

Be It Done Unto Me

Image: Annunciation, John Collier (2000) at St Gabriel's Church, McKinney, Texas

The Parents' and Friends' held their annual Easter reflection. We began with an outdoor Stations of the Cross in the College grounds bursting with green. Mass for the Feast of the Annunciation followed. The feast is celebrated nine months to the day of Christmas – those liturgists in Rome assuming, of course, that Mary went full-term.

Mary's "yes", which is the gateway to the extraordinary event of the Incarnation, is a turning point in human history, in salvation history. So much so, that the number of artists who have tried to capture it over the millennia is legion. One American artist John Collier, recorded his particular take on the Assumption for a Catholic Church in Texas almost two decades ago (pictured above).

Many of the traditional paintings of the Annunciation have Mary garbed in so many clothes and veils that it is hard to appreciate how young she was. She was, perhaps, only fourteen. More recent artists, like Collier, remind us of her youth, her freshness, her potential. They make us wonder at her willingness to say "yes" to all the implications of the invitation offered.

This Annunciation takes place in the present day. In one sense, the work follows a convention from the Renaissance and earlier, where any religious painting has the characters dressed in the garb of the times. But those older, earlier, portrayals which we look upon today, and beautiful as they are, hold Mary at a distance – a temporal or an emotional distance. Unconnected with us. They give us an excuse to think of her as not really quite like us. Yet here, she could be anybody's daughter.

So there she is, just home from school, it would seem. Still in her uniform – it could be Monte or Loreto. She has switched her school shoes for something more comfortable. The laces are casually undone. Her hair is pulled back. All very domestic and informal.

Yes, Collier does employ some of the conventional iconography. Mary is wearing blue. She is reading a book. The classical representations have Mary reading from the prophet Isaiah which proclaims "a virgin will conceive and bear a child". As if a poor village girl would have a book. In her day, only the synagogues had scriptures – and they were parchment scrolls. But is that really a bible she has in her hand, or is she reading a school book or her diary? How ordinary is she?

Mary comes to the door to discover this odd caller. She stands on a welcome mat – a sign of her openness and hospitality to this visitor who has turned up with such a strange invitation. Her look is of surprise. She peeps coyly over the rim of her book.

And consider this angelic caller: the purists would say the artist is breaking with tradition again. Because angels are always painted entering the scene from the left. So here is a difference. This Gabriel, this messenger, is dressed in something of a Byzantine gown. Such a peculiar fabric. The pattern almost blends in with the rendering of the house, the background. So is he real, or a vision, or only partly present in this world? What could Mary possibly make of him?

Gabriel brings the teenage girl a lily. Ah, that is very conventional, a sign of her purity. Collier has not abandoned all the conventions. He has also painted a dark sealed window in the background. Collier says it is a symbol of her virginity – the window that will not be opened. Another tradition.

Young Mary is here living in suburbia. And she seems to be living in a rather palatial home. Tradition tells us that Mary was poor, a simple village girl. Yet most of the classical paintings have Mary in a rather grand

setting. That is because the surroundings of any saint portrayed in religious images are indicative of the condition of his or her soul. If you look to the background, the other house suggests simpler circumstances. Also in the background, you can see a dove on the nearby roof. It is the Holy Spirit waiting to see what Mary's answer will be. Waiting. You see, God never forces himself on us. God is always a respecter of persons. God defers to the free will he has given us.

This juxtaposition of the feast of the Annunciation and our calling to mind the coming great Easter event is coincidence, yes. But there is a link, a mutuality. When Mary takes up this invitation with her "yes", she joins herself to that suffering salvation of her Son. You will recall that when she and Joseph later present Jesus in the Temple, as part of the expectation of the Jewish law, the holy man, Simeon, prophesies that a sword will pierce Mary's heart. In Catholic custom, Mary experiences seven sorrows – seven being regarded as a mystical number. These include the flight into Egypt – her life as a refugee, an asylum seeker, a displaced person, in common with some 65 million people in the world at this very moment. It includes the loss of her young son for three days until he is found in the Temple, going about his Father's business. This absence prefigures the loss she will later know in Jesus' three days of death in the tomb before the Resurrection. The other sorrows revolve around Jesus' passion and death, to the point when she will cradle his lifeless body in her arms at the foot of the cross, captured so often and so poignantly in images of the Pietà.

We sometimes disparagingly describe a person as a 'yes-man'. That is, someone spineless and servile. One who bows and scrapes for their own advantage. Or one lacking boldness and initiative. At the Annunciation, though, this young Mary, is a 'yes-woman' of a very different kind. She says "yes" to life, "yes" to possibilities, "yes" to others and to God. Come what may. As we say in the Creed it was a "yes" "for us and for our salvation". This is a young woman of generous resolve. She would surely have known the immediate consequences of her "yes". At this moment, she is only engaged to Joseph. They are not formally living together. How would she explain to him her being with child – the story of some angelic visitor to her home? How would the small village with perhaps more than its share of small minds deal with the pregnancy of an unmarried girl? Scandal and even worse are on the horizon. But Mary still says "yes". "Be it done unto me, according to your word."

A response which echoes through history.