

REFLECTION ON THE FRESCO OF THE ANNUNCIATION¹

There are clear references to an altar in the church with a picture of the Annunciation from 1341. From that date, the documents speak of donations, lamps, votive offerings and the establishment of the *Opera* which was to oversee the various works of embellishment and restoration in the chapel of the famous image. We can still admire today, in all its beauty, the fresco which made the sanctuary renowned.

Legend has it that the Servants of Mary had the fresco of their ‘Glorious Virgin’ painted in 1252, that is, when the church of Saint Mary of Cafaggio was inaugurated. The present fresco is, in the view of the experts, datable to the 1300s. According to fra Eugenio M. Casalini, the original fresco should be underneath (behind) the fresco we see today.

It is said that in 1252, the important commission of painting the scene of the Annunciation (cf. *Lk* 1, 26-38) was entrusted to an artist called Bartholomew, who poured all his skill and faith into creating a worthy picture of the Annunciation. But the devout artist, in attempting to portray the face of Our Lady, was seized by bewilderment and distrust of his abilities and after various attempts, which left him more and more dissatisfied, fell into a strange sort of somnolence. When he came to, the miracle had happened and he could admire that masterpiece of faith which, after seven centuries, continues to amaze artists and ordinary folk alike. In the words of Michelangelo Buonarroti: *Here it was not the art of the paintbrush that created the face of the Virgin, but a truly divine intervention.*²

In the 13th and 14th centuries, the whole of Tuscany was a centre of devotion to Our Lady. Siena, Florence, Pisa, Lucca, Guelphs and Ghibellines, contended for freedom and political supremacy, while placing their ambitions under the protection of the Mother of God. The artists, in the churches and shrines at the corners of streets and on the fortified gates of their cities, have handed down to us an artistic record of this widespread devotion of that age. The Gospel scene which was of greatest attraction to painters was the Annunciation by the angel to the Young Maiden of Nazareth.

For the people of Florence, tormented by political and spiritual struggles, this subject must have been of particular significance. The angel of the Gospel had brought to the Virgin of Nazareth the announcement of a new era. With the birth of Christ, humanity had reached a turning-point in history. For Florence, the Virgin of the Annunciation was like the *good news*, the synthesis, symbol and ideal of a renewed spirituality. Suffice it to recall Dante and his verses in the *Divine Comedy* (*The angel reaching earth with the decree of peace, so wept-for over centuries: Purgatory* 10, 34-35) in order to understand that the Florentines of the 13th century found in the story of the Annunciation a spiritual programme in complete contrast to the harshness of the time: “*peace*,” in place of never-ending wars; *trust* in the intercession of the Virgin *who turned the key that opened out the utmost love* (v. 42) over against the lack of trust in human relations that had become the norm for knowing how to live, the call to humility of *Behold the Handmaid of the Lord* (v. 44) as opposed to unbridled ambition which poisoned life together.

Of no less importance is an ecclesial aspect – with social consequences – that the mystery of the Annunciation embodied at the time of our first Fathers and which continues to have a profound significance for our own times.

The thirteenth-century Church witnessed in an acute way the contradictions stemming from its divine and human nature: in particular, the wealth of some parts of the Curia and not a few prelates was in sharp contrast to the way of life described in the Gospel.

Because of this, many pauperistic movements arose, with the desire of bringing the Church back to its Gospel roots. A considerable number of these placed themselves outside the Church, equating

¹ See: <http://annunziata.xoom.it/immagine.html>.

² Cf. BOCCHI Francesco, *L'immagine della SS. Annunziata*, Firenze 1592, p.80

legitimate challenge to the Church with the uselessness of the institution and reclaiming a direct relationship with the Lord.

Other movements, such as the Franciscans, chose to challenge the Church from within it, by means of personal and community witness: the fresco of the *Dream of Pope Innocent III*³ by Giotto in Assisi is emblematic of this position.

The experience originating from our first Fathers is precisely along these lines of “affective” as well as “effective” reform; the choice of the mystery of the Annunciation as one of their “guiding lights” is proof of this.

The fresco “captures” the very moment when *the Word was made flesh*: the flesh of Mary experiences “giving hospitality” to God. This Incarnation continues throughout history: if the mystery of the Incarnation speaks of a new divine-human reality – the person of Jesus Christ – this reality continues to be mysteriously present through the Church, whose nature is exactly analogous to that of the Incarnate Word.

Professing faith in the mystery of the Incarnation therefore means recognising the divine-human nature of the Church, without being scandalised and with a continual tension of internal reform; this was how our first Fathers saw themselves in the Church of their time.

The Virgin painted in Santa Maria of Cafaggio by the artist Bartholomew is a work by no means inferior to that of other artists or to the poetry of Dante,

Leaving legend aside, it is clear that the Florentine artists called upon to paint the Annunciation of the angel to the Virgin in the first half of the thirteen hundreds could not forget the fresco in Santa Maria of Cafaggio, even if they never could achieve that intuition of poetry and faith that it contained.

The angel

The angel has just entered a moment or two ago. The golden halo surrounded by rays, the fluttering of his cape, the wings still in motion in the doorway (more than a sort of severity in the features of the face) show us that this is a heavenly being. He has greeted the “Full of Grace,” and soothed her initial fears, he has explained the mystery of virginal motherhood and now stands humble and silent, bowed under the sound of those words which will decide the final destiny of a human creature.

It is to be noted that in the artistic representations of the Annunciation of the first millennium, the angel always appears taller than the lowly handmaid, while from the beginning of the second millennium, and particularly from the 13th century, the angel appears shorter than the Virgin of the *Fiat*, devotion to whom is in full growth.

Many of the faithful and generations of Servite friars have gathered before this icon of the Annunciation, yesterday and today. It has been a source of inspiration for all.

In the events of life, in this third millennium, the Lord has not ceased visiting his Servants, the Servants of the lowly Handmaid, he has not ceased sending his angel and challenging them. We are to be attentive – like the Virgin of Nazareth – to his voice and listen to his calls, to make His plans our own. Let us not fear letting Him disrupt our schemes and opinions.

³ The *Dream of Innocent III* is sixth of twenty-eight scenes in the cycle of frescos about the *Tales of St. Francis* in the upper Basilica in Assisi, attributed to Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337). It was probably painted between 1290 and 1295 and measures 230 x 270 cm.

This episode belongs to the series of the *Legenda maior* (III, 10) of St. Francis: in a dream, the Pope sees humble Francis holding up the Lateran Basilica, which at that time was thought of in the same way as we regard St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, i.e., the very heart of the Latin Church. It shows a canopied bed with the Pope and two guards fast asleep (previously present in the *Dream of arms* and the scene of *Isaac repelling Esau* by the Master of Isaac), but now moved to the right side, while on the left there is a basilica leaning dangerously over and held up, with a very eloquent gesture, by the saint, here depicted for the first time in the habit of a friar. With a solution that in reality is “materially” impossible but extremely evocative on the “symbolic” and meaningful level, Giotto – who very probably was a Franciscan Tertiary like Dante Alighieri – has chosen to show Francis holding up the Church *with both his feet inside it*, thereby showing his belonging to the Church.

The Virgin

The Virgin is seated on an inlaid choir-stall. She has interrupted her reading of Isaiah and the open book resting on a cushion on a chest shows us the passage: *Ecce virgo concipiet...*⁴ A diagonal ray of light connects her bosom with the group of the Eternal Father high up, in the strip of blue sky, on the left of the picture.

The ingenuity of the artist, so as to create movement in the reply of the young girl of Nazareth, inscribed above the ray the words (seen by us as reflected by a mirror) of her reply: *Ecce ancilla Domini.*⁵

That response can be seen in the entire stance of the Virgin. Her body is a synthesis of movement and expectancy. A delicate curve, an “interior” surge thrusts the torso upwards, along with the face, her expression, the slender line of the neck and the fair hair. The virginal bosom – like an open seashell in the white lining of the cloak – and the arms, not rigid but hanging loosely to her waist, with the hands – joined and gracefully resting on her knees – are like words of expectation: a waiting that is also “interior.” *Fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum.*⁶

Meditating and praying before the image of the Annunciation, generations of Servite friars, down through the centuries, have, like her, opened the Sacred Scriptures and allowed themselves to be taught by God, by his Word, and have learnt from her to respond “Yes,” to say with her: *behold the servant of the Lord: let it happen to me according to your word.* Day after day they have allowed themselves to be formed, or rather, moulded, by God: like her, they have allowed themselves to be dwelt in by the Word, Christ, Word of eternal life, the Way, Truth and Life ... and have left possessions, ideas and paths in order to embrace the goods, thoughts and ways of God, and let themselves be guided by God.

The face

The legend speaks of the beauty of the face, but it is the whole person of the Virgin which leads us in a “balanced” harmonious way to this face, which is a concrete example of the relations that should connect the creature with its Creator.

Not fear or bewilderment, as often depicted by artists in successive centuries, but serene joy; not painful submissiveness, but open acceptance and steadfast assent to the divine will; not affectation or elegance but honest straightforwardness.

In this Virgin there is the truest example of the “whole” person, returned to its original dignity by the Redemption. In this face, where, across the centuries, worshippers have read their own story and salvation, is found the reason, more than a legend, for the throngs of pilgrims and the abundance of graces and miracles at the altar of Our Lady of Florence.

Meditating and praying before this painting of the Annunciation, generations of Servite friars, down through the ages, have gazed at Her, the Virgin of the “Yes,” and have noticed that, in that face, fear and dread have given way to peace: the peace of full assent to God and His plans, the peace of those who agree to be part of the eternal story of love and salvation that comes from God and leads back to God, the peace of those who have completely entrusted themselves to God, as expressed by Saint Augustine: “*You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*”⁷

Created in the image of God and for God

To the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians who were trying to trap him in what he said (cf. *Mt 22, 15*) and who asked if it was permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not, Jesus made them realise that the image and inscription on the coin they paid the tax with were of Caesar, and said:

⁴ *Is 7, 14: Behold, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and she will call him Emmanuel (cf. Mt 1, 23).*

⁵ *Lk 1, 38: Behold the servant of the Lord.*

⁶ *Lk 1, 38: Let it happen to me according to your word.*

⁷ *St. Augustine, Confessions 1, 1.*

“Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God” (Mt 22, 21). In our everyday life in this world, we cannot serve two masters, both God and money (cf. Mt 6, 24), seek the things of heaven and the things of here below. We, who have been created (by God) in the image of God (cf. Gen 1, 26-27), must fix our gaze on God and offer ourselves (images of God) to God, give back to the earth what belongs to the earth (the goods of the earth) and to God what belongs to God (ourselves).

The gaze of holy Mary – and her bosom thrust slightly forward – in the fresco of the Annunciation well expresses her holy intent: to give to God what belongs to God, her very self. This is a proposal that we can make our own.