

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 20, 2020

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The Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary is associated with *beginnings*. Recall that the ecclesiastical year used to begin with Lady Day, March 25<sup>th</sup>, and you see the connection. Whatever the merits of the Church Year beginning on or around December 1<sup>st</sup>, you can make the case there is no better starting point for a year of grace than the conception of Our Saviour. The day Mary said *yes* is the day the human race made a new beginning.

Anthropologists remind us the great heroes of ancient time were said to have been born of a virgin. This was part of the protocol honoring a great man. The reason we have to be reminded is that the lives and deeds of those heroes are preserved on dusty book shelves in great libraries. Some theologians even 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 all this 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 further, by God's unchangeable plan, this woman was to have the same relationship to the members of her Son's mystical body the Church as she has to Jesus Himself.

The role of Our Lady in the whole work of salvation, and the inner life of every Christian, is something Catholic theology has understood more clearly as time goes on. We should not be surprised by this but expect it. Our ever-deeper appreciation of Our Lady's role comes from the Word of God in Holy Scripture proclaimed over the course of centuries in the Holy Mass. That constant combination of Word and Sacrament nourishes the faith of the community, which is guided by Peter and acted upon by the Holy Spirit always at work in the Church. We do not go to a library full of ancient manuscripts to increase our faith.

The particular Advent emphasis on Blessed Mary is what St Paul meant when he declared, "In the fullness of time God sent His son, born of a woman, born under the law." The Blessed Virgin's role was connected to all that had gone before in the annals of the Old Testament. That connection makes clear her relationship

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continues to all souls who in every age call upon her Son as Lord. Simply put, “the fullness of time” meant *when there was Mary*. God waited for Mary! All the preparations, inspirations, graces, and pre-figurations of twenty centuries were summed up and culminated in her.

Isaiah probably did not completely understand the details by 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 this girl from Nazareth, who one day in her hometown said, “He hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden.” Mary is that 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. 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 “full of grace” because in Mary every valley *was* filled, every mountain and hill *brought low*, and the way of the Lord was *paved smooth* before Him.

You and I spend a lifetime in Catholic faith and practice to do just that: having every valley filled and the mountains brought low so 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 the maxim “To Jesus through Mary.” All the longing and preparation of the Old Testament was fulfilled in her. Some of the masters of fine art have portrayed those last days prior to Christmas. Mary and Joseph are heading for Bethlehem because of that enrollment and tax required by Caesar. It is a journey of about 90 miles. The *Cunard Steamship Company* used to advertise “Getting there is half the fun.” No one would conclude the Blessed Virgin was having fun riding on the back of a donkey! But as she rides on that animal, led by Joseph, Mary is bearing in herself, quite literally and wonderfully, the mystery of God’s Full Presence come for all of us.