

Basilica of the Annunciation, Nazareth



Statue of the young Virgin on one of the outside walls of the Basilica of the Annunciation.

²⁶ In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³ and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" ³⁵ And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; ³⁷ for nothing will be impossible for God." ³⁸ Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Christians have revered the site upon which the Basilica of the Annunciation is located since at least the fourth century AD. The first recorded structure, an altar, was located within a cave which was believed to be the house of Mary, the daughter of Anna and Joachim. Some time during the sixth century a Byzantine church was erected upon the site, but in the 7th century the church was destroyed by Muslims during their conquest of Palestine. A Crusader church was erected over the ruins of the Byzantine church during the 12th century. It is believed that the new church was never completed as Saladin's victory in the region put an end to its construction. Saladin allowed Franciscan monks to occupy and care for the site. In 1260 the Baybars and their Mamluk army destroyed the Crusader church during their assault on Nazareth. In 1730 Zahir al-Umar allowed the Christian community of Nazareth to rebuild a church at the site of the Annunciation. The church was eventually demolished in 1954 and the new Basilica was built by the Catholic Church which was completed in 1969.



The Tower of the Basilica was constructed to be in the shape of a lighthouse signifying Christ as the "light of the world."



Father Joel standing in front of the bronze doors at the entrance of the Basilica of the Annunciation.



Remnants of the Crusader Church.



VERBUM CARO FACTUM EST ET HABITAVIT IN NOBIS
The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.



Inside the sanctuary of the Basilica of the Annunciation.



The gates leading to the entrance to the Grotto of the Annunciation.



Altar within the Grotto of the Annunciation.



Excavation of first century Nazareth town underneath the Basilica.



A pilgrim between the Basilica of the Annunciation and the Church of Saint Joseph.



Icon of the Annunciation within the sanctuary of the Basilica of the Annunciation

Jan's Reflection:

First of all, I love the bronze statue of young Mary with arms outstretched to God, showing her ascent to His will. She wondered how it would be possible to become pregnant without relations, but she did not doubt the angel. And then the angel shared that Elizabeth is no longer barren, but in her 6th month. At this point, Mary says "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done unto me according to Thy Word." She is the first believer of the Church and the Mother of God, and our example of what we are to be in our love and obedience to God.

Kevin's Reflection:

One day, shortly after we moved to our new home, I was working on my property when a neighbor dropped by and introduced himself. Mike was his name and it wasn't long before I learned that he was a very, very evangelical, Evangelical Christian. He was quite suspicious of my Catholicism. Fortunately, over the years and many hours of conversation over burning piles of brush and slash we developed a close friendship and an on-again-off-again appreciation of our different Christians traditions. One issue that we never had the opportunity to resolve, and I'm not sure if we would have ever been able to resolve it even if he and his wife hadn't moved away, was our positions on *free will*. His position was that of Christian *predeterminism*, which is the belief that some are called to be saved while others to be damned and that we have no choice in the matter because our fallen natures are so completely corrupted as to make us incapable of choosing the Good, which is in its highest manifestation, God. He had plenty of Scripture to back it up too, such as the following from the Epistle to the Romans:

²⁹For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:29-30)

I took the Catholic position, that although we are indeed fallen we are not entirely corrupted and as such we still possess at least an attenuated *free will* capable of knowing good and evil and choosing the good, and even the *Summun Bonum*, the Supreme Good, Who is God.

"God willed that man should be 'left in the hand of his won counsel,' so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to Him." (CCC 1730)

In our final conversation in the matter, I suggested to Mike that often when dealing with the Holy Scripture things are not always "either-or" as God is not limited to the Aristotelian Law of non-Contradiction. God is the *Mysterium Tremendum*, and that the mind through reason may approach, but never fully comprehend the things of God or His Divine Word. I suggested to Mike that there are other approaches to such controversies. That of, for example, the Medieval Catholic philosopher and monk, Nicholas of Cusa, who approached God as the *Coincidentia Oppositorum*, the Coincidence of Opposites. God who is One and Many (Trinity), and God and Man (Jesus Christ) is a coincidence of opposites and a mystery beyond human comprehension. I suggested that the seeming contradiction between predestination and free will might only find their resolution, not through reason, but through participation in the Mystery.

This conversation that I had with Mike came to mind as I have reflected on my visit to the Basilica of the Annunciation. Consider these elements from the Annunciation passage from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke:

³¹ Behold, **you will** conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³ and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. ³⁴ But Mary said to the

angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”³⁵ And the angel said to her in reply, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

I have highlighted portions of the angel’s conversation with Mary. Note that the Angel Gabriel is telling Mary what *will* happen, not what might happen if she assents. Gabriel is addressing Mary as if she had no say in the matter; the decision has been already made for her, her destiny has been *predetermined*. Now let’s read Mary’s response:

³⁸ Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. **May it be done to me according to your word.**” Then the angel departed from her.

In her “may it be done” Mary not only says “yes” to God thereby opening the gates of salvation to all humankind, she resolves, in her person, the contradiction between her *predetermined* election to be His mother, and her *free will* acceptance as the *Theotokos* (the Mother of God). Mary is both humble and bold and as such she affirms our human dignity even in our *fallenness*. This single phrase, “may it be done” is the most important phrase uttered in human history; it is an acknowledgment that we are made in the *image* and *likeness* of our Creator and as such we participate in the *Mysterium* and are endowed with the “divine” ability to say “yes” or even “no” to God.

And what does this tell us about God that He allowed Mary to boldly proclaim her *free will* ascent to the divine command? I believe that God reveals Himself not only as He who commands the destiny of all of creation and humanity, but also humble enough to create space for Mary’s “yes.” What a truly wonderful God we have that He does not call us servants, but friends. (John 15:15)

Would we honor Mary if she were a predetermined and uninvolved recipient of the *Logos*, the Second Person of the Trinity? I think not. We honor Mary because the Father honored Mary in the mystery of her *free will* offering of herself to her predetermined divine election. In doing so, she became the eternal Spouse of the Holy Spirit, the Mother of our Lord and Bridegroom, the Mother of the Church, and as such the Mother-in-Law of the Bride. She is my Mother; may I grow more like her and in love with her every day.

Prayers to the Virgin Mary



The Annunciation
by Sandro Botticelli

*Hail Mary, full of grace.
Our Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,
Jesus.*

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.*

*Rejoice Mary, Birthgiver of God, Virgin, full of grace, the Lord is with thee:
Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the Fruit of thy womb, for thou
hast borne the Savior of our souls. It is truly meet to glorify thee, O Birthgiver of
God, ever blessed, and all undefiled, the Mother of our God. More honorable
than the Cherubim, and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim, thou
who without stain didst bear God the word, true Birthgiver of God, we magnify
thee. Amen*



Extreme Humility
of the Theotokos