

A SERMON PREACHED ON THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT,

DECEMBER 21, 2008

Father Richard S. Bradford

THE Annunciation is associated with *beginnings*. Some of you know that the ecclesiastical year used to begin not with Advent but with Lady Day, March 25th. And whatever the merits of the Christian year beginning on or around December 1st, you can make the case that our annual observance of a year of grace has the conception of Our Savior as a better starting point than an arbitrary fourth Sunday before Christmas. The day Mary said *yes* is the day the human race made a new start.

Anthropologists remind us that other great heroes of ancient time were said to have been born of a virgin. Such a story is part of the protocol honoring a great man. And some theologians speculate that our Lord's mission would not have been lessened had it been stated He was the product of a natural conception.

The Catholic response to all this is that the stupendous miracle is not the virgin birth but that Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, *should be born at all*. And that, by God's unchangeable plan, this woman was to have the same relationship to the members of Christ as she has to Christ himself.

The part played by Our Lady in the whole work of salvation and in the inner life of every Christian is something Catholic theology has understood even more clearly in the past one hundred years. We should not be surprised by this but expect it. Our deeper appreciation of Our Lady's role comes from the Word of God in Holy Scripture, especially as proclaimed over the course of centuries in the Holy Mass, nourishing the faith of the community guided by Peter and acted upon by the Holy Spirit always at work in the Church.

In Advent we have the particular emphasis on the way Blessed Mary was what Saint Paul once meant when he declared, "in the



fullness of time God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” When we appreciate how the Blessed Virgin’s role was connected to all that had gone before in the annals of the Old Testament, her relation to all souls in every age who call upon her Son as Lord becomes clearer to us. Quite simply, “the fullness of time” meant *when there was Mary*. God waited for Mary! For all the preparations, inspirations, graces, and prefigurations of twenty centuries were summed up in her.

Isaiah probably did not understand the way in which his prophecy would be fulfilled. But when he said, “every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill should be brought low” Isaiah was talking about this girl from Nazareth, who one day in her hometown said, “He hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden.” Mary is the flower springing out of the root of Jesse, the final point in the work of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the prophets and holy men and women of ancient Israel. Think of it! All the advances made in the souls of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Ruth, came to perfection in the soul of Mary. The archangel Gabriel could say, “thou that art

endued with grace” because in Mary every valley was filled, every mountain and hill brought low, and the way of the Lord was paved smooth before Him.

You and I spend a lifetime in Catholic faith and practice to do just that: having every valley filled and the mountains brought low so that the way of the Lord into our hearts is smooth before Him. That is what we mean when we pray that Christ “when He comes will find in us a mansion prepared for Himself.”

No wonder Catholic Christians have the maxim “*To Jesus through Mary.*” All the longing and preparation of the Old Testament was fulfilled in her, and, as she heads to Bethlehem because of that enrollment and tax required by Caesar, she bore quite literally and wonderfully the mystery of God’s Full Presence in herself. Mary shows us how to surrender our wills to the Lord. And Almighty God always have a vocation for anyone who does just that.

Fr. Richard S. Bradford was an Episcopal priest, serving parishes in the Midwest and ultimately at All Saints Church, in the Ashmont section of Boston, Massachusetts. Fr. Bradford, his family, and several congregants left the Episcopal church and were received into the Catholic Church in 1996, where they formed the Congregation of St. Athanasius, the only Anglican Use parish in New England.

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How well her name an Army doth present,
In whom the Lord of hosts did pitch his tent!

George Herbert, *The Temple*, 1633