



DECEMBER 19, 2012. THE FAITH OF MARY

The Catechesis of the Holy Father Benedict XVI during the Year of Faith



BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

PAUL VI AUDIENCE HALL
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[VIDEO]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Virgin Mary has a special place in the journey of Advent as the One who, in a unique way, awaited the fulfilment of God's promises, welcoming Jesus the Son of God in faith and in the flesh and with full obedience to the divine will. Today, I wish to ponder briefly with you on Mary's faith, starting from the great mystery of the Annunciation.

"Chaîre kecharitomene, ho Kyrios meta sou", "Hail, [rejoice] full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). These are the words — recorded by Luke the Evangelist — with which the Archangel Gabriel addresses Mary. At first sight the term *chaire* "rejoice", seems an ordinary greeting, typical in the Greek world, but if this word is interpreted against the background of the biblical tradition it acquires a far deeper meaning. The same term occurs four times in the Greek version of the Old Testament and always as a proclamation of joy in the coming of the Messiah (cf. Zeph 3:14, Joel 2:21; Zech 9:9; Lam 4:21).

The Angel's greeting to Mary is therefore an invitation to joy, deep joy. It announces an end to the sadness that exists in the world because of life's limitations, suffering, death, wickedness, in all that seems to block out the light of the divine goodness. It is a greeting that marks the beginning of the Gospel, the Good News.

But why is Mary invited to rejoice in this way? The answer is to be found in the second part of the greeting: "The Lord is with you". Here too, if we are to understand correctly the meaning of these words we must turn to the Old Testament. In the Book of Zephaniah, we find these words "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion.... The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.... The Lord, your God, in your midst, a warrior who gives victory" (3:14-17).

In these words a twofold promise is made to Israel, to the daughter of Zion: God will come as a saviour and will pitch his tent in his people's midst, in the womb of the daughter of Zion. This promise is fulfilled to the letter in the dialogue between the Angel and Mary. Mary is identified with the people espoused by God, she is truly the daughter of Zion in person; in her the expectation of the definitive coming of God is fulfilled, in her the Living God makes his dwelling place.

In the greeting of the Angel Mary is called "full of grace". In Greek, the term "grace", *charis*, has the same linguistic root as the word "joy". In this term too the source of Mary's exultation is further clarified: her joy comes from grace, that is, from being in communion with God, from having such a vital connection with him, from being the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, totally fashioned by God's action. Mary is the creature who opened the door to her Creator in a special way, placing herself in his hands without reserve. She lived entirely *from* and *in* her relationship with the Lord; she was disposed to listen, alert to recognizing the signs of God in the journey of his people; she was integrated into a history of faith and hope in God's promises with which the fabric of her life was woven. And she submitted freely to the word received, to the divine will in the obedience of faith.

The Evangelist Luke tells Mary's story by aligning it closely to the history of Abraham. Just as the great Patriarch is the father of believers who responded to God's call to leave the land in which he lived, to leave behind all that guaranteed his security in order to start out on the journey to an unknown land, assured only in the divine promise, so Mary trusts implicitly in the word that the messenger of God has announced to her, and becomes the model and Mother of all believers.

I would like to emphasize another important point: the opening of the soul to God and to his action in faith also includes an element of obscurity. The relationship of human beings with God does not delete the distance between Creator and creature, it does not eliminate what the Apostle Paul said before the depth of God's wisdom: "How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33).

Yet those who — like Mary — open themselves totally to God, come to accept the divine will, even though it is mysterious, although it often does not correspond with their own wishes, and is a sword that pierces their soul, as the elderly Simeon would say prophetically to Mary when Jesus was presented in the Temple (cf. Lk 2:35). Abraham's journey of faith included the moment of joy in the gift of his son Isaac, but also the period of darkness, when he had to climb Mount Moriah to execute a paradoxical order: God was asking him to sacrifice the son he had just given him. On the mountain, the Angel told him: "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen 22:12). Abraham's full trust in the God who is faithful to his promises did not fail, even when his word was mysterious and difficult, almost impossible to accept. So it is with Mary. Her faith experienced the joy of the Annunciation, but also passed through the gloom of the crucifixion of the Son to be able to reach the light of the Resurrection.

It is exactly the same on the journey of faith of each one of us: we encounter patches of light, but we also encounter stretches in which God seems absent, when his silence weighs

on our hearts and his will does not correspond with ours, with our inclination to do as we like. However, the more we open ourselves to God, welcome the gift of faith and put our whole trust in him — like Abraham, like Mary — the more capable he will make us, with his presence, of living every situation of life in peace and assured of his faithfulness and his love. However, this means coming out of ourselves and our own projects so that the word of God may be the lamp that guides our thoughts and actions.

I would like once again to ponder on an aspect that surfaces in the infancy narratives of Jesus recounted by St Luke. Mary and Joseph take their Son to Jerusalem, to the Temple, to present him to the Lord and to consecrate him as required by Mosaic Law: “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord” (cf. Lk 2:22-24). The Holy Family’s action acquires an even more profound meaning if we interpret it in the light of the evangelical knowledge of the 12-year-old Jesus. After three days of searching he was found in the Temple in conversation with the teachers. The deeply anxious words of Mary and Joseph: “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously”, are in conformity with Jesus’ mysterious answer: “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:48-49). The significance lies in the Father’s property, “in my Father’s house”, as a son is.

Mary is obliged to renew the profound faith with which she said “yes” at the Annunciation; she must accept that it is the true and proper Father of Jesus who has precedence; she must be able to leave the Son she has brought forth free to follow his mission. And Mary’s “yes” to God’s will, in the obedience of faith, is repeated throughout her life, until the most difficult moment, that of the Cross.

Confronting all this, we may ask ourselves: how was Mary able to journey on beside her Son with such a strong faith, even in darkness, without losing her full trust in the action of God? Mary assumes a fundamental approach in facing what happens in her life. At the Annunciation, on hearing the Angel’s words she is distressed — it is the fear a person feels when moved by God’s closeness — but it is not the attitude of someone who is afraid of what God might ask. Mary reflects, she ponders on the meaning of this greeting (cf. Lk 1:29). The Greek word used in the Gospel to define this “reflection”, “*dielogizeto*”, calls to mind the etymology of the word “dialogue”.

This means that Mary enters into a deep conversation with the Word of God that has been announced to her, she does not consider it superficially but meditates on it, lets it sink into her mind and her heart so as to understand what the Lord wants of her, the meaning of the announcement.

We find another hint of Mary's inner attitude to God's action — again in the Gospel according to St Luke — at the time of Jesus' birth, after the adoration of the shepherds. Luke affirms that Mary “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). In Greek the term is *syballon*, we could say that she “kept together”, “pieced together” in her heart all the events that were happening to her; she placed every individual element, every word, every event, within the whole and confronted it, cherished it, recognizing that it all came from the will of God.

Mary does not stop at a first superficial understanding of what is happening in her life, but can look in depth, she lets herself be called into question by events, digests them, discerns them, and attains the understanding that only faith can provide. It is the profound humility of the obedient faith of Mary, who welcomes within her even what she does not understand in God’s action, leaving it to God to open her mind and heart. “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Lk 1:45), her kinswoman Elizabeth exclaims. It is exactly because of this faith that all generations will call her blessed.

Dear friends, the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord which we shall soon be celebrating invites us to practise this same humility and obedience of faith. The glory of God is not

expressed in the triumph and power of a king, it does not shine out in a famous city or a sumptuous palace, but makes its abode in a virgin's womb and is revealed in the poverty of a child. In our lives too, the almightiness of God acts with the force — often in silence — of truth and love. Thus faith tells us that in the end the defenceless power of that Child triumphs over the clamour of worldly powers. Many thanks!

To special groups:

I offer a warm welcome to Japanese pilgrims from the Diocese of Kagoshima. My cordial greeting also goes to the Nigerian Christian Pilgrim Commission. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience I invoke God's blessings for a happy and holy celebration of the coming feast of Christmas.

I address a special greeting to the *young people*, to the *sick* and to the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, especially you students of the Capriotti Institute in San Benedetto del Tronto, may you approach the mystery of Bethlehem with the same sentiments of faith and humility as Mary. Dear *sick people*, may you draw from the manger scene that joy and inner peace that Jesus comes to bring to the world. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, contemplate the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth, to impress the virtues practised in it upon the journey of your family life.

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