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the Praying Rosary

*a journey
through scripture
and art*

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Cover image: *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception* (Seville Cathedral); sculpture attributed to Juan Martínez Montañés (1568-1649).

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The background of the entire page is filled with a sparse, random distribution of small dots. Most dots are a warm gold or yellow color, while a few are a muted blue. The dots vary slightly in opacity and size, creating a subtle, starry effect.

The Joyful Mysteries

The Annunciation

The Visitation

The Nativity

The Presentation
of Jesus in the Temple

The Finding of Jesus
in the Temple

The Annunciation

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, "Rejoice, so highly favored! The Lord is with you." She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, "Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob forever and his reign will have no end."

Mary said to the angel, "But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?" "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," the angel answered, "and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God."

"I am the handmaid of the Lord," said Mary, "let what you have said be done to me." And the angel left her.

Luke 1:26–38

A life interrupted

We meet Mary for the first time when her life is dramatically interrupted by something she could not have imagined. The young Mary is neither yearning nor praying for a child. She is waiting to move in with her husband, at which point their marriage will be completed. Luke's story of the annunciation celebrates the initiative of God. The focus is on the surprise appearance of God's messenger and the message, not on the need or aspirations of Mary. This birth proposal is God's original idea. This child comes, not as a couple's answer to prayer, but as the gratuitous act of God.

Will Mary stay with her own domestic plans or risk an uncharted adventure as God's coworker? Whatever Mary was planning for her life with Joseph, it did not include becoming pregnant outside that relationship. If she ever dreamed of being a princess, she knows that, as a peasant girl, she is destined to marry a carpenter. Mary welcomes the unforeseen and adjusts her life to this new adventure.

Mary responds by making her annunciation: to hand over her body and spirit to God's purpose. For the story of Jesus to be told, it needs more than God's word to be spoken. It also needs the human word to say, "Yes." That is why there are two annunciations: God's annunciation to Mary and Mary's annunciation to God. God's best plans for us can only happen when there is human cooperation, when God's word and our word come together. When those two annunciations coincide, God's Word always takes flesh.

But how do you walk on an unmapped road with confidence? There are no antique maps, previously charted, to guide you on the way. There are no people to consult who have experienced the challenge you are now facing, no experts to guide you with their shared wisdom.

Sometimes the only way we can learn is by doing, setting out, leaving our cautious questioning behind us, even though we might still be afraid of our own inexperience and inadequacy. There is no rehearsal, we know, only live performance. We have to trust this new voice, a voice that we have discovered is truly ours, and head out to welcome the unforeseen. And we might know that we are not wholly alone in this new adventure.

At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke celebrates the fact that something radically new is about to take place. Because of God's initiative and a young girl's "yes" to the unforeseen, the presence of God is going to become vulnerable in human flesh. In the ancient days it was the Ark of the Covenant that marked the presence of God. Now, Luke says, something new is going to happen. The presence of God will take human shape in the womb of Mary. Mary of Nazareth is the tabernacle of God.



John Collier, *The Annunciation*

Welcoming the unforeseen

One of America's most honored artists, John Collier, was chosen as the chief sculptor for the Catholic Memorial at Ground Zero at the former World Trade Center in New York. While much of his life has been spent making art for the world's major secular institutions and for private collectors, he now devotes his time to painting and sculpting for the Church.

Like the old masters before him, he sets the scene at the time of painting, not at the time of the event. This is not Nazareth in the ancient world but suburbia in today's world. The artist wanted to avoid the traditional view of Mary, dressed in the rich robes of the Renaissance, which keeps her at a safe distance and disguises her age. This Mary is a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl dressed in her blue-and-white uniform, wearing saddle shoes, with laces untied. Although the door behind her is closed, she stands on the welcome mat of her home.

Mary is interrupted on her own doorstep while dutifully reading. The artist has explained that she is reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah: "The Lord himself, therefore, will give you a sign. It is this: the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Will Mary become this Scripture?

Mary looks more puzzled than frightened by her deferential visitor with a neat haircut, whose full robe fashionably matches his wings. Does she suspect, perhaps, that he has arrived at the wrong address? This young girl is the picture of suburban serenity. If she is worried about what the neighbors will think, she does not show it. Gabriel has just delivered the large pot of lily flowers, signifying purity, which are about to blossom. On a nearby roof, a dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, awaits the outcome. Collier manages to depict with unusual tenderness both the ordinariness of the setting and the extraordinariness of the event.

Prayer

Loving and tender Father,
we pray that we might attend your call
with a fraction of the generosity of Mary.

Even when we know
that we do not know
where the road will end,
what we will confront on the way
and can only guess how we will manage.

Even when we wonder
did we say “yes” too quickly, agree too readily?
Should we have asked more questions?
Should we have insisted on more guidance?
Will there be a way back to the uncomplicated life
we left behind us, before we heard your voice?

Forgive our questions, loving Father.
Teach us to be generous-hearted
when we hear your call
and to be trustful of your kind purposes,
knowing that, in following you,
we will never journey beyond your shadow.