

My Brothers and Sisters,

Two weeks ago the Gospel introduced the figure of John the Baptist. Today's Gospel introduces the figure of Mary, the Blessed Mother.

Therefore, it would be good for us to review what we know about the Blessed Virgin. Tradition names her parents Joachim and Anne. She was conceived in the ordinary way. However, what was unique is that she was conceived without original sin, which means that from the first moment of her earthly existence she was full of grace. We refer to this as her Immaculate Conception, the holyday we celebrated on December 8. One basis for our belief in the Immaculate Conception is that Gabriel addressed her as full of grace: "*Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you*" [Lk. 1:28]. The other is an argument from fittingness: it was only fitting that she whose body was to give birth to the Son of God not be touched by original sin.

We also know that as a young woman, the angel Gabriel announced to her that God had chosen her to be the mother of his Son. We are told that she was "*greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be*" [Lk. 1:29]. According to Fr. Jack Rathschmidt, there were three stages in Mary's response. The first was fear, first at the appearance of an angel and then at his strange greeting. Second, from fear, she moved into her head and pondered the meaning of the greeting. The angel then told her that God wanted her to become the mother of his Son. She remained in the head and asked how this could happen since she was a virgin. The angel then explained and informed her that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant. From the head, she moved into the heart: "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word*" [Lk. 1:38]. She anticipated Jesus' own response to God's will as expressed in our second reading: "*Behold, I come to do your will.*"

Today's Gospel picks up where the story of the annunciation ends and tells the story of Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth. This is one of my favorite Gospel stories. Tradition suggests that Mary was very young when she conceived Jesus. Young and pregnant, she immediately left the security and the comfort of her home to travel to the hill country to help care for her elderly cousin Elizabeth.

What is significant about the story is that Mary brought Christ to Elizabeth on two different levels. First, because she was pregnant with Jesus, she brought him physically. John the Baptist recognized Christ in her womb by leaping for joy. However, she also brought him in her love for her cousin. Finally, Elizabeth acknowledged Mary's trusting faith in God: "*Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.*"

My brothers and sisters, it seems to me that Mary teaches us two very important lessons. First, she taught us a process for living life in these challenging times. I think we are often frightened, especially when confronted with change in our lives, especially change we did not seek. Fear is a normal response. Our first response to fear is to try to understand, to make sense of, what is happening. However, if we are people of faith, we move to our heart and say yes to what God is calling us to do. After all, faith is entrusting our lives and our futures to God.

Second, when we reach out to others in love, we bring Christ into their lives and hearts. As St. John wrote in his First Letter, "*God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them*" [4:16]. We talk about the rebirth of Christ in our lives and hearts, but we are called to bring Christ to our waiting world. Wherever there is love, there is God.