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**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE ANNUNCIATION  
AND THE CLOSING OF PASTORAL MINISTRY DAYS**

**Holy Cross Chapel – *Terra Sancta*, Rapid City**

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I found myself in the Holy Land during Christmas time two years ago with 35 seminarians from North American College celebrating Mass where the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with this invitation to bring forth into the world the Savior.....Jesus...Emmanuel, God is with us, the one who would save you and me from our sins.

It was profoundly moving for me to be there that morning in the very place where the *“Word of God was made flesh and came to dwell among us.”*

In that place, as we contemplated God’s activity in the world, the words continued to echo to us, “Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God.” Because of Mary’s “yes”, we can hear the words of the Father speaking to each of us, “You are my beloved Son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased.”

In a real sense, a Theological Reflection took place. As the seminarians *‘listened’* with an inner ear and *‘saw’* anew with the mind’s eye in this sacred place, they were brought a deeper awareness of the mystery of their own call to the priesthood. Like Mary, they would come to realize in a deeper way that God will ask many things of them...things they would never choose for themselves, things we couldn’t even think of at the moment; things that may cause them to shutter.

I think about my own life. The Lord has done amazing and powerful things...and some challenging things as well. But throughout my priesthood, God has led me to ministry and assignments that I would have never thought about for my life, would have never chosen for myself and that are vastly different than what I had in mind when I said “yes” to becoming a priest. Though I have said “yes” to all of them, my heart has always been filled with a bit of fear, a bit of trepidation, a bit of anxiety. But one thing that I have discovered.....and have learned sometimes the hard way.....[and I am still coming to believe, more and more] is that the Lord is not only incredible.....but more importantly, unbelievably faithful.

I would suspect that Mary would have never imagined what God was asking her to do either. In this encounter with God’s messenger, a bit of Mary’s heart is revealed to us. One can only imagine what she must have been going through. This whole experience became a theological reflection for her, more so as she went through it.

We can but imagine that as Mary reflected on her experience, she did so with an intentional openness to the Holy, assuming ‘a contemplative posture’, placing herself in a receptive attitude. This is how theological reflection is done.

It is to ponder how and where the Divine may be encountering us. It is a way of perceiving that not only invites self-revelation but the discerning of what the Spirit brings to mind in our times of reflection. So it is important to be aware of our thoughts and feelings.

Many things went through Mary's mind. She was "deeply troubled by his words," Luke says, "What can this greeting mean?" There perhaps was some fear. She heard that she was favored and so perhaps she questioned "But why?" Or "What does that mean?"

Something great and unbelievable was going to happen to her, and she said, "How can this be....?" She had a heart that questioned many things. Many things must have gone through her mind. But she was listening and looking at these things through her own faith experience. She must have been thinking, "You are asking me to do WHAT?" Perhaps that would have been our response. But for Mary, perhaps this question is much more than what it appears. Perhaps at the heart of this question for Mary is a deep sense of wonder, and a deep sense of awe, a deep sense of marvel at God's power and love; a deep knowing that this is all about God. Reflecting theologically would easily lead her and us to this sense, this feeling.

As I mentioned yesterday, theological reflection is not completed until the fruit of our reflection finds its way into praxis – a "thoughtful action" of our faith. Remember that "action" is not always external. Often times it is interior. As Mary pondered with a deep sense of wonder...and a deep sense of awe, her response, her "thoughtful action" of faith, was a deep sense of marvel at God's power and love; a deep knowing that this is all about God. It was interior, but it led to an exterior choice.

God does not impose himself; God did not simply pre-determine the part that Mary will play in His plan for our salvation: God first seeks her consent. And Mary said, "*I am a maidservant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say.*" This was Mary's "thoughtful action" of faith. A "yes."

Based upon Mary's response, there must have been a deep sense of surrender, and trust, and honor, and hope, and dependence, and faith. Because of her relationship with God, Mary's faith surrendered her heart, her will and her body to God's invitation. It was God's initiative and Mary's response. This is all about God!

In theological reflection, as the Lord reveals Himself to us through our experience, the interior choice always invites us to a deeper surrender of our lives, our hearts. Our exterior response, if it is called for, will come out of this place of surrender. There is so much more in this theological reflection of Mary for you to ponder upon.

But I want to kind of bring our two days together to a close in some way. I first want to thank the Pastoral Ministry Days (PMD) team who worked very hard in putting Fr. George's initial idea together. Much more work this year went into planning the whole event because of having to indentify so many speakers who would share their stories. This team had to think out of the box more than in past years. I appreciate your effort. I don't know about you, but I believe that we have had a wonderful two days. As I said in my comments yesterday, it is not what you are used to for PMD, but there is no doubt that the Lord was present, inviting us to a deeper intimacy. I want to thank Fr. McCaslin for his wonderful reflections. Very insightful and very inspiring! What a gift to us! You have shared God's love with a great message and your wonderful humor. Many, many thanks!

I have deeply appreciated the many speakers sharing their love for God and for ministry, sharing how the Lord has worked and is working in their lives; the challenges they may have faced as they

continue to answer the Lord's call. Just beautiful! We have received much food for thought, really much food for theological reflection. I don't know about you, but I was deeply inspired, and grateful for the courage of all of our speakers. So I deeply thank the speakers who put themselves out there. You were all inspiring. Thank you.

I want to thank Reeny Wilson and the many volunteers who provided the food and drink and cleaned up after us. You have truly made us feel welcomed here at *Terra Sancta*. What a great place have an event such as this. Thank you.

I am sure that there are many others to thank, and you know who you are. But my gratitude and thanks goes out to all of you. Also a special thanks for all of you who came for these two days. I hope and pray that you received much from each other in this time together.

But now, where do we go from here? What do we take away from our time together? Certainly, a new experience of faith, and the opportunity to hear about how the Lord is working in the lives and ministry of others. But hopefully a better understanding of what theological reflection is and the importance of it in our faith life and encounter with the Lord.

But we are reminded that the intent of theological reflection goes beyond gaining clarity or new insights. It is more than just the product of our best efforts at analyzing an experience, and processing new information from whatever source or resource we bring to the reflection.

The goal is response-oriented. It is to bring our faith to life experiences in order to come to a new way of perceiving and a new way of responding to the Lord and our call to follow. Really, **theological reflection** is about **transformation** – in our thinking and in our perceiving – in our being, and in our doing.

Where does our theological reflection ultimately lead us? It opens us to a deeper experience of God's love, but also, I believe, it brings us to a greater awareness of how much the Lord desires us. Such reflection draws us into the realm of deeper faith. It grounds us in an unseen reality, alters our way of 'seeing' and shapes our responses in all of life's relationships. This was Mary's experience in the Annunciation. Her response led her to a deeper experience of God's fidelity, His faithfulness. Mary responded in faith and trust, and surrender.

We often reflect upon our faithfulness or our unfaithfulness. But what about the God's faithfulness, His fidelity to us sinners, weak and poor, who are in great need? Yet He continues to pour out His blessings, His graces upon us as He did to Mary and Jesus and Joseph. This is what real love is. This is what unconditional love is. We are called His beloved even though we've done nothing to deserve it, or earn it. We can't earn it, yet we so often try. This is the Father's faithfulness and fidelity to us.

How we accept this truth will greatly impact our ministry and future ministry. How we accept this truth will greatly impact the way in which and the depth to which we receive his love.

How we accept this truth will greatly impact the way we love ourselves and accept ourselves... with all of our flaws.

How do you and I respond to a love so deep, a fidelity so rich? How do you and I respond to this faithfulness? A heart that deeply knows the love of the Father in Christ Jesus will not fear in giving his/her life away. We will keep nothing for ourselves. That was the fidelity and love of the Father in the Incarnation; that was the love and fidelity of Jesus throughout His life even unto death on a cross for you and me; that was the love and fidelity of Mary in giving her life away. She must have

known the ramifications of conceiving a child outside of marriage. It was death by stoning. In her “yes,” she lived in the mystery of the unknown as she pondered all of these things in her heart.

God’s fidelity is a great mystery, and in human terms, it makes no sense. God’s invitation to Mary, and Mary’s “yes”, is a great mystery, and in human terms, it makes no sense. Mary’s “yes”, both on a human level and spiritual level, led to her surrender in love, to Love itself, and for the sake of love.

*The Word became flesh and came to dwell with us* is a great mystery, and in human terms, makes no sense. Jesus, obediently saying “yes” to the cross was His surrender in love, to Love itself, and for the sake of love.

Our response to the Father’s fidelity, in human terms, makes no sense – but through faith in the Incarnation, makes all the sense in the world.

If we say “yes” and give our life away because of God’s fidelity to us, it, too, will change everything for us and for those whom we have been called and will be called to serve. Remember that *“the will of God will never take you where the grace of God will not protect you.”* [repeat]

I want to conclude with the words of Pope Benedict, *“What happened here in Nazareth, far from the gaze of the world, was a singular act of God, a powerful intervention in history, through which a child was conceived who was to bring salvation to the whole world.”*

*The wonder of the Incarnation continues to challenge us to open up our understanding to the limitless possibilities of God’s transforming power, of his love for us, his desire to be united with us. Here the eternally begotten Son of God became man, and so made it possible for us, his brothers and sisters, to share in his divine Sonship. That downward movement of self-emptying love made possible the upward movement of exaltation in which we too are raised to share in the life of God himself (cf. Phil 2:6-11).”*

My dear friends, may our hearts rest in deep gratitude today and every day because,

Yes, the Lord is truly incredible.....and is truly faithful. And so we gather here around this altar for this Eucharist, to celebrate His fidelity to us.

God bless you all.