



ANNUNCIATION

On Tuesday morning March 25, we begin the third week of Great Lent. That Means that two weeks have passed. One possible response is: already? Another possible response is: is that all?! Perhaps our experience hovers in between those two poles. The journey before us is another four weeks and then Holy Week and Pascha. Therefore, the challenge remains and even intensifies as our initial enthusiasm for the lenten season may begin to cool. Then we begin to realize that a real battle remains as we struggle with the "flesh" and our many "passions" that have fought against us from our youth up - at times hardening into bad habits or sinful inclinations. As the Lord said about these "inner demons:" "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting." (MK. 9:29) The "fleshpots" of Egypt may continue to entice us, but the "desert" of the Fast is to dwell where Christ himself did for forty days.

Though it remains Great Lent, we are now on the eve of a wonderful "festal interlude:" the Feast of the Annunciation. This deeply profound Feast gets lost within Lent, and this is deeply unfortunate. In fact, it is due to the lenten season that it remains basically a one-day Feast. Yet it remains that only on March 25 is the Divine Liturgy and the eucharistic consecration permitted during a weekday during Great Lent. Festal colors appear on this day as we celebrate the "conception without seed" that is at the heart of this Feast. This is the Church's celebration and glorification of the Incarnation! The eternal Word becomes flesh, when that very Word of God enters the womb of the Virgin Mary upon her consent to her unique vocation to become the Mother of God. He who was born from all eternity from a Father without a mother, is now born within time from a mother without a father. The mysterious "moment of conception" is the "moment" of God becoming fully human in the womb of His mother. The Annunciation is a festal response welling up from the interior depths of ecclesial faith and life that speaks to contemporary issues of life and death. In other words, this is the Church's great "pro-life" celebration. Nine months later we will celebrate our Savior's birth on December 25.

The Annunciation reveals like no other event the cooperation between God and humanity in the process of salvation. The Incarnation was the work of God, but also the work of the Virgin Mary who represents all of humanity in her "yes" to the archangel's words. This incomparable dialogue between the celestial and human realms recorded by the evangelist Luke (1:26-38) with a kind of exquisite refinement should be carefully read and "pondered over" carefully as we celebrate this Feast.

The synergy of divinity and humanity revealed in the Annunciation has been beautifully expressed by St. Nicholas Cabasilas (14th c.) in a justifiably praised passage that captures the balance between the two perfectly, thus expressing the Orthodox understanding of synergy in a classical manner:

The incarnation of the Word was not only the work of the Father, Son and Spirit - the first consenting, the second descending, the third overshadowing - but it was also the work of the will and the faith of the Virgin. Without the three divine persons this design could not have been set in motion; but likewise the plan could not have been carried into effect without the consent and faith of the all-pure Virgin.

Only after teaching and persuading her does God make her his Mother and receive from her the flesh which she consciously wills to offer him. Just as he was conceived by his own free choice, so in the same way she became his Mother voluntarily and with her free consent.

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