

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
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Today, in the midst of Lent, we stop to celebrate – with festivity – the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord! The theme of this Congress is “Do Whatever He tells You.” This demands accepting God’s will in our life and acting upon it. This is precisely what Mary did at the Annunciation, saying, “*I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your Word.*” In doing so, she conceived the Savior of the World.

Mary is the model of discipleship. Firstly, she recognizes that she is the disciple – the lowly handmaiden – not the Master. As a disciple, she is an attentive listener. Pope John Paul II called her “the woman of silence and listening.”

It is difficult to listen amidst the noise of our world. Earlier I spoke of the empty jar – in need of silence to hear God’s voice and to reflect. Mary had a spirituality of listening to the Word of God, deriving from the *Shema* (Dt 6:4): *Hear, O Israel!*

At the Annunciation, Gabriel would find her in silence and greet her. While many translations say, “Hail Mary, full of grace,” in Greek, the Angel says, “*Rejoice, full of grace.*” Hearing these words, Mary must have immediately thought of the words of Zephaniah (3:14-17): *Rejoice, daughter of Zion; shout for joy, Israel ... the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.*”

What was spoken once to a whole people was now uttered to her! It is interesting to note that in Greek, the words joy (*chará*) and grace (*charis*) go together. In her would be fulfilled the promise of the long-expected Messiah – the one who brings joy and grace to the world! She is to bear the Child who will be the Savior, the Son of God.

It was in silence and stillness, she received Gabriel’s joyful message. Unlike Zechariah, she does not refuse to believe, nor does she ask whether this will happen or become upset that it will happen; rather, she merely inquires how it will happen. She receives God’s Word and tries to understand its meaning for her life. Mary is a model for us of faith. She thought about how God’s plan might come about and asked: “*How shall this be?*” (Luke 1:34).

Her faith had grown over the years through an attentive listening to God, which allowed her to entrust herself to His plans for her life. She listened to the Word of God in order to abandon herself to His Word with her whole mind, heart, and will.

We learn from Mary that we find true joy in doing whatever He tells us – according to His plan and in His time. As disciples, at times we want our vocation on our terms. Mary teaches us that everything must be surrendered to God. This lesson is best learned in silence and contemplation.

The angel (and God) understood Mary’s question and told her: *Do not be afraid.*” One must imagine the burden, which she had to face in silence, knowing that she would carry God within her! Mary could say “*Let it be done to me according to Your Word*” because she knew that God would be carry her – support her, strength her. She would be willing to do whatever God told her; she freely and willingly surrendered herself, her will, to Him. She gave her consent.

She said Yes to God – a Yes which changed the world. If Eve brought sin into the world by listening to the voice of the serpent, now Mary, by listening to the voice of God, brings the Redeemer into the world. The Fathers of the Church say that “she conceived through her ears” – through attentive listening to God.

But once she conceived, she could not keep this Good News to herself; she hastened to meet Elizabeth. She is not simply a disciple, but she is also a missionary disciple! She gives us the example of a Church going forth. Mary arrived at an important decision to say Yes to God and later to visit Elizabeth, by taking her time and thinking things through. Commenting on this passage, Pope Francis reminds us:

“It is difficult in life to take decisions. We often tend to put them off, to let others decide instead. We frequently prefer to let ourselves be dragged along by events, to follow the current fashion; at times, we know what we ought to do but do not have the courage to do it, or it seems too difficult because it means swimming against the tide. In the Annunciation, in the Visitation ... Mary goes against the tide; she listens to God, she reflects and seeks to understand reality and decides to entrust herself totally to God. Although she is with child, she decides to visit her elderly relative and she decides to entrust herself to her Son with insistence so as to preserve the joy of the wedding feast.” (Address of the Holy Father, 31 May 2013)

Mary gives us the good example of listening and reflecting, so that we may reach a decision to take prophetic action. How necessary this is for the Church today – to be prophetic – in welcoming the gift of life, in welcoming the stranger, in building a culture of encounter! We see the difference her Yes to God made: it changed our world! She conceived the Savior! That is the joyful news of the feast!

It leaves us to ponder: what difference might our prophetic Yes make in our Church and our world?! It is not always easy to make the big decision or to be a prophet. In the dark moments, we must listen to the word of the Archangel Gabriel once more: “*Rejoice, full of grace!*”

To be prophets, we need God’s grace; therefore, I conclude with a prayer – the one with which we conclude the Angelus: *Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by his Cross, be brought to the glory of His resurrection, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.*