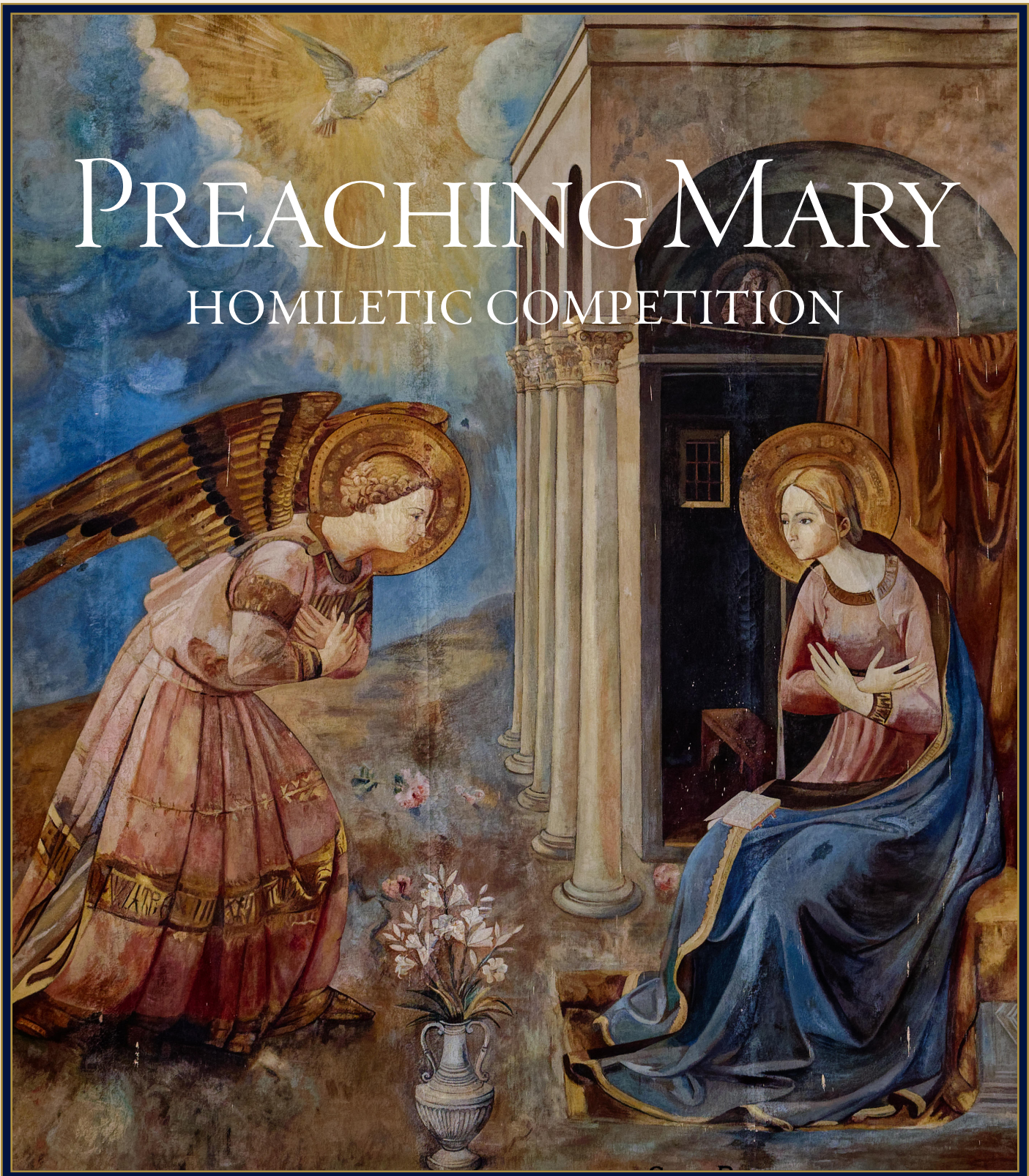




PREACHING MARY

HOMILETIC COMPETITION



MARTEN PROGRAM
in Homiletics and Liturgics



McGRATH INSTITUTE FOR CHURCH LIFE

PREACHING MARY

Homiletic Competition

McGrath Institute for Church Life &
the John S. and Virginia A. Marten Program in Homiletics and Liturgics

2025

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First-place Prize:

Rev. Andrew Hofer, O.P.

Second-place Prize:

Rev. Vincent Dávila, O.P.

Third-place Prize:

Rev. Thomas More Garrett, O.P.

Honorable Mentions:

Rev. Chris Brennan, C.S.C.

Rev. Bernard Confer, O.P.

Rev. Anthony L. Cecil, Jr.

Rev. Thomas Skamai, C.O.

Rev. Emmanuel Umanah

Rev. Nsibiet Linus Ekon

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

Genesis	Gn
Exodus	Ex
Joshua	Js
Ezekiel	Ezk
1 & 2 Samuel	1 & 2 Sm
Song of Songs	Song
Psalms	Ps
1 Kings	1 Kg
Isaiah	Is
Matthew	Mt
Luke (Lucas)	Lk (Lc)
John	Jn
1 & 2 Corinthians	1 & 2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Philippians	Phil
Hebrews	Heb
1 John	1 Jn
Revelation	Rev

SOLEMNITY OF THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD

Reading 1: Isaiah 7:10-14, 8:10

Responsorial Psalm: Psalms 40:7-8a, 8b-9, 10, 11

Reading 2: Hebrews 10:4-10

Verse before the Gospel: John 1:14ab

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

Homily 1

Rev. Andrew Hofer, O.P.

If you go to Nazareth you can visit the Grotto of the Annunciation. In the Grotto is an altar inscribed with the Latin words: *Verbum caro hic factum est*. This phrase comes from John 1:14, but there's one word added. *The Word was made flesh* HERE.

The faith we celebrate on today's Solemnity of the Annunciation is not about a generic presence of God throughout the world. We believe that the Incarnation, God the Word becoming flesh, occurred in a certain place: "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth." (Lk 1:26)¹ I'm told that when you stand there in Nazareth, you can *feel* it: HERE *the Word was made flesh!* HERE *God is with us!* (Cf. Is 8:10)

Nazareth is in the Holy Land. God called Abram to leave his homeland of Ur of the Chaldeans to settle there and become our father in faith. There, many centuries later, we find *a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary* (Cf. Lk 1:27). Since the very land is holy because of God's call, consider the holiness of the most faithful virgin called to be the Mother of God. She lived in a particular place.

And she lived at a particular time—a holy time. The Incarnation was not *from the beginning* as if Christ's humanity always existed. But *What was from the beginning* (Cf. 1 Jn 1:1), the eternal Word of the Father, "by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man."² When Mary said yes, that time became, to use Saint Paul's words to the Galatians, the fullness of time: *In the fullness of time, God sent his Son born of a woman*. (Cf. Gal 4:4) NOW *the Word was made flesh!* NOW *God is with us!*

Our faith is about a "here and now." It's about a "here and now" in doing God's will. The Virgin Mary, at a particular place and time, said, "May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). By doing God's loving will, she became the mother of the One announced in Psalm 40, used in our Responsorial Psalm. That Psalm is taken up in Hebrews 10, given in our entrance antiphon and second reading:

¹ All direct quotations from liturgical readings follow the *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America, second typical edition* (CCD: Washington, D.C., 2001) unless otherwise stated.

² "The Order of the Mass," *The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II. Third Typical Edition* (USCCB: Washington, D.C., 2011), pg. 527.

“Behold, I come to do your will.” (Heb 10:9) Over 2,000 years ago in a distant land, the eternal Son of God entered time. He became the Son of Mary to fulfill the Father’s will. He always did his Father’s will in all the particularities of time and place during his earthly life—*even until death, death on a cross* (Cf. Phil 2:8). According to early Christian tradition, Christ was crucified on Golgotha on March 25.

By the Incarnation, we know a place that is holy and a moment that is holy—a moment so holy that today we genuflect in professing the Incarnation in the Creed. For rather than making a profound bow, the Church genuflects at “and was incarnate” on this day and Christmas Day.

On this day, God proposed to be wedded to human nature, and Mary gave her consent, her “I do,” on behalf of us all. St. Catherine of Siena, whose birthday was probably March 25, 1347, prays to Our Lady: “God’s Son did not come down into your womb until you had given your will’s consent. He waited at the door of your will for you to open to him; for he wanted to come into you, but he would never have entered unless you had opened to him.”³

But someone may object that the Incarnation, at a particular place and time, makes us be distant from God. Why not *our* here and now? Origen of Alexandria, almost 1,800 years ago, preaches: “What does it profit if I should say that Jesus has come in that flesh alone which he received from Mary and I should not show also that he has come in this flesh of mine?”⁴

The Virgin Mary did not remove our ability to have Jesus come in our flesh. In a real sense, she *enabled* it. Because of the grace of her Son, each one of us, in our own way, can say “May it be done to me.” Jesus Christ says in the Book of Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me.” (Rev 3:20) What St. Catherine prays to Mary, I now preach to you who have come to this Mass: “He waited at the door of your will for you to open to him; for he wanted to come into you, but he would never have entered unless you had opened to him.”⁵

In the Incarnation, God the Word is sent, breathing forth love, the love of the Holy Spirit divinizing us. God wants to be seen in our lives of doing his will. *Now is the day of salvation.* (Cf. 2 Cor 6:2) God

³ St. Catherine of Siena, “Prayer 18, 27 March 1379” in Susan Noffke (ed.), *Catherine of Siena: An Anthology*, Volume I (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval Studies, 2012), pg. 125.

⁴ Origen of Alexandria, “Homily on Genesis 3,” in Ronald Heine (ed.), *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D.C., 2008), pg. 101.

⁵ St. Catherine of Siena, *ibid.*

wants us always to do his will in the Body of Christ, the incarnate Lord. That's our salvation—that we “may merit to become partakers even in his divine nature,” as today's Collect says.⁶

Again, “What does it profit if I should say that Jesus has come in that flesh alone which he received from Mary and I should not show also that he has come in this flesh of mine?”⁷

We can show that he comes in this flesh of ours, here and now, when we do the Father's will. What is the Father's will for you? How does he want you to receive his love and to love? Each of us has fears. Each of us has reasons to be hesitant. Each of us does not fully understand. Each of us suffers. What are your troubles and questions today? The Virgin Mary never sinned, and we are sinners. Yet, we are like the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation, who was “greatly troubled” (Lk 1:29) and who repeatedly questioned before she gave her consent. St. Catherine of Siena speaks to our souls about the Annunciation: “Today you have been shown that even though you were made without your help, you will not be saved without your help.”⁸

Today we're not at Nazareth's Grotto of the Annunciation. At that site, over 2,000 years ago, Our Lady did God's will and welcomed his Son into the depths of her being. Here and now at this altar, *we* can say yes to the Father's loving will. *We* can say Amen to the Body of Christ given to us. Here is our own holy land and holy time. We make the Virgin Mary's words our own: “May it be done to me.”

⁶ “The Annunciation of the Lord,” *The Roman Missal*, pg. 841.

⁷ Origen, *ibid.*

⁸ St. Catherine of Siena, *ibid.*

Homily 2

Rev. Vincent Dávila, O.P.

A few years ago, a priest-friend of mine told me that on major feasts he likes to prepare to preach by looking at what Aquinas has to say about the mystery we celebrate that day. Admittedly, I wish I had been the one giving him that advice, considering I'm the Dominican friar of the two of us, but I thought I would follow it nonetheless.

So here's what I found: in the third part of the *Summa Theologiae*, in the section on Christ, Aquinas asks—and the whole section is endearingly typical of him—whether it was necessary for God to announce to Mary what was to take place in her. Aquinas shies away from saying it was strictly *necessary* that the Annunciation take place, but instead offers four reasons why it was *fitting* for God to do so. I was particularly taken by the fourth: it was fitting for God to announce his plan to Mary “in order to show that there is a certain spiritual marriage between the Son of God and human nature. Therefore in the Annunciation the Virgin's consent was sought in place of that of the entire human nature.”⁹

In other words, God's goal in the incarnation, his intention, is to marry humanity, to espouse humanity to himself. But like any marriage, it can only take place with the consent of the spouse—God wants to marry us, but we have to say “I do.” And so Mary, standing for all humanity, gives her “I do” to God's marriage proposal.

Read like that, the scene in the Gospel today becomes a sort of wedding: the archangel Gabriel is officiating, and comes asking Mary, “Do you take God to be your lawful husband?” And when Mary gives her *fiat*, her “May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38) she is effectively saying “I do”—not only for herself, but on behalf of all humanity. And with that “I do,” the marriage between God and humanity takes place in Mary's womb: humanity and divinity are joined together like spouses, and *the two become one flesh* (Cf. Gn 2:24)—humanity and divinity are joined together in the one Jesus Christ.

But that's not the end of the story: what God accomplished at the Annunciation in the womb of Mary he means to do with each of us. In fact, he brought about that marriage in Mary's womb *so that* he

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 30, a. 1, response; Translation follows Laurence Shapcote, OP, *Summa Theologiae Tertia Pars, 1-59 (Latin-English Opera Omnia)*, (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2018), modified for style.

might bring about that marriage with us: that's the whole goal of the incarnation: God became human, so that we might become God. Our Collect today captures that: it begins by recognizing the mystery of the incarnation: "O God, who willed that your Word should take on the reality of human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary."¹⁰ But then we prayed that we might experience the effect of that incarnation, the goal of that incarnation: "grant, we pray, that we, who confess our Redeemer to be God and man, may merit to become partakers even in his divine nature."¹¹ The incarnation, the marriage in Mary's womb, is for the sake of our divinization, our marriage with God.

But the very fact that our Collect prays for that marriage to take place in us tells us that we're not there yet, that there's still something missing on our side, something still to be done: the marriage isn't complete yet. Our marriage with God requires something of us; it requires our "I do." God has made his marriage proposal to each of us by the incarnation, but we still have to accept it. Yes, Mary gave her "I do" on behalf of all humanity, but now we have to give our consent to be members of that marriage. To echo Augustine, "God who created you without you, will not save you without you."¹²

Our whole lives are in some sense our response to that proposal. But the Mass gives us a unique opportunity to give that "I do" to God's marriage proposal. The Eucharist, after all, is Christ's own body, blood, soul, and divinity—it is the marriage of God and humanity that results from the incarnation, it is the two-become-one-flesh that took place in Mary's womb. And *receiving* the Eucharist makes us in turn members of Christ's body—we become his body by receiving his body. But because the Church is the body of Christ, we can also say that we become members of his *Church* by receiving his body. But remember that the Church is also the beloved *spouse* of Christ, the spouse for whom he laid down his life. So, bringing all those pieces together, we could say that by receiving the Eucharist, the incarnate flesh of Christ, we become the Church, his ecclesial body, and so we become Christ's spouse—in other words, we are *married* to him by receiving the Eucharist.

In that case, you could actually think of receiving Communion as a kind of wedding, and thus a kind of re-enacting of the Annunciation. In just a few minutes, I'm going to take the place of the archangel Gabriel; and if that sounds a little self-aggrandizing, don't worry, because you're going to take the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary! In presenting you with the Eucharist, in saying "The Body of Christ," I'm going to declare God's marriage proposal to you—I will basically ask: "Do you take Christ to be your lawful spouse?" And that means your response, your "Amen," is your "*Fiat*," your "May it be done to

¹⁰ "The Annunciation of the Lord," *The Roman Missal*, pg. 841.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Cf. St. Augustine, *Sermo* 169, 11, 13.

me according to your word,” it’s your “I do.” When I say to you “the Body of Christ,” I am not just declaring to you what the Eucharist is, and your “Amen” isn’t just “I believe”—though it *is* those things too. In a sense, when I say to you “The Body of Christ,” I am also telling you what it will *make* you; I am telling you God’s plan, his proposal: he intends to make you the Body of Christ. Your “Amen” is your acceptance of that plan, your consent to be made a member of Christ’s body. And when you eat the Eucharist, that marriage takes place in you—Christ unites himself to you, and makes you his Body, makes you his spouse. In you, too, *the two shall become one flesh*.

Homily 3

Rev. Chris Brennan, C.S.C.

Most homilies for the Annunciation begin like this: “Mary said yes to God’s will in her life. You should too!” That about right?

Well that is basically the summary of this homily but with a bit of a twist. Because I am not actually going to preach too much about Mary ... but about the Father. My bet, though, is that Mary in her humility will be delighted that she is not the focus of this Gospel or this homily.

Because if we only focus on Mary and her yes, we miss most of the Gospel we just heard. Before Mary says yes and perhaps why she says yes is because we see God pouring himself out to her, giving her encouragement, helping her to know who she is, so that she might say yes.

We see God, the Father, through the voice of Gabriel, say “Hail Mary, full of grace” (Cf. Lk 1:28). He calls out to her and identifies for Mary, her beautiful identity as his daughter.

And then when she seems frightened, he reassures her. He says “be not afraid” (Cf. Lk 1:30).

And then when she is confused, he reassures her further and says, I am sending my son to you.

And then when Mary is still confused, asking “How might this be?” (Cf. Lk 1:34) He reassures her: “the Holy Spirit will be with you, he will overshadow you.” (Cf. Lk 1:35)

And then the Father says if none of that is enough, look at this miracle I have worked in your cousin, Elizabeth.

As so, in order for us to say yes like Mary, we have to first recognize God’s work in our lives and the lives of those around us. Because he is constantly—if we attune our eyes and our ears and our hearts—he is constantly encouraging us. Daily. To say yes. To say: “Here I am Lord, I come to do your will.” (Heb 10:7)

So this Lent, as we push away some of the distractions of our lives, may we attune our focus to the God who says, “You are my beloved.” (Cf. Song 6:3) To the God who says, “Be not afraid.” To the God who says, “The Holy Spirit is with you and I will not leave you to face your perils alone.” To the God who says, “Be reassured by the work that I do in the world.”

So my brothers and sisters, say yes as Mary said yes. But know that the only way to do that is by focusing on God's will and work, as mysterious as it may be, trusting as Mary did, in his work and his encouragement in our lives.

Homily 4

Rev. Bernard Confer, O.P.

The Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord really is a celebration of the wedding day of mankind with Almighty God, and marks the beginnings of our Redemption.¹³

It is a feast of the Lord but has traditionally been seen as a feast of the Blessed Virgin as well, “*Lady Day*” as it was called in medieval England. This is only as it should be, for we cannot separate the Son from the mother, the divine Person, the Word of God, from the human person, the woman from whom he was to take our human nature, who would give him birth and nurse him, live with him the mystery of his hidden life, observe his public ministry with awe, and at length stand beneath his cross—faithful to the last.

And so we ought to consider today both aspects of the Mystery: God coming among us as a man, and humankind, through Mary, receiving the Word of God in its midst.

At each Mass when the priest prepares the chalice, he prays:

“By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”¹⁴

In a sense, these words express the whole purpose of the Incarnation, as many of the Fathers of the Church often put it: “God became man so that men might become gods.” The spiritual life of each of us is, in effect, a *divinizing*, a becoming more God-like, not by casting off what is human, but rather by our humanity being transformed after the image of Jesus Christ—who is truly God and truly man.

The Letter to the Hebrews from which our Second Reading today is taken, contains a magnificent exposition of the role of Jesus as our High Priest and Mediator with God: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me ... By this ‘will,’ we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb 10:8-9)

This is an essential principle of theology and of the spiritual life: for it is God who saves us, and it is God’s Trinitarian life that we share by grace, but it is ours only through the Sacred *Humanity* of Jesus

¹³ I would like to express my thanks to three friends, Augustine Thompson, O.P.; Boniface Ramsey, O.P.; and Romanus Cessario, O.P. for their assistance.

¹⁴ “The Order of the Mass,” *The Roman Missal*, pg. 529.

Christ. The divine life is communicated to the humanity of Jesus in such a fullness that it is in fact the humanity of the very Son of God.

We can never appreciate fully the Church, her sacraments, or the elements of our own growth in God's love if we fail to perceive the centrality of the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ: we are saved by Immanuel — "*God-with-us*"—not a God out there somewhere, distant, and separate, but *with-us* in our human nature, like us in all but sin. (Cf. Is 8:10)

And it is this reflection that cannot but bring us to contemplate the figure of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Mother of God, and our Mother in the order of grace. For, as Christ is truly the Word-made-Flesh, we must not forget that he would never have been "*God-with-us*," had he not become "*Man-in-her*."

Mary is central to the entire mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, and she can be no less central in our own lives if we are to enter fully into these mysteries. She is the supreme contemplative, the one who heard the Word of God and cherished it in her heart. The physical maternity of Mary, of course, is not to be compared to the total fidelity to God's word that she practiced. It was her utter and complete openness to whatever He asked that disposed her to receive the very Son of God in the Flesh. In the words of Saint Augustine: "Mary is more blessed in receiving the faith of Christ, than in conceiving the flesh of Christ (*Beatior, ergo Maria percipiendo fidem Christi quam concipiendo carnem Christi*)."¹⁵

God's plan for man's salvation involves humanity, and we are not merely passive; rather, like Mary, we must be actively receptive. Mary did not merely *assent*; she *consented* to God's plan for her and for all of us. The Greek scholars point out to us something we would likely miss on hearing the Gospel account read in English. For in the Greek Mary's response to Gabriel, they tell us, is phrased in the optative mood, which denotes enthusiasm. And so, not merely, "Let it be done to me according to your word", (Lk 1:38) but something more akin to, "Oh yes! Let it be done to me just as you say!"

There is in the choir of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, a lovely Flemish Gothic brass lectern surmounted by a statue— "The Expectation of the Virgin" —obviously pregnant, queenly, serene, smiling, and rapt in contemplation, the contemplation of the life that is growing within her. It is the image of Mary as the Ark of the Covenant: the New Covenant between God and humanity in her Son, Jesus.

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate* 3; translated by C. L. Cornish (<https://www.logoslibrary.org/augustine/virginity/03.html>).

The Incarnation is the heart of Christianity, and Mary is inseparable from the Holy Incarnation. In meditating on this mystery, we must acclaim her with the angel and Elizabeth: Hail, full of grace! (Cf. Lk 1:26) Hail, the Lord is with you, and within you! (Cf. Lk 1:26) You are blessed above all women on the earth. (Cf. Lk 1:42)

We must continue to call her blessed, since, in the words of a *Theotokion* from the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete: “As from purple silk, O undefiled Virgin, the spiritual robe of Emmanuel, His flesh, was woven in your Womb.”¹⁶

But our praise of the Blessed Virgin is not addressed to one exalted but distant from us, but to the one who is not only Mother of Christ, but also the Mother of all his members. And just as she knew the joy of having Christ, the very Son of God, growing within her, taking from her our humanity, so does she desire to see him formed in each one of us. She is present to us and intercedes for us, so that, like her, we might bring forth Christ in our lives. We cannot separate the Mother from the Child.

Mary has been compared to the splendid dawn that announces the rising of the Sun.¹⁷ The dawn precedes the sunrise, just as Mary in her own sinless integrity preceded the Incarnation of the Word, but the dawn receives all its light from the Sun that has not yet appeared. So, with Mary. Our love and devotion to her can only glorify the Lord who has given her to us.

Let us pray for ourselves, then, and for the whole Church, with the sentiments of that ancient prayer beloved by so many of the saints:¹⁸

O Holy and Immaculate Virginity, I know not with what praises to extol you, for Him whom the whole world cannot contain, you have born within your virgin womb:

Pray for the people, plead for the clergy, make intercession for the women consecrated to God.

Let all feel your aid who celebrate your blessed memory, for out of you arose the Sun of Justice, Christ our God!

¹⁶ St. Andrew of Crete, *Great Canon*, Ode 8, 1, 22; translated by Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Great Canon: The Work of Saint Andrew of Crete* (Holy Trinity Publications: Jordanville, NY, 2016).

¹⁷ See, for example, in the “O Antiphons” of Advent, which can be found in The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catholic Household Blessings & Prayers* (USCCB: Washington DC, 2007), pg. 77.

¹⁸ Namely, the “O Beata Virgo Maria” found in *Sermo IX, De Annuntiatione Dominica* of Fulbert of Chartres and included in Ambrose St. John, *The Raccolta: or Collection of Indulged Prayers and Good Works* (Benzinger: New York; Chicago; Cincinnati, 1910), pg. 200.

Homily 5

Rev. Anthony L. Cecil, Jr.

None of it makes any sense.

Ahaz was a bad king – some may even say evil.

He finds himself in the midst of political turmoil, facing a potential war. God speaks through the prophet Isaiah – trying to encourage him, pleading with him to put his trust in God instead of outside forces. God even offers him a sign of his fidelity!

But the king says “no.”

And yet, God promises a sign anyways.

That sign was to be, of all things, a baby.

But not just any baby – a firstborn son – a son whose name would be Emmanuel, that is, *God is with us*. (Cf. Is 8:10)

God is with us.

Even though the king says no to him.

Even though the people have been led astray.

Even though there are more powerful forces at hand.

God is with us – in the sign of this baby to be born.

And Isaiah is careful, isn't he, to include the detail that this baby would be born of – *a virgin*? (Cf. Is 7:14)

None of it makes any sense.

Fast-forward a few centuries to the town of Nazareth.

It was a small, insignificant town—easily forgettable.

In that town was a young woman, Mary, betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter.

They were poor.

And it was there – in a backwater town, in the room of a poor, virgin girl – that an angel of the Lord appeared, bearing the strangest of news.

That news, of course, we know: That she was to become the mother of that fulfilled sign – of that firstborn son – who would be God with us. The child of this poor girl would be great, and reign as King over a Kingdom that would have no end.

And – none of it makes any sense.

Even Mary herself questions the angel: “how can this be?” (Cf. Lk 1:34)

Gabriel explains, but reinforces his answer with another sign:

“Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren...” (Lk 1:36)

Elizabeth.

Surely Mary knew of Elizabeth’s struggle – perhaps of her shame – of her desire to give Zechariah a child, and how the years slipped away until now it was impossible.

And as these thoughts surely flooded Mary’s curious mind, Gabriel finishes by saying: “...for nothing will be impossible for God.” (Lk 1:36)

None of it makes any sense – and in fact, all of it seems impossible.

And yet, we’re told, *nothing will be impossible for God*.

Brothers and Sisters, today on this Solemnity of the Annunciation, we celebrate the reality and truth of this sign:

A sign which is not limited to a single moment in history –

And so it is not limited to that moment when Isaiah first uttered its promise –

or when Mary said her fateful “yes” –

But rather, it has completely changed the course of history, and is woven into the very fabric of our lives and our stories.

This sign has a name and his name is Jesus – Emmanuel – God is with us – God, for whom nothing will be impossible.

And what does this mean?

It means that no matter what may come our way;

No matter what hand of cards we've been dealt;

No matter our success or our failures;

In the heights of our joys, and in the depths of our sorrows;

In the midst of our great fidelity, and even in our struggle against sin.

When life doesn't seem to make any sense:

God is with us!

And nothing will be impossible for him.

It's important that we note the very different responses to God's promised sign:

God offers Ahaz a sign, and he *still* says no to him.

He says no, because in his turmoil he was uncertain, and in his uncertainty, he was grasping at control.

But then there's Mary –

She, too, finds herself uncertain – and in her uncertainty, she is given another sign in her cousin Elizabeth – and it was then that she says “yes.”

What's interesting is that the second sign – Elizabeth's pregnancy – really has nothing to do with Mary – uncertainty still abounds when it comes to her story and what lay on the path ahead of her.

And yet, she says yes.

She says yes, you see – because a sign doesn't offer us certainty – a sign doesn't tell us the full story yet to come –

But in hearing about her cousin Elizabeth, Mary saw a glimpse of God's great fidelity – and if God had been faithful to Elizabeth, he would surely be faithful to her, too.

Brothers and sisters, I hope you see that this story is our story, too.

How many of us struggle to trust God, and ask him again and again for signs of his goodness and faithfulness? How many of us imagine that some miracle would convince us to trust God fully?

And so often, we can't see that the sign we seek has already been given to us –

given to us in the words of the prophet Isaiah;

given to us at the moment Mary says yes;

given to us, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger on that first Christmas night;

given to us – given for us – on that Cross on Calvary Hill;

given to us each and every time this sacrifice is offered – here, in the fullness of his presence in the Eucharist.

A sign that has already been given – a sign who has a name – a sign whose name is Jesus, Emmanuel, who is God with us – God, for whom nothing has been, is, or ever will be, impossible.

Brothers and Sisters, in celebrating this great Solemnity – let us ask God for the grace to respond to the sign in the same way our Blessed Mother did. That even in the face of uncertainty that lay ahead, seeing the greatness of his fidelity – we would say yes to him.

If you've been looking for a sign...it's here....*he's* here.

Thanks be to God.

Homily 6

Rev. Thomas Skamai, C.O.

... the Lord himself will give you this sign:
the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son,
and shall name him Emmanuel,
which means “God is with us!” (Is 7:14, 8:10)

This prophecy was first said by Isaiah to King Ahaz. What was the context in which this prophecy was first spoken?

Ahaz and his people were in a very dark place. At the time, the kingdom of Israel had been split in two. There was the Northern Kingdom of Israel (composed of ten of the tribes) and there was the Southern Kingdom (composed of only two tribes, Benjamin and Judah). Ahaz was king of the Southern Kingdom (the generally smaller, weaker kingdom). And in the time of Ahaz, the Northern Kingdom had partnered with someone else and decided to attack the Southern Kingdom.

Ahaz and his people knew that they were no match for this battle—things looked *very bleak* for them. And in the midst of this darkness, the Lord assures Ahaz: “Remain calm; do not be afraid; do not let your courage fail. I will be victorious over these nations that are attacking you – just trust in me!” But Ahaz presumably wasn’t convinced, so God (in His mercy) goes further.

And this is where our first reading picks up today: “Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying: Ask for a sign!” (Cf. Is 7:14, 8:10) You don’t believe me? Fine, I will give you a sign to assure you. And Ahaz essentially responds, “Eh, no thanks.” And God persists, “Please! Let me give you a sign”: “The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us!’” (Cf. Is 7:14, 8:10) Still, Ahaz doesn’t listen.

Instead of trusting the Lord with his weakness and present darkness, Ahaz decides to take matters into his own hands. He rejects the word of God and forms an alliance with Assyria. And while this helps him in the short term because they are not destroyed by the other nations, it greatly harms him and his people in the long term. This leads to them being oppressed by the Assyrians, their supposed “ally.” This leads to them worshipping other gods. This leads them away from the Lord who had promised to save them.

However, in the Gospel today, we have a wonderful fulfillment (and in some ways, *reversal*) of this Old Testament prophecy: “The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph.” (Lk 1:26-27) Unlike Ahaz, Mary was not – by any appearance – a powerful or influential person. She was a humble virgin in a small, unknown town. But, like Ahaz, she was probably very aware of the darkness that surrounded her. Politically, her people were oppressed by the Romans, but in her sinless state, she surely would have been aware of the greater evil that surrounded her: for centuries, humanity had been sitting in darkness; trapped in sin; engaged in a battle with the devil that it had no chance of winning on its own.

And in the midst of this darkness, the Word of God comes down: “Do not be afraid, Mary... you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.” (Lk 1:30-31) Unlike Ahaz, Mary places her trust in the Lord. She does not doubt, but gives *everything* to God. The Holy Spirit overshadows her. The True God becomes also true man as he is virginally conceived in her very womb. God has come to the aid of our mortal frailty by assuming our mortal frailty. Instead of seeking to protect herself in her lowliness, Mary gives her weakness to the Lord. She provides a body for him, so that he can gain a definitive victory over our enemy by his passion and death upon the cross. As Mary trusts the Lord amidst darkness and in her weakness, the grace and salvation of which we are sharers through the Church have their beginnings on this day: the day of the Incarnation of the Lord; the day of the Annunciation of the angel to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

So, if you find yourself in weakness and darkness (weighed down by sin, immersed in the darkness of this world, wondering if there is any hope left), then remain calm, do not fear, and do not let your courage fail. The Virgin has conceived and born a Son: Jesus. Emmanuel. God-with-us! Our weakness and darkness are not obstacles to him, but our weakness is the very channel by which he conquers our darkness. He is Son of God and Son of Mary; and he will destroy our ancient enemy by offering his Body, first conceived in the womb of Mary, upon the cross. So, like the Blessed Virgin Mary, place your trust in the Lord, and simply say to Him *time and time again*: “May it be done unto me according to your word.” (Cf. Lk 1:38)

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Reading 1: Genesis 3:9-15, 20

Responsorial Psalm: Psalms 98:1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4

Reading 2: Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

Alleluia: Luke 1:28

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

Homily 1

Rev. Thomas More Garrett, O.P.

“Woman! above all women glorified, Our tainted nature's solitary boast.”¹⁹ These words are from a 19th century poem of William Wordsworth. Wordsworth wasn't Catholic; he was Anglican, but he recognized something of Mary's perpetual purity; her freedom from sin that we celebrate today in Catholic churches around the world. That's the significance of today: The solemnity of the Immaculate Conception marks the fact that Mary was, in view of her divine maternity, kept free from original sin. Not since Adam and Eve had a human person come into the world free of the taint of original sin.

The early Church Fathers called Mary the New Eve, because it was with Mary that God began to undo the effects of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. Mary's “yes” to the angel Gabriel is contrasted with Eve's “no” to God, by her acceding to the fallen-angel-serpent's temptation.

But why would Mary need to be free of original sin to accept Christ in her womb? Mary's immaculate purity isn't a matter of keeping the baby Jesus free from the touch of sin *in utero*. It's not a technical issue. The better way of understanding Mary's immaculate conception is this: Mary is free of original sin because God chose Mary to *begin a new generation of people* from the old; a new generation of the living that would commence by her giving birth to her Son, Jesus Christ, into whose body many would be grafted through the mercy of God in baptism. Baptism washes away original sin, but in doing so it grafts us onto the body of Christ, which is to say that baptism makes us part of Mary's family. That new generation – Mary's family – is a people freed from original sin. Its mother never knew that sin.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians describes a portrait of this family, and that portrait is one that includes us. Mary, in Christ, was always holy and without blemish as the matriarch of this family. We are destined to be grafted to her family tree. To borrow Paul's words, we are chosen for adoption into this family. And like the mother of this family, we are chosen to be holy and blameless before God.

God held in his mind the portrait of this family from the beginning. In Genesis, after the Fall, we hear of God telling the ancient serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers”(Gn 3:15). Christ is her offspring – her only offspring in the physical sense. But

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, “The Virgin”, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston & New York, 1911), pg. 316.

today's memorial marks the birth of her spiritual children, that family of Mary's that makes up the Church. We too have become offspring of that woman.

That woman, our mother, is blessed among other women and Elizabeth was among the first to recognize as much. Long before Wordsworth wrote the words with which I began, Elizabeth called Mary *blessed*. Elizabeth, whose own unique place in God's plan is highlighted in this Gospel, merely echoes the angel's praise when Mary later goes to her in the spirit of kinship ignited by the angel's words.

But consider Elizabeth for a moment. Mary's divine motherhood is not the only reason Elizabeth calls Mary *blessed*.

Luke's Gospel will later have Elizabeth proclaim to Mary that she is most blessed among women, and go on to say to her, "blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Cf. Lk 1:42). That language, of course, would later become part of the Hail Mary. But Elizabeth calls Mary *blessed* on account of something else in addition to her divine motherhood – and that is her great faith. Consider that Elizabeth also says to Mary, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." (Lk 1:45) That confidence Elizabeth references was on display in front of the angel Gabriel in this Gospel. On account of her great faith, Mary is *blessed*.

Why does this matter? Mary is unique among all of God's creatures in many ways. She was, as we celebrate today, born without original sin. She is also the only mother to give birth to her maker. We cannot emulate her in any of those ways.

But as astounding as Mary's divine maternity is, it was on account of another reason that she receives praise throughout the scriptures. And that is her great faith. It is her confidence in God that wins her praise. And in our own expression of that confidence, we can emulate her and so reveal something of a child's resemblance to its mother.

But like any family its members can at times become strained. Sacramental confession is our chief means for reconciling ourselves with our spiritual family that makes up the body of Christ – the family of Mary – when we run astray of it. Advent is a popular time for confession; just as Christmas is a time for bringing families together.

Today is a feast of Mary, but her celebration is one for us to share. In it we recognize God's emphatic "no" to the choice to abandon his children. Instead, in return Mary responds with her "yes" to God's

Antidote. Our tainted nature need not remain tainted; God has delivered the cure. And he is born of Mary, our solitary boast.

Homily 2

Rev. Nsibiet Linus Ekon

Queridos hermanos, celebramos hoy la solemnidad de la Inmaculada Concepción de la Santísima Virgen María. La Inmaculada Concepción significa que María fue concebida en el vientre de Ana sin la mancha del pecado original. La esencia del pecado original consiste en la falta de la gracia santificante. María fue preservada de este defecto; y desde el primer instante de su existencia, se encontraba en estado de gracia santificante. Esto ha sido objeto de debate a lo largo del año, y por ello la Iglesia, a través del Papa Pío IX, la definió oficialmente como doctrina con estas palabras:

Declaramos, pronunciamos y definimos que la doctrina que sostiene que la Santísima Virgen María, en el primer momento de su concepción, por singular gracia y privilegio concedido por Dios Todopoderoso, en vista de los méritos de Jesucristo, Salvador del género humano, fue preservada libre de toda mancha del pecado original, es una doctrina revelada por Dios y, por lo tanto, debe ser creída firme y constantemente por todos los fieles.²⁰

Hay muchas preguntas sobre la posibilidad de que María fuera concebida inmaculadamente. Lo cierto es que Dios la preservó libre de pecado debido al papel que desempeñó en la historia de la salvación. Por eso es apropiado decir que celebramos la omnipotencia de Dios. Para algunos, María era solo una virgen depuesta para casarse con José, de la casa de David, pero para Dios, María está llena de gracia. Dios la usó para realizar su obra salvadora en la tierra. Las lecturas de hoy dan testimonio de la omnipotencia de Dios. También se ve en ellas el elemento colaborador del hombre en su historia de salvación. Esto se ve claramente en la vida de María. En la primera lectura, vemos que Adán y Eva se desviaron del camino de Dios al elegir su propia voluntad en lugar de la voluntad de Dios. Con sus decisiones, rechazaron a Dios. María, por otro lado, en el Evangelio, aceptó la voluntad con palabras claras: «He aquí la esclava del Señor; hágase en mí según tu palabra» (Cfr. Lc 1:38). Queridos hermanos, la aceptación de María de la voluntad de Dios significa su aceptación de colaborar con Él en la historia de la salvación. Dios nos eligió antes de la fundación del mundo y nos destinó a ser adoptados por medio de Jesucristo, según el favor de su voluntad (como se expresa en la segunda lectura de hoy). Dios nos ha elegido y nos da también la libertad para responder a este llamado. María ejerció su libertad responsablemente, alineándose con la voluntad de Dios. Por otro lado, Adán y Eva ejercieron su libertad negativamente al rechazar la voluntad de Dios, lo cual afectó su relación con Él,

²⁰ Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 diciembre 1854.

pues su rechazo a la voluntad divina provocó una ruptura en su relación con Él. María aceptó el papel de DIOS como todopoderoso al aceptar la voluntad de DIOS en su vida. A diferencia de Adán y Eva, María confió en DIOS y su confianza la convierte en un modelo para nosotros en esta lucha de fe.

María es modelo porque su plenitud de gracia, las maravillas que el Señor hizo en ella, no quiere decir que María lo encontrará todo hecho; y que su actitud en la gran empresa de ser madre de Jesús fuera una actitud pasiva. María era muy activa en responder a la voluntad de Dios. «El “sí” de la Virgen al anuncio del ángel se sitúa *en lo concreto de nuestra condición terrena*, como humilde obsequio a la voluntad divina de salvar a la humanidad, no *de la* historia, sino *en la* historia».²¹

La Santísima Virgen María es un buen ejemplo para todos los cristianos. Como dijo el papa Benedicto XVI:

En ella, la bondad de Dios se acercó y se acerca mucho a nosotros. Así, María está ante nosotros como signo de consuelo, de aliento y de esperanza. Se dirige a nosotros, diciendo: «Ten la valentía de osar con Dios. Prueba. No tengas miedo de él. Ten la valentía de arriesgar con la fe. Ten la valentía de arriesgar con la bondad. Ten la valentía de arriesgar con el corazón puro. Comprométete con Dios; y entonces verás que precisamente así tu vida se ensancha y se ilumina, y no resulta aburrida, sino llena de infinitas sorpresas, porque la bondad infinita de Dios no se agota jamás».²²

Querida familia, hay que saber cómo María que en Dios nada es imposible. Centremos nuestra atención en el misterio de la Inmaculada Concepción. Hay que siempre buscar y cumplir la voluntad de Dios. En este mundo hoy en día la gente está buscando sólo su voluntad en vez de buscar la voluntad de Dios. Cómo buscamos y practicamos la voluntad de Dios, nuestra búsqueda empieza con nosotros mismos, en nuestra familia, en nuestro trabajo y en nuestras actividades diarias. Hay los que siempre nos preguntan: que Dios quiere que yo haga. Y a da respuesta a esta pregunta, hay que siempre rezad como San Pedro Poveda: «Señor, que yo piense lo que tú quieres que piense; que yo quiera lo que tú quieres que quiera; que yo hable lo que tú quieres que hable; que yo obre como tú quieres que obre.

²¹ Homilía del Santo Padre Juan Pablo II en la Santa Misa con ocasión del 150 aniversario de la proclamación del Dogma de la Inmaculada Concepción (8 diciembre 2004). (https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20041208_immaculate-conception.html)

²² Homilía del Santo Padre Benedicto XVI del 8 de diciembre de 2005, *L'Osservatore Romano*, edición semanal en lengua española, (16 diciembre 2005).

Esta es mi única aspiración».²³ Nuestra única aspiración debe ser hacer la voluntad de Dios como María.

En este día, imploramos a la Santísima Virgen María que nos ayude y ore por nosotros mientras nos esforzamos por hacer la voluntad de DIOS como decimos: Madre mía: Desde que amanece el día, bendíceme; en lo rudo del trabajo, ayúdame; si vacilo en mis buenas decisiones, fortaléceme; en las tentaciones y peligros, defiéndeme; si desfallezco, sálvame y al cielo llévame. Amén.

²³ San Pedro Poveda, *Diario*, I, 2 marzo 1933, tal como se publicó en Dolores Gómez Molleda, *Pedro Poveda, hombre de Dios* (Narcea: Madrid, 2003), pg. 47.

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Reading 1: Revelation 11:19a, 12:1-6a, 10ab

Responsorial Psalm: 45:10, 11, 12, 16

Reading 2: 1 Corinthians 15:20-27

Gospel: Luke 1:39-56

Homily 1

Rev. Emmanuel Umanah

Although it was already a common practice in the Catholic Church, it was on Nov 1, 1950 that Pope Pius XII, after due consultation with the bishops, theologians, and laity, pronounced the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven, a dogma with the document, *Munificentissimus Deus* (The Most Bountiful God).²⁴ It is believed that Mary – the Immaculate Virgin – who was preserved from all stain of original sin,²⁵ having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heaven.

The Assumption of the B.V.M. is one of the Glorious Mysteries of the Holy Rosary – the fourth. While today's solemnity follows from the Immaculate Conception of Mary, it is also very closely connected to the fifth Glorious Mystery which we celebrate 7 days from today – the Coronation of Mary as Queen of Heaven. Thus, *preserved from original sin* – in order to be the *Mother of God*, Mary was *assumed into heaven* after her earthly life. Assumed into heaven, she is crowned *Queen of heaven and earth*.

In the first part of today's first reading, John sees God's temple in heaven opened, and the Ark of the Covenant is seen in the temple. This image of the Ark of the Covenant is important for us, especially in meditating on the mysteries of Mary who is the new Ark of the Covenant. This, in fact, is one of the titles of Mary in the Litany of Loreto. The Ark of the Covenant was like a portable temple, kept inside the tabernacle. It was the dwelling place of God on earth (Cf. Ex 25:8). The Ark was to be made of *an incorruptible wood and covered in Pure gold* (Cf. Ex 25:28). The contents were the tablets of the 10 commandments, the Bread of the Presence, and the golden staff of Moses. It was here that the glory of God (*Kabod*), the cloud was to descend from heaven. As such, the Israelites went to fight carrying with them the Ark, for it was the presence of God in their midst (Cf. Js 6:1-21). When the Ark was taken to Jerusalem, it could be recalled that David danced before the Lord in all his might. But at some point, during the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (Cf. 1 Kg 11-12) the Ark was lost (587 BC). Prophet Ezekiel however writes that before the destruction, the glory Cloud of God's presence had departed from Jerusalem (Cf. Ezk 10). As such the Israelites were hoping for the return of the glory cloud. The

²⁴ This solemnity was already celebrated in the Eastern Churches as early as the 6th century, although it was known as the *Dormitio Mariae*, which means the falling asleep of Mary.

²⁵ That is, the Immaculate Conception. See Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, Dec 8, 1854.

fulfilment of this hope seems to have taken place in the person of Mary. At the Annunciation, the Angel announces that the *Holy Spirit will come upon Mary*, and *the power of the Most High will overshadow her* (Cf. Lk 1:35). In Greek, the verb is *episkiazo*. The same verb in the Septuagint refers to the descent of the glory cloud on the Tabernacle (Cf. Ex 40:35 LXX). Mary is, therefore, the dwelling place of God's glory like the Tabernacle in the Old Testament. She is the new Ark of the Covenant. She carries in her womb Jesus: the Bread of life (Cf. John 6), the fulfilment of the law and the prophets (Cf. Mt 5:17). Let us make a typological assessment of today's Gospel with the Ark of the Old Testament:²⁶

The Ark of the Covenant	The Blessed Virgin Mary
The glory of the Lord and the cloud covered the Tabernacle containing the Ark and <i>overshadowed</i> them (<i>episkiazo</i>) (Cf. Ex 40:34)	The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary and the power of the Most High will <i>overshadow</i> (<i>episkiazo</i>) her... (Cf. Lk 1:35).
David <i>arose and went</i> to the <i>hill country of Judah</i> to bring up the Ark of God (Cf. 2 Samuel 6:2)	Mary <i>arose and went</i> into the <i>hill country of Judah</i> to visit Elizabeth (Cf. Lk 1:39)
David <i>admits the unworthiness to receive the Ark</i> by exclaiming: <i>How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?</i> (Cf. 2 Sam 6:9)	Elizabeth <i>admits her unworthiness to receive Mary</i> by exclaiming: <i>And why is it granted to me that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?</i> (Cf. Lk 1: 43)
David <i>leaped</i> before the Ark as it was brought in <i>with shouting</i> (Cf. 2 Sam 6: 15-16)	John <i>leaped</i> in Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's <i>voice</i> and Elizabeth cried <i>with a loud shout</i> (Cf. Lk 1:41-42)
The Ark remained in the hill country, in the house of Obed-Edom, <i>three months</i> (Cf. 2 Sam 6:11)	Mary remained in the hill country, in Elizabeth's house, <i>three months</i> (Cf. Lk 1:56)

Thus, Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant, made of "incorruptible wood" (Immaculate Conception), carrying Jesus – the Bread of Life and fulfilment of the law and prophets. Her body is the dwelling place of God on earth (Motherhood). And the new David, like the old, would also bring her – the new Ark of the Covenant – up to heaven (Assumption) to reign with him forever (Queenship) in the

²⁶ This table is drawn from Brant J. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish roots of Mary: Unveiling the Mother of the Messiah* (Image: New York, 2018), pg. 58. This book, apart from the Sacred Scriptures and Magisterium, is one of our sources for the homily.

heavenly temple where He himself is king. She is the Queen Mother! The Queen stands at your right hand, arrayed in Gold.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, as we celebrate the Assumption of the New Ark of the Covenant to the heavenly temple, it recalls the destiny of every Christian. We too shall one day be part of that heavenly temple.

As Christians, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and each time we receive Jesus in the Eucharist, we become “mobile tabernacles” carrying him in the world. We become “Christophers” (*Christophoroi* – bearers of Christ)! We are supposed to keep our bodies pure, and we are supposed to carry Jesus to those we meet. Elizabeth encountered Jesus in Mary, do people see Jesus in us? Do they perceive something different in us?

Mary’s visit to Elizabeth also brought joy to her cousin. If we invite the Blessed Virgin Mary to our homes, our homes too shall be blessed. And one of the ways of inviting her into our homes and our lives is by praying the Holy Rosary. A Rosary a day drives the devil away. A Rosary a day draws us closer to Mary.

Let us pray that God may overshadow us with His grace so that we too, like Mary, may be able to carry Jesus to everyone we encounter, and perhaps, leave them happier than we met them.

Amen.

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