



## Flame Ministries Conference

### Speech

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John XXIII College, Mt Claremont**

As we gather together this evening to mark the opening of this year's Flame Ministries' Conference, we do so just a few days after the conclusion of our Christmas celebrations. While for the secular world in which we live the celebration of Christmas ends on Christmas Day, for us as Christians the feast is too important to confine to one day only. For us Boxing Day is not just an extra public holiday, but is rather the feast of Saint Stephen, the first person to die as a martyr because of his faith in Christ as the Son of God, sent among us to reveal the true face of God to us. The following day is the feast of Saint John the Evangelist, the one who, more clearly than any of the other gospel writers, proclaimed Jesus to be both the Messiah and also, extraordinarily, the very Word of God Himself, made flesh for us. After that, we celebrated the feast of the Holy Innocents, the children put to death by order of King Herod, who was motivated purely by a desire to retain his position of privilege and power. On New Year's Day, we celebrated the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God. On the following Sunday we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord and on the day after that, on Monday of this past week, we celebrated the Baptism of the Lord and the end of the Christmas season.

I mention all of this because it seems to me to be important that just as the gospels, or at least three of them (Matthew, Luke and John), begin the story of Jesus by reflecting on the mystery of his origins, so we, as we gather together for this year's conference, with its one-word theme of **rejoice**, should also begin by reflecting on the same mystery. After all, it is surely the case that our desire to rejoice and our reasons for rejoicing are grounded in our faith that in Jesus, God has come among us as one of us, in order to reveal the merciful face of His Father to us.

You will all recall, I am sure, the wonderful initiative of Pope Francis in convening what he called the Extraordinary Year of Mercy in 2016. In fact, that year officially began on 8 December in 2015. That is, it began on the solemn feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the feast which in a sense marks the beginning of God's decisive entry into the long and tragic story of humanity's infidelity and sinfulness. It is a history, as we know, which reaches back to our first parents and continues to manifest itself in each one of us. By preserving the future mother of the Messiah from every trace of sin from the very first moment of her conception, God was preparing Mary to be



the one who, on our behalf and in our name, could give her **yes** to God's plan of salvation. To do so, in a truly free way, Mary needed to be free herself from the effects of sin because sin, as we all know through bitter experience, can so often distort our use of our freedom – and in God's wonderful plan it was important that the gift of salvation, which God freely offers, should be accepted in a fully free way by one who could speak on behalf of us all. God never forces his gifts of love on us – but he always offers them freely and generously, looking for our generous response.

The importance of Mary's **yes** is captured very beautifully in the prayer of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist. When Zachariah received back the gift of speech, which he had lost because of his doubting of the angel Gabriel's message that he and his wife would have a son, he broke into a beautiful hymn of praise, which now forms part of the daily prayer of the Church:

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel for he has come to his people and set them free.*

*He has remembered his promise to Abraham that he would grant us, free from fear, to serve him in holiness and virtue, all the days of our life.*

*All this is because of the loving kindness of the heart of our God, who visits us from on high (cf Luke 1:67-79).*

As Christians, we rejoice because in Christ we have come to know the loving kindness of the heart of our God.

In my address this evening, as we enter into what we all hope will be an enriching and grace filled conference, I want to offer just a few thoughts about what this loving kindness of the heart of our God really means. The more we understand the great things the Almighty God has done for us the fuller and truer will our rejoicing be as we recognise the holiness of his name. We rejoice because of what God has done and is doing **for** us, and as part of that we rejoice because of what God has done and continues to do **through** us for his people.

As we do this, as we enter more deeply into the mystery of God's love made known in Jesus, I want to invite all of us to place this conference and all that it involves under the care of the prayers of the woman who said **yes** to God. Through her prayers, may we also find it within ourselves to give our **yes** to God. A **Yes** to God is a powerful thing. In Mary's case the result of her **yes** was that, as the Angelus prayer puts it, *the Word became flesh and lived among us*. In our case, our **yes** to God can also lead to the Word becoming flesh, becoming real, becoming present in the lives of those we meet and those we love. And when this happens we rejoice because God has been able to work through us; the people whose lives we have touched rejoice because the mystery of God has been revealed to them; and as Saint Luke's gospel puts it "the angels in heaven rejoice because a sinner has repented" (Luke 15:10).



Mary, the mother of the Lord holds a very important place in the life of the Church, and in the life of every Christian disciple. I have already made reference to the mystery of her Immaculate Conception and, as I suggested, in God's divine plan the meaning of this mystery becomes clearer at the time of the annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel. We are all very familiar with this story. We recall it every time we say the much loved prayer to her which begins with the words, "Hail Mary, full of grace".

This greeting by the angel, which we find in St Luke's Gospel, which was of course originally written in Greek, begins with the word  $\chiαίρω$  (kairo) which means "rejoice". We usually translate the word as "hail" which is, of course, a more solemn form of "hello". Saint Luke's gospel tells us that Mary was deeply disturbed by this greeting. That is quite understandable. God was stepping into her life in an extraordinary and unexpected way. The appearance of the angel makes that clear but so does the greeting itself. The words the angel uses (Rejoice, highly-favoured one, the Lord is with you) are a form of greeting which often occurs in the Old Testament when God chooses someone for a special vocation and mission, always directed to renewing and deepening God's relationship with his people. As a faithful Jewish girl Mary would have understood this. She would have realised that God was reaching into her life to ask something important and special of her. And so, while the angel greets her by encouraging her to rejoice, Mary is not able to do so immediately. Rather than rejoicing she becomes troubled and even fearful. And when the angel goes on to tell Mary just what God is asking of her, Mary becomes even more concerned and confused. "How can this be?" she asks. "I am not yet married."

In the way Saint Luke tells the story of the Annunciation, Mary emerges as a very human figure. It is a great privilege to be called to something special by God and ultimately, if we respond generously, we will certainly find ourselves rejoicing, but before that happens, we may have to go through times of doubt, of struggle, of confusion and even of fear. And this will be even more the case if, in spite of our initial **yes**, we sometimes, and even often, find ourselves backtracking and turning our **yes** into a **no**. This was not the case with Mary but it will be the case for many of us. When this happens there will be no reason for rejoicing for we have failed to be the people God is asking us, and has created us, to be.

The great thing about our faith, and a solid basis for our rejoicing, is that these moments of failure, no matter how serious and how often they might occur, do not need to be the end of the story. They do not have to be the defining reality of our lives. They may distance us from God, but they don't distance God from us. They may lead us to condemn ourselves, but they don't lead God to condemn us. They may turn our love for ourselves into loathing, but they don't stop God from loving us. The words which the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary, and which allowed her to give her **yes** – *the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High God will cover you with*



*its shadow* – are the very same words, the very same promise, which God makes to us – if we are willing to recognise our need to return to him in humility, in honesty and in sorrow. And this indeed is a motive for rejoicing – not because of anything we have done but because of what God is always ready and anxious to do: to throw his arms around us as the loving father threw his arms around his prodigal son, and to carry us on his shoulders as the Good Shepherd carried the lost sheep back to the flock.

The remarkable thing about the God who reveals himself in Jesus is that this God does not wait for us to be perfect before he steps into our lives and calls us to allow him to work both in and through us. When, in Saint Luke's gospel, Simon meets Jesus for the first time he is so overcome by the encounter that he falls on his knees in front of Jesus and says, "Leave me Lord, for I am a sinner". As the gospel story unfolds, we realise that this is not a display of false humility on Simon's part. He is indeed a sinner who will constantly misunderstand Jesus and even eventually deny him. But this does not stop Jesus from choosing him for something special and nor does it stop Jesus from persevering with him in spite of his many stumbles. "*Don't be afraid,*" he says to Simon, who will soon become Peter. "*Up until now you have been a catcher of fish – but from now on it is people whom you will catch for the Lord*". The final encounter between Jesus and Simon Peter, as St John's gospel tells it, happened on the shore of the lake when the risen Jesus gave Peter three opportunities to make up for his three denials: *Simon, son of John, do you love me? Do you love me more than these others do? Do you really love me?* How full of rejoicing must Simon Peter's heart have been as he saw the shame of his denials being washed away by the Lord's generosity and forgiveness.

In chapter 10 of St Luke's Gospel, we read the story of a large group of disciples, seventy-two of them according to the gospel, who were sent by Jesus on a mission to all the towns and villages which Jesus himself intended to visit in order to prepare the way for his coming. The disciples went, and after some time returned to Jesus with a report on how things had gone. The gospel tells the story this way:

The seventy-two came back rejoicing. "Lord", they said, "Even the devils submit to us when we use your name." He said to them, "I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Yes, I have given you power to tread underfoot serpents and scorpions and the whole strength of the enemy. Nothing shall ever hurt you. Yet do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you; rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:17-20).

As I bring this brief reflection to a close it is this passage which I would like to highlight and offer to you all as something to keep in mind over the weekend. Our real reason for rejoicing is not because of what we have done, or what we have achieved - even if we have, either literally or symbolically, trod serpents and scorpions and the whole strength of the enemy underfoot in



our zeal for God's kingdom. The real reason for rejoicing is, and must be, that thanks to God's grace we have been able to say, as Mary did, *"I am the servant of the Lord. Let God's will be done in me"*. As Jesus once said to his disciples, *"It is not those who say to me 'Lord, Lord' who will enter the kingdom of heaven but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven"* (Matt 7:21-23). This was the secret of Mary's greatness and of the joy which filled her heart and in which she rejoiced: that in spite of her fears and confusion she committed herself to listening to the Word of God and then putting it into practice. It was this attitude of mind and heart which explains the greeting of the angel to her: *Rejoice highly favoured one of God. The Lord is with you*. It will be the same for us. Our openness to the will of God, and our eagerness for this divine will to be lived out in our daily lives will be the source of that deep joy which will lead us to rejoice – because our names, like Mary's, will be written in heaven.