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Annunciation and Contemporary Challenges: The Pandemic and Social Injustices

Luke 1: 26-38; Matthew 1: 18-24 —
A Light of Hope in the Darkness of Our Fears

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The Announcement of the Angel and the Fiat of Mary and Joseph

The tradition of the Church and most of the teachings of the Magisterium classify the mystery of the Annunciation as one of the joyful Mysteries of the Rosary. Indeed, we can see this joyfulness demonstrated in the two main phases of this Mystery: The **Announcement of the angel (Luke 1: 26-33)**¹ and the **Fiat of Mary (Luke 1: 34-38)**.² Both phases qualify that event as good News. Separating

¹ The Birth of Jesus Foretold:

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,
27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was
Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."
29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.
30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.
31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.
32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his
father David,
33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

² Fiat of Mary:

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"
35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow
you. So the holy one to be born will be called[b] the Son of God.

both phases allows us to have a deep and realistic insight in the Mystery of the Annunciation. The same scenario occurs in Matthew in the Annunciation to Joseph. There is an **Announcement the Angel (Mat 1:18-24)**³ and the **Fiat of Joseph (Mat 1: 22-24)**⁴ who acted according to the words of the Angel. Both Fiats that proceed from the Announcements of the Angel underscore that this is good News.

I- The announcement of the Angel: Luke 1: 26-33; Mat 1:18-24

On its own, the Announcement of the angel does not convey that the Annunciation was good news. Let us consider some facts or impact of the announcement on Mary.

The apparition of the Angel was:

1- A sudden disruption in the life of Mary

The Angel appeared suddenly and without warning. A disruption is just that: it is a sudden and unexpected occurrence in someone's life or someone's business.

36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

³ Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son:

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about[d]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet[e] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,[f] because he will save his people from their sins."

⁴ Fiat of Joseph:

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

An unexpected visit is not necessarily wanted or welcomed, but any disruption of anything in our lives disturbs in some ways.

Whether she was asleep or awake, Mary was interrupted in what she was doing. No one likes to be suddenly interrupted in his activities. She gives her consent to be interrupted.

2- A Trouble (The Angel was a trouble Maker)

The text says she was troubled. She did not say (“Eh welcome, nice to see you”). That disruption was cause for panic and serious inquiries. What is happening? What should I do? What does that mean? ... are not funny questions in our life?

3- A Disturbance

Mary was disturbed in many ways but particularly in her plans and projects. She was betrothed to Joseph. Some traditions asset that Mary had planned to remain a Virgin. Regardless of her plans, they too were all disrupted, and she had to change all of these plans.

4- A Restart

The message the Angel imposed on Mary a new beginning. All her initial projects of life had to be put aside. Now she had to start a new adventure full of mysteries. Worst, an adventure without a clear vision of the future.

5- A Life-Threatening situation

Finally, the announcement of the Angel was a life-threatening event for Mary. According to the Law of Moses, Joseph should denounce Mary and accuse her of adultery (Mat 1:18-24). According to the same Law of Moses, such women should be stoned to death.

Joseph experienced the same challenges (Mat 1:18-24). The apparition of the Angel in his dream was an unexpected disruption in his life. An interruption, a trouble, a disturbance, a new restart and even life threatening. Taking the risk to protect Mary was disobedience to the law exposing himself to a condemnation of death.

In conclusion the Announcement was not yet a good News. It was only a potential good News.

II- The Fiat of Mary (Luke 1: 34-38) and Joseph (Mat 1: 22-24)

Only the Fiat of Mary and Joseph *transformed* the Announcement of the Angel into good news. Let us take a close look at the Fiat of Mary. A close analyses of the text tells us the Fiat of Mary was a process of discernment characterized by qualities of Christian virtues

1- Listening

Mary was not obliged to listen to the Angel. Listening is the first virtue we can attribute to Mary in this scene. Listening to someone is to accept their presence and even their existence. In the same way, not listening is to deny, reject or refuse to accept the interlocutor. The Fiat of Mary begins with her listening to the Angel, being opened to an eventual mission.

2- Serenity

Mary was troubled but did not panic. To panic is to lose control and fail to react constructively. Serenity is a peace of mind. An emotional maturity that allows one to confront with calm any kind of challenge in his life. Mary demonstrates this kind of serenity in front of the Angel.

3- Dialogue

Mary engaged a dialogue with the Angel showing her willingness to understand and to discern. She did not retreat in reaction to the mysterious language of the messenger of God. That shows her strong will to give a responsible answer to the message of the Angel.

4- Self-Denying

This expression means the opposite of selfishness. It is very difficult to understand this word in today's world. There are very few people today that demonstrate such self-denial. Our society promotes selfishness and ours is a narcissist society. We like to be in the center of the attention and we like to put our own interest first in all we do. In her dialogue and discernment with the angel, Mary did not look for her own interest. She did not avoid the sacrifices the announcements of the Angel would imply for her. She sought only the truth about the message of the Angel.

5- The Fiat of Mary

Her genuine and sincere dialogue with the Angel as well as her self-denial in her inquiries allowed Mary to discern and acknowledge humbly the will of God and say yes to the announcement of the Angel. Joseph went through the same process of in his dream: he listened to the angel, did not panic, discerned the will of God, and did not look for his own interest but chose to fulfill the plan of God accepting to take Mary into his house.

Only after the “yes” of Mary and Joseph, the announcement of the Angel becomes a Good News

Both of the phases- the Announcement of the Angel and the Fiat of Mary and Joseph - made possible the joyfulness of the Joyful Mystery of the Annunciation.

A relevant parallel can be made between the Annunciation and our modern fears, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Pandemic and the Announcement

I- The COVID-19 and the announcements

The COVID-19 pandemic has some strangely similar features to the announcements. It was:

1- A disruption in our lives.

It began suddenly in Wuhan in China. It seemed so far from us and no one seemed to care about it when it first emerged. No one was expecting the virus here in North America or in any other parts of the world. Yet in few months the invaded the whole world. The virus imposed us many interruptions to our normal lives: the confinement of quarantine and social distancing; interruption of our usual activities such as classes, religious services, parties, bars, restaurants...

2- A Trouble

We are all troubled with this virus. So many wonders and inquiries: Why? How? How long? What to do? ...and many other.

3- A Disturbance

The world is disturbed by the virus. We have to change our habits, practice social distancing, wear masks, use sanitizers, quarantine....

4- A Restart or Reorganization

We have reorganize our lives in many different ways. Our plans and projects were changed.

5- A Life Threatening event

The virus can literally kill us. It creates uncertainty in our lives, damages the economy. Many lost their jobs and consequently may become homeless beggars.

II- COVID-19 and the Fiat of Mary and Joseph

Like Mary and Joseph at the Announcement, each of us needs to give a personal answer to the COVID-19 event in our lives. We can look at Mary and Joseph at the announcement of the Angel and ask ourselves: Are we trying to discern the will of God in the midst of all these disturbing events? Can any of the virtues of Mary and Joseph help us?

For instance:

1- Listening

Are we listening to the epidemiologists? To the recommendation of the WHO (World Health Organization), the public health officials of our cities, our states and considering all the relevant information we need to know?

2- Serenity

Do we panic? Do we lose control, or do we try to maintain the peace of mind necessary to confront all the challenges of the COVID-19?

3- Dialogue

Do we try to discern humbly through dialogues and discussions what should be a Christian response to this pandemic?

4- Self-denial

Are we ready to make some sacrifices necessary to eradicate the pandemic for the common good, or do we think only about our personal interests?

5- Are we ready to accept any task that may appear to us as our mission in this period of pandemic?

The mystery of the annunciation, this is both the Announcement of the Angel and the Fiat of Mary and Joseph tells us that any fear of our life and even COVID-19 can be transformed into good News, and through us, good News in the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are faithful imitators of Mary and Joseph.

I would like to conclude with a famous quote of St Paul!

Rom 8: 28 — “... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Prayer

Mary and Joseph, inspired by your readiness to accept all that God would work in you,
And so transformed the announcement of the Angel into a good News,
We offer you our hearts, our minds and our total life.
Teach us to be ready to accept the will of God in the darkness of our fears
and come to say like you did “Here I am to act according to your will”
And so transform the Darkness of this time into a Light of Hope for our
brothers and sisters and for the whole World.

Annunciation and Justice

The semantic field of the word “Justice” in the Bible is wide and includes a variety of meanings. The most important concepts come from two Hebrew roots “mišpāṭ” (right decision, impartial, trustworthy) and “šedeq” (righteousness, blameless behavior, honesty).

I- God is Just

In the Bible, God is “The JUST” par excellence and the source or foundation of any justice as we can notice in the following texts:

- 1- Psalm 33:5 He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the loving-kindness of the LORD.*
- 2- Psalm 37:28 For the LORD loves justice, and does not forsake His godly ones.*
- 3- Psalm 89:14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Thy throne; Loving-kindness and truth go before Thee.*

In his prayer for the King, the King Solomon asked a right judgment from God:
Psalm 72:

- 1 God, give your judgments to the king. Give your righteousness to the king's son. 2 Let him judge your people with righteousness and your poor ones with justice.*
- 3 Let the mountains bring peace to the people; let the hills bring righteousness.*
- 4 Let the king bring justice to people who are poor; let him save the children of those who are needy, but let him crush oppressors! May he judge Thy people with righteousness, And Thine afflicted with justice.*

II- Jesus, Personification of Justice

Jesus Son of God, born of Mary is the Personification of the Justice of God.
The prefiguration of Jesus in the Suffering Servant Songs in Isai 42 and Palm 72 portrait him as perfect servant and perfect reflection or gleam of the Justice of God.

- a. *Isaiah 42:1 "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations.*
- b. *Isaiah 42:3 "A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice.*
- c. *Psalm 72, In his days shall the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace, till the moon be no more.*

The advent of Jesus announced the Kingdom of God and the justice it would bring, but the prophets foretold a time of Justice and peace.

- a. *Isa 45:*

8 Heavens above, rain down justice; let the clouds pour it down. Let the earth open, so that salvation springs up, and justice sprouts with it.
- b. *Isai 11:*

1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

2 And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear,

4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

5 Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist ...

The teachings and the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament are the perfect expression of the Justice of God.

- a. *Matt 23: 23 “Woe to you hypocritical Torah-teachers and P’rushim! You pay your tithes of mint, dill and cumin; but you have neglected the weightier matters of the Torah — justice, mercy, trust.*
- b. *Luke 4: 18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised ...*

III- Our common call for Justice

There is a constant call to all in the Bible to build the kingdom of Justice and Peace as expressed in:

- a. *Isaiah 56:1 Thus says the LORD, "Preserve justice, and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come And My righteousness to be revealed.*
- b. *Isaiah 1:11 “Your sacrifices mean nothing to me. I am sick of your offerings of rams and choice cattle; I don’t like the blood of bulls or lambs or goats.*
- c. *Isaiah 1:17 Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless; Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.*
- d. *Isaiah 61:8 For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering.*
- e. *Is 58; 6 “Here is the sort of fast I want —releasing those unjustly bound, untying the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free,*

breaking every yoke, 7 sharing your food with the hungry, taking the homeless poor into your house, lothing the naked when you see them, fulfilling your duty to your kinsmen!”

f. Matt 23: 23 “Woe to you hypocritical Torah-teachers and P’rushim! You pay your tithes of mint, dill and cumin; but you have neglected the weightier matters of the Torah — justice, mercy, trust.

IV- Mary and Joseph bearer of the Justice of God personified in Jesus

The fiat of Mary and Joseph made possible the incarnation of Jesus, the personification of the justice of God on the earth. The annunciation offers us both a paradigm of any vocation and a model of acceptance of the will of God.

1- Paradigm of any vocation

The call of God will often bring into our life the same challenges Mary and Joseph dealt with at the announcement of the angel: any call of God will be a sudden disruption in our life, an interruption and a disturbance of our plans, a restart or reorganization of plans and sometimes, life threatening.

2- Model of acceptance of the will of God

The Fiat of Mary and Joseph are a permanent model of the acceptance of the will of God. Discerning the will of God requires the virtues of Mary and Joseph: listening, serenity, dialogue and discernment, self-denial, courage to say “yes”.

Through the acceptance of the will of God we can all participate in the building of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Justice and Peace. As sons and daughters of Mary we are called to participate in her mission which is to bears and bring to the world the Prince of Justice and Peace. Mary “is the model of perfect acceptance

of the will of God and of wholehearted conformity with Christ, who out of love for us, endured our weakness and bore our sufferings.”⁵

Prayer

O Lord our God,
In order to redeem the world and lead humankind to yourself,
You sent us your beloved Son, Prince of Justice and Peace.
Who was made flesh, born of the Virgin Mary,
And raised by Mary and Joseph.
Grant that we may be formed by them
in the image of their Son,
And help us participate
In the mission of Mary and Joseph to bring to the World the Prince of Justice
and Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.

⁵ Collection of Masses of The Blessed Virgin Mary: v.1 p. 131.