

Immaculate Mary: the imagination and seal of God's optimism

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Although it is not recorded in the Gospels, the beginning and end of Mary's earthly life corresponds to the fulfilment of God's project with humanity.

Created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 2:26), and called to become his children (Jn 1:12), human beings realize this likeness on earth through the practice of a love that resembles the Father's (Lk 6:35), and their existence continues in the Lord on through the threshold of death (Jn 11:25-26).

By presenting Mary as the perfect model of this journey in becoming a child of God, the Church celebrates her entrance into earthly existence with the Immaculate Conception and her life in the sphere of God with the Assumption. Although these truths have absolutely no reference in the New Testament they belong to the deposit of Christian faith, they are born out of the intuition of the people rather than out of theological speculation.

By "Immaculate" the Church means that the entangling guilt which impedes the full communication of life between God and humanity does not weigh upon Mary. This condition is not static, given once for all, but rather is dynamic—the creature is invited to actively collaborate by the gift of God, attuning her love with the same wavelength of God, "he chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and *immaculate* before him in love" (Eph 1:4).

Mary is presented by the evangelists as the tangible sign of that which God can realize with every creature who does not put obstacles in front of His love and instead lets His Spirit fill them. The Immaculate Conception is the seal of God's optimism for humanity, the sign of how much He esteems humanity, and needs every person to bring His creation to completion and be Father to all humanity (2 Cor 6:18).

Two annunciations

The abyss that separated humanity from God has been filled with the Immaculate Conception—the creature can be intimately united to her Creator. This full communion is possible for every person (Eph 1:4), and it is the fruit of a process of growth in the faith which has been lived out by Mary herself. The itinerary of Mary's faith can be sketched by the arc of two great cycles or annunciations. Every annunciation is a call by God to the fullness of life, and in the life of Mary we encounter two important calls: i) the God of Israel turns to the girl from Nazareth; and, ii) Jesus, "God with us" (Mt 1:23), calls his mother. The first annunciation will culminate with the birth of the God-Man, the second with that of the perfect disciple—Mary. In the first annunciation, God, unheard by the priests in the Temple (Lk 1:20), turns to "that which the world despises" (1 Cor 1:28), a married woman from backwoods Nazareth (Jn 1:46), and asks her to become the mother of His Son (Lk 1:26-38). Fully trusting in God, Mary accepts the proposal which the divine messenger made to her and

her acceptance is the profound formulation of life that was inside her and which now can liberate and cause growth.

The second call arrives in a highly dramatic climate: among the entire family who had characterised Jesus as demented (Mk 3:21-35). From the perspective of the religious leaders, the Galilean presents himself as one sent by God (Lk 4:18-21), and comports himself as an enemy of God, by transgressing the most sacred precepts and commandments (Mk 3:5-22; 7:15-23), while the religious authorities grill him as a heretical blasphemer and demon possessed (Mt 9:3), according to the people he is only a crazy person to throw stones at (Jn 8:59).

The family's request to Jesus "Your mother and brothers are asking for you," is interrupted by Christ's cold retort: "Who is my mother?..."

For Jesus, his closest friends were only those who follow him and like him live the will of the Father translating it into an unconditional love open to all, despite religious, moral, or sexual categories (Lk 10:29-37).

Mary has to decide: either to stay with her family, who thinks Jesus is crazy, and save her reputation; or to follow the son known for being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 11:19).

In Nazareth, the Virgin was entrusted with the invitation extended by the Lord and through her acceptance the Messiah of God was born. In this second annunciation, more heartfelt and mature, Mary responds again with a Yes to the invitation to the fullness of life, which comes from the God-Man and which generates a new birth: her own.

She will now be the mother reborn by her son—a new birth that comes "from above" (Jn 3:3), from He who, lifted up on the cross, will transform his mother into a faithful disciple (Jn 19:25-27). The first annunciation was crowned with the beatitude with which the gospels open: "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:45); the second annunciation finds its formulation in the beatitude with which the gospels conclude: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn 20:29).

The birth of the Woman

While the annunciation in Nazareth culminates in Bethlehem, where the blazing light of the glory of the Lord wraps around the birth of the Son, with shepherds and magi in adoration (Lk 2:1-21; Mt 2:1-12), the other annunciation will be in the darkness of Jerusalem (Mk 15:33), where blasphemies and sneers accompany the death of Christ and the birth of the Woman (Mk 15:29-32; Jn 19:27).

The evangelist does not present a pain stricken mother under the cross, who stays close to her son even if he is a criminal, but rather as the courageous disciple that decided to follow the teacher, risking her own life, while the apostles, who had sworn to be ready to die for him (Mk 14:29-31), have cowardly vanished (Mt 26:56).

On Golgotha, rather than a mother that suffers for her child, John shows us instead the disciple that suffers with her Teacher, the Woman that shares in the pain of the “Man of sorrows” (Isa 53:3; Rom 8:17). Mary took up her cross and was placed next to the executed, against those who had crucified Him, forever siding with the oppressed and marginalized.

This was not easy for Mary.

To side herself with the crucified placed her against her own family and she had to break with the religion whose highest representative, the High Priest, had excommunicated Jesus (Mt 26:65; Mk 3:22). So, choosing the condemned, she had dared to put herself against the civil authorities that executed that Galilean as a dangerous revolutionary (Mt 27:38). At the cross, Mary actively adheres to the One who “overturns the powerful from their thrones” (Lk 1:52) —she stays with the victim of these powers and takes up her cross, that is, accepts it, like Jesus did, to be considered like the trash of society, so as not to be less than committed to being the presence of God’s love in the world (Mk 8:34).

The imagination of God

The cycle opened with the annunciation in Nazareth and closes with the image of the holy family united in an ever-growing love and with Mary who “treasures all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51-52). The other annunciation has its ideal crown in the new family of Mary, the community of Jerusalem, which continues to live out, together with all believers, the experience that began in Nazareth: the unheard God in the Sanctuary continues to effuse His life, the Spirit, to those marginalised from the Temple, to the community of Galilean heretics (Acts 1:14; 2:1ff).

In the end, Mary is “assumed” into heaven and she is the signature of God on the project of humanity that gets involved by the vital action of the Holy Spirit. This glorification is the destiny which Christ gave his brothers because, as Paul writes, those that follow the Lord “are seated in heaven, in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6), they are, like him, victors over death and they continue to live forever (Jn 11:25). For Mary, the assumption is the ordinary conclusion to an extraordinary life: from Nazareth she is always oriented toward life-enriching decisions, she entrusts herself to the imagination of that God who transforms everything into good (Rom 8:28), and turns stone into bread (Mt 7:9); a God that chooses the foolish things in the world to become an object of his love (1 Cor 1:27-30); and makes an anonymous young girl from an isolated village to be “proclaimed blessed by all generations” (Lk 1:48).