



20th Anniversary of Redemptoris Mater Seminary - Homily

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Redemptoris Mater Seminary, Morley
Sunday, 9 November 2014

This evening, we gather here in this beautiful chapel to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Redemptoris Mater Seminary here in our Archdiocese. The last 20 years have been years of extraordinary growth, amazing generosity, great perseverance in the face of many difficulties and, above all, trusting and hope-filled faith. Tonight, then, is a night for thanksgiving and also a night to renew our faith and our entrustment of ourselves, this seminary, and the Archdiocese to the Lord.

Because we are doing this in a seminary dedicated to Mary under the title of Mother of the Redeemer, and because we entered into this chapel through doors which commemorate the moment when Mary had her vocation revealed to her by the Angel Gabriel, I want to invite all of us once more to turn our gaze to this young woman and allow her to teach us again what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Whether someone is called to marriage, to single life, to religious life, or to priesthood, the fact is, of course, that we are all called to discipleship. Let us allow Mary, as she responds to the message of the angel, to remind us of what this means.

We all know the Annunciation story in Luke's Gospel very well. It begins with the encounter between Mary and the angel, one which leaves Mary deeply troubled. She is frightened both by the appearance of an angel and by the greeting the angel gives her. "Who am I," she must have asked herself, "to be greeted in such an exalted fashion? I am only a poor girl from a simple village."

Mary, of course, is not alone in being frightened by this invasion of God into her life. Just a little earlier in the Gospel story, Zachary had already been similarly frightened by the angelic appearance in the Temple. In the Old Testament, lots of the prophets were dismayed and overwhelmed by God's call. The same pattern was repeated in the Gospels. Just think of Simon Peter's reaction when he was first called by Jesus to be a fisher of God's people.

It seems to me that this is, in fact, a common experience in the lives of people who are trying to be open to the presence of God's Spirit. God does not always come to us in ways that we can readily understand or even clearly discern. Often enough, He comes in ways that are confused and confusing, all mixed up with the challenges of our lives, be they big or small. Things happen to us which overwhelm us and confuse us and seem to be threatening us in all kinds of ways and we become troubled and frightened. It is not always easy to recognise the presence of God in many things that happen to us. But we are in good company – Mary, too, experienced this doubt and confusion.

As the Annunciation story progresses, the angel seeks to allay Mary's fears. "Do not be afraid," he says. "You have found favour with God. Listen, you are to conceive and bear a Son and you must name Him Jesus."



In spite of the angel's words, however, Mary's fears are not allayed. In fact, they are deepened and her fears and confusion increase. "How can this be?" she asks the angel. "How can I bear a child, for I am a virgin?" This, of course, is a strange question for a girl engaged to be married and it seems to hint at some deeper intuition Mary has about the direction her life should take. Perhaps, in spite of her engagement, Mary has already heard the call of God deep within her to give her life exclusively to Him. Perhaps she is still trying to work out just how she should respond to this.

Now the message of the angel indicates that God is calling her to something which she has never considered. God is asking her to be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. It is often the way, isn't it. We, too, are often faced with demands which we feel are simply beyond us. Many of you must have felt this when you first realised that God was asking you to enter the seminary. Surely God can't be asking this of me? How can this be? I don't understand.

In response to Mary's growing fear and confusion, the angel finally finds the way to reassure her. *"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."* It is only when Mary receives into her heart the assurance of God's presence with her in all that she is being asked to do that she is able to say the words which have become the great expression of faith in our Christian and Catholic tradition: *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word."*

Because it is true of all Christians, I think it is also and perhaps especially true of those of us who are called to the ordained ministry, whether we be deacons or priests already or whether we are seminarians still on the journey, that Mary's response to God is meant to be echoed in our own lives. We are invited to understand ourselves as men who are being called to, and hopefully are willing to open ourselves to, the often surprising, unexpected and possibly extremely demanding and even disturbing invitation of God as He seeks to work in and through us to become the Word made flesh for others, just as He did through Mary. In trying to open ourselves like this, we recognise that we are men who may often struggle with confusion, doubt and fear as we gradually realise just what it is that God is asking of us but that, in being like this, we are treading the path that Mary, and indeed all followers of her Son, have in the past and must today continue to tread. And most of all, we recognise ourselves as men who must, if we wish to be faithful, keep alive a sense of the overshadowing presence of God's Spirit, just as Mary did.

In the end, the Annunciation story reminds us that, because Mary was a woman of faith who opened her life to God in spite of her fears and confusion, the Word became flesh and lived among us. The heart of our vocation is the call to gaze intently on the face of Christ and draw our strength from Him. The key to unlock the secrets of life, the door through which we need to enter into life, is Christ – and He comes to us with the gift of life in its fullness because of the faith of a woman who found within herself, thanks to God's grace, the courage to say "yes" to all that God was asking of her. The Annunciation reveals just what kind of energy and power and life can be unleashed when people take their courage in both hands and launch themselves out into the deep, saying "yes" to God's invitation. If we can be people of faith who open our lives to God in spite of our very real fears and confusion, then also through us the same power and energy for life can be unleashed: the Word of God will become flesh in the lives of God's people, and we will know that we have lived out the call we first received at our baptism, and to which you have all committed yourselves through the journey which has brought all of you to this seminary, either as seminarians, as formation guides, as collaborators or as friends.



May the prayers of Mary accompany all of us as we all seek to say “yes” to God as Mary did, and may God’s blessings continue to be experienced as Redemptoris Mater enters into the next stage of the journey.