

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday, March 25, Annunciation Hebrews 2:11-18 Luke 1:24-38

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This year the Feast of the Annunciation falls on a Sunday of Lent, today. We are all very familiar with the Gospel reading appointed for this day, which is often read on feasts of the Theotokos, so this morning I'm going to speak about the less familiar but quite interesting Epistle which the liturgical Fathers have assigned for this Feast. I'll begin by reading it once again:

For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: "I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You." And again: "I will put My trust in Him." And again: "Here am I and the children whom God has given Me." Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.



As is the case with so many other passages in the New Testament, this one also refers back to important verses in the Old. Thus, the writer of this Epistle to the Hebrews quotes verse 22 from the 22nd Psalm; "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly will I sing praise to you." There then follow also two verses from the Book of Isaiah. This is consistent with the fact that this Epistle was intended for the Jews themselves, to demonstrate further that Jesus is The Christ, the Son of the Living God, and the prophesied Messiah of the Jews.

Some Church Fathers believe that this Epistle was written by St. Paul, others that it was written by one of Paul's disciples, at his command, and

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its composition has been dated to 63 A.D., before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem and before the martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul in Rome.

In this Epistle the writer invites us to grasp the reality of the brotherhood that exists between us and Christ *precisely because He came to dwell among us in the flesh*. We remember, therefore, that the Lord came to save those whose names were written *"in the book of life of the lamb slain from the foundation of the world"* (Rev. 13:8).

Jesus always saw us as His brothers and sisters in the flesh, and He made it clear that He came in order to reveal our common Father to us and to proclaim His Name and His authority and His plan for our salvation.

This “plan” was inaugurated on this Feast Day, the Annunciation, when the Holy Spirit of God overshadowed the pure Virgin Mary and she conceived the God-Man, Jesus Christ, in her womb.

It has always been interesting to me that although some of the angels of heaven fell through disobedience and rebellion, the Lord never chose to become *their* savior, but only *our* Savior. So He did not become angel, but a man, like unto us in every way except sin. This means that like us He suffered weariness, hunger, and temptation, pain. And by means of this taking on of our nature—which, again, begins on this Feast Day, the Annunciation—Jesus launched the plan for delivering us from bondage to death and Satan, the chief of the Fallen Angels—as this morning’s Epistle tells us: *“He Himself likewise shared in the same [nature as we], that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”*

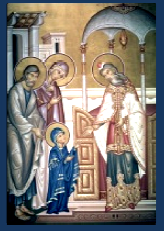
Therefore, this Feast Day is one of great rejoicing for believers, of great hope and gladness!

This, therefore, is truly a Feast of the Lord Jesus Christ, His conception in the flesh of the Virgin—but let us not forget that it is *also* a Feast of the Mother of God!

You see, brothers and sisters, in this sense the Virgin Mary was truly a *mediator*—or, more properly, a “mediatress”—between humankind and God Himself. Yes, and why? Because she provided a human nature for the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Without her solemn “yes”, then, on this day of the Annunciation, the Incarnation of the Son of God would not have occurred. Let us never forget that and the debt we owe her.

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Now, in general, Protestants firmly reject the important role of the Virgin in this incredible event—the Incarnation—or, at least, they play it down, not seeing Mary as a mediatrix at all and, in fact, disdaining this title because of the following verse in St. Paul’s Epistle to Timothy: “There is one God, and *one* (eis) Mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus...” (1 Tim 2:5-6).

Of course, clearly, St. Paul is emphasizing that Christ has the most important and transcendent role as the Mediator with God the Father because of His redeeming death on the Cross and His third day resurrection. No one disputes that. But isn’t it interesting that Paul uses the Greek word “eis” for “one” instead of “monos” meaning “only” or “alone”—therefore not *at all* excluding the possibility of other lesser mediators with God?

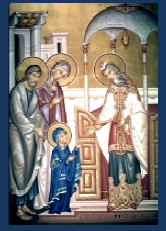
Let us turn now to the historical record. Beginning even in the second century after Christ—that is, within a hundred years of the Ascension of the Lord into heaven and the later death of His dear Mother—the generation of the Apostolic Fathers—that is, those who had known and been instructed by the Apostles and Evangelists themselves—already began to speak openly and plainly of the crucial role of the Virgin as mediatrix. All of this exists in the documentation that has come down to us from those times. One can find these clear explanations even in the volumes of non-Orthodox scholars and historians. The fact that this seems to be unknown to many Western Christians is a mystery to me. Evidently Church history is not of interest to them. Protestants need only consult these documents to see that this was indeed the earliest teaching and firmly held belief of the Christian Church and not some later invention.

In the 5th century, a Holy Father of the Church, St. Proklos, Patriarch of Constantinople, who was a close friend of St. John Chrysostom, preached a famous sermon on the Annunciation, which was later included in the dogmatic Acts of the Council of Ephesus, therefore giving it conciliar authority for all of us since that time.

In this wise sermon St. Proklos made the following statements, which I wish to share with you on this Feast Day:

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“Our present gathering,” said the saint, “in honor of the Most Holy Virgin inspires me, brethren, to say of Her a word of praise, of benefit also for those come unto this churchly solemnity.

“It comprises a praise of women, a glorying of their gender, which (glory) is brought it by Her, She Who is at one same time both Mother, and Virgin. O desired and wondrous gathering! Celebrate, O nature, that wherein honor be rendered to Woman; rejoice, O human race, that wherein the Virgin be glorified....The Holy Mother of God and Virgin Mary hath gathered us here, She the pure treasure of virginity, the intended paradise of the Second Adam -- the locus, wherein was accomplished the co-uniting of natures, wherein was affirmed the Counsel of salvific reconciliation.

“Whoever is it that ever saw, whoever heard, that within a womb the Limitless God would make habitation, Whom the Heavens cannot circumscribe, Whom the womb of a Virgin cannot limit!?” And this, by the way, is the reason we Orthodox gave the Virgin the title “More Spacious than the Heavens”—because she contained the Uncontainable God within herself. To continue:

“...The Lover-of-Mankind did not disdain to be born of woman, since this gave Him life. He was not subject to impurity, being settled within the womb, which He Himself arrayed free from all harm. If perchance this Mother did not remain a Virgin, then that born of Her might be a mere man, and the birth would be no wise miraculous; but since she after birth remained a Virgin, then how is He Who is born indeed -- *not* God? It is an inexplicable mystery, since in an inexplicable manner was born He Who without hindrance went through doors when they were locked. [Thus] when confessing in Him the co-uniting of two natures, Thomas cried out: ‘My Lord, and my God!’ (John 20:28)....

“We can be persuaded in this by the very name of the Archangel making annunciation to Mary: his name -- is Gabriel. What does this name mean? -- it means: ‘God and man.’ Since That One about Whom he announced *is* God and Man, then his very name points beforehand to this miracle...To save people would be impossible for a mere man, since every man has need of the Savior: ‘for all, -- says Saint Paul, -- have sinned, and come short the Glory of God’ (Rom 3:23)....Thus know...that having settled within the womb of the Virgin, [Jesus] clothed Himself in my fate....

“But tell us even more clearly, O prophet, Who is He? *The Lord is the God of Hosts*, says the prophet: ‘God is the Lord, and hath revealed Himself unto us’ (Ps 117[118]:27). ‘he Word was made flesh’ (John 1:14): there were co-united the two natures, and the union remained without mingling....”

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This, then, brothers and sisters, is the great mystery that we, with such great joy and delight, contemplate on this Feast of the Annunciation.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.