

My friends in Christ, we are now four weeks into our Parochial Year for Evangelization – a year *hopefully* that will enlighten our minds, enflame our souls, and inspire our lives so as to be active and intentional disciples of Jesus Christ...that we may be made even stronger, more effective in our every effort to proclaim the Gospel and evangelize the nations. As I mentioned on Christ the King, four weeks ago, to become *evangelists*...we must first become *disciples*. And so as our Advent journey concludes and Christmas very soon begins, we continue this theme of discipleship.

My Pastor Column way back at the beginning of the month offered us our first “Tip of the Month” for our Year for Evangelization: *knowing* Jesus (and *knowing* Mary). Knowing Jesus *through* knowing Mary. Because as I seem to keep saying: in order to evangelize effectively and thus share the joy of the Gospel with family and friends in the hope and expectation of bearing much fruit in our labor, we must first *know* Him Whom we strive to proclaim; because we cannot give what (and *Who*) we do not have. We must *have* a deeply personal relationship with Jesus in order that we may reasonably hope and expect then to *give* (and *share*) that relationship with others.

And Mother Mary is our model *par excellence* for *knowing* Jesus; hence why I have appealed to her to be our first “Saint of the Month” for this Year for Evangelization. And it just so happens on this day that we are given my very favorite Scripture text for our Gospel passage today, Saint Luke’s record of the Annunciation. Here in this Gospel scene, we are given a tremendous account of how Mary truly is the perfect model of knowing Jesus...and thus, the perfect model of discipleship.

At the Annunciation after the Archangel’s unprecedented proclamation, the Blessed Mother conceived her Son by the power of the Holy Spirit; and Christ the Lord, the Word of God, thus was made flesh in her immaculate womb, so as to make His dwelling among us.

This is a great mystery; indeed, among world religions in all the world in all of history, it is, perhaps, the *greatest* mystery. For no other religion or faith tradition has ever dared to profess that glorious truth that *God*...became *human*; that rather than despising the material realm – rather than

shunning it as evil – God actually condescended so as to *embrace* it, to become *one* with it – become one of *us*; warts and weakness and whatever *else* makes humanity so darn pathetic – but God really would, really *did*, become one of us, being made flesh so as to make His dwelling among us. God *needed* to do this, you see, so as to save us – save us from ourselves, from our sinfulness; for if we were to have even a shadow of a chance to be saved from eternal damnation, then it was sure *not* going to happen because of *us*, our *own* merit, our *own* power.... No, we need *God* to save us; we *needed* God to be made flesh and live among us.

This is a great mystery; this is the key to salvation; this is the last ditch-effort for humanity, history, all the world, all of Creation to be redeemed.... The Lord *needed* to do this if His Creation were to be saved; He needed to do this if such a wondrous, miraculous project called the Created Order were to be worthwhile.... And yet, though this *needed* to be done, even then, God was not going to force it; Mary was not going to be forced into submission.... And so, we turn to Mary's part to play in all of this; and I propose to you that in this Gospel scene of the Annunciation, we find three qualities of perfect discipleship that are portrayed in the Blessed Mother.

First, there is her obedience of faith; the *Catechism* teaches us that “at the announcement that she would give birth to ‘the Son of the Most High’ without knowing man, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary responded with the obedience of faith.” For “nothing will be impossible for God.”

However, it appears that Mary experiences some measure of doubt – insofar as she does not understand and is at a complete loss in this cloud of divine mystery. “How can this be,” she says to the Archangel Gabriel. But even if we were to think of this question as an instance of doubt, it was not a doubt of cynicism and skepticism...but rather one of uncertainty, of not knowing yet wanting to know; it is a matter of faith-seeking-understanding. Yet, we can still view her to be the model of perfect discipleship, despite this crucial question that she asks. What does that tell us? One, that it is okay to ask God questions, provided that what we are after in asking these questions is the truth,

that our faith be informed – and thus nourished and strengthened – with understanding. And two, that *faith* certainly is a necessary quality of perfect discipleship...yet understanding is not. As Saint Paul teaches us in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “We walk by *faith*...*not* by sight.” That is, *not* by *understanding*.... The Archangel had told her *not* to be afraid, and so, she was *not* afraid – *not* afraid to ask God questions, *not* afraid to engage the Lord in faith-filled dialogue (or what we call “prayer”), and in the end, *not* afraid to surrender herself to God in perfect obedience of faith.

The second quality of perfect discipleship: consent and free will. The Lord does have every reason there is to expect each of us fully to obey His most holy will...but as I say, He does not *force* us to obey *His* will against *our* will. He created us; He created us to be fully human, fully alive. And a crucial component of what it means fully to be human – an important part of what makes each of us the *Imago Dei*, the “image and likeness of God,” is that we are blessedly endowed with the gift of free will. To force conformity to *His* will in violation of *our* free will frankly would be tantamount I think to destroying our humanity, reducing us to the level of robots. But the Lord did not create us just to destroy us, and He knew full well that creating us human, creating us with free will, runs the risk that we may freely choose *not* to obey His will. And this, we call “sin.”

No wonder all of Creation was frozen still with baited breath, anxiously waiting to see how Mary would respond to God’s will for her! And thanks be to God that she said “yes.” Because if she had said “no,” well...who knows where we would be?

And so, with her *fiat*, her “be it done unto me,” her “yes” to God’s will for her, once again, she shows us that perfect discipleship means that we consent to God’s will for us, that we exercise our God-given free will rightly, properly – not abusing it in some damnable spirit of licentiousness but using it as the Lord intends for us to use it: by *freely* choosing to conform *our* will to His own.

And the third quality of perfect discipleship found in Mary: total gift of self. The *Catechism* teaches us that Mary, “espousing the divine will for salvation wholeheartedly, [and] without a single

sin to restrain her...gave herself entirely to the Person and to the work of her Son.” And “she did so in order to serve the mystery of redemption with Him...by God’s grace.” Adding to that, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI says that she “offered her own flesh, her own blood to Jesus and became a living tent of the Word.” In a certain sense, she is “totally emptied of herself; she has given herself entirely to Christ and with Him is given as a gift to us all.” Would that all of us would surrender to God’s will, that all of us would offer unto God the total gift of self! Would that we might all of us see ourselves as clay in the hands of the Potter to do with us as He wills!

May it be, then, that we find in Mother Mary a supreme model of perfect discipleship, that we appeal constantly to her unceasing intercession on our behalf to cooperate with God’s grace to grow in our obedience of faith, our right and proper consent and exercise of our free will, and our commitment to total gift of self. May it be that the Word of God, in the Scripture proclaimed and in the Sacrament received, strengthen us always and everywhere in this most holy endeavor, that at the end of days, we, like Mother Mary, would be declared by the Lord to be full of grace and so be received by every angel and saint and the Lord Himself in halls of heavenly realms.