

J. Brian Bransfield

Foreword by Cardinal Francis George, OMI

# MEETING JESUS CHRIST

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**Meditations on the Word**

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**The Resurrection**

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After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a great earthquake, and the stone was rolled away from the tomb. The angels said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know how hard you have labored in the tomb, and you have not found the body. It is not here. Remember what I told you. Go, tell the disciples and the elders that I have risen from the tomb. I am with you all the time until I send you back to my Father in heaven. Amen. Praise be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, always and forever. Amen.'

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Reverend Monsignor J. Brian Bransfield

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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Annunciation

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. (Lk 1:26–27)



The movement itself is almost imperceptible.<sup>1</sup> Not quite invisible, it is remarkably real. It resembles the petals of a new spring bud that depart one another's embrace in open flower. It has all the fanfare of a distant ripple in a small corner of a large lake. Like the opening note of a symphony, something new is in motion. The large stretch of eternity firmly

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1. Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that Our Lady's experience is at once so deeply secret and so profoundly rich that it virtually defies description (See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I: Seeing the Form* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 338).

reaches into “the sixth month.” The vast span of eternity intersects with time in the smallest of moments. Time blushes at eternity. Each respects the other, neither overtakes the other, yet both surrender. Time has found all it ever wanted in eternity, and eternity in time. At this fruitful juncture, an angel’s voice is heard. And this almost imperceptible movement that exceeds all meaning takes place “in the sixth month.”

It seems impossible, doesn’t it? That something moves in heaven, and we know about it on earth. It seems fine as long as we keep it wrapped up in church. But, once we take it outside the church building, or so we think, it should separate and evaporate. What does all of this have to do with our daily lives? Science should be among the first, not the last, to see. After all, science explores space, time, matter, motion—and light. Light is one of the names for God (see Jn 1:4–9; 8:12; 1 Jn 1:5; Jas 1:17).

*Heaven is when light  
gets its voice and its say  
And, poised, this galaxy of bright sound  
Tells the detailed reason of the meadows it has inched across,  
alone;  
And kept its data to ferment  
And tells the full affair of  
One-hundred ocean waves it briefly kissed,  
and ridden wait-less, hitching one to another  
to some shore obscure  
in the height of a momentary lapped existence, it reveals  
the seeing of a different sort.  
Its faithful sport, light  
Never gives up  
Making things  
Known.*

*Even dark. Even here.*

*Gathered in from the ocean,  
And deserting the meadows it stands  
With all the speed of obedience ready  
For night's harshest wait-less demands:*

*Even now foreshadows cast, its tongue speaks smarts  
To bring a child's stamps to whimper  
Like some intelligent spell  
Comprehended at its casting having mercy on the crib, beneath.*

*Where does light learn its lesson?*

*In a moment for all time . . . What hides behind the light  
is brighter still.*

*The witnesses knew:  
You saw an angel the last time you saw light  
Did you listen?*

Something moved in heaven: "the angel Gabriel was sent from God. . . ." The words may seem incidental, but they are anything but incidental: Heaven moved. And God, the almighty, eternal, invisible God, *sent* an angel.

We are not comfortable with angels. We put them through an obstacle course to make them conform to our expectations. True witnesses, they flunk our course. If we cannot see something under a microscope or through a telescope, we arbitrarily declare that it does not exist. We do not detect the angel through the lens of a microscope or telescope. Rather we catch a passing hint and vanishing clue of the angel's work in the light of truth by which we make the telescope and microscope. Saint Augustine of Hippo explains that when God said, "Let there be light" (Gn 1:3), this refers to the very creation of

the angels.<sup>2</sup> Unlike God, our world has largely given up on angels.

Fortunately the angels have not given up on us. It is rather ironic for the contemporary world to say that because God and angels are not visible, they do not exist, when that same contemporary world invests billions of dollars and countless hours in video games, reality television, and advertising which, while visible, are meaningless and fleeting. Visibility, it seems, cannot be the criterion for meaning and existence. On occasion those who declare themselves to be people of science turn aside from religion and cite those times in history when people have done terrible things in the name of religion or the Church. Based on these events, the world seems to find it easy to stop listening to the Church. The tragic actions that some religious people have done purportedly in the name of the Church are not actions of the Church, but of sinful individuals. That some erroneous people do horrendous things in the name of the Church does not in any way disprove the Church's divine mission. If anything, it reveals how much we need the Church in all of her authentic and lasting beauty.

The same is true of science. People of faith do not stop believing in the authentic importance of science because some scientists found a way to build a nuclear bomb, abort the child in the womb, create chemical weapons, euthanize human beings, or assist with suicide. Such acts do not tell us to abandon or reject science, but reveal how much we actually need ethical and sound science in the first place. There is a considerable difference between science itself and what some people do in its name. So too with the Church.

Something moves in heaven and a region of light opens up on earth. "This is the message we have heard from him and

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2. Saint Augustine, *City of God*, book XI, chapter IX.

proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn 1:5). He is “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas 1:17). The psalmist proclaimed: “In your light we see light” (Ps 36:9). The prophet Baruch proclaims, “[He] sends forth the light, and it goes; he called it, and it obeyed him, trembling” (Bar 3:33).

Saint John tells us, “[I]n him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn 1:4–5). When God communicates his light, the expanse of light is compact, deep, and dense. Saint Gregory the Great tells us that the angels, essentially invisible beings, become visible through their *beauty*, names, and ministries.<sup>3</sup> The region of light, as it enters space, takes place as an event that takes form in time itself. Prepared from the first moment of her existence, Mary’s deepest intuition stirs. She has no resistance to this visit of light. The light has been freely drawn to her mystery, as if the prophet Isaiah were speaking of this very moment: “the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you” (Is 60:2).

The dawning movement disturbs nothing. The doorway to the Blessed Virgin Mary’s home in Nazareth is the threshold between eternity and time: An angel on one side, the Blessed Virgin “betrothed to a man named Joseph” (see Lk 1:27 NAB) on the other. The angel crosses. The silence only deepens as the light heightens and crests at Mary’s reception. The expansive moment opens wide without ever losing its quality of near and almost practical imperceptibility. This event is at once so honestly luminous, radiant, and real that it has a name: Gabriel.

And God, from the heart of his eternity, has sent this angel Gabriel as a messenger, a courier, “to a town in Galilee called Nazareth” (Lk 1:26). When we are speaking of God and angels

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3. Saint Gregory the Great, *Homily* 34, Sections 7 and 9.

and eternity, why do we need to speak of a region and town by name? True brilliance is attracted to the humble, and the humble are nearly imperceptible. The smaller things are on earth, the larger they are in God. As the prophet Isaiah said, “The least of them shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the LORD; in its time I will accomplish it quickly” (Is 60:22). Gabriel announced the birth of Saint John the Baptist to his father Zachariah in the sanctuary of the temple (see Lk 1:13). Gabriel announces the birth of the Savior in the sanctuary of the home—the home of the Virgin Mary. The grace of God is not confined to the temple, but reaches, and in a sense, establishes its profound center in the home. Already the words of the psalmist are being fulfilled, “All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God” (Ps 98:3). We go as well in the one small movement from the immensity of eternity to the specific local address of “a virgin betrothed.” Like it has with angels, our world has also largely given up on virginity. Like the angels, fortunately, virginity has not given up on us.

“The virgin’s name was Mary” (Lk 1:27). What was almost imperceptible a moment before is now very specific. Something moved in heaven: a shift, an opening, whose only source can be love. The Big Bang pays attention and bows at this magnificence. Such is the humility of God and the elaborate silence of love. From eternity, God sent the angel Gabriel into time to a region and town of this world, to the Virgin Mary who was betrothed to a man named Joseph. God acted. When God acts, his greatest acts are almost imperceptible. They are barely a ripple. The more invisible the action of God seems, the more real it is. The more distant the action of God seems, the closer it is. Isaiah the prophet summed it up: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (Is 55:8), and again, “[T]he LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the

LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). God, who is love, always sees and abides in authentic truth. This is why love suffers. Love alone spans eternal truth into time. And so, love suffers.<sup>4</sup>

And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” (Lk 1:28)

Light becomes sound. Brilliance ignites into words, which portend a heavenly avalanche. The perfect angelic knowledge of Gabriel meets the perfect humility of Mary. Angels speak all the time. Whereas only true charity can hear the voice of the angel, only humility can understand the angelic words. Pride is therefore the leading cause of spiritual deafness. Untreated, pride hardens the heart and crushes the spirit. The sin of pride cannot be tamed. It must be killed off in us, extinguished. Only the rare vintage of grace called humility can overtake the venom of vanity and pride. Heaven’s first movement is always “humility.”

The angel’s words bring heavenly news. We know all too well what it’s like to receive bad news. We hear of house fires, cancer, and drive-by shootings. Bad news travels quickly, usually by the express route of gossip. Gossip even converts good news for someone else into bad news with the phrase: “Well, you know why *that* happened. . . .” The psalmist alerts us to the wickedness that can flow from the tongue: “[T]he scheming of evildoers, who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush at the blameless . . .” (Ps 64:2–4). The great saints warn us about the evil of gossip. Saint Paul exhorts us, “Let no one deceive you with empty words” (Eph 5:6). Saint Anthony of the Desert meditates on the words of the Book

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4. On this, see Pope Benedict XVI, *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*, first unabridged edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 95–96.

of Proverbs: “The mouths of fools are their ruin” (Prov 18:7). Saint Anthony warns us that evil speech is the worst of poisons. He further notes that those who gossip often whisper, and that if we allow the whisperer to even approach us he will take every merit away from us.<sup>5</sup> Recall the parable Jesus told about the rich man. Tormented in flames, he asked Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool the rich man’s tongue (see Lk 16:24). Saint Gregory the Great explains that besides his neglect of the poor, this man’s sin was talkativeness.<sup>6</sup> Spiritual writers also warn us about the danger of gossip’s first cousin: idle conversation. Several of the late medieval mystics tell us that when we refrain from idle speech the Lord desires to give us greater rewards than if we were to fast for seven years on bread and water without giving up idle conversation.<sup>7</sup> Such talk is empty conversation, which brings a void into the space where only a blessing should be.<sup>8</sup> Turning away from this fault is even more difficult today, since our endless 24/7 news drones on and on.

Angels have spoken to human beings before, but what follows next is unlike any conversation in history: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The theological writer Origen declares that he could not find such a greeting anywhere else in all of Sacred Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Gabriel’s words, along with Saint Elizabeth’s (see Lk 1:42), form the words of the

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5. Saint Anthony, *Watchfulness of the Tongue*, PG 40, col. 965.

6. See Saint Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, vol. 1, book 1, chapter 11.

7. See Nicolas of Strasbourg, *The Sermon on the Golden Mountain in Late Medieval Mystics of the Low Countries*. The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 57.

8. See Adrienne von Speyr, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 197, 208.

9. Origen, “Homily on the Gospel of Luke, 6.7,” in *Homilies on Luke, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 94 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

“Hail Mary”—the most quoted and repeated greeting in history. Every recitation of the Rosary repeats this greeting over fifty times. In prayer we take the words of the angel as our own.<sup>10</sup> The words of the Hail Mary, which proclaim the plan of God and the birth of his Son, in a sense introduce the Our Father, which the Son himself gives to us. The Hail Mary and the Our Father are intimately connected.

The magnitude of Gabriel’s greeting speaks volumes. The Greek word used in the Scripture passage for “full of grace” is *kecharitōmenē*. This word speaks of Mary as the recipient of God’s action: Our Lady has already been blessed or graced in a permanent and complete manner by the action of God. Mary is to be the Mother of God. In the plan of God, it is most appropriate and fitting that Mary is therefore free from Original Sin and that her most sublime holiness is resplendent in the plan of God. Mary is immaculate, the spotless pure Virgin undefiled by sin. The Church teaches that Our Lady is the Immaculate Conception. Mary is preserved from all stain of sin by a singular grace from God, from the first moment of her conception in the womb of her mother, Saint Anne. God accomplishes this in Mary by applying to her the merits of the cross of Jesus. Love creates time; therefore love can apply the highest gift of love, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, to any moment in history, before, during, or since the sacrifice of the cross. Mary is free from sin due to the action of Jesus.

But She was much perplexed (*dietarachthē*) by his words and pondered (*dielogizeto*) what sort of greeting this might be. (Lk 1:29)

The original Greek further opens the passage to our understanding: “And when she saw (*idoussa*) him she was troubled

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10. See CCC, no. 2676.

(*dietarachthē*) at his saying.”<sup>11</sup> Notice that Luke emphasizes that Mary *sees* (*idousa*) the angel. On one level she sees the angel through her visual perception; on a deeper level she sees by faith. Mary’s experience with the angel is not simply the imparting of information. In the mystery of the annunciation, Mary encounters the angel and *sees* the plan of God in the angel’s message. She *sees* and beholds the divine illumination of the mission of salvation, and this brilliance gives shape, as it has from the first moment of her conception, to her very being.

In the tradition, *seeing* is a kind of knowing and believing.<sup>12</sup> The message of the angel is not simply a clarification or explanation of what is about to take place. It is an all-encompassing act, the final unveiling of congruence between the message of the angel and the person of the Blessed Mother. Like meets like. God bestows and Mary receives, *takes in to herself* all that is true about her very existence and mission. This reception is Mary’s humble response of faith that immediately trusts and grasps the mysterious depths of the divine illumination. Because of her immaculate heart, Mary always senses immediately the unsurpassable truth.<sup>13</sup> Yet notice her overriding humility. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux tells us that the Blessed Virgin Mary is so noble that she is greeted by an angel and yet so humble as to be the fiancée of a workman.<sup>14</sup>

The Gospel passage emphasizes that in the moment she sees the angel, Our Lady is troubled at his words. Her Son too will be troubled. The word used to describe Mary in this verse

11. Because of some slight variations in the Greek wording of this text, not all manuscripts have the word *idousa*. The verse with *idousa* is from a Byzantine text of the Gospel of Saint Luke.

12. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I*, 141.

13. *Ibid.*, 362.

14. See Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Homilies in Praise of the Virgin Mother* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1993), 9.

as troubled (*dietarachthē*) is also used to describe the emotion of Jesus as troubled in spirit when he approaches the tomb of his friend Lazarus (see Jn 11:33). The same word is also used when Jesus faces his hour of the cross (see Jn 12:27) and when Jesus tells his apostles that one of them would betray him (see Jn 13:21).<sup>15</sup> Our Lady is already sharing in the mission of her Son. At the same time, the inward commotion or distress (*dietarachthē*) that Mary experiences differs somewhat from the agony that her Son will experience later in the Gospel of Luke. In the Garden of Olives Jesus will suffer agony (*agōnia*), which comes from the word for a struggle for victory in a contest or trial, as in an arena. In the agony in the garden, Jesus experiences severe mental anguish. In that moment an angel from heaven appears and strengthens the Lord (see Lk 22:43).

Mary's response to the trouble is to ponder. Already she is showing us, her children, how to respond in moments of trouble and distress. The word for ponder, *dielogizeto*, means to turn something over in the mind. Mary looks for connections in what she has seen and heard, in order to reason, consider, and muse within her heart.

Yet, as is always the case with the Blessed Mother, more is taking place.

A greeting is the first word of another by which we are *drawn to* that other. Mary hears the first word of the angel, and in a sense she *sees* the first word of the angel in the light of the angel's very presence. Mary's calmness of mind is stirred up or disturbed (*dietarachthē*). The rousing spoken of here does not seem to be a negative upsetting or agitation but rather a positive stirring forth and an enthusing. Indeed the root word here is

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15. See Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth Part Two, Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, chapter 6.2, loc. 2059 of 4202.

the same one found in the passage in Saint John's Gospel in which the angel troubles (*tarachthē*) the waters at the pool of Bethesda (see Jn 5:4, 7), and the waters, once troubled, heal.

The early Fathers of the Church saw the baptismal font as the womb of the Church. Just as the Holy Spirit overshadowed the womb of Mary, so too, the baptismal font is a womb for members of the Church. Saint Leo the Great says, "the water of baptism is like the Virgin's womb, for the same Holy Spirit fills the font, who filled the Virgin."<sup>16</sup> In this sense, in the present passage the angel may be said to be troubling or stirring the waters of Mary's spirit as God's final preparation for the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit (see Lk 1:35), so that lasting healing may come forth in the Incarnation of the Word made flesh (see Jn 1:14). And Mary meditates, contemplating what she has seen and heard. She immediately turns in humility and seeks to discover the hidden meaning even in what seems perplexing and confounding. *This is humility in motion*: Mary does not refer the mystery of what she has heard to *herself* but to *God*. In the brilliance of the angel's light Our Lady searches for even more light. Balthasar reminds us that the first gift of light is humility.<sup>17</sup> Humility is the sense organ of the human heart. Nothing can enter our heart except through the light of humility. If we do not have humility, our heart is hardened.

The greatest "proofs" for the existence of God do not come from arguments or explanations, but from humility. Atheists commonly refer to the Christian's concept of belief in God as a convoluted coping mechanism built on the denial of death. Yet, the atheists' mistake is failing to see that their own denial

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16. Saint Leo the Great, Sermon 24.3, P. Schaff et al., eds. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), II, 12:135.

17. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I*, 163.

of God is a belief *in* death. Humility always believes in *life*. Humility transforms all that we encounter so that the heart can receive it. In the words of the angel, light became sound only to again become light in the heart of the humble Virgin. We think of the words of the psalmist: “Deep calls to deep” (Ps 42:7). Humility invites. Usually the greeting of the “greeter” draws in the one greeted. Here it is reversed: the angel greets, but it is Our Lady who draws in the angel. Angels rush to humility’s side.

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” (Lk 1:30)

The angel responds: “Do not be afraid (*mē phobou*) . . . for you have found (*heures*) favor with God.” While the word fear (*phobou*) certainly can mean “to be terrified or alarmed,” it seems likely that its other meaning as “reverence” or “awe” is highlighted in this context. In a sense, the angel is reflecting that Mary is not to be in awe of him; instead, the angel is in awe of Mary.

We have many ways of approaching God. We call out to him. We petition him. We plead with him and praise him, which is all very fitting and essential to our life of prayer. But we have it on the authority of an angel that humility, above all else, *finds* God. Mary, the lowly Virgin of Nazareth, has not only found favor with God; she has *found* God. In the very moment that the mystery is announced and begins to unfold, Our Lady entrusts herself to it with immediate freedom and completeness, that is to say, with full humility and total obedience.

Unlike the angel at the empty tomb who tells the women not to be afraid (see Mt 28:5, Mk 16:6), Gabriel’s words “Do not be afraid” are not an instance of the angel giving advice to Mary. Rather, Gabriel *describes what he sees in Mary*: “Fear not!” He uses the imperative or command form of speech, which shows that

Our Lady's humility is strong and immediate, not vague or hesitant. True humility, contrary to the world's poor caricature of it, is not fearful or tentative, because humility frees us from trouble. In fact, true humility does not fear: it is steadfast and strong, but it need not show off its strength because its strength comes from its silence, grows in its stillness, and blossoms in its calm.

“Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Lk 1:31–33, NAB)

And the strength comes forth: “Behold.” The words of the angel are words of praise, rather than simply words of explanation. Angels unceasingly praise and worship God. Gabriel speaks clearly every syllable of heaven's highest secret, the great mystery over which the angelic world marvels: “Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:31–33 NAB).

Balthasar says that this verse is the first formal and explicit biblical revelation of the Trinity.<sup>18</sup> He notes that the dialogue with the angel has three successive stages. First, Gabriel announces: “The Lord is with you” second, “you shall bear a *Son* who shall be called the Son of the Most High”; and third, “the *Holy Spirit* will overshadow you” (see Lk 1:28–35). This leads to “the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things”

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18. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 197.

(Eph 3:9; see Col 1:26). The Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, the eternal Son of God, will take to himself a true human nature, without ceasing to be God. He will do so through being conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary and so he will be the Author of our salvation. His name, “Jesus,” means “one who saves.” Jesus is not just a good man. He is not just a teacher of a way of life like other teachers in history. Jesus is the only Son of God and Savior of the world. He does not simply give advice; he saves the world from sin and death, and in doing so he reveals the Father in the Holy Spirit. The child conceived and born of Mary is truly the eternal God: without ceasing to be God, he became true man in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

On the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, the Church celebrates the wonder of the unsearchable depths of the Incarnation. Venerable Bede emphasizes that through the action of the Holy Spirit, “Jesus, that is, our Savior, was both the true Son of God the Father and the true Son of a mother who was a human being.”<sup>19</sup> As Saint Augustine said, he who in his divine nature is the equal of the Father assumed the condition of a slave and became like us, and so restored to us our likeness to God. The only Son of God became a son of man to make many men sons of God.<sup>20</sup> The Doctor of Grace further notes, “the blessed and beatific God, having become a participant in our humanity, has offered a shorter route to participation in his divinity.”<sup>21</sup>

The mystery that Jesus was truly conceived of the Virgin Mary without the introduction of the male seed does not

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19. Venerable Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Studies, 1973), Cistercian Studies 110, 22.

20. Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 194, 3–4: PL 38, 1016–1017.

21. Saint Augustine, *City of God*, book IX, chapter XV.

denigrate human sexuality. Rather, it demonstrates to us the mystery that Jesus is truly God and truly man. If Jesus had been born of Saint Joseph, then Jesus would only be man. If Jesus had not been truly born of Mary, then Jesus would only be God. He took his humanity from the Virgin Mary: the blood that the Son shed on Calvary has its ultimate human source from Mary. The Son of God, a divine Person, has taken to himself a real humanity in the Incarnation.

Because human nature and divine nature are united in the Person of the Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the saints have referred to her womb as a nuptial chamber. There, the marriage of human and divine nature in the Son of God took place.<sup>22</sup> This miraculous union came about when Mary was betrothed to Saint Joseph, the foster father of Jesus. Marriage is thus also greatly exalted by the coming of the Savior to the world. Saint Joseph, too, learned of the incarnation through the word of an angel:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous (*dikaios*) and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss (*apolysai*) her quietly (*lathra*).

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the

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22. See Saint Augustine, *On the Psalms*, Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* vol. 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), Ps XLV. 3; 146. For marriage as a symbol of the redemption, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 188.

virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." (Mt 1:18–25)

Notice the difference in the way the angel appears to Our Lady and the way that he appears to Saint Joseph. The angel comes to Mary during the day, "in the sixth month." The angel comes to Joseph in a dream, presumably at night. The difference in timing reflects a deeper difference. Our Lady, without sin, sees directly, in the light of day. Joseph, not free from sin, experiences the word of God through sleep, a type of visionary contemplation.

We tend to interpret the angel's words to Joseph as meaning that he was confused at Mary's pregnancy, since she was found with child after they were betrothed but before they came together. We also tend to think that the angel had to convince Joseph not to divorce Mary, and to explain to him the plan of God that Joseph had unwittingly ventured upon.

However, another interpretation is possible.<sup>23</sup> Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man (*dikaïos*). A righteous man is blameless (see Gn 6:9), hates falsehood (see Prv 13:5), and walks in integrity (see Prv 20:7). But he also "falls seven times a day and rises again" (Prv 24:16 NAB). The prayer of the righteous man accomplishes much (see Jas 5:16). The righteous man is learned (see Prv 9:9): he knows the Scriptures. He knows the prophecy that the messiah will be born of a virgin who will conceive and bear a son (see Is 7:14). Joseph also knows the blessedness of Mary, his betrothed. Far from suspecting

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23. See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *STb* Supplement, IIIa, q 62, 3 ad 2, and Saint Bernard, *In Praise of the Virgin Mary*, Sermon 2, 14. See also René Laurentin, *The Truth of Christmas: Beyond the Myths* (Still River, MA: Saint Bede Publications), 265 ff, John Seward, *Redeemer in the Womb* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 38–42; and Jean Daniélou, *The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 40. See also Ignance de la Potterie, SJ, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant* (New York: Alba House, 1992), 37ff.

anything untoward about her, he does suspect that God is at work in Mary. The angel is sent to confirm this. The phrase “expose her to shame” (*deigmatisai*) comes from the root word “to show forth” (*deigma*) (to display openly or to expose to the eyes). Saint Joseph was unwilling to expose, display, or show forth the mystery of Mary to the eyes of others. Humility was the basis of his fear. He knew God was acting in Mary, and the Gospel tells us that he wanted to “withdraw” (*apolysai*) from her “quietly” (*lathra*) (see Mt 1:19).

Although the word *apolysai* can at times mean divorce, it has a deeper meaning more true to the present context: to set free and to hold back no longer. In this passage, divorce does not seem to be its meaning because at that time one could not divorce quietly. One had to give a public writ of divorce (see Mt 19:7; Dt 24:1–4). If he expected something untoward, a righteous man such as Saint Joseph would *have had to* follow the law, which did not allow a quiet divorce in the civil sense. From the text and the context, rather, it seems very likely that Joseph in his humility was secretly trying to escape notice, to release Mary, to free her from himself,<sup>24</sup> and so be hidden from her great and overwhelming mystery. This same root word for “quietly” (*lathra*) is used to describe what Jesus did when, in the midst of his public ministry, he “went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice” (Mk 7:24).

Saint Luke also uses this word to describe the action of the woman with the hemorrhage whom Jesus heals: “When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed” (Lk 8:47).

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24. See *STb* Supplement, IIIa, q62, 3 ad 2.

Saint John uses this same word to describe the intention of Pilate during Our Lord's trial: As he hears those who have handed over refer to the Lord as the "Son of God" and as he himself questions Jesus, Pilate is increasingly troubled and begins to sense the great mystery of Jesus Christ. And so, Pilate seeks to *apolysō* or "release" Jesus, to send him away and so gain distance from the mystery before him. So too, the angel does not come to talk Saint Joseph out of divorce, but to strengthen him and confirm his humility before the mystery of God, which is taking place in his midst.

*A nightly mission, the operative at last dispatched  
from the  
real to unreal world.  
The angel enters the corridors of sleep where the troubled  
Joseph rests;  
Interrupting one wonder with Another  
whispering the long-treasured saving Plan,  
prophecy becomes reality as  
A seer's vision brims.*

*Joseph's sleep continues in the wake of the Almighty  
At the noiseless morning breaking (or is that sin's back?)  
the angel close to now returned to his haven, glances round  
And sees as Joseph stands and stretches  
the preview of Another Rising much more final and profound.*

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." (Lk 1:34–37)

Mary's first words to the angel are, in one sense, not for her own benefit, but for ours:<sup>25</sup> "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" Mary allows us to learn the mystery of her divine motherhood and of her perpetual virginity from the angel. The angel moves to the heart of the mystery: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The Old Testament describes a variety of holy realities, such as the Sabbath (see Ex 16:23), the holy place (see Ex 26:33; 28:29), and holy things (see Ex 28:38, 31:10, 35:21; Lv 5:15). The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, coequal and coeternal with the Father and the Son. The second verse of the book of Genesis tells us that in God's original creative act, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." (Gn 1:2). The Hebrew word for "wind" is *ruach*. In Greek, this word is translated as *pneuma*; in Latin, *spiritus*; and in English, *spirit*, for Holy Spirit. Just as a wind is an invisible power, so too, the Holy Spirit manifests the invisible power of God.<sup>26</sup>

In creating man, God *breathes* the breath of life into him (see Gn 2:7). God is present to the prophet Elijah in the whispering sound (see 1 Kgs 19:12), and later takes Elijah to heaven in a whirlwind (see 2 Kgs 2:1, 11). The psalmist says of God, "You make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind" (Ps 104:3). The Lord Jesus proclaims to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8).

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25. See John Seward, *Cradle of Redeeming Love: The Theology of the Christmas Mystery* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 218.

26. See Pope John Paul II, *God: Father and Creator: A Catechesis on the Creed* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1996), 173; see also Prosper Grech, *An Outline of New Testament Spirituality*, 92.

The angel declares that the power of the Most High will overshadow (*episkiasei*) Mary. The word “overshadow” likewise conveys a particular form of the presence and action of the otherwise invisible power of God, manifested through the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Unlike an ordinary shadow that blocks light, the overshadowing action of God concentrates the light. The prophet proclaims, “His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. The brightness was like the sun” (Hab 3:3–4).

As a shadow of light, not darkness, the divine shadow illuminates. When God overshadows, the divine shadow covers an area that belongs especially to God, the place where God has chosen to dwell. In the Book of Exodus, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud (see Ex 16:10). Likewise, the cloud that overshadowed the temple was the sign of the presence of the Lord: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Ex 40:34).<sup>27</sup> The angel proclaims that the presence of God, as it once overshadowed the tent of meeting, will overshadow Mary. The glory of the Lord will now dwell in Mary in an unprecedented way, for Our Lady is to be the Mother of God’s only begotten Son. The presence of God in the womb of Mary points immediately to the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity. Our Lady is ever-virgin. She is a virgin before (*ante partum*), during (*in partu*), and ever-after (*et post partum*) the birth of Jesus. Saint Leo the Great emphasizes that the birth of Jesus goes beyond human understanding and surpasses all precedent.<sup>28</sup> This is

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27. For the significance of the image of the cloud as an element of theophanies, see Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Resurrection and the Message of Easter* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975), 34.

28. See Pope Leo I, *Sermons, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), vol. 93, 128–129.

because she is the Ark of the New Covenant, the place where only God may dwell.

The same word “overshadow” is used to describe what happens to Jesus when Saint John the Baptist baptizes him in the Jordan River (see Mk 9:7). It is also used in relation to the bright cloud that covers the apostles at the transfiguration (see Mt 17:5; Lk 9:34), and to Peter’s shadow that falls on the sick in the streets, that they may be healed (see Acts 5:15).

*Humanity in such a tangled snare  
 . . . where did this all come from?  
 A warning rises  
 A prophet’s voice  
 “WATCH” into the darkness  
 A people called again to turn an eager, weary head  
 In a resistant time  
 To look through the darkness of a Judean night and  
 Trust that in the darkness of a Virgin’s womb  
 The Creator of Light begins to form.*

*As Advent begins, watch now and trust that  
 In your own unfamiliar darkness—  
 Inadequacy, job loss, depression, or distance  
 There is a taste of the Bethlehem darkness,  
 Containing a flavor of the Promise  
 A Savior already forming from the Overshadowed One.  
 Patience, then.*

Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. (Lk 1:38 NAB)

Mary uses the same word the angel used only a few moments earlier: “behold” (*idou*) (see Lk 1:31). The root word for “behold”

carries the meaning “to perceive,” “to see,” or “to know.” The very first action of Mary at the appearance and message of the angel was to see (see Lk 1:29). In the passage, “seeing” deepens progressively. The seeing is a deepening of faith. The word “behold” (*idou*) summons the hearer to pay special attention. With this word the Blessed Mother summons the angel and us to heed the deepening of the mystery that Mary is now poised to utter. Notice the reversal of emphasis: the angel has announced to Mary that she is favored of God and the Lord is with her. Furthermore, the angel has proclaimed that Mary is to conceive and be the Mother of God’s only Son, who will save the world from sin. Finally, the angel has announced that to accomplish this motherhood, the power of the Most High will overshadow Mary through the action of the Holy Spirit. Only one thing remains: Our Lady’s free consent. God has prepared all else. Nothing is lacking. Salvation history hinges now on the “yes” of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She begins, “Behold” . . . it is she who is the one now making the announcement, proclaiming to the angel and to the world: “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done . . .”

In the very moment when Our Lady utters those words, “May it be done to me . . .,” the word of the angel comes to pass and the ancient promise is fulfilled. The Holy Spirit overshadows her, and the Son of God, without ceasing to be God, takes flesh in her virginal womb. The Word has truly become flesh (see Jn 1:14). Mary’s “May it be done to me . . .” is *the moment* at which the incarnation takes place. All the treasures of heaven come to dwell in Mary’s womb. Eternity fills time.

*The cruel axe once wielded cut short the tree of Jesse  
The wound in the wood leaves an empty, shorn base  
The human family suffers a crude cut—Sin—we are sapped  
of possibility.*

*God, leaving no such scar, reaches down  
moving freely  
to such an impossible place: the womb of the Virgin becomes  
sheer fertility.*

*God has poured himself out . . . so probe then—  
Has the axe, with cruel decisiveness, touched your life  
leaving a hollowness you fear to enter?  
Step with determination; feel along the empty dark  
and you'll come upon the One Poured Out  
Who overflows the impossible place  
and brush close to a stirring most rare:  
Hope in motion.*

In *Verbum Domini* Benedict XVI notes that the author to the Letter to the Hebrews proclaims:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb 1:1–3)<sup>29</sup>

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29. See Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 11.