

Mary Freely Cooperated in God's Plan

by Pope Saint John Paul II

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1. In the Gospel account of the Visitation, Elizabeth, "filled with the Holy Spirit", welcomes Mary to her home and exclaims: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45). This beatitude, the first reported in Luke's Gospel, presents Mary as the one who, by her faith, precedes the Church in fulfilling the spirit of the beatitudes.

Elizabeth's praise of Mary's faith is reinforced by comparing it to the angel's announcement to Zechariah. A superficial reading of the two announcements might consider Zechariah and Mary as having given similar responses to the divine message: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years", Zechariah says; and Mary: "How can this be since I have no husband?" (Lk 1:18, 34). But the profound difference between the interior attitudes of the principals in these two episodes can be seen from the very words of the angel, who rebukes Zechariah for his disbelief, while he gives an immediate reply to Mary's question. Unlike Elizabeth's husband, Mary fully submits to the divine plan and does not condition her consent on the granting of a visible sign.

The angel, who proposed that she become a mother, is reminded by Mary of her intention to remain a virgin. Believing that the announcement could be fulfilled, she questions the divine messenger only about the manner of its accomplishment, in order better to fulfil God's will, to which she intends to submit with total readiness. "She sought the manner; she did not doubt God's omnipotence", St Augustine remarks (Sermo 291).

Intense listening and pure faith is required of Mary

2. The context in which the two announcements are made also helps to exalt the excellence of Mary's faith. In Luke's account, we see the more favourable situation of Zechariah and the inadequacy of his response. He receives the angel's announcement in the temple of Jerusalem, at the altar before the "Holy of Holies" (cf. Ex 30:6-8); the angel addresses him as he is

offering incense, thus, as he is carrying out his priestly duties, at a significant moment in his life, the divine decision is communicated to him in a vision. These particular circumstances favour an easier understanding of the divine authenticity of the message and offer an incentive to accept it promptly.

The announcement to Mary, however, takes place in a simpler, workaday context, without the external elements of sacredness which accompanied the one made to Zechariah. Luke does not indicate the precise place where the Annunciation of the Lord's birth occurred: he reports only that Mary was in Nazareth, a village of little importance which did not seem predestined for the event. In addition, the Evangelist does not ascribe unusual importance to the moment when the angel appears and does not describe the historical circumstances. In meeting the heavenly messenger, one's attention is focused on the meaning of his words, which demand of Mary intense listening and a pure faith.

This last consideration allows us to appreciate the greatness of Mary's faith especially in comparison with the tendency, then as now, to ask insistently for sensible signs in order to believe. In contrast, the Virgin's assent to the divine will is motivated only by her love of God.

3. Mary is asked to assent to a much loftier truth than that announced to Zechariah. The latter was invited to believe in a wondrous birth that would take place within a sterile marital union which God wished to make fruitful: a divine intervention similar to those benefiting several Old Testament women: Sarah (Gn 17:15-21; 18:10-14), Rachel (Gn 30:22), the mother of Samson (Jgs 13:1-7), Hanna, the mother of Samuel (1 Sm 1: 11-20). In these episodes the gratuitousness of God's gift is particularly emphasized.

Mary is called to believe in a virginal motherhood, for which the Old Testament mentions no precedent. In fact, the well-known prophecy of Isaiah: "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (7:14), although not excluding such a view, was explicitly interpreted in this sense only after Christ's coming and in the light of the Gospel revelation.

Mary is asked to assent to a truth never expressed before. She accepts it with a simple yet daring heart. With the question: "How can this be?", she expresses her faith in the divine power to make virginity compatible with her exceptional and unique motherhood.

By replying: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35), the angel offers God's ineffable solution to the question Mary asked. Virginity, which seemed an obstacle, becomes the concrete context in which the Holy Spirit will accomplish in her the conception of the incarnate Son of God. The angel's response opens the way to the Virgin's co-operation with the Holy Spirit in the begetting of Jesus.

4. The free co-operation of the human person is realized in carrying out the divine plan. By believing in the Lord's word, Mary co-operates in fulfilling the motherhood announced to her.

Mary's act of faith recalls the faith of Abraham

The Fathers of the Church often stress this aspect of Jesus' virginal conception. In commenting on the Gospel of the Annunciation, St Augustine in particular states: "The angel announces the Virgin listens, believes and conceives" (Sermo 13 in Nat. Dom.). And again: "Christ is believed and conceived through faith. The coming of faith first occurs in the Virgin's heart and then fruitfulness comes to the Mother's womb (Sermo 293).

Mary's act of faith recalls the faith of Abraham, who at the dawn of the Old Covenant, believed in God and thus became the father of a great posterity (cf. Gn 15:6; *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 14). At the start of the New Covenant, Mary also exerts a decisive influence with her faith on the fulfillment of the mystery of the Incarnation, the beginning and the synthesis of Jesus' entire redeeming mission.

The close relationship between faith and salvation, stressed by Jesus in his public life (cf. Mt 5:34; 10:52; etc.), helps us also to understand the fundamental role which Mary's faith exercised and continues to exercise in the salvation of the human race.