

**Homily at Liturgy of Reconciliation given by Cardinal Robert Sarah,  
President of the Pontifical Council 'Cor Unum'.**

*"Through her Fiat, the Word of God Took Flesh in the Tabernacle of her Womb"*

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It was through the body of a young, Jewish girl, living in a tiny village called Nazareth, that Jesus, the divine Word, was made flesh. Mary belonged to that part of the people of Israel, who awaited the Lord's coming with expectation and longing. She had no doubt read about His coming in the Old Testament Scriptures and prayed for it. But she had no idea how it would come about. Most Israelites thought the Messiah would manifest Himself gloriously.

When the Archangel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to be the "door" through which the long awaited desire of the nations would be fulfilled, she must have been astonished: "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you! ... You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus" (Lk 1.28-31). A new life – filled with risks – opened before her. According to the Church's tradition, Mary, in an exceptional gesture for a Jewish woman, had decided "not to know man" (Lk 1.34). She had discerned virginity to be God's will. Her Immaculate Heart – the Feast we keep this day – prompted a total giving of herself to God and included the gift of both her body and her heart. Reassuring her that God had not disdained her vow, Gabriel told Mary that, like the glory of God coming upon the ark, so would the Spirit overshadow her. The young "handmaid of the Lord" contemplated the Angel's words. She treasured them in her heart. Her response, known as her fiat – "let it be done to me as you say" (Lk 1.38) – shows that she entrusted herself fully to God's designs. She chose to forgo her own plans for God's. Through her fiat, the Word of God took flesh in the tabernacle of her womb.

Saint Augustine tells us that the Blessed Mother conceived Jesus first in faith, then in her body (De virg., 3: PL 40, 398). Faith that God would fulfil the Word spoken through His messenger preceded motherhood. It was this faith that sustained Mary in the many ordeals of her life. Through faith, she allowed God to lead her totally and unreservedly. In her, the definition of faith given by the Second Vatican Council finds perfect embodiment: "The obedience of faith (Rom. 13.26; see 1.5; 2 Cor 10.5-6) is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God" (Dei Verbum #5).

But, as Mary was to discover, faith is "not a triumphal march but a journey marked daily by suffering and love, trials and faithfulness" (Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, Wednesday, 24 May 2006). As for Abraham, our "father in faith" (Eucharistic Prayer I), it is

often lived in darkness and can be put to the test. “How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways,” Saint Paul tells us (Rom 11.35).

Mary touched the obscurity of faith from her first fiat in Nazareth to her final fiat beneath the Cross at Golgotha. When she and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple, a “second Annunciation” to her took place. The old man Simeon prophesied that her Son was to be “a sign of contradiction” and that “a sword would one day pierce her heart” (Lk 2.34-35). Mary experienced the truth of Simeon’s words during the annual Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem – the Gospel, which we have just heard. Having allowed Jesus to wander freely among the other pilgrims, Mary and Joseph discovered after a day that their son was lost. But rather than an apology, they received the gentle reprimand that Jesus had to be about His Father’s business. Saint Luke relates explicitly that neither Joseph, his father, nor Mary, His mother, “grasped what he said to them” (Lk 2.50).

This sword of sorrow would cut deeper with the passing of time. Even in the hidden life of Nazareth over the next eighteen years, Blessed John Paul II tells us that Mary’s journey was marked by “a particular heaviness of heart ... a kind of ‘veil’ through which one has to draw near to the Invisible One and to live in intimacy with the mystery” (Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Mater* #17). Living in daily intimacy with the divine child, whom she knew from Scripture was the Son of God, yet destined to become “a man of sorrows,” “a worm and no man,” “despised and rejected by men” (cf. Is. 53), required enormous faith and surrender in God’s designs. Here again, Mary, empty of self and completely receptive for God and His loving plans, abandons herself to the incomprehensible will of the Father, regardless of what it may cost her, for she believed that “for those who love God, all things work together for the good” (Rom 8.28).

She emerges from this obscurity with her faith strengthened. In the miracle at the Wedding of Cana, we find Mary relying on her faith in her Son to change water into wine. “Do whatever He tells you” (Jn 2.5). Mary, like us, did not have infused knowledge about God’s plans. But, in the face of life’s events, rather than rebel or stumble in the dark, it was faith that enabled her to come into the light.

She needed that faith to remain at the foot of the Cross. As the soldier thrust his lance through Jesus’ side, the sword of suffering pierced her heart, too. Here, Mary made her second fiat. She consented to God’s “unsearchable judgments” and “inscrutable ways”. Mary stood before the atrocious sufferings of Her Son. She watched His unthinkable defeat and the apparent victory of Satan. She might have been tempted to flee from the

Cross or invite Jesus as the Son of God to climb down. Instead, it was precisely at this moment of greatest trial that Mary's fiat attained its supreme confirmation.

What was it that formed Mary's faith? In his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei* of just a few months ago (11 October 2011), inviting the entire Church to a "Year of Faith," Pope Benedict provides an answer that can help us in our journey. I quote: "the 'door of faith' (Acts 14.27) is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church. It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace" (#1).

The Pope's words represent an invitation to us. He tells us that we receive the gift of faith through hearing the Word of God and opening our heart to the transforming power of grace. Mary is our model. She is the one who hears the word of God and keeps it. Saint Luke tells us: "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Lk 11.21). Literally translated, the Greek verb *symballein* means "to toss things together in one's heart." The Book of Proverbs tells us that the wise man teaches his son and urges him, "Hold my words in your heart" (Proverbs 3.1). Mary did this. The Psalmist recounts to God: "I have hidden your sayings in my heart so that I may not sin" (Psalm 119.11). Mary did this. Not that she had full comprehension of all that she held and "tossed about" in her heart. Her greatness lies in her faith in God's Word by which she was willing to go forward with a plan she did not understand, to a place she had not chosen, for the sake of a people who would reject and torture and kill her Son.

In this context, we can understand why Saint Luke chooses to insert in his Gospel the somewhat bizarre incident of a woman in the crowd who praises Mary for bearing her Son, "blest is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you" (Lk 11:27). Jesus used her remark to define true blessedness: "blest are they who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 11:28). Mary heard God's word and kept it – believing that "nothing is impossible with God," and so she is blest.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: what a precious lesson the Blessed Mother offers to us! Our lives, too, are marked frequently by the obscurity of faith. On a personal level, some of us are afflicted by bodily sufferings or difficult relationships; on a national and global level, we face unprecedented moral challenges, which threaten our Christian foundations and the very fabric of society; trying economic times place our livelihoods at risk and we find it ever more difficult to make ends meet; even in the Church, sins and scandals mar the call to holiness. Only faith in a God who ultimately triumphs can give birth to a hope that sustains us through all darkness, allowing love of God and even

whatever presents itself to us as an enemy to enter as light into the world (Deus Caritas est #39).

This love, this light was made flesh, entering the world and transforming it definitively through a young, Jewish girl, called Mary, in the tiny village of Nazareth. How many Saints have shed light upon their dim worlds through openness to the Word of God and the transforming power of grace: Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Blessed John Paul II, Saint José Maria Escrivá, to name just a few!

Today in this Eucharist, on the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Jesus knocks at the door of our heart. In us, He wishes to take up His abode and, through our body, enter human history. When we welcome Him, He gives birth to divinity within the crib of our hearts. What answer will our heart give to His divine proposal?

Allow me to finish with some words of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who – as if from behind a curtain – watches the encounter between the Archangel Gabriel and Mary. His words urge us to give ourselves in faith, hope and love to a truth that has been attested to throughout the ages: “Without God, nothing is possible. With God, all things are possible”:

“You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit.

The angel awaits an answer ... we too are waiting.

On your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race.

Answer quickly, O Virgin ... Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word.

Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the Creator. See, the desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter.

Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith; hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving. ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord’, she says, ‘be it done to me according to your word’” (“In Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary”, Hom. 4, 8-9).