difference in the lives of Mary, Elizabeth, and John. Hidden, Jesus Christ yet affects their conduct.

Every time we eat the Holy Food that is Christ Himself we carry Him into our daily life. *We cannot help bearing Jesus with us*. And His nature is to communicate joy and peace to us and through us just as He did invisibly at the Visitation. Here is your science reminder for the day! Think of ourselves as a little bit of iron shavings attracted to a magnet. As a consequence of the attraction *you yourself become magnetic*. The force that attracted you to the magnet passes through you and causes you to attract others. Now we aren't to equate Christ's relationship to us in terms of electro-magnetic charges! Thank heaven Luca Della Robbia didn't portray iron shavings! But Christ unites Himself to your soul, and just as at the Visitation with Mary and Elizabeth, from the Tabernacle of His invisible Presence in you He reaches out in His power and love.