

## **Fr Cantalamessa gives first Advent reflection to Pope and Roman Curia**

The Preacher of the Papal Household, Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, gives his first Advent reflection at the Redemptoris Mater Chapel in the Apostolic Palace. Below is the full text of his sermon.

### **P. Raniero Cantalamessa ofmcap BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVED!"**

#### **Mary in the Annunciation First Advent Sermon 2019**

Every year the liturgy leads us to Christmas with three guides: Isaiah, John the Baptist and Mary, the prophet, the precursor, the mother. The first announced the Messiah from afar, the second showed him present in the world, the third bore him in her womb. This Advent I have thought to entrust ourselves entirely to the Mother of Jesus. No one, better than she can prepare us to celebrate the birth of our Redeemer.

She didn't *celebrate* Advent, she *lived* it in her flesh. Like every mother bearing a child she knows what it means be waiting for somebody and can help us in approaching Christmas with an expectant faith. We shall contemplate the Mother of God in the three moments in which Scripture presents her at the center of the events: the Annunciation, the Visitation and Christmas.

#### *1. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord"*

We start with the Annunciation. When Mary went to visit Elizabeth she welcomed Mary with great joy and praised her for her faith saying, "Blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45). The wonderful thing that took place in Nazareth after the angel's greeting was that Mary "believed," and thus she became the "mother of the Lord." There is no doubt that the word "believed" refers to Mary's answer to the angel: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word (Lk 1:38).

In these few simple words, the greatest and most decisive act of faith in history took place. Mary's answer represents the "summit of all religious behavior before God, because it expresses, to the highest degree, both a passive willingness and active readiness, the deepest void that accompanies the greatest fullness." [1] Origen said that it's as if Mary were saying to God, "Behold, I am a tablet to be written on: let the Writer write whatever he wills, let the Lord of all things do with me as he wishes" [2]. He compared Mary to the wax writing tablet used in his day. Nowadays, we might say that Mary offered herself to God as a clean page on which he could write whatever he wanted.

In an instant that will exist for all time and remain for all eternity, Mary's word was the word of humankind and her 'yes' was the Amen of all creation to God's 'yes' " (K. Rahner). It's as if God were once again challenging created freedom through her, offering it a chance of redemption. This is the deep meaning of the Eve-Mary parallelism, so meaningful to the Fathers of the Church and all tradition. "That which Eve had bound through her unbelief, Mary loosened through her faith." [3]

From Elizabeth's words "Blessed is she who believed" we note that early in the Gospel Mary's divine maternity is not just considered in the physical sense but, much more so, in a spiritual sense, based on faith. This is what St. Augustine based himself on when he said: "The Virgin Mary gave birth believing what she had conceived believing. . . . When the angel had spoken, she, full of faith (*fide plena*), conceiving Christ in her heart before she did so in her womb, answered: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me

according to your word.' ”<sup>6</sup> The fullness of faith on Mary’s part corresponds to the fullness of grace on God’s part, the *fide plena* to the *gratia plena*.

### **Alone with God**

At a first glance, Mary’s act of faith was easy and could even be taken for granted. She was to become the mother of a king who would reign forever in the house of Jacob, mother of the Messiah! Wasn’t this the dream of every Hebrew girl? But this is a rather human and worldly way of reasoning. True faith is never a privilege or an honor; it means dying a little, and this was especially true of Mary’s faith at that moment.

First of all, God never deceives and never surreptitiously extorts consent from his children by concealing the consequences from them of what they are taking on. We can see this in every great calling on God’s part. He forewarned Jeremiah: “They will fight against you” (Jer 1:19), and to Ananias he said of Saul: “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). Would he have acted differently only with Mary for a mission such as hers? In the light of the Holy Spirit that accompanied God’s call, she certainly sensed that her path would be no different from that of all other “chosen ones.” In fact, Simeon soon put this foreboding into words when he told her that a spear would pierce her soul.

But even on a simply human level Mary found herself in complete solitude. To whom could she explain what had taken place in her? Who would believe her when she said that the child she was carrying in her womb was the work of the Holy Spirit? This was something that had never taken place before and would never take place again. Undoubtedly Mary was well aware of what the law exacted if the signs of virginity were not found in a young woman at marriage: she would be brought to the door of her father’s house and be stoned to death by the men of her city (see Deut 22:20 f.).

Nowadays we are quick to talk about the risk of faith, and we generally mean the intellectual risk, but Mary faced a real risk! In his book on the Madonna, Carlo Carretto told us how he came to understand Mary’s faith<sup>[4]</sup>. When he was living in the desert, he had heard from some Tuareg friends of his that a young girl in the encampment had been betrothed to a young man but she had not gone to live with him as she was too young. Carretto had associated this fact with what Luke said of Mary. So, two years later, finding himself in the same encampment, he asked about the girl. He noticed a certain embarrassment among his interlocutors, and later one of them, secretly approaching him, made a sign to him: he held his hand to his throat in the characteristic gesture of the Arabs when they want to say, “Her throat has been slit.” It had been discovered that she was with child before the marriage, and her death was necessary for the honor of the family. Then he thought of Mary again, of the pitiless glances of the people of Nazareth, of the knowing winks, and he understood Mary’s solitude, and that same night he chose her as his traveling companion and the mistress of his faith.

Mary is the only one to have believed in a “situation of contemporaneity,” that is to say, she believed while the event was taking place and prior to any confirmation by the event or by history.<sup>8</sup> She believed in total solitude. Jesus said to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe!” (John 20:29). Mary was the first to have believed without having seen.

In a similar situation, almost in triumph and amazement, Scripture tells us that Abraham, who was promised a son even though he was advanced in years, “believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). And with what greater triumph can

we now say that of Mary! Mary had faith in God, and it was reckoned to her as righteousness—the greatest act of righteousness ever fulfilled on earth by a human being, after that of Jesus, who is, however, also God.

St. Paul said that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7), and Mary uttered her yes cheerfully. The verb Mary used to express her consent and which is translated by *fiat* or by “let it be done” is in the optative mood (*genoito*) in the original text. It doesn’t just express a simple resigned acceptance but a living desire. It’s as if she were saying, I, too, desire with all my being what God desires; let his wish be fulfilled quickly. Indeed, as St. Augustine said, before conceiving Christ in her body she conceived him in her heart.

Mary didn’t use the Latin word *fiat*; neither did she use the Greek *genoito*. What did she use then? Which word or expression? What did a Jew say for “so be it”? He said “Amen!” If we reverently try to go back to the *ipsissima vox*, that is, to the exact word Mary used—or at least to the word that existed on this point in the Hebrew source used by Luke—it must really have been the word “amen.” “Amen”—a Hebrew word whose root means solidity, soundness—was used in the liturgy as an answer in faith to God’s word. Each time in the Vulgate where *fiat*, *fiat* appears at the end of certain psalms (in the Septuagint version, *genoito*, *genoito*) the original Hebrew, which Mary knew, is *amen*, *amen*!

The use of “amen” acknowledges what has been said as being firm, stable, valid, and binding. Its exact translation when it is in answer to God’s word is, “It is so, may it be so.” It indicates both faith and obedience; it acknowledges that what God says is true and submits to it. It is saying yes to God. This is how Jesus himself used it: “Yea, Amen, Father, for such was thy gracious will” (Matt 11:26). Rather, he is the Amen personified (see Rev 3:14), and that is why we utter the amen through him, to the glory of God (see 2 Cor 1:20). Just as Mary’s *fiat* precedes that of Jesus in Gethsemane, so her amen precedes that of the Son. Mary, too, is a personified amen to God.

### **In Mary’s Wake**

The wake left on the surface of the water by a lovely ship gradually spreads until it disappears altogether and merges with the horizon, but it started with the point of the ship itself. The same is true of the wake of believers who make up the Church. It begins at a certain point, and this point is Mary’s faith, her *fiat*. Faith, together with its sister, hope, is the only thing that does not begin with Christ but with the Church, and therefore with Mary, who was its first member in the order of time and importance. Jesus cannot be the subject of the Christian faith because he is its object. The Letter to the Hebrews gives us a list of those who had faith: “By faith Abel. . . . By faith Abraham. . . . By faith Moses” (Heb 11:4 ff.). Jesus is not included! Jesus is called the “founder and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:2), the one on whom our faith depends from beginning to end, but not one of the believers, even the first.

By the mere fact of believing we therefore find ourselves in Mary’s wake, and we now want to look more deeply at what following in her wake really means. From reading what concerns Mary in the Bible, we can see that the Church, right from the Fathers, has followed a criterion that can be expressed thus: *Maria, vel Ecclesia, vel anima*: “Mary, or rather the Church, or rather the soul.” The meaning is that what is said especially of Mary in Scripture is universally meant for the Church, and what is universally said of the Church is meant personally for each believer.

Keeping to this principle, let us now see what Mary’s faith has to say first of all to the Church as a whole and then to each one of us. Just as we did with grace, let us first stress

the ecclesial or theological implications of Mary's faith and then the personal or ascetical implications. In this way, the Madonna's life will not just be useful in developing our private devotion but will also give us a deeper understanding of God's Word and of the Church's problems.

First of all, Mary talks to us of the importance of faith. There can be no sound or music if there is no ear to hear it, no matter how many melodies or sublime chords fill the air. There is no grace, or at least grace cannot work, if there is no faith to accept it. Just as the rain cannot germinate anything unless it falls on soil that absorbs it, so it is with grace if it doesn't fall upon faith. It is through faith that we are sensitive to grace. Faith is the basis for everything; it is the first and the best among the good works. This is the work of God, that you believe, Jesus said (see John 6:29). Faith is so important because it alone maintains the gratuity of grace. It doesn't try to invert the order, making God a debtor and man a creditor. That's why it is so dear to God, who makes almost everything depend on faith in his relations with man.

Grace and faith: this is how the two pillars of salvation are placed. Man is given two feet to walk on or two wings to fly with. It is not, however, a question of two parallel things, almost as if grace came from God and faith from us and that salvation thereby depends equally on God and us, on grace and freedom. Heaven help the person who thinks that grace depends on God but faith depends on me; together God and I bring about salvation! We would once again have made God a debtor, somehow depending on us and who must share the merit and glory with us. St. Paul banished all doubt when he said, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this [that is, faith, or more generally, being saved by grace through faith, which is the same thing] is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8 ff.). Also Mary's act of faith was prompted by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

What interests us now is to throw light on some aspects of Mary's faith that could lead today's Church to greater belief. Mary's act of faith was very personal, unique, and can never be repeated. It was trust in God and the total entrusting of herself to God. It was a person-to-person relation. This is called *subjective* faith. The emphasis is on believing rather than on what is believed. But Mary's faith was also very *objective*. She didn't believe in a subjective, personal God, detached from everything, who revealed himself only to her in secret. She believed, instead, in the God of the Fathers, the God of her people. She saw in the God who revealed himself to her the God of the promises, the God of Abraham and his descendants. She humbly felt part of the host of believers and became the first believer of the new covenant, just as Abraham was the first believer of the old covenant. The *Magnificat* is full of this faith based on Scripture and of references to the history of her people. Mary's God was a God of exquisitely biblical characteristics: Lord, Almighty, Holy, Savior. Mary would not have believed the angel if he had revealed a different God to her, one whom she could not have recognized as the God of her people Israel. Also in her external life Mary conformed to this faith. She subjected herself to all that the Law prescribed: she had the child circumcised, she presented him in the Temple, she underwent the rite of purification, and she went up to Jerusalem for Passover.

There is a great lesson in all of this for us. Faith, like grace, has throughout the centuries undergone the phenomenon of analysis and division, so that we have innumerable forms and sub forms of faith. Our Protestant brethren, for example, give more value to the first aspect—subjective and personal—of faith. Luther wrote, "Faith is a living and bold trust

in God's grace"; it is a "firm trust."<sup>13</sup> In some trends of Protestantism, as in Pietism, where this tendency is carried to the extreme, dogmas and the so-called truths of faith are of very little importance. An interior personal attitude toward God almost exclusively prevails. Instead, in the Catholic and Orthodox tradition, the problem of right faith and orthodoxy has always been of great importance right from ancient times. The problem of what was to be believed very quickly prevailed over the subjective and personal aspect of believing, that is to say, over the act of faith. The treatises of the Fathers called "On Faith" (*De fide*) do not even mention faith as a subjective act or as trust and abandonment, but they are concerned with defining the truths to be believed in communion with the whole Church in opposition to the heretics.

After the Reformation and as a reaction to the unilateral emphasis on faith-trust, this tendency became more emphasized in the Catholic Church. "Believing" principally meant adhering to the belief of the Church. St. Paul said that man believes with the heart and he confesses with his lips (see Rom 10:10), but the confession of the right faith has often prevailed over believing with the heart.

In this case, too, Mary urges us to find again the "whole," which is much richer and much more beautiful than each single part. A simple subjective faith, a faith that is abandonment to God in one's inner conscience, is not sufficient. It is easy to reduce God to one's own measure this way. This happens when we form our own idea of God, based on our own personal interpretation of the Bible or on the interpretation of our own narrow circle, and then adhere to this with all our strength, even fanatically, without realizing that we believe more in ourselves than in God and that our unshakable trust in God is nothing other than an unshakable trust in ourselves.

However, a simply objective and dogmatic faith is not enough either, if it fails to lead to an intimate I-you personal contact with God. It can easily become a dead faith, belief through a third person or institution, which fails as soon as there is a crisis, no matter what the reason, between one's faith and one's personal relation with the institution of the Church. In this way, a Christian can easily reach the end of his life without ever having made a free and personal act of faith, which alone justifies the name "believer."

It is necessary, therefore, to believe personally, but in communion with the Church; we must believe in communion with the Church, but personally. The dogmatic faith of the Church doesn't take from personal faith or from the spontaneity in believing, rather, it preserves it and allows us to know and embrace an immensely greater God than the God of our own limited experience. There is no one, in fact, who is able to embrace through his own act of faith all that can be known about God. The faith of the Church is like a great wide-angle lens, which, in a particular panorama, makes it possible to see and photograph a much wider view than that of the simple lens. In uniting myself to the faith of the Church, I make the faith of all those who have gone before me mine: that of the apostles, the martyrs, and the Doctors of the Church. The saints, as they could not take their faith to heaven with them, where they no longer need it, left it in heredity to the Church.

The words "I believe in God the Father Almighty" contain incredible power. My small "I" united and joined to the great "I" of the whole mystical body of Christ, and present, makes a sound more powerful than the roaring of the sea and makes the very foundations of the reign of darkness tremble.

**Let Us Too Believe!**

Let us now go on to consider the personal and ascetic implications that spring from Mary's faith. After affirming in the above-mentioned text that Mary, "full of grace, gave birth believing what she had conceived believing," St. Augustine explained what he meant: "Mary believed and what she believed was fulfilled in her. Let us, too, believe so that what was fulfilled in her may also be to our advantage."

Let us, too, believe! The contemplation of Mary's faith urges us to renew, above all, our personal act of faith and abandonment to God. That is why it is so vitally important to say to God, once in life, let it be done, *fiat*, as Mary did. This is an act enveloped in mystery because it involves grace and freedom at the same time; it is a form of conception. The soul cannot do it alone; God helps, therefore, without taking away freedom.

What should we do then? The answer is simple: after praying, so that our prayer does not remain superficial, say to God, using the very words Mary used: Here I am, I am the servant of the Lord: let it be done to me according to your word! I am saying amen, yes, my God, to your whole plan. I give you myself!

We must, however, remember that Mary pronounced her *fiat* willingly and joyfully. How often do we repeat the word with poorly hidden resignation and, tight lipped, murmur, "If it cannot be avoided, well then, let your will be done!" Mary teaches us to say it in a different way. Knowing that God's will is infinitely more beautiful and richer in promises than any of our own plans, and knowing that God is infinite love and nourishes "plans for welfare and not for evil for us" (see Jer 29:11), let us say, full of desire and almost impatiently, as Mary did: Let your will of love and peace be fulfilled in me, O God!

In this way the meaning of human life and its greatest dignity is fulfilled. To say yes, amen, to God does not decrease man's dignity, as modern man often thinks; instead, it exalts it. And what is the alternative to this amen said to God? Modern philosophy itself, especially the existential stream, has clearly demonstrated man's need to say amen, and if it is not said to God, who is love, it must be said to something else that is simply a cold and paralyzing necessity: to destiny or fate.

### **"The righteous shall live by his faith"**

We are all called to imitate Mary's faith, but especially pastors and those in any way called to transmit the faith and the Word to others. The righteous, God says, shall live by his faith (see Heb 2:4; Rom 1:17), and this is true in a special way of pastors. My priest, God says, shall live by his faith. He is the man of faith. A priest's "specific weight" depends on his faith. His influence on others will be determined by his faith. A priest's, or pastor's, task among his people is not simply that of distributing the sacraments and of service, but it is also that of enkindling faith and being a witness to it. He will really be one who guides and leads souls to God to the extent to which he believes and has given his freedom to God, as Mary did.

The essential thing that the faithful sense immediately in a priest or in a pastor is whether he believes or not, whether he believes in what he is saying and in what he is celebrating. Whoever is seeking God through a priest will realize this immediately. Whoever is not seeking God through him may easily be deceived and, in turn, deceive the priest himself, making him feel important, clever, and with-the-times, whereas in fact he, too, may be empty, like the man without grace we mentioned in the last chapter. Even a nonbeliever who approaches a priest with a searching spirit immediately understands the difference.

What can provoke him and cause him to positively query his way of life are not, generally speaking, the most gifted discussions on faith but simple faith itself. Faith is contagious. Just as contagion does not take place by simply talking about or studying a virus but by coming into contact with it, so it is with faith.

The power of God's servant is in proportion to the strength of his faith. We sometimes suffer or maybe complain to God in prayer because people abandon the Church, they go on sinning, and because we talk and talk without results. One day the apostles tried unsuccessfully to cast out a demon from a young boy. After Jesus had cast it out the disciples came to Jesus in private and said: " 'Why could we not cast it out?' And Jesus said to them, 'Because of your little faith' " (Matt 17:19-10).

As we have said, the world, like the sea, is furrowed by the wake of a beautiful ship, which is the wake of faith, started by Mary. Let us be part of this wake. Let us, too, believe, so that what was fulfilled in her will be fulfilled in us. Let us invoke the Madonna with the sweet title of *Virgo fidelis*: Virgin most faithful, pray for us!

[1] H. Schurmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, Freiburg in Br., 1982, ad loc.

[2] Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Fragment 18 (GCS 49, p. 227).

[3] St. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, III, 22, 4 (SCh 211, p. 442).

[4] See C. Carretto, *Blessed Are You Who Believed*, London, Burns & Oates, 1982, p. 3 f.