

## QUESTION 30

### The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin

Next we have to consider the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Was it fitting for what was going to be begotten in her to be announced to her? (2) By whom should this have been announced to her? (3) In what way should this have been announced to her? (4) What about the ordering of the Annunciation?

#### Article 1

##### Was it necessary for what was going to be brought about in the Blessed Virgin to be announced to her?

It seems that it was not necessary for what was going to be brought about in the Blessed Virgin to be announced to her (*non fuerit necessarium beatae virgini annuntiari quod in ea fiendum erat*):

**Objection 1:** An annunciation seemed necessary only in order for the virgin's consent to be obtained. But her consent does not seem to have been necessary, since, as a certain Gloss on Matthew 1:22 explains, the virgin's conceiving had been announced beforehand by a prophecy "of predestination, which is fulfilled without our will (*sine nostro completur arbitrio*).” Therefore, it was not necessary for such an annunciation to be made.

**Objection 2:** The Blessed Virgin had faith in the Incarnation, without which no one was able to be in the state of salvation, since, as Romans 3:22 says, "The justice of God comes through the faith of Jesus Christ." But if an individual believes a given thing with certitude, then he does not need to be instructed any further. Therefore, it was not necessary for the Blessed Virgin that the Incarnation should be announced to her.

**Objection 3:** Just as the Blessed Virgin conceived Christ *corporeally*, so every holy individual conceives Him *spiritually*; this is why in Galatians 4:19 the Apostle says, "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." But such a conception is not announced to those who are supposed to conceive Him spiritually. Therefore, neither did it need to be announced to the Blessed Virgin that she was going to conceive the Son of God in her womb.

**But contrary to this** is what we find in Luke 1:31, viz., that the angel said to her, "Behold, you shall conceive in your womb and bring forth a son."

**I respond:** It was fitting for it to be announced to the Blessed Virgin that she was going to conceive Christ:

First of all, in order to preserve a fitting order in the union of the Son of God with the virgin, so that, namely, her mind was instructed about Him before she conceived Him in the flesh. Hence, in *De Virginitate* Augustine says, "Mary is more blessed in receiving the faith of Christ than in conceiving the flesh of Christ." And later he adds: "Her closeness as a mother would have done her no good if had she not carried Christ in her heart in a more fruitful way (*felicius*) than in her flesh."

Second, in order that she could be a more certain witness of this mystery (*certior testis huius sacramentum*) once she had been divinely instructed on this matter.

Third, in order that she might offer the voluntary gift of her compliance with God. To this end, she offered herself as ready by saying, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38).

Fourth, in order that it might be shown that there is a certain spiritual marriage between the Son of God and human nature. And so what was being sought through the Annunciation was the consent of the virgin standing in for the whole of human nature.

**Reply to objection 1:** A prophecy of predestination is fulfilled without our will *causing* it, but not

without our will *consenting to it*.

**Reply to objection 2:** The Blessed Virgin had explicit faith in the Incarnation that was going to happen in the future, but, since she was humble, she did not envision such high things as having to do with herself. And so she had to be instructed about this matter.

**Reply to objection 3:** The spiritual conception of Christ, which comes through faith, is preceded by an annunciation, which comes through the preaching of the Faith, insofar as “faith comes through hearing,” as Romans 10:17 says. And yet the individual does not thereby know for certain that he himself has grace, but knows instead that the Faith which he accepts is true.

## Article 2

### Was it fitting for the annunciation to be made to the Blessed Virgin by an angel?

It seems that it was not fitting for the annunciation to be made to the Blessed Virgin by an angel (*beatae virgini non debuerit annuntiatio fieri per angelum*):

**Objection 1:** As Dionysius explains in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 7, revelation is made by God to the highest angels without mediation (*immediate*). But the Mother of God is exalted above all the angels. Therefore, it seems that the mystery of the Incarnation should have been announced to her by God without mediation and not through an angel.

**Objection 2:** If in this matter it was necessary to preserve the usual order, according to which divine things are revealed to men through angels, then, similarly, divine things are to be conveyed to a woman by a man; this is why the Apostle says in 1 Corinthians 14:35, “Let women remain silent in the churches, and if they want to find out about something, let them ask their husbands at home.” Therefore, it seems that the mystery of the Incarnation should have been announced to the Blessed Virgin by a man—especially given that, as Matthew 1:20-21 reports, Joseph, her husband, had been instructed in this matter by an angel.

**Objection 3:** No one can fittingly announce what he is ignorant of. But the highest angels did not fully know the mystery of the Incarnation; hence, in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 7 Dionysius claims that the question posed in Isaiah 63:1—“Who is this who comes out of Edom?”—should be understood to be asked in the person of the angels. Therefore, it seems that the annunciation of the Incarnation could not have been fittingly made by any angel.

**Objection 4:** Greater things should be announced by greater messengers. But the mystery of the Incarnation is greater than all the other mysteries that have been announced to men by angels. Therefore, it seems that if it was going to be announced by some angel, it should have been announced by an angel from the highest order of angels. Gabriel, however, does not belong to the highest order, but instead belongs to the order of archangels, which is the second lowest order; hence, the Church sings, “We know that the archangel Gabriel spoke to you from God.” Therefore, it was not fitting for this annunciation to be made by the archangel Gabriel.

**But contrary to this:** Luke 1:26 says, “The angel Gabriel was sent by God, etc.”

**I respond:** It was fitting for the mystery of the divine Incarnation to be announced to the Mother of God by an angel—and this for three reasons:

First of all, in order to preserve, in this matter as well, the divine ordering, according to which divine things reach men through the mediation of angels. Hence, in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 4 Dionysius says, “The angels were the first to be taught the divine mystery of Jesus’s kindness; afterwards, the grace of knowledge passed through them to us. So, then, the most godlike Gabriel taught

Zachary that a prophet was going to come from him, whereas he taught Mary how the divine mystery of the ineffable formation of God was going to be effected within her.”

Second, this was fitting for the human renewal (*reparation humanae*) that was going to occur through Christ. Hence, in a homily Bede says, “It was an apt beginning of human restoration (*aptum humanae restaurationis principium*) for an angel to be sent to consecrate the virgin for a divine birth, since the first cause of human perdition had occurred when a serpent was sent by the devil to deceive the woman with a spirit of pride.”

Third, because it fits in with the virginity of the Mother of God. Hence, in a sermon for the Assumption Jerome says, “It is good that an angel is sent to the virgin, since virginity has an affinity to the angels. Surely, to live in the flesh and yet beyond the flesh is a heavenly life and not an earthly life.”

**Reply to objection 1:** The Mother of God was higher than the angels as regards the dignity for which she was chosen by God. But as regards her status in the present life, she was lower than the angels. For even Christ Himself, by reason of His passible life, “was made a little lower than the angels,” as Hebrews 2:9 says. Still, because Christ was both a wayfarer and a comprehender, He did not need to be instructed by the angels as regards His cognition of divine things. By contrast, His mother was not yet in the state of a comprehender. And so she had to be instructed by angels about the divine conception.

**Reply to objection 2:** As Augustine explains in a sermon on the Assumption, the Blessed Virgin Mary is, by a true assessment, excepted from certain general rules: “For she did not multiply her conceptions, and she, who in her spotless womb received Christ by the Holy Spirit, was not under the power of a man”—i.e., of her husband. Again, because of this she was likewise instructed before Joseph; for she was instructed before the conception, whereas Joseph was instructed after her conception.

**Reply to objection 3:** As is clear from the passage cited from Dionysius, the angels knew of the mystery of the Incarnation, but they nonetheless ask their question, wishing to learn more perfectly from Christ the reasons behind this mystery, which are incomprehensible to every created intellect. Hence, Maximus explains, “There should not be any dispute about whether the angels knew that the Incarnation was going to occur. But the inscrutable conception of our Lord was hidden from them, along with the manner in which He remained wholly in the Father, wholly in all things, and wholly in the narrow confines of the virgin.”

**Reply to objection 4:** Some claim that Gabriel was of the highest order [of angels], and this because Gregory says, “It was fitting for the highest angel to come, because he announced the greatest news of all.” However, from this it follows not that he was the highest among all the orders, but only that he was higher than the [order of] Angels, given that he belonged to the order of Archangels. Hence, the Church calls him an archangel, and, in the homily *De Centum Ovibus*, Gregory himself says, “They are called archangels who announce the greatest things.” Therefore, it is sufficiently credible that Gabriel is the highest in the order of Archangels. And, as Gregory notes, his name fits his role: “For the name ‘Gabriel’ means ‘the strength of God’ (*Dei fortitudo*). Therefore, it was going to be announced by the strength of God that the Lord of hosts and mighty in battle was coming to vanquish the high powers (*potestates aeras*).”

### Article 3

#### Was it fitting for the announcing angel to appear to the virgin by a bodily vision?

It seems that it was not fitting for the announcing angel to appear to the virgin by a bodily vision (*angelus annuntians non debuerit virgini apparere visione corporali*):

**Objection 1:** As Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, “An intellectual vision is more worthy than a bodily vision,” and an intellectual vision is especially more fitting for an angel himself. For an angel sees by intellectual vision within his own substance, whereas he sees by bodily vision in an assumed bodily shape. But just as it was fitting for the highest messenger to come in order to announce the divine conception, so, too, it seems that it would likewise have been fitting for there to be the highest kind of vision. Therefore, it seems that the announcing angel appeared to the virgin by an intellectual vision.

**Objection 2:** A vision in the imagination (*visio imaginaria*) seems to be more noble than a bodily vision, just as the imagination is a higher power than a sensory power (*imaginatio est altior potentia quam sensus*). But as is clear from Matthew 1:20 and 2:13 and 2:19, an angel appeared to Joseph in his dreams by a vision in the imagination. Therefore, it seems that an angel should likewise have appeared to Mary by a vision in the imagination and not by a bodily vision.

**Objection 3:** The bodily vision of a spiritual substance stuns the seers; hence, even of the virgin herself we sing, “... and the virgin was afraid of the light (*et expavescit virgo de lumine*).” But it would have been better for her mind to be preserved from such a disturbance. Therefore, it was not fitting for this sort of annunciation to be made through a bodily vision.

**But contrary to this:** In a certain sermon Augustine represents the Blessed Virgin as saying this: “The archangel Gabriel came to me with a reddish face, a gleaming robe, and a remarkable entry.” But these features can belong only to a bodily vision. Therefore, the announcing angel appeared to the Blessed Virgin by a bodily vision.

**I respond:** The announcing angel appeared to the Mother of God by a bodily vision.

And this was fitting, first of all, because of what was being announced. For the angel had come to announce the incarnation of the invisible God. Hence, it was likewise fitting that for the declaration of this reality an invisible creature should assume a form in which he appeared visibly. For all the apparitions of the Old Testament were ordered toward this apparition by which the Son of God appeared in the flesh.

Second, it fit in with the dignity of the Mother of God, who was going to receive the Son of God not only in her mind, but also in her bodily womb. And so not only her mind but also her bodily senses were to be stimulated by her seeing the angel (*sensus corporei erant visione angelica refovendi*).

Third, it fits in with the certainty of what was being announced. For we apprehend with more certainty those things that are subject to our eyes than those things that we imagine. Hence, in *Super Matthaicum* Chrysostom explains that the angel “stood near the virgin not in her dreams but, indeed, visibly. For since she was receiving from the angel an exceedingly great message, she needed a solemn vision before the unfolding of such a great reality.”

**Reply to objection 1:** Intellectual vision, if taken by itself, is more powerful than the vision in the imagination or bodily vision. But Augustine himself claims that a prophecy is more excellent if it contains an intellectual vision and a vision in the imagination together than if it contains just one of them.

Now the Blessed Virgin perceived not only a bodily vision but an intellectual illumination as well. Hence, such an appearance was more noble. However, it would have been more noble if she had seen the angel himself by an intellectual vision in his own substance. But seeing an angel through his essence was not compatible with the status of a human wayfarer.

**Reply to objection 2:** The imagination is, to be sure, a more powerful power than an exterior sensory power. Yet since sensation is the beginning of human cognition, a greater certitude rests in it; for it is always necessary that the beginnings of a cognition should be more certain. And so Joseph, to whom the angel appeared in dreams, did not have as excellent an apparition as the Blessed Virgin did.

**Reply to objection 3:** As Ambrose says in *Super Lucam*, “We are disturbed and estranged from

our affections when we are restricted by an encounter with a superior power.” And this happens not only in the case of a bodily vision but also in the case of a vision in the imagination. Hence, Genesis 15:12 says, “When the sun was low in the sky, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great and dark horror seized upon him.” But this sort of disturbance in a man does not harm the man to such an extent that the appearance of an angel should be neglected because of it.

First of all, because by the very fact that the man is elevated beyond himself, which involves his dignity, his lower parts are weakened, and it is because of this that the aforementioned disturbance arises; in the same way, when the body’s natural heat recedes into its interior parts, its exterior parts tremble.

Second, because as Origen says in *Super Lucam*, “The angel who appears, knowing that this is human nature, first of all remedies the disturbance.” Hence, in the case of both Zachariah and Mary, after the disturbance he said, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 1:13, 30). And because of this, as we read in *Vita Antonii*, “It is not difficult to distinguish good spirits from evil spirits. For if joy follows upon the fear, we know that this assistance has come from the Lord, since the security of the soul is a judgment of the presence of majesty. On the other hand, if the inflicted fear remains, it is an enemy who is being seen.” Again, the very fact that the virgin is disturbed fits in with her virginal modesty. For as Ambrose says in *Super Lucam*, “It is the part of virgins to be fearful, and to be afraid of any advance by a man, and to draw back upon being addressed by a man.”

Still, there are others who claim that because the Blessed Virgin was accustomed to visions of angels, she was disturbed not by seeing the angel, but in marveling over the things that were being said by the angel, since she was not thinking of such magnificent things as involving herself. And this is why the evangelist says that she was troubled not by seeing the angel, but “at his word” (Luke 1:29).

#### Article 4

##### Was the Annunciation carried out in the right order?

It seems that the Annunciation was not carried out in the right order (*Annuntiatio non fuerit convenienti ordine perfecta*):

**Objection 1:** The dignity of the Mother of God depends on her conceived offspring. But a cause ought to be manifested before its effect. Therefore, the angel should have announced the conception of the offspring first, before expressing her dignity by saluting her.

**Objection 2:** A proof should be either (a) omitted, as in the case of things that are not doubtful, or else (b) given first, as in the case of things that can be doubted. But it seems that the angel first announced what the virgin was doubtful about, and in her doubt she asked, “How will this be done?” And after that he added the proof, both by appeal to the example of Elizabeth and by appeal to the omnipotence of God. Therefore, the Annunciation was carried out by the angel in the wrong order.

**Objection 3:** What is greater cannot be sufficiently proved by what is lesser. But it was greater for a virgin to give birth than for an older woman to give birth. Therefore, the angel’s proof was insufficient, because he proved the virgin’s conceiving by appeal to the older woman’s conceiving.

**But contrary to this:** Romans 13:1 says, “Things that come from God are well ordered (*quae a Deo sunt, ordinata sunt*).” But as Luke 1:26 says, the angel “was sent by God” to make an announcement to the virgin. Therefore, the Annunciation was carried out by the angel in an extremely well ordered manner.

**I respond:** The Annunciation was carried out by the angel in an appropriate order. For there are three things that the angel intended as regards the virgin:

First of all, he intended to render her mind attentive to the consideration of such a great reality. He

did this by saluting her with a somewhat novel and unusual salutation. Hence, in *Super Lucam* Origen says, “If she, who presumably had knowledge of the Law, had known that similar words had been addressed to someone else, such a strange salutation would never have worried her.” In that salutation he first pronounced her fitness for the conception by saying, “Full of grace.” Then he expressed the conception by saying, “The Lord is with you.” And then he announced in advance the honor that would follow, when he said, “Blessed are you among women.”

Now, second, he intended to instruct her concerning the mystery of the Incarnation, which was to be fulfilled in her. He did this by announcing in advance the conception and birth by saying, “Behold, you shall conceive in your womb, etc.,” and by disclosing the dignity of the conceived offspring, when he said, “He shall be great, etc.,” and also by revealing the manner of the conception, when he said, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you.”

Third, he intended to lead her mind to an act of consent (*intendebat animum eius inducere ad consensum*). He did this by appeal to the example of Elizabeth and by a line of reasoning taken from God’s omnipotence.

**Reply to objection 1:** To a humble mind there is nothing more strange (*mirabilius*) than hearing of its own excellence. But astonishment (*admiratio*) fixes the mind’s attention to the highest degree. And this is why the angel, who wanted to render the virgin’s mind attentive to hearing about such a great mystery, began by praising her (*ab eius laude incoepit*).

**Reply to objection 2:** In *Super Lucam* Ambrose explicitly claims that the Blessed Virgin *did not* doubt the angel’s words. For, he says, “Mary’s response is more temperate than the words of the priest [Zachariah]. This one says, “How shall this be done?” That one replies, “How shall I know this?” He denies that he believes, because he denies that he knows this. She does not doubt that it is going to be done; she asks *how* it is going to be done.”

By contrast, Augustine seems to claim that she *did* doubt. For in *De Quaestionibus Veteris et Novi Testamenti* he says, “To Mary, who is in doubt about the conception, the angel explains its possibility.” But this sort of doubt stems more from astonishment than from incredulity. And so the angel introduces his proof not in order to drive away disbelief, but in order to remove her astonishment.

**Reply to objection 3:** As Ambrose says in *Hexaemeron*, “The reason why many sterile women had preceded [Mary] was in order that the virginal birth might be believed in.” And so sterile Elizabeth’s conceiving was cited not as a sufficient argument, but as a sort of symbolic example. And this is why, in order to confirm this example, an efficacious argument appealing to God’s omnipotence is added.