

March 2010

Dear Friends of the Missions,

We are in the midst of Lent and Spring is about to begin. During this time the Church supports and sustains those who are preparing for Baptism at the Easter Vigil, and the rest of us continue our preparation for Easter

On March 7, 14 and 21, the Scrutinies are celebrated for the Elect. These are moments of intense prayer by the community for those who will be baptized. During the third week of Lent, the Creed is presented to those preparing, and during the fifth week, the Lord's Prayer is presented. This way when the elect are baptized and join us in the liturgy they will be able to profess faith with us and pray with us the Lord's Prayer, the true prayer of the faithful. Try to make time to share in these rites as a way of supporting the community and helping to prepare those who will be initiated at the Easter Vigil (and make plans to join in the celebration of the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday--April 3).

The two big feasts of the month are St. Joseph on March 19 and the Annunciation of the Lord on March 25. During Lent, try to participate in the devotions that are taking place in your parish, especially the Stations of the Cross. Holy Week begins with the celebration of Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion on March 28.

Use Lent well. The traditional Lenten practices are a great support on our journey to Easter. As you take extra time for prayer, please remember the missions. We will keep you in our prayers hoping that Lent will be a time of renewal, a new Spring. Thank you for all you do for the missions, we all are grateful.

The Annunciation of the Lord

Fr. Russell Becker, OFM

Today is the beginning of our salvation, the revelation of the eternal mystery: the Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin as Gabriel announces the coming of grace. Together with him let us cry to the One who bore God: Rejoice, O Full of Grace, the Lord is with you!
(Byzantine Hymn for the Feast)

March 25 celebrates the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord. This is one of the great festivals associated with the Incarnation Cycle. As the liturgical year unfolds, there are many celebrations that keep the mystery of the Incarnation before us (Christmas, Presentation of the Lord, Birth of John the Baptist, many feasts of Mary, but the first and foremost festival of the Incarnation cycle is the Annunciation.). These are celebrations of God keeping faith with humanity. This faithfulness always restores hope to us even in the most hopeless of times. (We always need a little Christmas!)

History. The development of the feast is very interesting. Originally the Annunciation was commemorated in Advent. In most Churches of the West, it was remembered on the Sunday before Christmas. When the date of Christmas was set on December 25, and John the Baptist was celebrated on June 24, the dating of the feast of the Annunciation took on a more temporal aspect. Nine months before the birth of the Lord the Church remembered that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Scripture recalls that Elizabeth (John's mother) was in her sixth month. But there is some scholarship that says that Christmas was celebrated in December because the Annunciation (The Word became flesh) was celebrated in Spring.

In early Christian times, calendars made March 25 a special day. It was calculated as the day of the Spring Equinox. Various Traditions consider this day the day that creation began, the day the people of Israel were set free from slavery, and the day of the crucifixion and death of the Lord. Easter quickly was calculated according to the first full moon after the Spring equinox. For some places, it was also considered the beginning of the civil year. But, by the seventh century, the celebration of the Annunciation was assigned to the day. The transformation of humanity began with the conception of Jesus, not the birth of Jesus. The crucifixion, death and resurrection of the Lord were then calculated as moveable feasts according to Spring Equinox and the rising of the moon, similar to the way the Jews calculated Passover.

So the festival appears in the midst of Lent as a reminder of the mystery of the incarnation. In some years it may fall on a Sunday in Lent, then it is transferred to the following Monday. If it falls in Holy Week or the Octave of Easter, it is transferred to the Monday after the Octave of Easter with a definite Easter tone.

The Liturgy. Even though the Alleluia is forbidden during Lent, this celebration has a very festal atmosphere. The rubrics call for both the Glory to God and the Creed. The kneeling or genuflecting rubric for the section of the Creed which speaks of the Incarnation is the same as at Christmas. This is a feast of the Lord, but Mary plays a very important role in this feast. The Promised One comes because Mary kept faith with God.

The reading from Isaiah is the traditional prophecy of Emmanuel. Mary is the virgin who will conceive and bear a Son. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the breadth of salvation history is recounted. Luke's Gospel story recalls the Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her that she will be the mother of God's Son. She trusts in God and her *let it be done!* (*Fiat*) is exactly that for which God had been waiting. The promise is being kept and the angel reminds us that *nothing is impossible with God.*

The Angelus. One of the devotions which is associated with this feast is the praying of the *Angelus* three times a day. It consists of verses and responses, Hail Marys and a collect. It is a substitute for the little Hours of the Liturgy of the Hours. People who were not in monasteries and did not have access to liturgical books could still punctuate the day with prayer.

The devotion probably originated in the thirteenth century and was fairly common throughout the

Church by the seventeenth century. Most often it is accompanied by the ringing of the church bells. One writer believes that it may have been encouraged at the time when Europe was threatened by Islam. People were asked to pray for peace and protection. Some even think that the idea may have come from the Islamic tradition of being called to prayer at certain times during the day. Some believe it was St. Francis who recommended this after visiting the Saracens.

It is called *Angelus* because of the first word of the Latin prayer. The verses and responses are taken from antiphons for the Solemnity of the Annunciation. As the people pray this prayer, they are recalling the great mystery of the incarnation and the passion death and resurrection of the Lord. Outside of the Easter Season, the emphasis is on the Incarnation: three times a day we are reminded of the promise which is ours in the incarnation and fulfilled in the paschal mystery. It is a prayer for peace, a prayer reminding us of our possibilities, seeking to be a disciple like Mary and expressing our gratitude to God for God's faithfulness.

During the Easter Season the *Angelus* is replaced by the *Regina Coeli*. This prayer highlights the Easter Mystery which celebrates the fulfillment of the Incarnation. This is an interesting devotion since it is one of the few traditional devotions which actually associates itself with the liturgical season. It adapts to Easter. The *Regina Coeli* includes alleluias and is always prayed standing (the traditional posture for Easter). During the rest of the year, the *Angelus* is prayed kneeling during the week and standing on Saturdays, Sundays, the Christmas season and Solemnities.

Reflection. The traditional summary of the meaning of the Incarnation by the early Church theologians is the *God became human so that humans might become God*. There is such optimism in this statement and such a rich proclamation of the generous and gracious love of God. What God is by nature, humans will share by grace in Jesus Christ. The challenge to us is to accept this as a gift, and not try to grasp after it as if we deserved or earned it. **IT IS GIFT!**

The Tradition reflects back to the garden when Adam and Eve were not satisfied and were tempted to believe God was holding something back from them, that they could take and become like God. Giving in to this temptation left them and all who followed after them outside of the place where God meant them to be. God was faithful but humanity followed a history of unfaithfulness. God chose to wait for us to be able to cooperate in our restoration. Mary is the one who is the instrument of the fulfillment of God's promise, because she would keep faith with God. The Son of God becomes flesh and through his birth, passion, death and resurrection offers us a way back, restores our possibilities, leads us back to Paradise. What our ancestors tried to take is freely given by God.

There are two wonderful quotes from the tradition of the Eastern Church which remind us of the meaning of the feast and worth becoming part of our prayer:

Of old Adam was fooled; wishing to become God, he failed. But now God becomes human to make Adam God [Byzantine Hymn for the feast].

In these days when the world was being created, when God pronounced the life-giving and powerful words, "Let it be!" the words of the Creator made creatures appear out of nothing. But on this unique day, when the divine Mary pronounced her brief and obedient "Let it be so!" I hardly dare say what happened then—the word of a creature caused the Creator to come into our world [Homily of Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow, 1874].

Reflection Questions:

1. What does the relationship between Lent, Easter and Spring mean to you?
2. How well do we keep faith with the God who is always faithful?
3. Can we follow the example of Mary and always say "yes" to God?
4. Do you really believe the words of the angel: nothing is impossible with God?
5. What new beginnings do you hope for? What new beginnings can you share or give to others?

Please remember our friar missionaries who celebrate birthdays this month:

March 9: Fr. Donnon Murray, O.F.M. (Japan)

March 26: Fr. Callistus Sweeney, O.F.M. (Japan)

May God bless them with peace, energy and happiness!

Please keep our present and former missionaries who are ill in your prayers:

Fr. Ignatius McGeedy, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Aloysius Siracuse, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)

Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Home Missions)

Fr. Stanislaus Widomski, O.F.M. (Japan)

May God give them health, strength and peace!