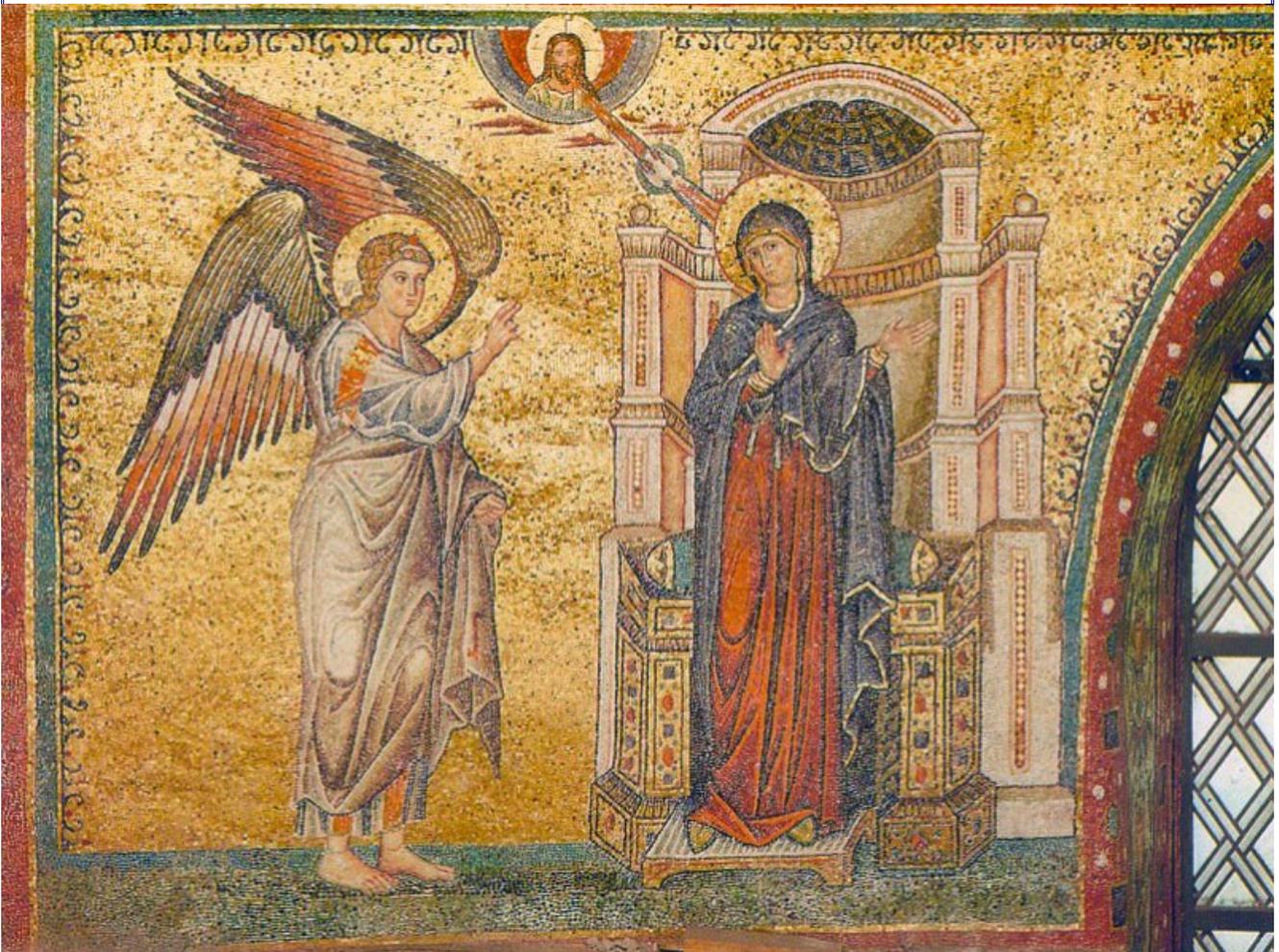


The Annunciation

of our Most Holy Lady,
Theotokos & Ever-Virgin Mary

Readings & Hymns



Troparion of the Annunciation - Tone 4

Today is the beginning of our salvation,
the revelation of the eternal mystery:

The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin
as Gabriel announces the good tidings of Grace.

Together with him let us cry to the Theotokos:

Rejoice, O Full of Grace, // the Lord is with thee!

Kontakion of the Annunciation - Tone 8

O Victorious Leader of triumphant hosts!

We, thy servants, delivered from evil,

sing our grateful thanks to thee, O Theotokos!

As thou dost possess invincible might

set us free from every calamity //

so that we may sing: Rejoice, O Unwedded Bride!

Please note: this is the beginning of the Akathist Hymn, written originally as the Kontakion for this feast

From the Menaion, on the Praises, for the Annunciation, by Theophanes - Tone 2

Today is revealed the mystery that is from all eternity.

The Son of God becomes the Son of man,

that, sharing in what is worse, He may make me share in what is better.

In times of old Adam was once deceived:

he sought to become God, but received not his desire.

Now God becomes man, that He may make Adam God.

Let creation rejoice, let nature exult:

for the Archangel stands in fear before the Virgin

and; saying to her 'Rejoice',

he brings the joyful greeting whereby our sorrow is assuaged.

O Thou who in Thy merciful compassion wast made man, //

our God, glory to Thee.

From the Menaion, for the Annunciation, on "Lord, I call ..."

Tone 6 Podoben "Having Set All Your Hope ..."

Revealing the pre-eternal counsel,

Gabriel appeared to thee, O Maiden,

and greeting thee, he said:

'Rejoice, earth that has not been sown;

rejoice, burning bush that remains unconsumed;

rejoice, depth unsearchable;

rejoice, bridge that leads to heaven and ladder raised on high that Jacob saw;

rejoice, divine vessel of manna;

rejoice, deliverance from the curse;

rejoice, restoration of Adam, //

the Lord is with thee' ¹

¹ Luke 1: 26 - 8; Exod. 3: 2; Gen. 28: 12; Exod. 16: 33; Heb. 9: 4; Gen. 3: 15.

'**Thou dost** appear to me in the form of a man',
 said the undefiled Maiden to the leader of the heavenly hosts:
 'how then dost thou speak to me of things that pass man's power?
 For thou hast said that God shall be with me,
 and shall take up His dwelling in my womb;
 and how, tell me, shall I become the spacious habitation
 and the holy place of Him that rides upon the cherubim?
 Beguile me not with deceit:
 for I have no experience of sensual pleasure,
 I have not entered into wedlock. //
 How then shall I bear child?' ²

'**When God** so wishes', said the bodiless angel,
 'the order of nature is overcome,
 and things beyond man's power come to pass.
 Believe that my words are true,
 all-holy Lady, utterly without spot.'
 And she cried aloud,
 'Let it now be unto me according to thy word:
 and I shall bear Him that is without flesh,
 who shall borrow flesh from me,
 that through this union of natures He may lead man up
 unto his ancient glory, //
 for He alone has power so to do'.

From the Menaion, for the Annunciation, by John the Monk – Tone 6

Gabriel the Archangel was sent from heaven / to announce to the Virgin the
 glad tidings of her conceiving; / and coming to Nazareth he pondered in
 amazement on this wonder. / 'O how shall He who dwelleth in the heights, /
 whom none can comprehend, be born of a Virgin? / How shall He whose
 throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth³ / be held in the womb of a
 woman? / He upon whom the six-winged seraphim and the many-eyed
 cherubim cannot gaze / has been pleased at a single word to be made flesh of
 this His creature. / It is the Word of God who dwells within her. / Why then
 do I stand here, and not say to the Maiden: / Rejoice, thou who art full of
 grace: the Lord is with thee. / Rejoice, O pure Virgin; / rejoice, Bride
 unwedded. / Rejoice, Mother of Life: // blessed is the fruit of thy womb.'

² Ps. 17: 11.

³ Isaiah 66 : 1.

Readings for the Feast

Genesis 28: 10 - 17

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran.

And he came to a certain place, and stayed there that night, because the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of the place,

he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep.

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth,

and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold,

the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!

And behold, the Lord stood above it and said,

"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham thy father and the God of Isaac;

the land on which thou liest I will give to thee and to thy descendants;

and thy descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad

to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south;

and by thee and thy descendants shall all the families of the earth bless

themselves.

Behold, I am with thee and will keep thee wherever thou goest,

and will bring you back to this land;

for I will not leave thee until I have done that of which I have spoken to thee."

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said,

"Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it."

And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place!

This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Ezekiel 43: 27 - 44: 4

THUS SAITH THE LORD: from the eighth day onward

the priests shall offer upon the altar your burnt offerings and your peace offerings;

and I will accept you, says the Lord God."

Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east;

and it was shut.

And he said to me, "This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened,

and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it;

therefore it shall remain shut.

Only the prince may sit in it to eat bread before the Lord;

he shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate,

and shall go out by the same way."

Then he brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple;

and I looked, and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple of the Lord.

Proverbs 9: 1 - 11

Wisdom has built her house,

she has set up her seven pillars.

She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.

She has sent out her maids to call
from the highest places in the town,
"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"

To him who is without sense she says,
"Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Leave simpleness, and live,
and walk in the way of insight."

He who corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,
and he who reproveth a wicked man incurs injury.

Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate thee;
reprove a wise man, and he will love thee.

Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser;
teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

For by me thy days will be multiplied,
and years will be added to thy life.

*The following two readings are usually read at the Vespereal Liturgy of the Feast on the 25th.
If however the feast is on Saturday or Sunday, there is not a Vespereal Liturgy and they are
read at the Great Vespers of the feast on the 24th, after the other three readings.*

Exodus 3: 1 - 8

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Míidian;
and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness,
and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a
bush;

and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not
burnt." When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the
bush,

"Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I."

Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet,
for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

And he said, "I am the God of thy father,
the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt,

and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Périzzites, the Hivites, and the Jébusites.

The Epistle

§ 306, Hebrews 2: 11 - 18 (*Annunciation*)

BRETHREN, both He that sanctifies and they who are being sanctified are all of one,

for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: "I will declare Thy name unto My brethren, in the midst of the Church will I sing praises unto Thee."

And again: "I will put My trust in Him."

And again: "Behold, I and the children which God hath given Me."

Forasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil,

and deliver them,

who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

For verily, He took not upon Himself the nature of angels, but He took upon Himself the seed of Abraham.

Therefore, in all things He had to be made like unto His brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest before God, that He might be a propitiation for the sins of the people.

For in that he himself hath suffered and been tempted, he is able to help them also that are being tempted.

The Gospel

§ 3; Luke 1: 24 - 38 (*Annunciation*)

IN THOSE DAYS, Elizabeth, the wife of Zachariah, conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favored,
the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying,
and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary:
for thou hast found favour with God.

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son,
and shalt call his name Jesus.

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest:
and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever;
and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

And the angel answered and said unto her,

The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee,
and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also
that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age:
and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

For with God nothing shall be impossible.

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord;

be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

The Matins Gospel

§ 4; Luke 1: 39 - 49, 56, Gospel Readings for the Theotokos

³⁹ AT THAT TIME MARY AROSE, and went into the hill country with haste,
into a city of Juda;

⁴⁰ And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth.

⁴¹ And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary,
the babe leaped in her womb;

and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

⁴² And she spake out with a loud voice, and said,

“Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

⁴³ And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

⁴⁴ For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears,
the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

⁴⁵ And blessed is she that believed:

for there shall be a performance of those things

which were told her from the Lord.”

⁴⁶ And Mary said, “My soul doth magnify the Lord,

⁴⁷ And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.

⁴⁸ For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:

for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

⁴⁹ For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.”

⁵⁶ And Mary abode with her about three months,

and returned to her own house.

From the Menaion for the feast, by Andrew of Jerusalem

Tone Four

Today there come glad tidings of joy:

it is the feast of the Virgin.

Things below are joined to things above.

Adam is renewed, and Eve set free from her ancient sorrow;

and the Tabernacle of the human nature which the Lord took upon Himself, making divine the substance He assumed, is consecrated as a Temple of God.

O mystery! The manner of His emptying is unknown, the fashion of His conceiving is ineffable.

An angel ministers at the wonder; a virgin womb receives the Son.

The Holy Spirit is sent down; the Father on high gives His consent;

and so the covenant is brought to pass by common counsel.

In Him and through Him are we saved,

and together with Gabriel let us cry aloud unto the Virgin:

‘Rejoice, thou who art full of grace: the Lord is with thee.

From thee has Christ our God and our Salvation taken human nature, raising it up unto Himself.

Pray to Him that our souls may be saved.’

Exapostilaria

Podoben *“With Thy Disciples ...”*

The captain of the angelic hosts was sent by God Almighty to the pure Virgin, / to announce the good tidings of a strange and secret wonder: / that, as man, God would be born a babe of her without seed, / fashioning again the whole race of man. // O ye people, announce the good tidings of the refashioning of the world.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Rejoice, O Theotokos, deliverance from the curse of Adam. / Rejoice, holy Mother of God; rejoice, living Bush. / Rejoice, Lamp; rejoice, Throne; rejoice,

Ladder and Gate. / Rejoice, divine Chariot; rejoice, swift Cloud. / Rejoice, Temple; rejoice, Vessel of gold. // Rejoice, Mountain; rejoice, Tabernacle and Table. Rejoice, thou release of Eve.⁴

Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Podoben "*Hearken, ye Women ...*"

The mystery hidden from all ages is made known today, / God from God, the Word / becomes in His compassion Son of the Virgin Mary, / and Gabriel proclaims the Gospel of joy. / With him let us all cry aloud: // Rejoice! Mother of the Lord!⁵



4 Genesis 3: 15 - 17; Exodus 3: 2, 25: 31; Genesis 28: 12, 17; Ezekiel 44: 2; Isaiah 19: 1; Exodus 16: 33; Daniel 2: 34 - 35; Exodus 26: 1, 25: 23.

5 Col. 1: 26.

Magnification

**With the voice of the Archangel
we cry aloud to thee, O pure Virgin:
Rejoice, thou who art full of grace, //
the Lord is with thee.**

Psalm verses selected for the feast by Nicephorus Blemmydes (†1272), which are sung with the Magnification.

O God, give Thy judgment to the King, *(Ps 71 [72]: 1a)*

and Thy righteousness to the King's son. *(Ps 71 [72]: 1b)*

That he may judge Thy people with righteousness, *(Ps 71 [72]: 2a)*

and Thy poor with justice! *(Ps 71 [72]: 2b)*

He will do justice to the poor of Thy people, and save the children of the needy. *(Ps 71 [72]: 4a)*

From day to day proclaim his salvation. *(Ps 95 [96]: 2b)*

The Lord gives speech with great power to those who bore the good tidings. *(Ps 67 [68]: 11)*

The Lord swore to David a sure oath, from which he will not turn back: *(Ps 131 [132]: 11a)*

“One of the sons of thy body I will set on thy throne. *(Ps 131 [132]: 11b)*

He shall come down as rain upon a fleece. *(Ps 71 [72]: 6a)*

like raindrops that water the earth. *(Ps 71 [72]: 6b)*

He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. *(Ps 17 [18]: 9)*

The Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation. *(Ps 131 [132]: 13)*

The Most High has hallowed his habitation. *(Ps 45 [46]: 4b)*

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. *(Ps 45 [46]: 5a)*

He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the poor. *(Ps 71 [72]: 13)*

All the nations will serve him. *(Ps 71 [72]: 11b)*

They and will bless him all the day. *(Ps 71 [72]: 15b)*

There will be firmament in the land on the mountain-tops. *(Ps 71 [72]: 16a)*

May his name be blessed throughout all ages! *(Ps 71 [72]: 17a)*

All the tribes of the earth will be blessed in Him. *(Ps 71 [72]: 17b)*

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. *(Ps 71 [72]: 18)*

And blessed be His glorious Name forever and ever. *(Ps 71 [72]: 19a)*

BE IT ACCORDING TO THY WORD

Again, the Annunciation is “the beginning of our salvation, the revelation of the eternal mystery: The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin as Gabriel announces the good tidings of Grace”¹. The divine will has been declared and proclaimed by the archangel. But the Virgin was not silent. She responded to the divine call, responded in humility and faith. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” Divine will is accepted and responded to. And this human response is highly relevant at this point. The obedience of Mary counterbalances the disobedience of Eve. In this sense the Virgin Mary is the Second Eve, as her Son is the Second Adam.

This parallel was drawn quite early. The earliest witness is St. Justin², and in St. Irenæus we find already an elaborate conception, organically connected with his basic idea of the recapitulation. “As Eve by the speech of an [fallen] angel was seduced, so as to flee God, transgressing His word, so also Mary received the good tidings by means of the angel’s speech, so as to bear God within her, being obedient to His word. And, though the one has disobeyed God, yet the other was drawn to obey God; that of the virgin Eve the Virgin Mary might become the advocate. And, as by a virgin the human race had been bound to death, by a virgin it is saved, the balance being preserved, a virgin’s disobedience by a virgin’s obedience”³. And again: “And so the knot of Eve’s disobedience received its unloosing through the obedience of Mary; for what Eve, a virgin, bound by incredulity, that Mary, a virgin, unloosed by faith”⁴. This conception was traditional, especially in the catechetical teaching, both in the East and in the West. “It is a great sacrament [*magnum sacramentum*] that, whereas through woman death became our portion, so life was born to us by woman,” says St. Augustine⁵. “Death by Eve, life by Mary,” declares St. Jerome⁶.

Let me quote also an admirable and concise passage from one of the sermons of the Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow (1782-1867). He was preaching on the day of the Annunciation. “During the days of the creation of the world, when God uttered his living and mighty words: “*Let there be,*” the Creator’s words brought creatures into existence. But on the day, unique in the existence of the world, when Holy Mary uttered her humble and obedient *Let it be,* I would hardly dare to express what took place then – the word of the creature caused the Creator to descend into the world. God uttered his word here also: You “*will conceive in your womb and bear a son . . . he will be great . . . and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever.*” But again that which is

1 Troparion of the Feast of the Annunciation

2 Dial., 100

3 5, 19, 1

4 3, 22, 34 – translation by Cardinal Newman

5 *De Agone Christ.*, 24, in another place he is simply quoting Irenæus

6 Epist. 22: mors per Evam, vita per Mariam

divine and incomprehensible occurs – the Word of God itself defers its action, allowing itself to be delayed by the word of Mary: *How can this be?* Her humble *Let it be* was necessary for the realization of God’s mighty *Let it be*. What secret power is thus contained in these simple words: “*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your will*” – that it produces an effect so extraordinary? This marvelous power is Mary’s pure and perfect self-dedication to God, a dedication of her will, of her thought, of her soul, of her entire being, of all her faculties, of all her actions, of all her hopes and expectations.”⁷

The Incarnation was indeed a sovereign act of God, but it was a revelation not only of His omnipotent might, but above all of His fatherly love and compassion. There was implied an appeal to human freedom once more, as an appeal to freedom was implied in the act of creation itself, namely in the creation of rational beings. The initiative was of course divine. Yet, as the means of salvation chosen by God was to be an assumption of true human nature by a divine Person, man had to have his active share in the mystery. Mary was voicing this obedient response of man to the redeeming decree of the love divine, and so she was representative of the whole race. She exemplified in her person, as it were, the whole of humanity. This obedient and joyful acceptance of the redeeming purpose of God, so beautifully expressed in the *Magnificat*, was an act of freedom. Indeed, it was freedom of obedience, not of initiative – and yet a true freedom, freedom of love and adoration, of humility and trust – and freedom of co-operation⁸ – this is just what human freedom means. The grace of God can never be simply superadded, mechanically as it were. It has to be received in a free obedience and submission.

From *The Ever-Virgin Mother of God* by Archpriest George Florovsky.

Homily on the ANNUNCIATION

By Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, 7 April 7, 1989

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

This year the Feast of the Annunciation, according to our calendar, falls just at the end of the week when we venerate the Cross. And perhaps is it particularly significant, because you remember the words which were spoken to the Mother of God when She brought Her Child, Jesus, to the Temple: that a sword will pass Her heart, a sword will pierce Her heart. This sword was the death of Christ upon the Cross. And to see at the same time the promise of Salvation given to the whole of mankind, indeed, the promise that one day God will be all in all, and that the whole Creation will become the shining, glorious vestment of God, on that day we see also

⁷ *Choix de Sermons et Discours de S. Em. Mgr. Philarete, Metropolitte de Moscow*, traduits par A. Serpinet (Paris, 1866, T. 1, p. 187); the translation is by Dr. R. Haugh

⁸ cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres.*, 3, 21, 8: “*Mary cooperating with the economy*”

the Cross above the Annunciation.

Let us reflect on this conjunction of events. The Mother of God received today the greatest promise which mankind can receive. At the same time, in Her perfect surrender: Let it be unto me according to His will! in this perfect surrender She accepts the tragedy that will follow. We are saved by Her faith, we are saved by Her surrender; without Her the Incarnation would have not taken place, but at what cost to Her.

And this is why it could be said once that if the Mother of God can forgive us our unfaithfulness, our betrayal of Christ, a life unworthy of the faith which we proclaim, if She can forgive us, no power in Heaven or earth can reject us. And this is why we pray to Her, and say, All-Holy Mother of God, save us! ... Not because She can save us apart from the sacrificial love, the Incarnation, the life, the death, the descent into hell, the Resurrection, the Ascension of Her Son, the Only-Begotten Son of God become the son of man; not because She can plead for us, but She can, in the very words of Christ at the Cross, say, Forgive! They do not know what they are doing ...

But it is not enough to be forgiven: one must bear fruit of repentance. If we understand at what cost we are forgiven by God: the life and the death of His Only-Begotten Son, at what cost the Mother of God can intercede for us: the surrender of Her life but also the gift unto death of Her Only-Begotten Son, gratitude alone should prompt us to be worthy of this love, to be worthy of God, worthy of Mary the Virgin, worthy of our own selves ... Because God's gift of self to us, Mary's gift of Him to us speaks to us of our eternal, immeasurable value in the eyes of God.

Let us therefore venerate worshipfully the event; and respond, respond with all our life, all our heart and mind, all there is in and of us to the trust which God has put into us. Because He gave His life for us, She surrendered to God for us, She gave Him unto death for us because God *believes* in us, because God hopes all things from us, let us respond to Him with all our life. Amen.

The Annunciation (March 25)

The Annunciation! At one time, this was one of the brightest and most joyful days of the year, the feast which consciously, and even unconsciously, was connected with a jubilant intuition, a radiant vision of the world and of life. The Gospel of Luke records the story of the Annunciation.

[The] angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Rejoice, O favored one, the Lord is with thee! Blessed art thou among women!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for

thou hast found favor with God. And behold, thou wilt conceive in thy womb and bear a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus ..." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon thee, and the power of the Most High will overshadow thee; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God ... For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Lk 1:26-38)

Of course, viewed from the perspective of so-called "scientific" atheism this Gospel story supplies plenty of reasons for speaking of "myths and legends." The rationalist will say, "When do angels ever appear to young women and hold conversations with them? Do believers really think that people of the twentieth century, living in a technological civilization, could believe this? Can't believers see just how silly, unscientific and impossible this is?" The believer always has only one answer to this kind of contentious debate, disparagement and ridicule: yes, alas, it is impossible to fit this into your shallow worldview. As long as your arguments about God and religion remain on the superficial level of chemical experiments and mathematical formulas you will always easily win. But chemistry and mathematics are of no help whatsoever in proving or disproving anything at all in the realm of God and religion. In the language of your science, the words angel, glad tidings, joy and humility are of course completely meaningless. But why limit the discussion to religion? More than half of all words are incomprehensible to your rationalistic language, and therefore in addition to religion you will have to suppress all poetry, literature, philosophy and virtually the whole of human imagination. You desire the entire world to think as you do, in terms of production and economic forces, of collectives and programs. Yet the world does not naturally think in this way and must be handcuffed and forced to do so, or rather, appear to do so. You say that all imagination is false because the "imaginary" does not exist, and yet the imagination is what people have always lived by, live by now, and will in the future as well. For everything most profound and most essential in life has always been expressed in the language of imagination. I don't pretend to understand what an angel is, nor, using the limited language of rationalism, can I explain the event that occurred almost two thousand years ago in a tiny Galilean town. But it strikes me that mankind has never forgotten this story, that these few verses have repeatedly been incorporated into countless paintings, poems and prayers, and that they have inspired and continue to inspire. This means, of course, that people heard something infinitely important to them in these words, some truth which apparently could be expressed in no other way than in the childish, joyful language of Luke's Gospel. What is this truth? What happened when the young woman, barely past childhood, suddenly heard - from what profound depth, from what transcendent height! - that wonderful greeting:

“Rejoice!” For that is indeed the angel’s message to Mary: Rejoice! The world is filled with countless books on struggle and competition, each attempting to show that the road to happiness is hatred, and in none of them will you find the word “joy.” People don’t even know what the word means. But the very same joy announced by the angel remains a pulsating force, that still has power to startle and shake human hearts. Go into a church on the eve of Annunciation. Stay, wait through the long service as it slowly unfolds. Then the moment comes when after the long wait, softly, with such divinely exquisite beauty the choir begins to sing the familiar festal hymn, “With the voice of the Archangel, we cry to Thee, O Pure One: Rejoice, O Full of Grace, the Lord is with Thee!” Hundreds and hundreds of years have gone by, and still, as we hear this invitation to rejoice, joy fills our heart in a wave of warmth. But what is this joy about? Above all we rejoice in the very presence of this woman herself, whose face, whose image, is known throughout the world, who gazes upon us from icons, and who became one of the most sublime and purest figures of art and human imagination. We rejoice in her response to the angel, to her faithfulness, purity, wholeness, to her total self-giving and boundless humility, all of which forever ring out in her words: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to thy word.” Tell me, is anything in this world, in any of its rich and complex history, more sublime and more beautiful than this one human being? Mary, the Most Pure One, the One who is Full of Grace, is truly the One in whom, as the Church sings, “all Creation rejoices.” The Church answers the lie about man, the lie that reduces him to earth and appetite, to baseness and brutality, the lie that says he is permanently enslaved to the immutable and impersonal laws of nature, by pointing to the image of Mary, the most-pure Mother of God, the One to whom, in the words of a Russian poet, “the outpouring of sweetest human tears from overflowing hearts” is offered in unending stream. The lie continues to pervade the world, but we rejoice because here, in the image of Mary, the lie is shown for what it is. We rejoice with delight and wonder, for this image is always with us as comfort and encouragement, as inspiration and help. We rejoice because in gazing at this image, it is so easy to believe in the heavenly beauty of the world and in man’s heavenly, transcendent calling. The joy of Annunciation is about the angel’s Glad Tidings, that the people had found grace with God and that soon, very soon, through her, through this totally unknown Galilean woman, God would begin to fulfill the mystery of the world’s redemption. There would be no thunder and no fear in His presence, but He would come to her in the joy and fullness of childhood. Through her a Child will now be King: a Child, weak, defenseless, yet through Him all the powers of evil are to be forever stripped of power.

This is what we celebrate on the Annunciation and why the feast has always been, and remains, so joyful and radiant. But I repeat, none of this can be understood or expressed in the limited categories and language familiar to “scientific” atheism,

which leads us to conclude that this approach willfully and arbitrarily has declared an entire dimension of human experience to be non-existent, unnecessary and dangerous, along with all the words and concepts used to express that experience. To debate this approach strictly on its own terms would be like first climbing down into a black underground pit where, because the sky can't be seen, its existence is denied. The sun can't be seen, and so there is no sun. All is dirty, repulsive, and dark, and so beauty is unknown and its existence denied. It is a place where joy is impossible, and so everyone is hostile and sad. But if you leave the pit and climb out, you suddenly find yourself in the midst of a resoundingly joyful church where once again you hear, "With the voice of the Archangel, we cry to thee, O Pure One: Rejoice!"



Readings collected at St Innocent Orthodox Church, Tarzana, CA