

*“Behold the handmaid of the Lord”.*



*Annunciation, mid-3rd century*

One of the earliest known paintings of the Annunciation is found in the Roman catacomb of Priscilla on the ancient road *via Salaria*. In the tradition of the annunciation genre, Mary and Gabriel are deep in conversation, each transfixed by the other. It appears, by his raised right hand that Gabriel is speaking. Seated on a high back chair, perhaps a throne, raised just a little above the angel, Mary remains silent. Both are enfolded in three concentric circles, evoking the sheer silence of this conversation that is taking place in the “heart-womb”<sup>i</sup> of the Trinity. The three circles radiate and connect to other circles and patterns. Although the fresco is deep underground, where there is no natural light, it is said to have a remarkable, vibrant luminosity.<sup>ii</sup> This annunciation conversation between Mary and Gabrielle, is an ineffable, intimate, personal conversation and at the same time, it is the conversation of all humanity. It is also an archetypal conversation that takes place in the depths of our own hearts.

Though we know this conversation from memory in the depths of our own hearts, I invite you to recall the details of the exchange:

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph...and the virgin's name was Mary. The angel went in and said to her, "Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, "Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Behold! (ἰδοὺ *idou*) You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus." ...Mary said to the angel, "But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God".... And Mary responded, "Behold(Ἰδοὺ *Idou*) the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me according to your word." And the angel left her.<sup>iii</sup>*

This ineffable conversation eternally taking place in the ground of Mary's heart and in our hearts, is surely one of the most beautiful, mystical conversations in the history of humankind. In it are held all the moments of our longing for God, and our passion and struggles that are part of us gaining a sense of ourselves as persons in the image of the Trinity, both individually and communally. In this conversation, we participate in what Beatrice Bruteau describes as the "act of creative freedom, of initiative, of self-originating self-giving".<sup>iv</sup> At its heart, this amazing conversation invites us to imagine the possibilities of conversation that is itself, a unitive, a oneing<sup>v</sup> consciousness. In this conversation we are released from the trance of the duality of subject-object seeing. We realise we share ecstatically in divine life.

Yet, my sense is that the fullness of the self-revelation of the Annunciation conversation is yet to be wholly realised. Even today, there tends to be an emphasis on Mary's passivity and submission, of her being a model of receptivity. While these are beautiful and necessary qualities in contemplative life, they are not the whole story. They place Mary in the familiar "I-Thou" subject-object relationship, where Gabriel is the active one, and she the passive one. Such passivity has been the focus of artwork down the centuries, often depicting Mary as falling backwards, or trembling in fear at the arrival of Gabriel. While these portrayals capture the pathos of the conversation, they can tend to focus our attention on Mary's emotions, and on the conversation as taking place *outside* of Mary. Mary listens to Gabriel, receives his message, and then she speaks. Yet, there is so much more to this luminous conversation than Mary simply being present to Gabriel. If we are truly to relate to each other, as Beatrice Bruteau upholds, "we cannot *look at* the other, or *listen to* the other, or *speak to* the other".<sup>vi</sup> Such interactions are not nearly intimate enough for the human heart.

This Annunciation conversation transcends all these dualisms, inviting us instead to attend to the subtle traces of the movements of unitive love, disclosed in the *in-between* space, unfolding between Mary and Gabriel. When we listen to the conversation from inside Mary's passionate, loving heart, inside the sheer silence of Silence, we enter into the space between Mary and Gabriel. 'In-between' is an important word for us, with "in" (from Old English *inne*, "within, inside"), suggesting we attend to the in-ness', or 'inside-ness',

that exists in the 'between-ness' created by two (or more) persons, as well as between a person and a text. This 'in-ness' is the union of two subjectivities, knowing each other from the inside. Thus, all conversation offers us a way of entering into this transcendent space, between 'two' that may appear to the dual mind to be separate things. But in fact, as the word 'in' suggests, the two are one. Understanding this possible oneness, has radical implications for the next step in our evolution. As Beatrice Bruteau insists: "we must enter into the other and experience what the other experiences as the other experiences it...their activities confluent and simultaneous, instead of being responsive, alternating, as in dialogue. Each of them knows the other from the inside...and each totally loves the other by uniting with the other in this complete way".<sup>vii</sup> This is such a beautiful place to share in, as we experience the deep joy and ecstasy of "passing *out* of oneself to enter into the other, there to be *as* the other."<sup>viii</sup> Mary invites us to be within her, and to receive Gabriel's invitation, as she receives his words, in the silent depths of her heart.

Quite strikingly, the etymology of the word *conversation* points to such mutual indwelling. Derived from the Latin active noun, *conversari*, "to dwell, to live, or to keep company with" and the passive voice *conversare* "to turn about, or to turn about with," (from *com* "with, together"), the word invites us to *turn* into, "the lovely dwelling place of God" (Ps 84:1). Last month, Kerrie invited us to awaken this dwelling place, this "unceasing circulating mutual indwelling, like the Trinity", as we are "turned within, to the ground of our heart, until our transcendent heart-self awakens as "I," in Christ, who dwells at the centre of our being". Here, in Christ our dwelling place, Kerrie urges, "our intent is naked when all our intent is set, wholly in beholding our Beloved, so much so that we turn into the point where *we behold the beholding, until we become one beholding*". Kerrie's invitations flow into the Annunciation conversation, as we attune to the delicate moments of the angel inviting Mary to "Behold" and Mary's response which also begins with "Behold!" Mary and the angel behold, until the in-between space dissolves and there is only "one beholding." Totally open and receptive to the Spirit's coming within her, Mary conceives the one she will name Jesus.

Fra Angelico - "The Annunciation" Used with permission. Wikimedia Commons



In his book, *Practical Theology*<sup>ix</sup>, Terry Veling distils five key movements unfolding in the "in-between" space of a conversation, that may be helpful for us as we are quietly present to Mary's "beholding the beholding", as she "becomes one beholding".<sup>x</sup> These movements are like energy fields of subtle traces of unfolding love, awakening deeper unitive consciousness. We must remember these movements are

taking place in Mary's heart, Mary, who Pere François says, "was virgin even of herself".<sup>xi</sup> It is in this self-forgetful interior landscape of her heart, that we will now attend to the deep energetic resonances from within the sheer silence, created by Mary's beholding, that turns her into Love.

The first movement is: *"What are you saying to me?"* This question, released deep in Mary's heart, signals a willingness to listen to and to take the angel seriously. In this moment, the angel beholds Mary and Mary beholds the angel. They are both openly receptive to each other. As she listens to Gabriel, Mary, opens her heart, as if she is saying "I allow *your* words to speak to *me and even more so, I allow your words to enter into me and change me.*" Here, we see her ever-evolving reflexivity, her capacity to turn within into her own heart's depths. Mary is in the *oneing*.<sup>xii</sup> Actively passive and passively active, Mary continues to turn into the dwelling place that is conversation itself.

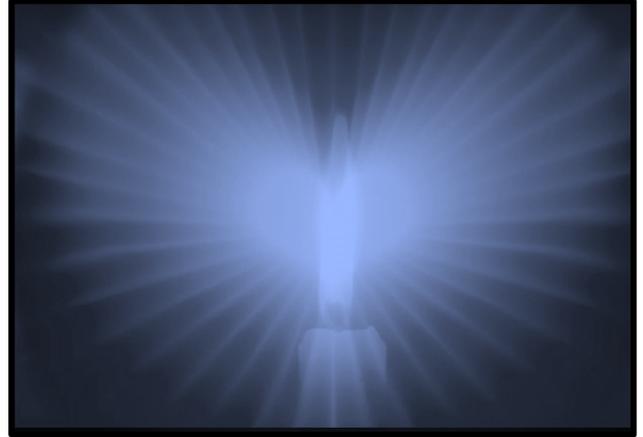
The second movement is: *"My experience is placed in question"*. As we each know so well, while we hear according to our experience, we cannot stay locked in "my experience".<sup>xiii</sup> Each new moment calls for a breakthrough of my prior understanding, a breakthrough which can feel deeply disturbing or surprising. This is no different for Mary, whose anguish is palpable. She is "deeply disturbed" (Lk 1:29), as Gabriel's words "lay claim" on her. All her familiar concepts are called into question, her whole identity is stripped away, laid bare. William Johnson describes how we must be confronted with a vision of both our adequacy and inadequacy, so the veils of illusion can be torn away.<sup>xiv</sup> Gabriel's words tear away at any illusions Mary may have about her identity. Stretched to her limits, Mary's gaze moves away from Gabriel towards herself, as she asks: "But how can this come about?" (Lk 1: 29) However, rather than shutting down the heart connection to Gabriel, she lets the conversation hold her and all the tension arising within it.

Continuing to turn into the conversation, Mary opens into the third movement, *"What is this text/word asking of me?"* This intimately personal question holds a mirror to Mary and asks her to consider what she sees. This is a crucial movement for Mary, who does not get stuck simply trying to understand and clarify what Gabriel is saying to her, but instead, turns deeper again, with "naked intent", into the fourth movement, *"the matter of concern"*. Last month, Kerrie reminded us how "in order to develop this revolution in consciousness we must journey within and do the necessary healing work and contemplative practice that will enable us to become more deeply reflexive". Here we see the matter of concern being refined in Mary's heart. Such healing takes place deep in the silence, as Gabriel and Mary keep each other company. Gabriel is a powerful witness to Mary's crying out in pain at the reality of his words. Together they wait in the anguish of the emptiness, turning into the blind beholding and the naked feeling, into the emptiness and poverty of her "heart-womb".

The final movement is *"What do you say? How will you choose to respond?"* In this final movement, Terry explains, where the text or word and my response "fuse", the real chemistry of the conversation awakens. Mary's words resound: "I am the handmaid of the Lord" and the chemistry between heaven and earth explodes. Beatrice captures the beauty and essence of this moment: "You are a participant in the Trinitarian Life Cycle, for you are doing the incarnating and the creating and the realising and the rejoicing. God's

ecstasy creates the world, and the world's ecstasy realises God. And you are right in the midst of it".<sup>xv</sup> Mary's naked "Behold!" is the summit of the conversation, as she becomes the beholding. She ecstatically sings: "Let what you have said be done to me" (Lk 1:38). Not only is Mary aware, in the *passive* sense of being created anew, but in the *active* sense of being a participant in the act of creating.<sup>xvi</sup>

In this moment, Mary is overshadowed by the Spirit. All movements dissolve into the silence. Mary has entered "the secret hiding place of her heart", as Kerrie describes, "into the unity of the hidden point of our oneing".<sup>xvii</sup> Here, as Beatrice explains, the goal of love is union taking place in "total darkness - nothing is seen as object - and in silence - one does not listen or speak, because the self-revelation is not mediated".<sup>xviii</sup> Mary knows she is pregnant with the divine and is at home in the ground of her essential being. She is silent and still. Her new consciousness, Bede Griffiths reminds us, is not a bodyless state.<sup>xix</sup> All divisions have melted away. Ilia Delio agrees: "the closer the mystic comes to divine reality, the more unified is one's space, so that the words *inner* and *outer* no longer have meaning."<sup>xx</sup> In a conversation of the heart, in the depths of the silence of our hearts, the two have become so one, that they mirror each other.



May we continue to be inspired by the evolving mystery of the Annunciation conversation, unfolding in the depths of our hearts, as we behold in beholding, and conceive the Christ anew this Advent.

Robyn Fitzgerald

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<sup>i</sup> Kerrie Hide, *Discerning from the Oneness of Love: Discernment in Julian of Norwich and the Cloud of Unknowing Seer*, [www.contemplatio.com.au](http://www.contemplatio.com.au)

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Drummond, *Divine Conception: The Art of the Annunciation* (London: Unicorn, 2018), 27.

<sup>iii</sup> This translation is based on the Jerusalem Bible with the Greek (ἰδοὺ *idou*) "behold," in the original Greek inserted.

<sup>iv</sup> Beatrice Bruteau, *The Grand Option: Personal Transformation and a New Creation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 75.

<sup>v</sup> Kerrie draws on the theology of Julian of Norwich that we are "knit and one'd to the Trinity at creation and kept in a relationship of oneing", to capture the vibrant dynamism of our oneing as being-in-union with God, that is always unfolding, evolving, encircling love. Kerrie Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfilment: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001).

<sup>vi</sup> Bruteau, *The Grand Option*, 74.

<sup>vii</sup> Bruteau, *The Grand Option*, 75.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup> Terry Veling, *Practical Theology, "On Earth as It Is in Heaven"* (New York: Orbis, 2005).

<sup>x</sup> Hide, *Discerning from the Oneness of Love*.

<sup>xi</sup> Cited in *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers* (Washington, ICS Publications, 1989), 57, in the poem "Total Virgin".

<sup>xii</sup> Veling, *Practical Theology*, 57.

<sup>xiii</sup> Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfilment*.

<sup>xiv</sup> William Johnson, *The Inner Eye of Love* (CollinsFount Paperback, 1979), 149

<sup>xv</sup> Beatrice Bruteau, *God's Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2016), 79.

<sup>xvi</sup> Bruteau, *Grand Option*, 171.

<sup>xvii</sup> Hide, *Discerning from the Oneness of Love*.

<sup>xviii</sup> Bruteau, *God's Ecstasy*, 74.

<sup>xix</sup> In Andrew Harvey, *Teachings of the Christian Mystics* (London: Shambhala, 2013), Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*.

<sup>xx</sup> Ilia Delio, *Hunger for Wholeness: Soul, Space and Transcendence* (New York: Paulist Press, 2018), 105.