

The Christmas narrative is so familiar, yet at the same time, so mysterious. It's about childbirth, which we've all experienced first-hand, yet it's also about God's incarnation, which is probably as mysterious as things get. The Christmas narrative, like the Eucharist, is all about love in action, and we get a good look at how best to respond from Mary. She doesn't say much in any of the gospels, but what she does say propels us right into the heart of that love and shows us how to respond. Let me tell you a story about that.

My friend George, like you, is a wonderful Catholic and really gets into Christmas. It wasn't always that way.

"As a young man," George explained to me one day. "I was puzzled about why there were two different Christmas narratives. I didn't understand Mary's conversation with the angel, either."

"What changed your mind?" I asked.

"Someone explained that the two narratives were written by two different evangelists for two different congregations with very different ways of understanding things. Not unlike the way it is nowadays when two history books are written about the same event by two different authors. What gets said depends on what each author wants to emphasize and what connections he or she wants to make. There's more to it than that, but just that one insight took the edge off my discomfort."

"What bothered you about Mary though?" I asked.

"Oh, lots of stuff," George said. "For instance, I wondered why the angel said she had found favor with God. How could that be? She hadn't done anything yet. Then someone pointed out that the Catechism explains that God's 'favor' was given to her in that she had been born without that Original Sin which leads us all to fall off the tracks from time to time. No, indeed, she hadn't done anything yet. She hadn't done anything sinful, nor would she ever."¹

"So, after that you were all set?" I asked.

"No, not at all," George continued. "There was that deal with the angel."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

¹ <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p122a3p2.htm#11>, November 30, 2020

described to you the way the angel did to Mary, how your child's conception and birth were to come about, and why it was going to be that way, what would your response be?"

"Probably something along the lines of 'you can't be serious'," I admitted.

"Me, too," George said. "and that's the difference between us and Mary, Tim, and the underlying reason we pray to her and with her. Her calm response to the angel was simple, complete consent. No need for details. Let it be as God wills; I trust and I'm in. I wish I could respond to receiving the Eucharist that way," George said ruefully, "but so often my own agenda gets in the way."

"I know what you mean, George," I agreed.

The two of us sat there quietly for a minute, taking in the distance between Mary's faith and ours, as we realized our own consent to God's will was so often neither trusting, nor simple, nor complete.

Then George said, "I have a question for my English major friend."

"What's that?" I asked.

"It says a little later that Mary 'pondered' these things in her heart. How do you read that – what does it mean to 'ponder' something?"

"Well," I replied, "as I recall, our verb 'to ponder' comes from the Latin 'ponderare,' which means to weigh, or think deeply, and 'pendere,' which means to suspend or hang something in the balance, its origins and outcomes unknown. Mary was being asked to accept and trust the loving will of God without knowing why it had to be that way or how it would play out. To hold that tension and embrace it with hope, faith and love is what pondering's all about."

That very same daunting challenge is presented to you and me every time we receive Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. It's the very same challenge that's presented to us when we listen to the Christmas narrative and ponder what it might be asking of us this time.