

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2017

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It is right to associate the Annunciation with *beginnings*. Both the civil and ecclesiastical calendars used to do that. They did not begin the year with Advent or January 1st but with Lady Day. That makes sense. Our annual observance of the beginning of a year of grace should commemorate the conception of Our Saviour and have it as our starting point. The Annunciation, the day Mary said *yes*, is the day the human race made a new start.

Anthropologists remind us other great heroes of ancient times were said to have been born of a virgin. It is argued such a story is part of the protocol honoring a great man. Some theologians 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 to that argument is succinct. 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.

Our Lady has a role in the whole work of redemption, and it affects the inner life of every Christian believer. That role is something Catholic theology grew to understand more clearly in the long history of Divine revelation. And we are not surprised by this development. We are rather to expect it. Our deeper appreciation of Our Lady's place in salvation history comes from the Word of God in Holy Scripture, and especially as that word is proclaimed over the course of centuries in the Holy Mass. It is the Mass which nourishes the faith of the community, guided by Peter and acted upon by the Holy Spirit always at work in Christ's Church.

In Advent we have a particular focus on the way Blessed Mary was what St Paul declared: "In the fullness of time God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." In Advent especially we appreciate how the Blessed Virgin's role was connected to all that had gone before in the annals of the Old Testament. And then her relationship to all her Son's disciples in every age becomes clearer to us. Quite simply, "the fullness of time" meant *when there was Mary*. God waited for Mary! For all the preparations, inspirations, graces, and prefigurations of twenty centuries were summed up in her.

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Isaiah probably did not understand the wonderful way in which his prophecy would be fulfilled. But when he said “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low” Isaiah was talking about a girl from Nazareth. And one day in her hometown she said “He hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden.” 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. When the archangel Gabriel declared “Thou that art endued with grace” it was because in Mary every valley *was* filled, every mountain and hill *brought low*, and the way of the Lord was paved smooth before Him.

That is how you and I spend a lifetime in Catholic faith and practice. By God’s grace we have every valley filled and the 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 that Christ “when He comes will find in us a mansion prepared for Himself.”

Catholic Christians have the maxim *To Jesus through Mary*. All the longing and preparation of the Old Testament was fulfilled in her. As she heads to Bethlehem because of that enrollment and tax required by Caesar, she bore quite literally and wonderfully the mystery of God’s Full Presence in herself. No one noticed. But a tabernacle rode on the back of a donkey. The Blessed Virgin Mary shows us what happens when we surrender our wills to the Lord. And her Son has a vocation for everyone who does that.