

The Greeting and *Fiat* that Echo: Advent 1949 in Merton's *Journal*, and Angelico's Annunciation

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Introduction

Thomas Merton's journal entry for 23rd December, 1949,¹ tells us he is working on a preface to Augustine's *City of God*.² In that preface he wrote, "The *City of God* is the autobiography of the Church written by the most Catholic of her great saints."³ Augustine wrote to refute the pagan claim that the Roman Empire's misfortunes, notably the sack of Rome in 410 AD by the Visigoths, were due to the spread of Christianity. He argues that the Classical "gods" could not grant eternal life; this comes, through Christ, from the True God, whose providence encompasses even all the evils he permits, which he turns to good. Augustine sketches humanity's history, in which "two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self."⁴ He concludes with an attempt to sketch the eternal life in which

God will be so known by us, and shall be so much before us, that we shall see Him by the spirit in ourselves, in one another, in Himself, in the new heavens and the new earth, in every created thing which shall then exist; and also by the body we shall see Him in every body which the keen vision of the eye of the spiritual body shall reach.⁵

Maybe that sense of God's eternal Plan that leads Saints to eternal bliss seeped into Merton's mind that morning, for he listens to the watch ticking, then, a bit later, remarks, "The watch ticks: but perhaps there is after all no such thing as time." Later, however, he notes how the light has changed with the sun's movement. That morning he seems to have reached Chapter 26 of Book XIV of *The City of God*, for he quotes it: "[Adam] vivebat fruens Deo, ex quo bono erat bonus."⁶ In that Book, Augustine contrasts the life of Adam and Eve before the Fall, and the fallen condition into which their sin of pride precipitated their race. The

unfallen state was not one of *eternity*: Adam and Eve were always meant to beget offspring. Nevertheless, by contrast with our actual history of conflict and suffering, the peace of Eden to some degree prefigured the Heavenly City which was always humanity's intended goal.

Merton lists the other books on his table. He also mentions "Angelico's *Annunciation* on a postcard Clare Luce sent from Florence... The sun shines in a very happy room this morning in which a monk is where he belongs, in silence, with angels, his hand and eye moved by the living God in deep tranquility." This sense of peace turns Merton's mind back to Augustine's text: "In [Adam's] mind was all tranquillity... true and ever-prolonged joy flowed out of God, towards whom charity flamed forth from a pure heart." But the picture before him reminds Merton of the season, so before that quotation from Augustine he quotes a text he had sung three times over the last few weeks: *Lux mundi Dominus cum potestate venit.*⁷

Fra Angelico's Annunciation

The Annunciation before him was painted around 1450 by Fra Angelico on the first floor of the Convent of San Marco, Florence.⁸ It would have been seen chiefly by friars going to their dormitory, but also by Cosimo de' Medici on his way to the cells where he sometimes made a retreat, and by anyone accompanying him, which may explain why this fresco is slightly more opulent than the ones in the friars' cells: Angelico mixed silica into the final layer of plaster on which the fresco was painted, so that Gabriel's wings glitter.⁹

Angelico painted the Annunciation several times. In terms of its format, the San Marco fresco belongs with three altar-pieces painted earlier:¹⁰ for San Domenico, Fiesole;¹¹ for San Francesco, Montecarlo;¹² and for San Domenico, Cortona.¹³ As intended for public viewing, these are opulent, with significant use of gold. The Annunciation takes place in a loggia, in which Our Lady is enthroned. For her dress and cloak Angelico used expensive pink and blue pigments. As Merton observes concerning the San Marco fresco, "Angelico knew how to paint her. She is thin, immeasurably noble, and she does not rise to meet the angel." In Old-Testament apparitions, human beings are over-awed by Angels; here, by contrast, Gabriel bows to Mary and is in the process of kneeling – for though she crosses her arms modestly before herself, she is Queen of the Angels and about to become Mother of the Lord he serves. For all the apparent realism of the scenes, Mary is too big for the loggia she is in: when she stands up, her head will almost touch the ceiling. In the Fiesole altar-piece – as in the San Marco fresco – Mary seated is taller than the Angel only beginning to kneel. There, she bows her head obediently but thoughtfully; in the other two altar-pieces she gazes directly at the Angel,

wonderingly and *knowingly*, for in all three she has been reading, and is ready to welcome the Fulfilment of the Prophecies she has been studying. The sadness in her face suggests she already has an inkling of the sorrow and suffering to come, to which she commits herself in her *Fiat*.

In all three altar-pieces, the loggia is set in a garden. In the Fiesole altar-piece this is the Garden of Eden, with its two significant trees, and Adam and Eve are being expelled; in the other two altar-pieces, at the top left Adam and Eve are being expelled from Eden into a barren landscape, and the garden contains one significant tree. In all three cases, Angelico is telling the onlookers that Mary's obedience undid Eve's disobedience and, so to speak, enshrined the obedience by which her Son-to-be would undo Adam's disobedience and save us from the effects of the Fall. As St John tells us, the Passion began and concluded in a garden; half-way through, Pilate presented Jesus as The Man; and Mary, standing by the Tree, was hailed as The Woman (John 18:1; 19:5, 26, 41). The garden motif in Angelico's altar-pieces also identifies Mary as the Bride of the Song of Songs 4:12: "A garden locked is my sister, my bride," for Mary, as the New Eve to the New Adam who made himself our Brother, is both Sister and type of the Church, the Lamb's Bride. Likewise, as Dante wrote, she is Daughter as well as Mother of her Son.¹⁴

The San Marco Fresco

The San Marco fresco is positioned such that a friar sees it ahead of him as he goes upstairs to his cell or to the library. Gabriel's greeting greets him, and he is invited to make it his own: the inscription says, "When you come before the image of the undefiled Virgin, take care as you go by that your 'Ave' not remain silent." Probably, he (and Duke Cosimo on his way to his cell) would have made Gabriel's *gesture* his own, and genuflected as he greeted Mary.

William Hood explains how carefully Angelico meshed his fresco with its architectural setting.¹⁵ Its painted frame looks like a window set into the wall, through which the friar looks slightly down on the scene in Nazareth 1,450 years ago – the perspective of the scene does not quite match the perspective of the frame. The light that bathes the scene does not seem to come from the window to the friar's left as he stands in the corridor of San Marco, but seems internal to the scene: it is the light of the new dawn that shone that morning in Nazareth.¹⁶ The shadows in the fresco heighten this effect (Gabriel, of course, casts no shadow, since, in Dominican theology, angels are completely immaterial).

In this fresco, unlike in the altar-pieces, Angelico did not depict God the Father sending the Holy Spirit to overshadow Mary;¹⁷ the friars knew Luke's account of the Annunciation, and knew well that God, as God,

transcends all images and concepts. Nor did Angelico depict Adam and Eve; he took for granted that the friars would know that Mary's *Fiat* undid Eve's disobedience,¹⁸ Jesus' Sacrifice redeemed us from the effects of Adam's sin. He does depict the garden; a picket fence separates it from a forest. It would have reminded any friar who had lived in Cell 1, just to the left of the Annunciation fresco, of the picket fence in the fresco there, which separates the Garden of the Resurrection from a forest. It may not be over-fanciful to draw a parallel between the birth of Jesus from the intact Virgin, and the "birth" of the Risen Christ from the still-sealed tomb.¹⁹ The Cell 1 fresco shows Mary Magdalene reaching out to the Risen Christ; the Dominican Liturgy paired that Mary, who that morning became an apostle to the Apostles, and is a Patron of the Order, with Our Lady, the Order's greatest Patron. A responsory for the feast of the Magdalene ran: "Let us praise God's work in Mary, Mother yet Virgin; let us praise it in Mary, sinner yet penitent."

Although the friar looking through the fresco's frame is transported into another place and time, Angelico reminds him of the present power of the momentous event that took place there and then, and its ongoing message. While the Corinthian capitals in the loggia are typical of 15th-Century Italian Annunciations, the Ionic capitals remind the friar of the cloister from which he has just ascended: the House of Nazareth merges into the space he inhabits. The friar is instructed not only to make Gabriel's words and gesture his own, but also to take Mary as his model. Instead of the opulent pink and blue of the altar-pieces, Angelico has given her a white dress, and a mantle that is almost black;²⁰ her attire is reminiscent of the friar's white tunic and scapular, and black cappa. Mary's private room, shown behind her, perhaps reminds the friar of the cell to which he is retiring, from the library, or from the refectory or Chapter Room, or from a preaching mission. Mary sits, not upon a throne, but on a simple stool. No book lies on her lap; she is engaged in quiet contemplation, taught by the Spirit – for the Spirit had overshadowed her while she was in the womb and filled her with grace, so that she might conceive the Divine Word in her mind before she conceived him in her womb.²¹ Perhaps she is telling the friar – or Duke Cosimo – to spend time in his cell in private, contemplative prayer, pondering the Mystery depicted on the wall of his cell, or the Mysteries he has celebrated in the Church, or the words he has read in the library and heard in the refectory, or the admonitions given in the Chapter Room, or whatever signs of grace have accompanied his ministry. He must ask the Holy Spirit to overshadow him, to conform him to Christ by the Gift of Wisdom,²² and to bestow the other Gifts that occupy a distinctive place in Dominican theology.²³ These will attune him to the Spirit's instincts in his

contemplation and his action, so that he can own something of Mary's *Fiat*.

Ecce completa sunt

Merton had been reading an article by Jean Daniélou that appeared the previous year; he mentions it towards the end of his journal entry.²⁴ Daniélou voices the same message as Angelico's fresco: "... in the interior, hidden world of holiness, it is... evident that all sanctification comes about through a filial union with Mary's *Fiat*."²⁵ This perhaps helped Merton formulate the prayer he recorded that afternoon:

The quiet of the afternoon is filled with an altogether different tonality. The sun has moved altogether around and the room is darker. It is serious... I take time out to pray, and I look at the Angelico picture, feeling like the end of Advent, which is today. *Ecce completa sunt omnia quae dicta sunt per angelum de Virgine Maria* [Behold all things are fulfilled which the angel spoke about the Virgin Mary] – that was the antiphon after the *Benedictus* this morning. For about eight minutes I stayed silent... and wondered if perhaps I might not understand something of the work Our Lady is preparing. It is an hour of tremendous expectation. I remember my weariness, my fears, my lack of understanding, my dimness, my sin of over-activity. What is she preparing: have I offended her? What is coming up? She loves me. I reject emotion about it. Her love is too tremendously serious for any emotion of which I might be capable. Her love shapes worlds, shapes history, forms an Apocalypse in me and around me: gives birth to the City of God. I am drawn back again into liturgy by a sense of my great need... Mother, make me as sincere as the picture. All the way down into my soul, sincere, sincere. Let me have no thought that could not kneel before you in that picture... **I will act like the picture.**²⁶ *Ecce completa sunt*: it is the end of Advent and the afternoon is vivid with expectancy.

Merton's mention of the Apocalypse may allude to Revelation 12, where the Woman clothed with the sun gives birth in anguish. This cannot be the painless birth at Bethlehem; it is Calvary, where the Creator groaned in travail in solidarity with his creation,²⁷ as he gave birth to the Church, the New Eve, his Bride and Body,²⁸ and Mary, the New Eve and Type of the Church, was with him in com-passion.

The Liturgy of Advent, which helped shape Merton's thought on the day before Christmas Eve, marshals a kaleidoscope of texts and images, both to recreate in us ancient Israel's longing for the Saviour (a longing which Our Lady summed up and which allowed her to welcome him unreservedly), and to refresh our ongoing longing for the Saviour to come again. In this ongoing longing we remain in solidarity with Israel.

Daniélou suggests that an Advent spirituality should be permanent: "... the preparation and prefiguration of Christ in the Virgin's soul, still remains a present reality for us, since the mystery we presently live out in the world is that of Christ's progressive coming in all souls and all nations... He has come; but he is always the One who must come... We are always in Advent, in a waiting for the coming of the Messiah."²⁹

Angelico's Annunciation fresco kept that Advent spirituality alive: several times a day it brought Gabriel's Salutation, and Mary's response, to the minds of the friars of San Marco. Likewise, three times a day the Angelus³⁰ brings to the minds of those who recite it the same events, plus the Word's becoming flesh that Gabriel announced and Mary enshrined. The Mediaeval English landscape brought these events to mind: chapels³¹ marked pilgrim routes to Walsingham where, in 1061, Rachel of Faversham built a replica of the House in Nazareth, following a dream in which Our Lady asked her thus to help people recall "the joy of my Salutation." To this day, several pubs are called "The Salu-tation Inn"; what may be the oldest one, in Nottingham, was originally called "The Archangel Gabriel Salutes the Virgin Mary." Mary's Salutation shaped even the English skyscape: the Milky Way was known as "the Walsingham Way," for it seemed to point across the heavens to England's Nazareth.

Our own Advent journey

If, with Merton, we are "drawn back again into liturgy by a sense of... need," the Liturgy, too, brings Mary's Salutation – *Dominus tecum* – to our minds. In the current rite of Mass, we hear the plural form, *Dominus vobiscum*, at the beginning, when we gather in Jesus' Name, and he is present in our midst; and before the Gospel, in which God's Word continues to speak to us. In England, during the Bidding Prayers, we then say "Hail, Mary," saluting Our Lady with Gabriel. We can trust that she prays the Spirit to overshadow us afresh, to form in us a deeper share in the Divine Wisdom. We hear *Dominus vobiscum* again as the Eucharistic Prayer commences, during which the Holy Spirit overshadows the altar and the Word become flesh again tabernacles among us. The fruit of Jesus' Sacrifice was the gift – into the *whole* of history – of the Holy Spirit, for John tells us that Jesus bowed his head and *handed over the Spirit* symbolised by Blood-and-Water.³² Hence the fruit of the Eucharistic Sacrifice³³ is a renewed gift of the Spirit: "Grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son, may be filled with his Holy Spirit to become one body, one spirit in Christ."³⁴ So, at the end of Mass, we hear *Dominus vobiscum* again. When Mary heard Gabriel's greeting, she must have recalled the Angel's greeting Gideon before commissioning him to deliver Israel.³⁵ Her Salutation implied that the promised

deliverance was at hand – and she herself was commissioned to be involved in it. No wonder she was stirred, and, before uttering her *Fiat*, anxious to know what God was asking of her. We, too, are charged to be involved. Having received Christ's Body, we are sent out to be his Body to the world, sent to live out the strange wisdom of the Sacrifice we have commemorated and been drawn into, sent to bring the joy of God's salutation to those we encounter in the flesh or in prayer.

Daniélou prompts Merton to speak of: "a certain strange presence of Our Lady... She is here, and she has filled the room with something that is uniquely her own, too clean for me to appreciate. She is here, with the tone of her expectancy." We can seek her accompanying presence for our own Advent journey, and for our mission to bring others to await, with joyful hope, both Jesus' birth in their souls and his final Return.

Notes

1. *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 2, 1941-1952* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 284-6.
2. It appeared the next year in Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods, with an introduction by Thomas Merton (New York: Modern Library, 1950). It was republished by Random House Publishing Group in 2000 (ISBN 9780679783190) and as an EBook in 2010 (ISBN 9780307764768).
3. Note the implication that the Church, the Body of those who believe in Christ, has existed throughout human history. Following Hebrews 11, and sharing Augustine's perspective, Aquinas recognised a real, if implicit, saving faith in Christ before his Incarnation (*Summa Theologiae, Secunda Secundae* 1, 7; *Tertia* 8, 3).
4. Book XIV, chapter 28.
5. Book XXII, chapters 29-30.
6. "[Adam] lived in the enjoyment of God, and from the Good [that God is] he himself was good."
7. A responsory in Matins of the first two Tuesdays of Advent began: *Erumpant montes jucunditatem et colles justitiam, quia lux mundi Dominus cum potentia venit* ("Let the mountains burst forth into delight, and the hills into justice, because the Lord, the Light of the world, is coming with power.") In the Cistercian Office, that text was also the Magnificat antiphon for Tuesday of the 1st Week. It seems to be loosely based on Isaiah 49:13 and 55:12; Psalms 72(71):3 and 98(97):8-9.
8. It is reproduced on the cover of this issue of *The Merton Journal*. It can be viewed by clicking on the detail near the top at http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/museum_of_san_marco.html There is a brief analysis at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPg3y8KMYiE>
9. Much of my information comes from William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), pages 260-273.

Hood provides fascinating detail concerning Angelico's development and techniques. He is less trustworthy on theology. For example, on pages 269-270 he claims that the Mediaeval "Dominicans believed that the necessity for human reproduction came into the world with Adam's fall... [the] ecstasy of pleasure [in sexual intercourse]... was... rooted in the sin that necessitated it" – both of which are the opposite of what Aquinas explicitly teaches – and "the father's sperm was believed to contain the homunculus," which is also inaccurate: the homunculus theory developed in the "Enlightenment" and is quite different from the Mediaeval Aristotelian theory of reproduction.

10. Angelico depicted the Annunciation in other ways, for example in Cell 3 of San Marco, and on the *Armadio degli argenti*: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/a/angelico/09/cells/03_annun.html and https://www.wga.hu/html_m/a/angelico/11/index.html (scroll down)
11. Now in the Prado: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-annunciation/9b02b6c9-3618-4a92-a6b7-26f9076fc67>
12. <https://www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/Fra-Angelico/603703/The-Annunciation.html>
13. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation_of_Cortona
14. *Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio* (Paradiso, 33).
15. *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, pages 262-263. My interpretation of how the fresco works differs slightly from Hood's.
16. This effect would have been more striking in 1450 than it is now, since a window was inserted in the previously dark stairwell, and the window in the corridor was enlarged, during the rebuilding after the earthquake of 1453.
17. He did paint a dove symbolising the Holy Spirit, but this has faded. Hood, page 322, note 35.
18. The hymn for Vespers of Our Lady, *Ave maris Stella*, plays on the Latin words for "Hail" and "Eve": *Sumens illud "Ave" Gabrielis ore, funda nos in pace, mutans nomen "Evae"*; "Receiving that 'Ave' from Gabriel's mouth, establish us in peace [with God] by reversing the name of 'Eva'."
19. The Easter hymn *Rex sempiterne Domine*, as revised under Urban VIII, contains the lines *Qui, natus olim e Virgine, nunc e sepulchro nasceris*, of which a metrical rendering runs: "Once of a Virgin born to save, and new-born now from death's dark grave..."
20. Angelico used azurite sparingly in its highlights: Hood, page 272.
21. In Sermon 215, Augustine spoke of Mary *Christum prius mente quam ventre concipiens* ("conceiving Christ in her mind before conceiving him in her womb"); Leo the Great echoed that phrase in his Sermon 21 (his first Christmas sermon). Both had the Annunciation in mind: they meant Mary conceived Christ in her mind by believing what Gabriel said about him, and in that context of her welcoming faith the Incarnation took place. It is legitimate to transfer the phrase of Augustine and Leo to the moment of Mary's conception, for when the Spirit graced her he imparted both Charity and Wisdom, so that (as per Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars*, 43, 5 ad 2) her will and intellect were always conformed to the Spirit and the Word.
22. *Secunda Secundae* 45, 6.

23. For Aquinas' still-maturing theology of the Gifts see *Prima Secundae* 68; *Secunda Secundae* 8, 9, 19, 45, 52, 121 and 139; *Tertia Pars* 7, aa. 5 and 6. For modern discussions, Andrew Pinsent, *The Second Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (Routledge, 2012), chapter 2; Richard Conrad, *7 Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2009).
24. "La Vierge et Le Temps," *Dieu Vivant* 10 (1948), pages 17-34. It exemplifies the ferment of Marian speculation that preceded the Definition of the Dogma of the Assumption in 1950, and hopes for a definition that Mary is Mediatrix of All Graces. I would nuance some of Daniélou's ideas.
25. "La Vierge et Le Temps" page 33.
26. Emphasis mine.
27. Jesus' parable of a woman in travail in John 16:20-22 may allude to his forthcoming Passion as well as to the birth-pangs by which his disciples will pass over in solidarity with him to the resurrection world, birth-pangs which Paul mentions in Romans 8:22-23.
28. For one artistic representation of this, see <https://www.artway.eu/posts/bible-moralisee-the-birth-of-ecclesia>
29. "La Vierge et Le Temps" page 25.
30. The Angelus developed during the Middle Ages, and came into general use in the 17th Century.
31. At least two still stand: the Red Mount Chapel in King's Lynn and the Slipper Chapel near Walsingham.
32. John 19:30 (*paredoken to Pneuma*, translated literally) and 34-37. John has prepared us for this climax in 1:32-33; 4:10, 14; 7:37-39; 14:16-17, 26; 16:7. In Scripture, blood means life (e.g. Genesis 9:4); hence Blood-and-Water is *Living Water*.
33. Which re-presents Jesus' one Sacrifice *and applies its fruitful power to those for whom we offer it*; *Tertia Pars* 83, 1.
34. Eucharistic Prayer III, as I think it should be translated.
35. Judges 6:12. The Hebrew, like the Aramaic Mary heard, and the Latin, can be a prayer ("The Lord *be* with you") or a statement ("The Lord *is* with you").

Richard Conrad, OP: Growing up, Richard was fascinated both by science and by Liturgy. While doing a PhD in chemistry at Cambridge, he attended some illustrated lectures by Bob Ombres, OP, which showed him how Christian art can help us grasp some of the Mysteries of Faith. He joined the Dominicans in 1979. After studying philosophy and theology at Blackfriars, Oxford, he served successively as Prior in Cambridge, novice master and parish priest in Edinburgh, Prior and parish priest in Leicester, Prior in Cambridge, Vice-Regent of Studies then Director of the Aquinas Institute at Blackfriars, Oxford, where he continues to teach dogmatic and sacramental theology. From 1992 to 2020 he also taught for the distance-learning courses of Maryvale Institute, Birmingham.