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THE OBJECT OF MARY'S CONSENT IN THE ANNUNCIATION

The subject of this paper is the object of Mary's consent in the Annunciation. Our inquiry will be an attempt to determine the content of the revelation concerning the office and person of Jesus, which Mary received at the Annunciation. In instituting such an inquiry, it is obvious that I consider the Annunciation narrative of St. Luke's Gospel a reliable record of the message addressed by God to Mary when He asked her consent to the Incarnation. However, certain clarifications are in order on the nature and peculiarities of the literary form through which the evangelist has transmitted to us the record of this central fact of history.

St. Luke has not written a biography of Jesus. The Third Gospel is not a history "à la grecque," to borrow a happy phrase of Père Lagrange. St. Luke has written a religious history. "I have determined, after following all things carefully from the very first, to write for thee, most excellent Theophilus, an orderly account, that thou mayest understand the certainty of the words in which thou hast been instructed" (*Lk.* 1, 3-4). The Lucan writings, the Third Gospel and the Acts, have been described very aptly as an arrangement of facts selected from the history of Jesus and the primitive Church, composed by a disciple of St. Paul precisely to illustrate and corroborate the thesis of his master's epistle to the Romans: "The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to Jew first and then to Greek. For in it the justice of God is revealed, from faith unto faith" (*Rom.* 1, 16-17).

Although of Gentile origin, St. Luke, like all the New Testament authors, constantly projects the Christian history and doctrine against the background of the Old Testament. In the Third Gospel, and especially in the Infancy narratives, St. Luke places the Christian history in the framework of the

Old Testament history and promises, and illustrates the religious significance of the Christian history by constant reference to the Jewish Scriptures.

In thus characterizing St. Luke's Gospel as "religious history" or as "theology presented through historical narration," we are not attempting to resurrect the defunct and long since buried system of "tendentious history" so dear to nineteenth century rationalist critics of the N.T. It is one thing to accuse the evangelists of having created the object of their Christian faith, i.e. of having forced and falsified the facts of history in order to fit them to their religious faith; it is quite another thing to say that the evangelists were believing Christians, who knew how to draw lessons from history, who knew how to illustrate their Christian faith by the events of history.

It would be unpardonably naive and indicative of an inexcusable ignorance of the Gospel literature, were the theologian to consider the Annunciation narrative a verbatim report of a conversation which Mary had with an angel. Whether or not the angelic messenger appeared to Mary in a corporeal form, as St. Thomas thought (*S.Th.* III, 30, 3), is irrelevant to our inquiry.

The only witness of the Annunciation was Our Blessed Lady. St. Luke indicates that she is the ultimate source of his information about the Infancy history. Twice he assures us that "Mary kept all these things in mind, pondering them in her heart" (*Lk.* 2, 19, 51). However, many years elapsed between the events narrated in the Infancy history and the composition of the Third Gospel. Father Gächter has made a strong case for written documents (Hebrew documents) as the source and basis of the Lucan Infancy narratives.¹

¹ P. Gächter, *Maria im Erdenleben* (Innsbruck, 1953), 9-75; R. Laurentin, *Traces d'allusions étymologiques en Lc 1-2*, in *Bibl* 37 (1956) 435-456; 38 (1957) 1-23; P. Winter, *On Luke And Lucan Sources*, in *ZNTW* 47 (1956), 217-242; id. *Lukanischen Miszellen*, in *ZNTW* 49 (1958), 65-77.

Be that as it may, this is certain: the Infancy narratives of the Third Gospel are stylized narratives in which the historical facts are described in language borrowed from the Old Testament and colored by the Old Testament events and promises to which reference is made. The Annunciation narrative is a mosaic of Old Testament references and allusions; almost an "anthology" of O.T. texts. René Laurentin has established quite conclusively that chapters one and two of the Third Gospel are a Christian example of that peculiar and popular Hebrew literary form called the Midrash.² Since Wellhausen the very word Midrash has been offensive to pious Catholic ears as connoting fable and falsification. Today we know that Wellhausen maligned a very beautiful and effective literary technique, which he never really understood.

The Midrash is essentially a reflection, a meditation on Sacred Scripture in order to penetrate more fully and understand more clearly the wonderful work of God in human history. The Midrash is an attentive, meditative study of the Sacred Text to draw out the lessons of faith and religious conduct that are contained in it. Renée Bloch in her excellent study on the Midrash, notes that "this practical preoccupation" leads the Midrash to reinterpret the Scriptures, to "actualize" them. This she considers, together with the constant reference to the Sacred Text, the essential characteristic of the Midrash. The Midrash is really the fruit of Israel's faith in the Scriptures as the word of God. "Revealed at a given moment of history, this word is addressed to men of all times. Thus it remains ever open to all the developments of the understanding of its message, to all legitimate adaptations, to all new situations. Such are the foundation and very *raison d'être* of

² Re the Midrash cf. R. Bloch, *Midrash* in *DBIS* 5, 1263-1281; A. Robert, *Littéraires (Genres)*, in *DBIS* 5, 405-421; W. H. Brownlee, *Biblical Interpretation Among the Sectaries of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, in *BA* 14 (1951), 54-76; R. Laurentin, *Structure et Théologie de Luc I-II* (Paris, 1957), esp. Ch IV, *Genre Littéraire de Luc I-II*, 93-119.

the Midrash. As long as there will be a people of God for whom the Bible is the living word of God, there will always be the Midrash. Only the name will change. Nothing is more characteristic in this regard than the use of the Old Testament in the New. It is always a Midrashic actualization; it is in the very actualization itself, in the present situation to which the ancient texts are adapted, that all the newness resides."³

The Midrash is usually associated with the non-canonical Jewish literature, the Apocrypha and Rabbinical writings; but its beginnings and first developments are found in the Old Testament itself. Later Biblical authors, especially of the post-exilic period, meditated on the ancient Scriptures and reinterpreted them in the light of contemporary happenings. At times the reflection on the meaning of the ancient texts takes the form of a glossed, edited redaction; thus, e.g. the Chronicler edits, glosses and interprets the narratives of the Books of Samuel and Kings. Frequently, and this is especially characteristic of the Midrashim of the Apocrypha and the New Testament, the reflection on the meaning of the Old Testament is presented through a narration of contemporary or recent historical events described in language borrowed from the Old Testament. This technique, which A. Robert aptly styled "anthological," was employed in the composition of the Infancy Gospel of St. Luke.⁴

While the Midrash is an especially effective literary device for preaching, it is met with in practically all the post-exilic Biblical literature—in the prophets, the historical, and especially in the Sapiential books. The literature of the Dead Sea sectaries and the Apocrypha attest to the popularity of the Midrash in the N.T. period. We should not therefore, be disconcerted to find Midrashim in the New Testament. Since the O.T. Midrashim are interpretations of the Bible by the

³ R. Bloch, *art. cit.*, 1266.

⁴ A. Robert, *Le genre littéraire du Cantique des Cantiques*, in *VP*, 3^{me} Serie (1944), 192-213.

Bible, this technique would be particularly appealing to the N.T. authors, who were convinced that Jesus and His Church is the fulfillment of the ancient promises.⁵ René Laurentin describes nicely what we mean when we term the Lucan Infancy narratives Midrashim: "Luke I and II is permeated by this conviction: that the coming of Christ was prepared by God; that it fulfills the promise made by God to Abraham, the patriarchs and the prophets. In harmony with this conviction, the reflection, the meditation on the infancy of Christ in Luke I and II is a confrontation of the facts with Scripture. It would be difficult to find a Greek word more apt to characterize the process of this reflection than the word *symbolousa* employed by Luke in 2, 19 to describe Mary's meditation."⁶ Robert sees in Luke's Infancy Gospel "an excellent example of '*le style anthologique*.' " The facts of Jesus' conception and birth are compared with the O.T. promises and described in the O.T. language.

The Prologue of the Third Gospel, as well as the author's concern to locate the events narrated in their chronological setting (*Lk.* 1, 5, 26; cfr. 3, 1-6) attest the historical preoccupations of St. Luke. His Infancy narrative belongs basically to the *genre* of historical literature. The events narrated are not fictions created by the author to illustrate his religious faith; they are a substantially faithful, although stylized

⁵ The LXX translators employed the same technique. On almost every page of the LXX one finds modifications of the text inspired by the theological ideas of the translators or by applications of the sacred text to the period of the translators. Thus, e. gr., the Arameans and Philistines of *Is.* 9, 11 become in the LXX the Syrians and Greeks. The Kittim of *Gn.* 10, 4, who are in *Is.*, *Jer.* and *Ez.* the inhabitants of Cyprus, become in *1 Mc.* the Macedonians, in the Book of Jubilees, the Syrians, while in the Vulgate and Peshitto versions of *Dn.* 11, 30, they are the Romans. This midrashic tendency of the versions is understandable, if we remember that the purpose of the ancient translators was not to give an exact literal translation, but one in harmony with the spirit of the text to be used in liturgical gatherings for edification and instruction. Cf. R. Bloch, *art. cit.*

⁶ R. Laurentin, *op. cit.* 99-100,

narration of real facts, transmitted and guaranteed by trustworthy witnesses. Since Mary was the only witness of the Annunciation, we have in the Annunciation narrative a history elaborated from memories that go back to Mary. These memories had been preserved with care, i.e. they had been meditated upon and perhaps very early committed to writing. René Laurentin notes that since St. Luke presents Mary as full of grace, versed in the Scriptures and reflective in her faith, he would have us understand that the core of his Midrash on the Infancy of Jesus goes back to her. Taking into account the evident historical preoccupations of St. Luke, as well as the Midrashic character of his narrative, we can conclude that we have in the Annunciation pericope, a stylized account of Jesus' conception, together with a reflection, probably Mary's own reflection, on the meaning of that central event of sacred history. We can confidently accept the Annunciation pericope as a faithful record of the revelation God gave Our Lady when He asked her consent to His redemptive plan.⁷ We are justified, therefore, in seeking through the exegesis of the Annunciation pericope, the answer to our question: What is the object of Mary's consent at the Annunciation?

I. MARY CONSENTS TO BECOME THE MOTHER OF THE MESSIAS.

The Annunciation pericope expresses very clearly the following facts: (a) a message is given to Mary from Heaven; i.e. a revelation is made to Mary; (b) the content of this revelation is that she will conceive a child through the action of God without loss of her virginity; (c) this child is the promised Messiah; (d) God asks and receives Mary's free consent.

The angelic message is divided into two parts by Mary's

⁷ Cf. P. Gächter, *op. cit.* 9-75. He demonstrates well the historical validity of the narrative.

question, "How shall this happen?" (1, 34). Both parts of the message are mosaics of phrases borrowed from or alluding to the O.T. Messianic promises. The opening words of the message are an unmistakable reference, almost a citation, of the joyful Messianic prophecy addressed by Sophonias to Jerusalem (*So.* 3, 14-17).⁸ *Xaire sphodra thygater Sion; Xaire kexaritomene*. "Rejoice exceedingly, O daughter of Sion." "Rejoice, thou full of grace." Luke as usual has in mind the LXX text of the prophet (*So.* 3, 14-17). "Rejoice exceedingly, O daughter of Sion; make proclamation, O daughter of Jerusalem; be glad and exult with all thy heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The Lord has taken away thy sentence; He has delivered thee from the hand of thy enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord is in thy midst, thou shalt not see evils any more. At that time the Lord will say to Jerusalem. Take courage, Sion. Let not thy hands hang down. The Lord thy God is with thee, the mighty one will save thee."

Similar prophecies introduced with the same exultant invitation to rejoice, occur in the books of Joel and Zacharias (*Jl.* 2, 21-27). *Tharsei ge, xaire kai euphrainou 'oti emegalunen kyrios tou posesai*: "Fear not (take courage), O Land, rejoice, because the Lord has done great things." (Note *emegalunen*, the characteristic verb of the Magnificat.) "Children of Sion, rejoice and exult in the Lord your God. I will make up to you for the years which the locust devoured, and you will know that I am in the midst of Israel, I the Lord your God."

The Messianic prophecy of Zacharias cited by St. Matthew (*Mt.* 21, 5) and St. John (*Jn.* 12, 15) with reference to Jesus' solemn entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, contains a similar invitation to rejoice because of God's presence among his people. *Xaire*—"rejoice exceedingly, O daughter of Sion

⁸ Cf. S. Lyonnet, S.J., *Xaire Kexaritomene*, in *Bibl* 20 (1939), 131-141; J. Huby, S.J., *Évangile selon S. Luc* [Verbum Salutis] (Paris, 1952) 11-21.

... behold thy king comes to thee, just and saving . . .”
(Za. 9, 9-10).

The similarity of these prophetic texts to the Angelic salutation is striking. In fact, the word *xaire* which begins the angelic salutation, occurs only four times in the LXX: in the three passages cited and in Lamentations 4, 21, where its use is in imitation of the prophetic texts.

Mary immediately perceives the Messianic import of the angel's greeting. To her, the humble handmaid of the Lord, is addressed the message of joy announced of old to the daughter of Sion. St. Luke notes expressly that Mary was disturbed because of the angel's greeting: *epi to logo*. Father Kleist translates nicely: “But she was profoundly disturbed by the address, and debated within herself what this greeting might mean.”⁹

The angel's response to Mary's troubling thoughts is a good example of Semitic parallelism. In phrases borrowed from the O.T. he repeats the message and expresses its meaning more explicitly. Mary should not be disturbed. God has deigned to favor her. She will conceive and bear a son, who is the promised Messiah. Note the parallelism: “Rejoice, full of grace. Fear not, Mary, you have found favor with God. The Lord is with you. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus.

As Sophonias had encouraged the daughter of Sion, assuring her of the presence of Yahweh her savior (*tharsei*, in the T M ‘fear not,’ Sion), so the angel reassures Mary: “fear not, thou hast found favor with God.” The saving presence of God among His people, the great Messianic blessing promised by Sophonias, Joel and Zacharias, will be realized through Mary's maternity. The Emmanuel prophecy of Isaias is now addressed to the maid of Nazareth. Isaias had written:

⁹ *The New Testament, The Four Gospels*, translated by James A. Kleist, *Acts of the Apostles and Epistles etc.*, translated by J. Lilly (Milwaukee, 1954).

"Behold the *Almah* shall conceive and bear a son, and thou shalt call his name Emmanuel," (God with us). The angel tells Mary: "Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus" (Yahweh saves).

The description of the child is a mosaic of Messianic titles and promises. He will be called "son of the Most High," i.e. Eloyn's son, Yahweh's son; Eloyn being almost the proper name of Israel's God. The Old Testament gives the title "son of God" to Israel, the Chosen people (*Ex.* 4, 22, 23), to the judges who share in God's authority (*Ps.* 82, 6), to the anointed kings of God's people (*2 Sm.* 7, 14; *1 Par.* 22, 10), and to the Messiah, who will be God's son of predilection (*Ps.* 2, 7: "the Lord said to me, 'you are my son; this day I have begotten you'"). It is in this sense of the term that Nathanael declared to Jesus: "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God, thou art King of Israel" (*Jn.* 1, 49).

"The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he shall be king over the house of Jacob forever." The Messiah would be a descendant of David, who, like his great ancestor, would rule over the whole house of Jacob and not only over the two tribes of Benjamin and Juda which constituted the Kingdom of Juda. David's great son, the Messiah, would reestablish the Davidic dynasty over all the descendants of the patriarch Jacob, even over the scattered children of the ten lost tribes. This promise which occurs in Second Isaias (*Is.* 49, 6), and in Ben Sirach (*Sir.* 48, 10) was a favorite theme of the Rabbis.¹⁰ It occurs in phrases reminiscent of Isaias and Ben Sirach in the canticles of the Infancy Gospel (cfr. *Lk.* 2, 32 and *Is.* 49, 6). "And of his kingdom there shall be no end." The Davidic descent of the Messiah and his everlasting reign were cardinal tenets of the Messianic hope of Israel. 'Son of David' became the pre-

¹⁰ M. J. Lagrange, O.P., *Le messianisme chez les juifs* (Paris, 1909), 198.

ferred Messianic title (Cf. 2 Sm. 7; Ps. 88, 4-5, 20-35). The text of Luke also evokes Daniel's promise of the everlasting kingdom of the Son of Man (Dn. 7, 14). But more than any other passage of the O.T. the angelic messenger's description of Mary's child is reminiscent of the mysterious Emmanuel. Just as the annunciation of the conception evoked the Emmanuel prophecy of Is. 7, 14, so the description of the child would recall to Mary's mind the Emmanuel prophecy of Is. 8, 23-9, 6: "In the former time He afflicted the land of Zabulon and Nephtali; (a reference to the deportation of the people of Galilee by Teglath Peleser III) but in the latter (the Messianic era) he has made glorious the way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people that walked in darkness, behold a great light, and upon them that dwelt in a land of gloom a light shines. . . . For a child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority is upon his shoulder; and his name is called: Wonder-Counsellor, Divine hero (*El Gibbor*; LXX: *megales boules aggelos*, i.e. angel of the great council), Father for ever, Prince of peace. His is great authority, and there is no end of peace, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom; to establish and sustain it in justice and righteousness henceforth for ever—The zeal of Yahweh of hosts will perform this."¹¹ Noting the literary relationship of Lk. 1, 31-32 to this Emmanuel poem, Father Lyonnet comments on the great joy the people of Nazareth must have experienced when they heard this promise of the glorious future of their despised province read aloud in their synagogue. "We can thus appreciate the delicate attention of Divine Providence in choosing from among all the Biblical texts precisely this passage to describe for Mary the mission of the child whose birth had just been promised."¹²

¹¹ Translation of E. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah* (Dublin, 1941).

¹² S. Lyonnet, S.J., *Le récit de l'Annonciation et la maternité divine de la Sainte Vierge* (Rome, 1956). (A conference delivered at the Pontifical Biblical Institute on Jan. 10, 1954.)

The Annunciation message is couched in phrases so reminiscent of the Biblical Messianic promises, that any pious Jew with an average knowledge of the Sacred Writings, would immediately understand that the birth of the Messiah was being announced. *A fortiori* Our Lady, who is depicted by Luke as versed in the Scriptures and reflective in her faith.

Mary's question: "how shall this happen, since I do not know man?" indicates that she understood the message. God has chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah. But in view of her resolution to remain a virgin, she wonders and asks how this will happen. May I be permitted to note in passing, that this question of Our Lady which implies that, like her Jewish contemporaries, she did not understand *Is. 7, 14* to refer to a virginal conception, is evidence that St. Luke is utilizing a very early written document or tradition and is not merely giving his personal reflections on the event. The Third Gospel was written probably between 70 and 80 A. D.; at the earliest about 60 A. D. If the Annunciation narrative were his personal theological reflections on the event, St. Luke would surely have indicated, as does Matthew 1, 22-23, the Christian interpretation of the *Almah* of *Is. 7, 14*. In depicting Mary at the time of the Annunciation as ignorant of the Christian interpretation of the *Almah*, St. Luke shows his fidelity to his source.

The first part of the Annunciation pericope reveals to Mary that God has chosen her, and asks her consent, to become the Mother of the Messiah, the promised Savior and King of Israel.

II. MARY CONSENTS TO BECOME THE MOTHER OF GOD.

In the past, many exegetes thought that they had found in the titles of v. 32 and v. 35 "Son of the Most High" and "Son of God," an explicit revelation of the divinity of Mary's

child.¹³ While it is true that among the Semites the expression "will be called such" signifies to be publicly recognized as such, because one is such, the titles "Son of the Most High" and "Son of God," considered in themselves, do not connote divinity. (In the Synoptic Gospels the title employed by Our Lord to give an insight into His divinity, is not "Son of God," but "Son of Man," which evokes the mysterious personage of *Dan. 7, 14*, who receives glory and power and a kingdom from the Ancient of Days.) As we have already pointed out, "Son of God," of which "Son of the Most High" is a synonym, is predicated in the O.T. of Israel, of the angels who constitute the court of Yahweh, of certain favored persons who have received a special office or mission, especially of the Messias to come. (Cfr. *Os. 1, 10*; *Ps. 81, 6*; *Jb. 1, 6*; *2, 1*; *38, 7*; *Ps. 2, 7*). Père Lagrange expresses the common teaching of modern Catholic exegetes: "To say that the child will be called Son of the Most High, is not yet to penetrate the mystery of his divine nature. . . . According to *Ps. 2, 2* the Son of God par excellence is the Messias."¹⁴

Scholars who have analyzed the literary structure of the Infancy Gospel of Luke, point out the parallelism between the Annunciations to Zachary and Mary.¹⁵ Throughout, the superiority of Mary's child over Zachary's is constantly emphasized. While Zachary's son will be great before the Lord, as the precursor, the Elias who prepares for the Lord a perfect people, Mary's son will be great because he will bear the

¹³ Among recent defenders of this exegesis are: E. Florit, *Maria nella esegesi biblica contemporanea*, in *SM* 1 (1942-1943), 83-132; M. Peinador, C.M.F., *La Maternidad divina de María en el mensaje del ángel*, in *EstB* 8 (1949), 39-63; id. *La Sagrada Escritura en la Mariología durante los últimos veinticinco años*, in *EstM* 11 (1951), 15-58; G. Hillion, *La Sainte Vierge dans le N.T.*, in *Maria. Etudes sur La Sainte Vierge*, ed. H. du Manoir, S.J., 1 (Paris, 1949) 436-68. A. Medebielle, *Annonciation*, in *DBIS* 1, 286.

¹⁴ M. J. Lagrange, O.P., *Évangile selon S. Luc* (Paris, 1927), 38.

¹⁵ P. Gächter, S.J., *op. cit.* 55-64; R. Laurentin, *op. cit.* 23-42; S. Lyonnet, S.J., *art. cit.* 5-8,

royal, Messianic title; he will be Son of the Most High, God's Son par excellence.

Luke 1, 35 is the response to Mary's question: "how shall this happen, since I do not know man?" Modern exegetes, even Catholics, are far from agreement on the precise meaning of Mary's words.¹⁶ The words certainly signify that Mary wonders how the announced conception will take place, in view of the fact that she has not had carnal relations. Personally, I think that the interpretation common in the past, which sees in Mary's words an expression of a resolution of virginity, still remains the most probable exegesis. Unlike Zachary, Mary does not doubt the message. She asks, because of her resolution of virginity, how the conception will take place. Her virginity, replies the angel, presents no difficulty, because God himself will accomplish in her what has been announced. "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; and therefore the Holy One to be born shall be called the Son of God." This verse is very difficult. In interpreting it we must be content with probabilities. The conjunction *dio* is certainly causal; the *kai* emphasizes the conjunction. Thus Lagrange notes: "one could translate without any arbitrariness 'precisely for this reason.'"¹⁷ Is '*agion*' in the subject or predicate position? Should we translate, as does our Confraternity version, "the Holy One to be born shall be called the Son of God," or, as do the ancient versions, "the child

¹⁶ Cf. Neal Flanagan, O.S.M., *Our Lady's Vow of Virginity*, in *MS* 7 (1956), 103-121; C. Ceroke, O.Carm., *Luke 1, 35 and Mary's Virginity*, in *CBQ* 19 (1957), 329-342. For a novel exegesis cf. J. Audet, O.P., *L'annonce à Marie*, in *RB* 63 (1956), 346-374; O. Graber, *Wollte Maria eine normale Ehe eingehen?* in *Mm* 20 (1958) 1-9, gives a brief, but well-balanced criticism of Audet's thesis. Cf. also M. Villanueva, *Nueva controversia en torno al voto de virginidad de Nuestra Señora*, in *EstB* 16 (1957), 307-328. *N.T. Abstracts* 2, 157-8, summarizes a number of articles on this question, e. gr. nos. 297, 298, 303.

¹⁷ M. J. Lagrange, O.P., *op. cit.* 35.

to be born will be holy, he will be called Son of God," (cfr. Vulgate: *quod nasceſtur ex te ſanctum, vocabitur filius Dei*), or, a third possibility, "the child to be born will be called holy, Son of God"? Grammatically, all three translations are defensible. The translation of the ancient versions better preserves the characteristic Semitic parallelism: to the two-fold affirmation of the divine action, "holy spirit" and "power of most high," corresponds two effects: the child will be "holy," he will be called "son of God." (Lagrange notes: "if Luke wanted *klethesetai* to be applied to both '*agion* and *uios theou*, either he would have placed the copula before *uios* or he would have placed *klethesetai* before '*agion*, as in *Is. 9, 6*."') In any case, the causality expressed by *dio kai* refers to both attributes. Mary's child will be holy and will be called God's son, precisely because of the miraculous conception.

Because Jesus is God's Son in the proper sense of the term only by reason of the eternal generation, theologians and many exegetes were embarrassed by this verse. They labored over it, twisted and tortured it, in order to extract from it an affirmation of the doctrine of the hypostatic union. If Christ is said to be holy and called God's son only because of the miraculous, virginal conception, the titles do not connote divinity. "The angel" remarks Père Lagrange, "does not exclude other reasons for giving Jesus the title Son of God; he simply does not give them."¹⁸ Verse 35 does not treat of the personality, the nature of Mary's child, but of the manner by which Mary will conceive him. Maldonatus observes wisely, that the angel says precisely what is appropriate to answer Mary's question: "*quia non a viro, sed a Deo virtute Spiritus Sancti generabitur. Neque enim de Christi naturæ, sed de modo generationis angelus agebat.*"¹⁹ "It were better then to

¹⁸ M. J. Lagrange, O.P. *op. cit.* 36.

¹⁹ J. Maldonatus, *Commentarii in Quatuor Evangelistas* (Lyons, 1602), in h.v.,

recognize that the text does not give the entire doctrine of the Incarnation, rather than to force the meaning.”^{19a}

However, verse 35 does mark a progress in the description of Mary's child. In telling Mary that her child will be holy (an attribute peculiarly proper to Yahweh) and that he will be called God's son, precisely because she will conceive him miraculously through the power of God, the angel is suggesting that when predicated of the Messiah, i.e. of Mary's child, the title “son of God” acquires a more profound meaning than is usual in the Old Testament. Père Lyonnet has expressed concisely and clearly what I have put so haltingly: “Many exegetes see no progress in the description of the Messiah given in the two sections of the Annunciation message. The unique, the sole purpose of the second part would be to tell the Virgin that she will conceive virginally. Now I ask myself if the phrases employed do not say more. Certainly they affirm the virginal conception, but it seems to me that they affirm this while revealing to the Virgin the true significance of the virginal character of the conception: this will be not an ordinary birth, not even a birth simply ‘miraculous,’ but the birth of one who is a ‘Son of God’ in a unique and transcendent manner. *A priori* I certainly can not say that the Virgin understood this; the Scripture does not say so. But the Evangelist uses expressions capable of revealing to Mary at least something of this mystery, both unheard of and ineffable, which was to be accomplished in her. Briefly, if these expressions were intended to make her understand the mystery, there is every chance that she did understand it.”²⁰

A literal exegesis of the Annunciation pericope, based solely on a study of the text in the context of its literary form, yields the following answer to the question which is the subject of our inquiry: Mary consented to become the virgin mother of

^{19a} Lagrange, *loc. cit.*

²⁰ S. Lyonnet, S.J. *art. cit.* 13.

the Messiah through the action of God within her, as a consequence of which her child would be holy and have a unique right to be called God's son.

In his endeavor to plumb the profound meaning of Sacred Scripture, the Catholic exegete enjoys a unique privilege. He is not left solely to the resources of patient scholarship. He is directed in his study and guided in his search by the divinely appointed custodian and the authentic interpreter of the inspired word, the Magisterium. The Holy Spirit, whom the glorified Jesus sent upon His Church, teaches her all things. Throughout the centuries, the Church, like her prototype Mary, has carefully guarded the revelation entrusted to her in Sacred Writ, pondering over it in her heart. Guided by the Divine Spirit of Truth, the Church ever penetrates more fully the meaning of the Sacred Books entrusted to her.

There is no Patristic unanimity on the interpretation of the Annunciation with reference to the question of our paper. However, the Fathers who have commented on the Gospel of Luke, favor the opinion that the angelic message contains a revelation of Jesus' divinity. Origen would seem to see a reference to Jesus' divinity in the expression: "he shall be great."²¹ St. Athanasius, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Ambrose, St. Bernard are quite certain that Mary learned of Jesus' divinity from the angel's message.²² Pope St. Leo I declares in a sermon on the Nativity: "The Virgin chosen from the royal line of David to bear the sacred fruit, must first conceive her divine and human offspring in her mind, before she conceived him in her body. That she might not be frightened by the extraordinary effects of the divine plan, she learned from the angelic message what the Holy Spirit was about to do in her. So she did not consider becoming the mother of God a harm to her virginity."²³

²¹ PG 13, 1816.

²² PG 22, 1931; 72, 475; PL 15, 1636.

²³ PL 54, 190.

Pope Pius IX sums up what may be called the trend of tradition on this point, in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*: "The Fathers and Writers of the Church loved to recall in their minds that the Angel Gabriel, in announcing to Mary the sublime dignity of Mother of God, proclaimed her full of grace, in the name of God Himself and by His command."²⁴

The conclusion of Father De Tuya is, I think, prudent and well-founded: "If it can not be said that there is in tradition a unanimous interpretation of this passage with reference to the divinity of the Messiah, such an interpretation finds strong support in tradition."²⁵

Two Supreme Pontiffs, in documents addressed to the entire Church, assert quite unequivocally that Mary learned from the angel's message the divinity of her child. Leo XIII in the Apostolic letter *Parta humano generi*, on the occasion of the consecration of the Basilica of the Rosary at Lourdes, wrote: "How sweet, how gracious is the angelic salutation to the Most Holy Virgin, since precisely when the angel greeted her with it, she perceived that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit the Word of God."²⁶ St. Pius X writes in the encyclical *Ad diem illum*: "To Mary were addressed these words, 'and blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord': in

²⁴ Const. Apost. *Ineffabilis Deus*, Dec. 8, 1854. For ready reference cf. *Doctrina Pontificia*, IV: *Documentos Marianos*, ed. Hilario Marin, S.J. (Madrid, 1954), 182, no. 288: "Cum vero ipsi Patres, Ecclesiaeque scriptores animo menteque reputarent, beatissimam Virginem ab Angelo Gabriele sublimissimam Dei Matris dignitatem ei nuntiante, ipsius Dei nomine et jussu gratia plenam fuisse nuncupatam. . . ."

²⁵ M. De Tuya, O.P., *En el relato de la Anunciación (Luc. 1, 26-38) ¿está expresada la divinidad del Mesías?*, in CT No. 256 (1955), 383-420.

²⁶ *Documenta Pontificia* IV, 350, no. 471: "O quam suavis igitur, quam grata angelica salutatio accidit beatæ Virgini, quæ tum, cum Gabriel eam salutavit, sensit se de Spiritu Sancto concepisse Verbum Dei!"

other words, that she would conceive and bring forth the Son of God.”²⁷

From these passages, as well as from the passage of St. Leo I's sermon cited above and from an expression of Benedict XIV in the Bull *Gloriosae Dominae*, Dec. 17, 1748 (“this most glorious Virgin . . . raised by the angel's annunciation to the ineffable dignity of Mother of God”), Father De Tuya concludes: “the interpretation of this biblical passage, according to the Papal Magisterium, is that the angel Gabriel in announcing to Mary the conception of the Messiah, announced him to her as man and as God.”²⁸ But this conclusion is too wide. I do not think that one can conclude to an express teaching of the Magisterium from expressions occurring *passim* in a few Papal documents. These passages, however, do manifest the attitude of the teaching Church toward this question. They indicate, consequently, the direction the Catholic exegete should follow in his search for the full meaning of the Annunciation message.

The Annunciation pericope belongs to a literary *genre*, the Midrash, which suggests, hints at, more than it expresses. The message is couched in biblical phraseology which constantly refers one to the O.T. To grasp the full import of the message one must consider the O.T. citations and allusions in their own context and then interpret the message in harmony with the O.T. meaning of the phrases.

In January 1954 Father Stanislaus Lyonnet, S.J. delivered a conference at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome on the Annunciation Narrative and the Divine Maternity of the Blessed Virgin. He argued ably and convincingly that the expression “And the power of the Most High will overshadow thee” in the context of the message, reveals the Divine Ma-

²⁷ *Documenta Pontificia IV*, 367, no. 485: “Profecto, si vere Mariae dictum: Beata quae credidisti, quoniam perficientur ea, quae dicta sunt tibi a Domino (Lc 1, 45), ut nempe Dei Filium conciperet pareretque.”

²⁸ M. De Tuya, O.P., *art. cit.* 395.

ternity to Mary. A year later, Father De Tuyà arrived at the same conclusion in an article published in *Ciencia Tomista*.²⁹ René Laurentin, the celebrated French Mariologist, in an excellent study on the literary structure and theology of the Infancy Gospel of Luke, embraces wholeheartedly Lyonnet's exegesis and develops the points he had suggested in his conference.³⁰ The following is an outline of this exegesis.

Mary has understood from the angel's message that she will become the mother of the Messias. Because of her resolution to remain a virgin, she inquires how that will happen. The angel answers that she will conceive miraculously through the power of God; consequently, her child will be holy and will be called God's son. This second part of the message, like the first, is a mosaic of O.T. references and allusions.

"The holy spirit shall come upon thee": this expression signifies in the O.T. the divine action investing chosen persons with a special mission, equipping them with strength and grace to fulfill the task to which they had been called. (Cfr. *Jgs.* 6, 34; 14, 19; *Ex.* 31, 3; *Ezek.* 36, 25-28). The spirit of the Lord will rest in a very special way upon the Messias (*Is.* 61, 1-3). The presence of the Lord's spirit was to be characteristic of the Messianic Community, the New Covenant (cf. *Jer.* 31, 31-33). Mary understands, then, that Yahweh will act in her to accomplish what had been announced. The second member of the sentence, parallel to the first according to Semitic usage, expresses more precisely what this divine action and presence in Mary will be: "and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee." Power of the Most High, like holy spirit, signifies the divine action, and in the final analysis, God himself. The context makes the meaning of the phrase obvious. God himself will cause Mary to conceive

²⁹ S. Lyonnet, S.J., *art. cit.* 11-16; M. De Tuyà, O.P., *art. cit.* 385-418.

³⁰ R. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, esp. Ch VI: *Marie Fille de Sion et Tabernacle Eschatologique*.

without detriment to her virginity. The Greek word employed to describe this divine action in Mary, *episkiaze*, occurs in *Ex.* 40, 35 in a context analogous to that of the Annunciation. There the LXX translators use it to render the Hebrew word *sakan*, a word that had a deep religious significance in Israel. The substantive formed from *sakan*, *Miskan* with the article, became the technical term for God's special presence among His chosen people. The place where the Presence was manifested was called simply "the dwelling," "Hammishkan." The LXX translators had the happy inspiration to render the Hebrew word by a corresponding Greek word formed of the same consonants as the Hebrew root, *skene*, tabernacle. Rabbinical Judaism attached great importance to the concept of the *sekinah*, "the Dwelling," and the term Shekinah came to be one of the usual substitutes for the divine name Yahweh.⁸¹

The invisible, transcendent God had visibly manifested His special presence among His people in the Tabernacle erected by Moses in the desert and in the Temple constructed by Solomon. The book of Exodus describes the first event: "Then the cloud covered the Meeting Tent, and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling. Moses could not enter the Meeting Tent, because the cloud settled down upon it (LXX *episkiazen ep'auten*—overshadowed it) and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling" (*Ex.* 40, 35). Because Yahweh, upon whom no man can look and live, had so visibly shown His presence in the tabernacle, entrance into the tent was forbidden to all except the priests. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and that but once a year on the Day of Atonement. And he must take the precaution to carry with him a censer full of glowing embers and a double handful of finely ground fragrant incense, so that a cloud of incense

⁸¹ Cf. Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum N.T. aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 2 (Munich, 1924), 314.

might cover the Propitiatory. If he fails to fulfill this precaution, he will die. For this is the place of "the Dwelling," where God reveals Himself in a cloud. (Cf. *Nm.* 7, 89: "When Moses entered the Meeting Tent to speak with him, he heard the voice [LXX: of the Lord] addressing him from above the propitiatory of the Ark of the Commandments, from between the two Cherubim.")

Centuries later, God again gave Israel the sign of His Dwelling among them. On the day of the dedication of Solomon's Temple a cloud filled the sanctuary. "And the priests could not stand and minister by reason of the cloud. For the glory of the Lord filled the house of God." "Then Solomon said: The Lord promised that he would dwell in a cloud. But I have built a house to his name, that he might dwell there forever" (2 *Par.* 5, 7, 14; 6, 1-2). Thus the cloud became the preferred symbol for God's mysterious presence among His chosen people. (At the Baptism and Transfiguration the voice of God comes from "the Heavens," "out of the cloud"). The second Temple had not been blessed with this marvelous manifestation of God's dwelling, but the people were comforted by the promise of the prophet Aggeus: "A little while longer, and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all the nations, and the treasures [LXX: *ta eklekta*; T M: *hemdat*; Vulgate: *Desideratum*] of all the nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. . . . The future splendor of this house shall be greater than the past, says the Lord of hosts" (*Ag.* 2, 7-9).⁸² Consoled by this promise, Israel yearned for the day of the Messiah, when God would restore to her the Shekinah and once again manifest His glorious presence. St. John the Evangelist had this hope of his people in mind when he wrote of the Incarnation:

⁸² Translation of *The Complete Bible, An American Translation*, Smith-Goodspeed (Chicago, 1939).

"And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (*eskenosen*) and we saw his glory, glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and of truth" (*Jn.* 1, 14).

Three times the LXX employs "cover with its shadow," "overshadow" (*episkiazei* or *skiazei epi*), to describe the mysterious phenomenon of the cloud of God's presence. (*Nm.* 9, 18, 22 and *Ex.* 40, 35). *Lk.* 1, 35 alludes to *Ex.* 40, 35: "And Moses could not enter into the tabernacle of testimony (*'oti epeskiazen ep auten 'e nephele*) because the cloud overshadowed it and the tabernacle was filled with the glory of the Lord." Mary's resolution not to know man is no obstacle to the fulfillment of the angelic message. It places her in the proper condition to become the Ark of the Covenant, because it makes her womb a *hortus conclusus*, sealed against all profanation. "The holy spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the most high shall overshadow thee (*kai dynamis ypsistou episkiasei soi*), wherefore also the child to be born will be holy, he will be called Son of God."

Note the progress in the angelic message. Mary is Sophonias' Daughter of Sion, to whom the presence of God is announced; she is the Almah of Isaias, who becomes the mother of the Emmanuel; she is the Dwelling of Yahweh, the Ark of the Covenant overshadowed by the cloud of the Lord. Through the miracle of the virginal conception God makes her His Dwelling, so that her child is holy and entitled to be called Son of God. Thus Mary is given an insight into the mystery of her child. In him Yahweh takes up His dwelling within her. In him Yahweh becomes present.

Father Lyonnet observes: "The exegesis which we propose is in fact very ancient; it is supposed by the interpretation which understands 'power of the most high' and even 'holy spirit' to designate the Word of God (v. gr. Justin, *Apol.* 1, 33; Hilary, *De trinit.* II, 26). The ancient Fathers, however, did not perceive that the angel speaks in the language of the

O.T., which does not yet distinguish the plurality of divine persons. This, without doubt, is why St. Luke omits the article before holy spirit and power of the most high. Without speculating on the notion of filiation, the angel simply makes Mary understand that her son will be God as Yahweh.”⁸³

In line with this exegesis, as Lyonnet notes, Eric Burrows, S.J. makes an interesting observation. In the Visitation scene St. Luke places on the lips of Elizabeth, the words with which David welcomed to Jerusalem “the ark of God which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts, who is seated upon the cherubim.” “How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?” (in the LXX: *pos eiseleusetai pros me ‘e kibotos kyriou*) (2 Kgs. 6, 9). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth cries out: “Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (*pothen moi touto, ‘ina elthe ‘e meter tou kyriou mou pros eme*). Luke notes explicitly that Mary remained three months with Elizabeth, while 2 Kgs. 6, 11 notes that “the Ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obbedom three months.”⁸⁴

Earlier in this paper I remarked on the embarrassment caused the exegetes by the causal conjunction *dio kai* in verse 35. In the interpretation I have outlined, this difficulty disappears. If the phrase “power of the most high will overshadow thee” reveals to Mary that by a virginal conception she will become the Ark of the Covenant, the Dwelling of Yahweh, the “holy of holies,” it follows that the child she conceives will be holy, not as were Samson and Samuel, not even as is John the Baptist, but with a unique holiness, since he will be the fruit of an absolutely unique presence of God in the womb of the Virgin-Mother. The expression “son of God” also acquires a deeper meaning than is usual in the O.T. Since it is precisely through the virginal conception that

⁸³ S. Lyonnet, S.J., *art. cit.* 15, note 3.

⁸⁴ Eric Burrows, S.J., *The Gospel of the Infancy and Other Biblical Essays* (London, 1940), 56.

Mary becomes the Dwelling of God, the child whom she conceives makes Yahweh present within her. He is God's Son because in him Yahweh makes himself present. "Is this not equivalent to saying that he will be not only a divine being, but God?"³⁵

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word." This humble act of obedience includes an act of faith in the Messianic office and Divine dignity of her child. Mary consents to become through God's action the virgin mother of a child, who is the Messiah, who is Yahweh, God Himself. So Elizabeth declares her blessed, because of her faith.

In conclusion, I would like to underscore the limitations, the obscurity, of this initial faith of Our Lady in the divinity of Jesus. The revelation she received at the Annunciation was not expressed in the theological terminology of the tract *De Verbo Incarnato*. The angelic message did not reveal to Mary the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. That cardinal truth of Christianity was first revealed by Mary's Son, the only Begotten, who is in the bosom of the Father (*Jn.* 1, 18). The coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost marked for Mary, as it did for the Apostles, a decisive progress in her understanding of Jesus' revelation. René Laurentin thus describes the limitations of Mary's initial faith in Jesus' divinity: "The virgin, simple daughter of Palestine of two thousand years ago, was not in a position to understand the technical formulas of our modern manuals, not even those of Chalcedon: abstract formulas that are the fruit of a development. 'Person' and 'nature' were notions foreign to her culture. She thought in the language of the Old Testament, and it is in this language that the message is delivered to her. It is through this that she knew of the Ark of the Covenant, of the cloud which manifested the divine presence to the heroes of Israel; it is

³⁵ S. Lyonnet, S.J., *art. cit.* 16.

by the light of *Ex.* 40, 35 and of *Soph.* 3, 14-17, that she could perceive who her son was. This knowledge, insinuated by tenuous allusions, was more implicit than explicit, more real than notional, more intuitive than reasoned. Nothing of a tract."⁸⁶

Laurentin describes this first faith in the divinity of Jesus as "a faith implied in a vital attitude." The sentiments with which Mary the mother cherishes her child, become an adoration. Mary understood that she should have for this son miraculously conceived in her womb, the same feelings of reverence, the same devotion and adoration, that she had for Yahweh, the God of Israel.⁸⁷

This interpretation of the Annunciation pericope takes into account both the literary form and peculiarities of the Gospel pericope, as well as the suggestions of the Magisterium. It will not satisfy some theologians. They prefer to conclude to the object of Mary's consent at the Annunciation from other arguments, principally *ex convenientia*. Some speak as if Mary were given at the Annunciation an infused knowledge of the tract *De Verbo Incarnato*. Laurentin indicates in a very pointed question the difficulty and the weakness of such a theological attitude. "If the Annunciation narrative goes back to the memories of Mary, if Luke I-II transmits to us the best of what Mary had pondered over in her heart, why would she have jealously kept for herself the very best of all that she had received?"⁸⁸ It is always dangerous to construct a theological edifice without a solid biblical foundation. It will fall an easy victim to the winds and storms of adverse criticism.

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⁸⁶ R. Laurentin, *op. cit.* 174.

⁸⁷ R. Laurentin, *op. cit.* 175.

⁸⁸ R. Laurentin, *op. cit.* 175.