

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

I used to shake hands with people every day, especially at church. Among the changes we've all undergone this pandemic is the way we greet people. Wearing a mask, we can't even use our faces effectively to communicate the joy of seeing a friend. We rely on other tools: words, tone of voice. Still, we hate giving up conventions everyone understands when we greet one another.

The angel Gabriel greeted Mary with words, a three-part greeting that troubled Mary. First, though, Saint Luke gives Gabriel a dramatic entrance. You can almost see the angel circling like an airplane funneling down to the right runway: "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to... Galilee, [to] Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary."

We don't know where Mary was or what she was doing. One tradition holds that she was sewing a veil for the temple and had just stepped out to fetch water from the well—but we don't know. The angel did not greet her with a handshake, a hug or any other visible sign of affection. We only know this remarkable three-part greeting: "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."

The first part is the most conventional. The angel simply says, "Hello." If Gabriel had stopped there, Mary would have had no reason to be troubled. But the second part of the greeting was not conventional. The angel calls her "full of grace." As messengers of God, angels know grace, so when Gabriel spots grace, names grace, and says that Mary is full of grace, his greeting resembles none other that Mary had ever heard; indeed, unlike any greeting any human being had ever heard. Gabriel recognized Mary was special.

This second part of the greeting explains our celebration today and the very name of this cathedral, the Immaculate Conception. Christians believe we are born with original sin inherited from Adam's fall, as well as concupiscence, the tendency to commit personal sin. But if Mary was indeed completely full of grace, then she somehow escaped all taint of any sin. From the moment of her conception, she was free of sin; she was immaculate. All of this Gabriel knew, recognized, and embedded in his greeting to her: "Hail, full of grace!"

The third part of his greeting affirms the second part. Bear with me a moment. Frequently at Mass you hear the priest or deacon say to you, "The Lord be with you." That translates two Latin words: *Dominus vobiscum*. A literal translation would be "Lord with you"—no verb. In Latin that verb is understood. We insert "be" to clarify our hope that the Lord may be with you in this celebration. Luke wrote his gospel in Greek, and in the original version of Gabriel's greeting the verb is also understood. It just says, "The Lord with you." But in Mary's case, the words probably do not mean, "The Lord be with you," but rather, as we heard today, Gabriel said to Mary, "The Lord is with you." That put an exclamation point on this entire greeting.

I miss shaking hands with people, but today's celebration reminds us that a few well chosen words can speak volumes. The pandemic has tied our hands, but it has not tied our tongues. We can still find ways to express our joy, to give a welcome, and to praise someone's grace.