

She Who is Full of Grace

Annunciation feast 7 April 2019

The Annunciation is considered to be the crown of feasts for it is the initiation of our salvation through incarnation, which continued with the Nativity of the Messiah and was completed by His death on the Cross and Resurrection. Thus, it is of utter importance among the feasts of the church as indicated by its

Troparion:

“Today is the crown of our salvation, / the manifestation of the eternal mystery! / The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin / as Gabriel announces the coming of Grace. / Together with him let us cry to the Theotokos: / Hail, O Full of Grace, / the Lord is with You!”.

We know from Church Tradition that the Virgin is also addressed as ‘the daughter of King David’ (as referenced in multiple church hymns). This term is taken from **Psalm 45:13** - *The royal daughter is all glorious within*. The *royal daughter* is the daughter of King David, who is the Virgin. As for the expression ‘*all glorious within*’, it refers to her glory-filled inner life. This leads us to ask ourselves: What is the mystery of such an inner life? What lesson can we learn from it for our own lives?

The answer to these questions lies within a most important mystery revealed by the Fathers of the Church. This mystery can help us greatly in our practical spiritual life. The mystery behind such a glory-filled inner life is that she was full of grace. This term ‘full of grace’ is a preferred phrase within the Orthodox Church

despite the fact that the closest translation of the original Greek would be ‘she who was given grace’. The fathers preferred this expression because they perceived that being *filled with* grace is the mystery that prepared her to be *given* this special grace (incarnation). But how was she filled with grace?

The fathers’ explanation might not appeal to us, but that is because we have become accustomed to obtaining everything in a quick and easy manner. According to them, she was filled with grace through the gathering of fragments and traces of grace. This means that she did not depend on feasts and temple prayers alone to receive grace. But rather, she collected grace whenever and however she could. She desired to be filled with grace and she understood that she has the opportunity to gather its fragments throughout the moments of everyday. She found these fragments in all kinds of forms such as in a small prayer, in a pleasing thought springing up from her heart or as she rejected negative thoughts. She also willingly served the other girls in the temple who were there to dedicate a few years to prayer. With each of them, she gathered a fragment of grace that collectively made a good amount at the end of the day. According to Tradition, she entered the temple at three years old and left between twelve and fourteen years old. This means that she held this endeavor for at least ten years. Moment after moment and day after day she held this endeavor. And it was the cumulation of all of these moments that filled her with grace. Notice how she must’ve perceived the grace of God to gather it so cautiously for so long! She found and understood grace to be of great worth!

As for us, we tend to depend more on the grace found in our festal spiritual assembly. And yet, we don’t perceive any change within us. The cause of this is that we often lose the grace we gained within minutes due to negative behavior.

We also gain grace from liturgies, which are also lost by the end of the day through our actions. As for the Virgin, her actions were guided through her endeavor to gather the traces of grace from each situation which resulted in being full of grace. This leads us to another very important mystery revealed by the Fathers for us.

When a person is filled with grace, he/she enters into a very distinct fellowship with the Holy Spirit that has a specific economy. Even those filled partially with grace would have a foretaste of this personal filling of the Holy Spirit and obtain its understanding. What is this personal filling? Its value is in the reading of Scripture. For the fathers never separate the Word from the Spirit. The Holy Spirit and the Word are the channels for change, being filled and all else. With the personal filling, the heart would know very well when a certain verse is speaking to it - It knows when the Holy Spirit is speaking to it in specific words through a specific verse. This, in turn, establishes within the heart of the person a specific spiritual state. In it, there is a deep movement in the heart, warmth of faith and light in the mind. The movement allows the person to perceive that God is speaking to them. The faith allows for obedience in carrying the matter out in one's life. And the light allows them to know why they are doing it and where it will take them — what is the direction or what matters of the kingdom will be completed through their obedience. Thus, the person comes to understand what God is telling them and giving them and for what reason.

For the Virgin, she used to discern without a doubt that there are passages that pertain to her as she read Scripture in the state of being filled with grace. How so and why they pertain to her she does not know. The Fathers say that while she was reading scripture in this state of being full of grace, she came across **Isaiah 7:14** “*The Virgin will conceive and give birth to a son*”. As she read this verse, she

knew there was something in it for her. Any of us in her place would automatically think that we are now to become mother of the Messiah, which was not far-fetched for all of Israel knew that the Messiah is coming. Every woman wanted to be the mother of the Messiah and those who were barren would grieve the loss of this chance. But the Virgin thought in a different way as she began to perceive that this verse is for her. She understood that God is speaking to her and saying that there is a virgin that will give birth to the Messiah. Knowing this, she only had one request before God - that she would be granted to serve this blessed woman, whom He alone knew. She wondered where she was and was hoping that she would meet her. All she wanted was to be her servant. Thus, she began to knock on the doors of God's mercies at every moment of everyday. The term 'knock' is a lovely patristic term that's worth understanding. She requested this one thing of Him - to be the servant of the mother of the Messiah. It was enough for her to just be able to gaze on such a woman's face. It would be enough for her to serve the mother of the Messiah for this is a great honor! And if this was granted to her, she would ask for nothing else.

She was full of humility as indicated by her response to the angel "*I am the handmaiden of the Lord*" - **Luke 1:31**. Her identity as His servant filled her thoughts and being with this notion that she is a handmaiden - a servant. She wants to serve His purposes and she wants nothing for herself. If anyone else were in her place and felt this verse speaking to them, they would think of themselves in the honorable position. Thereafter she started to frequent her request to God intensely.

Her humility allows us to understand, according to what the Fathers teach us, that our human souls, even as children of grace, are still full of pride. And the pride that is filling us gives no space for the grace to fill us in order for us to think

in a different way, enter into the foretaste of the personal filling of the Spirit and allow the words of Scripture to have a different impact in us and be under a different light. This would bring about real change in us. We are so sensitive over our honor. Before our eyes are our own egos not Christ, the Kingdom of God or the service of others.

She was full of grace and full of humility. Thus, she was able to perceive that she was called to something regarding the mother of the Messiah. And because of this humility and frequent requesting that she offered in front of the throne of grace, she was surprised by the angel coming to tell her that she will become the mother of the Messiah. *“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy One which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”* We can imagine her response: “Oh my, who Me?!”. For her, it was enough to be that woman’s servant. If this second step came without the first, she could’ve been too distraught. But through the light that was filling her, she instantly became aware that becoming the mother of the Messiah through this unheard-of virginal pregnancy means that she will be put in a difficult situation. At that moment, she became aware of the cost, even if only from afar. But she didn’t think about it. *‘Let it be to me according to your saying’*. She knows how to throw herself upon His sayings and submit. Her submission was of a kind that we have yet to learn even after many years. So, the Virgin became the Mother of God, the mother of the Messiah. This is the richness of this feast. This is the mystery of this feast.

“Today is the crown of our salvation, the manifestation of the eternal mystery! The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin.”

This day is the crown of our salvation. Are we aware? What will we do in a day such as this? Will we learn from her to gather the traces of grace and be cautious that the grace we gather is not lost from us? If so, we each will also have personal ‘good news’ delivered to us. The mystery of the Annunciation is still present and available to each one of us. To those who desire, there is a unique annunciation for each of us. The Virgin already brought forth the Messiah and Christ was born. But there are still many mysteries that He wants to bring to fruition and is waiting for the vessels that will accept its good news; its unique mystery. And by doing so, we would enter the procession of the Annunciation. The procession of Annunciation, in which many individuals have entered into and completed the great will of God.

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And all the glory be to God forever, amen.