

Annunciation of the Lord
Solemn Profession of Bro. Laurent M. Salud Abila
(Isaiah 7:10-14.8:10 / Luke 1:26-38)
25.03.2022
'Yes'

Saying 'Yes' to God engages the offering of our lives

The great story of our salvation began with a simple *yes* pronounced by the humble virgin girl of Nazareth. Thanks to Mary's *yes* – which, St Bernard tells us, the whole of creation longed for with expectant hope – Jesus was conceived. With His incarnation *the Word was made flesh and lived among us*. The coming of the Son of God into this world, inaugurated a new era of history. When the Virgin spoke her *yes* to God's will nothing less than a new beginning opened up for the whole world. Put simply, *a before and an after Jesus Christ* is counted from that moment onwards. However great a mystery the Annunciation was, Pope Emeritus Benedict reminds us: [it was] *a humble and hidden event – no one saw it, no one except Mary, no one knew of it, except her... and yet it was crucial to the history of humanity*. All so often, truly great happenings in this world attract little or no attention. They pass over quietly, without clamour or acclaim. Mary's *yes* reflected or, better still, coincided with that which the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us Christ spoke entering into this world. The author of Hebrews envisages Jesus' conception to have been accompanied by Him declaring: *God here I am! I am coming to obey Your will*. We could say that Mary's *yes* was the verbalisation or articulation of what the child she conceived within her was speaking at that very moment. The *yes* you declare on this day, dear Bro. Laurent, is an echo of that of Jesus, as well as that of Mary. Our reiterated *yes*, joined to yours, unites all of us with you – as we renew the offering of our lives, along with that which you make of your life, in the celebration of this Holy Eucharist.

Bro. Laurent's 'Yes' to God leads him to Ireland

By your act of Solemn Profession on this great feast, you pronounce your *yes* to God on Irish soil in the community of *Holy Cross Abbey, Rostrevor*. Little did you imagine that one day it would be here, in the Valley of Kilbroney, in this monastery, that you would be led to make Solemn Profession. When you first heard God's call, having felt attracted by what you witnessed to be lived at *Monte Oliveto Maggiore* on a chance visit to that hallowed place, you entered into contact by email with Dom Andrea Santus (who was then novice-master at the Mother-House). You explained to him that you wanted to explore how you might respond to your vocation. Encouraged by Dom Andrea, you presented yourself at the door of one of our American monasteries: *Mother of the Redeemer Monastery, in Louisiana*. It is there that you thought you would live out the rest of your life as a monk. Instead, it is here, in this little corner of County Down, in Northern Ireland, that you make your life commitment, vowing perpetual stability in this community, responding to God's call, in a humble obedience which reflects that of Mary and that of Jesus. We might go as far as to speak of your response to the Lord's call – which eventually sent you here – as having demanded of you a blind, unknowing obedience. In like manner, we could speak of Jesus' and Mary's obedience as having asked the same of them. Just think of it. Jesus came into this world saying *yes* to whatever the Father would ask of Him, not knowing in advance what His response to the Father's will would entail and where it would lead Him. Christ echoed that initial *yes*, pronounced at the moment of His conception, at every step along the way – sometimes struggling to pronounce it, but, nonetheless, always somehow managing to do so. That crucial moment at Gethsemane comes to mind. There a

humanly reluctant Jesus prayed: *Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass me by... and yet, not what I want, but rather Your will be done.* I think it fair to say, Brother Laurent, that you will have found yourself led to make a similar prayer at various stages along the way that has led you to where you stand today, ready to serve, ready to do what is and will be asked of you.

Just like Mary, you had no idea where the initial *yes* you consented to give in response to God's call would lead you and all that it would entail, but you dared (and still dare) to believe, as the Blessed Virgin did, in God's promise: *The Holy Spirit will cover you with His shadow.* Bro. Laurent, the Holy Spirit will strengthen you to accomplish God's life-giving will in the offering of your life.

I know the important place Mary holds in your spirituality. Given that, I am sure you will have heard and meditated upon those words she spoke to the wedding feast attendants at Cana in Galilee. Mary's words of motherly advice will have spoken into your heart at those times when you struggled to make sense out of things. At such moments in all our lives they can speak to us. *Do whatever He tells you.* You did just that when at the closure of *Mother of the Redeemer Monastery* the Abbot General assigned you here. You did what you were told to do by Christ, for, as the Rule teaches: *We believe that the abbot holds the place of Christ in the monastery.* The same spirit of obedience animated your brethren here at Holy Cross Abbey when they were asked to welcome you, along with our brother Gregory. The obedience of faith we all consented to give at that moment has brought us great blessing. Our joy has been to grow together – not just as *fellow-servants*, but as *brothers in Christ... members of one body... gathered together in unity... fortified by the bonds of mutual love.* Our joy has been to experience the blessing of communion. It has been to discover the truth of those words of Scripture which St Benedict echoes in his Rule for Monks, when he states: *We are all one in Christ.*

We say Yes to a God who can be trusted to guide us

Bro. Laurent, I think it is good for you – and for us with you – to halt for a moment today to remember how the Lord's hand has guided everything concerning your life (and all our lives) up until now. This should lead us to dare to believe that *God who is faithful and who can be trusted* will continue to lead, guide and direct you, and all of us along with you, as we seek to respond to His call and do His will. A few lines from the great American Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, have spoken strongly into your heart, helping you to make sense of things which were, at first, far from clear. Even more than that, these words have helped you *launch out into the deep.* You shared them with us in the *Preces* you sent out asking for our prayer support in preparation for this great day. They are reproduced on the back of the programme printed to guide us through this liturgy. Let me echo them: *I was not sure where I was going, and I could not see what I would do when I got there. But You saw further and clearer than I, and You opened the seas before my ship, whose track led me across the waters to a place I had never dreamed of, and which You were then preparing to be my rescue and my shelter and my home.*

Remembering humility in our 'Yes' to God

I said at the outset of this meditation that the great story of our salvation began with a simple *yes* pronounced by Mary. I alluded to the fact that great things often have the humblest beginnings: as humble as a faint *yes* whispered in the darkness. Abbot Paul Grammont who has marked the vision of our community profoundly would insist frequently upon the humble start of the great things that have been accomplished in our monastic family throughout the centuries – going right back to its origins at Monte Oliveto Maggiore. In a letter written to the Chapter of *L'Abbaye du Bec* from *Monte Oliveto Maggiore*, after a time of meditation in the grotto of

St Bernard Tolomei, he penned some lines to his brethren which I esteem to be as relevant for us today as when they were first written to the monks of Bec in 1948. *Remember the rock from which you were hewn. Remember the humility and poverty of your origins. Remember la Sainte Esperance. Remember Holy Hope. Remember the faith-filled love and tremendous generosity of the Founding Fathers of Monte Oliveto and of Mesnil Saint Loup. Remember those who sowed in sorrow so that we might reap in joy.* To what Abbot Paul wrote to the monks at Bec in 1948 could be added these words today: *Bro. Laurent (and with you Bro. Gregory and Fr James), remember the graces that were part of your story at Mother of the Redeemer Monastery.* And to that exhortation could be added the following encouragement: *Brothers of Holy Cross Abbey, remember all that was part of your story, founding this monastery from little or nothing but a response to God's call to serve Him and the Church in this land... and more specifically in the Church of this Diocese of Dromore, wherein we are planted and in which we are called to bear our specific testimony to unity in Christ.*

We were blessed to share our respective stories as we welcomed the brethren of *Mother of the Redeemer Monastery* into our midst here at *Holy Cross Abbey*. The days of profound heart to heart sharing we lived as a renewed community were moments of great grace for all of us. They helped us *see and honour Christ in each other*, as St Benedict counsels his monks to do time and time again in his Rule. What we shared in our community meetings helped us see ourselves and each other as *Christ-bearers!* This is what monks ought to be: *Christ-bearers!* This what every Christian is called to be: *a Christ-bearer! A Christopher!* We should never forget that.

Looking to the future in our 'Yes' to God - Fulfilling our vows

While remembering the past is important in the Bible, biblical *memorial* would also have us look forward. The notion of the past being made present, while looking forward, is at the heart of the Eucharistic memorial. And so, Bro. Laurent, in the context of this Eucharistic celebration of your monastic Profession, I invite you not only to look back, but also, to be well and truly present to what you live right now. Indeed, I invite you to make of your life a present to God: a total gift of self-offering love. Even more than that, I also invite you to look forward, as Mary must have done on that first Annunciation day when she said *yes* to God... a *yes* that made *all things possible for God*, including so much of which she simply had no inkling. Today is not a point of arrival. It is a point of departure. It is a moment of re-departure in your life. You are called today to *start out afresh with Christ*. All of us who are gathered here with for this celebration are also called to *a fresh start with Christ*. Your *yes* pronounced today will have to be echoed again and again and again – just as Mary's initial *yes* had to be constantly renewed at each step along the way... not least at the more challenging, the really crucial (indeed, truly crucifying!) moments. At various points in Mary's lifetime there were passages when she simply did not understand God's ways for herself and for her Son. The same will be true in your life, as in all our lives. There will be times when we simply do not understand God's ways for ourselves and/or for others who are dear to us. When this is the case, all we can do is say *yes* to God anew. A *yes* of humble, trusting, obedience. A *yes*, followed up with the declaration: *I am Your humble servant. Be it done to me in accordance with Your word. Your will be done. Not mine. Yes, I engage myself to do whatever You tell me – even if it does not quite make sense to me... yet!* Our *yes* to God leads us to place our lives entirely in His hands, so that the Lord may use us in whatever way He wills. Our obedient *yes* to God leads us to cooperate with what my own late mother would have called *God's holy will*. Our obedient *yes* to God's call upon us leads us to do as Mary did: to give flesh to Christ!

Our *yes* to God lived in the community to which we vow stability, in obedience and in the way of conversion, leads us to make Christ present not only to each other, but, all of us together, in and for the Church and the world in which we are called to bear witness. Our *hidden life* as

monks can and should have an impact upon the wider Church community and upon world in which we live – far beyond the confines of our own little circle of life. Our monastic life is called to be a prophetic sign of fraternal communion. God knows, that is much needed in today's greatly fragmented world. (We cannot but think of the conflict raging at the moment in Ukraine.) May our little community here at Holy Cross Abbey – a community into which you are welcomed today for life – remain faithful to the call confided to us. May we strive to be a true leaven of communion in our bitterly divided world and in Church marred by the scandal and sin of disunity.

The responsibility of those who say Yes to Consecrated Life

As I draw this reflection to a close, words Pope Francis addressed to Consecrated men and women in 2016 come to mind. I offer them for your consideration: *I trust that rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create alternate spaces, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love for one another can thrive. Monasteries, communities, centres of spirituality (...) should increasingly be the leaven for society inspired by the Gospel, a city on a hill, which testifies to the truth and power of Jesus' words. 'Experts in communion' (...), I am hoping that the spirituality of communion (...) will become a reality and that you will be in the forefront of responding to the great challenges facing us, (...) to make the Church the home and the school of communion.* I hear the following words penned in the same context – his 2016 Letter to Consecrated Men and Women – to be words addressed to our particular community, given its make-up and the context in which we live. You see, Pope Francis went on to speak of what he called '*the mystique of living together*', stating: *We need to ask ourselves about the way we relate to persons of different cultures, as our communities become increasingly international. How can we enable each member to say freely what he or she thinks, to be accepted with his or her particular gifts.* French, Mexican, American, Filipino, Irish... we are all called to be *gathered together as one* in a way that bears witness to *the unity of all in Christ*. The international make-up of our community makes for a more prophetic witness. It speaks of the importance of communion and encounter. I believe it opens up a path of hope for a world divided by race, culture and colour. As Pope Francis constantly reminds us: *No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance.* Gathered here at Holy Cross – remembering the cross of Jesus to be the rallying point for the Church of Jesus Christ, may we hear the call to engage ourselves to live a true synergy and to do all we can to spread the spirituality of communion of which the Church and the world of our day stand in need.

May Mary, *Mother of the Redeemer*, given to us by Christ from the holy cross to be *Mother of the Redeemed, the Mother of Holy Hope*, encourage us always to *do whatever He tells us!*

Amen!