

**HOMILY FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**  
**ST. EPHREM SYRIAC CATHOLIC CHURCH, JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA**  
**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2016**

I am very happy to be with you this Sunday to open this beautiful season of Advent, a season of expectation, hope, and preparation for the Savior's birth. I wish to thank Bishop Habash, the clergy gathered here, and all of you for your graciousness and hospitality, both yesterday and today. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's personal representative in this country, I wish to assure you of his spiritual closeness and his prayers. You are a very special part of the Church in the United States, enriching the lives of others with your specific gifts, liturgy, and traditions. This is a joyful moment of encounter.

In his recent message to the Bishops of the United States, Pope Francis said:

"Our great challenge is to create a culture of encounter, which encourages individuals and groups to share the richness of our traditions and experiences, to break down walls and to build bridges. The Church in America, as elsewhere, is called to 'go out' from its comfort zone and to be a leaven of communion. Communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope. We need to become ever more fully a community of missionary disciples, filled with love of the Lord Jesus and enthusiasm for the spread of the Gospel." (Video message to the General Assembly of the USCCB, 14-17 November 2016)

This idea of "going out" and being a missionary disciple is seen concretely in the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She went forth, with her Child in the womb, to encounter her cousin Elizabeth. What was the result of this encounter? Joy! The Mother of God and Her Son bring joy to our world and deepen our communion.

How did Mary arrive at her decision to 'go out' to encounter Elizabeth? After all, Mary had just seen the Archangel Gabriel, received his message, and conceived by the Holy Spirit. Many thoughts must have been going through her mind. How did she arrive at her decision? By first *listening* to God. Mary knew how to *listen*. She did not merely *hear*; rather, she was attentive and open to God's Word. She was also attentive to what was happening around her – to reality, to daily events, like Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age – and to the specific words of the angel: "For God, nothing is impossible." (Luke 1:37).

We too could follow Mary's example – right here in this parish and in our homes! We could listen to God who speaks to us, listen attentively to "the signs of the times", to reality, and we can pay attention to people – to the bishop, the clergy, the lay faithful, and to the elderly, poor, and lonely who cry out for love.

How did Mary arrive at her decision to visit Elizabeth? The Scriptures say she went "with haste", but she did not *live* in haste. These days, during the holiday season, we see how quickly people run here and there, shopping and preparing things. Everything moves so quickly. While Mary went in haste, she did not live in haste. In silence and stillness, she received Gabriel's joyful greeting. She thought about how God's plan might come about and asked: "*How shall this be?*" (Luke 1:34). Later, St. Luke will relate that she "pondered all these things in her heart." Mary arrived at an important decision to say *Yes* to God and to visit Elizabeth, by taking her time and thinking things through. Commenting on this passage, Pope Francis reminds us:

"It is difficult in life to take decisions. We often tend to put them off, to let others decide instead. We frequently prefer to let ourselves be dragged along by events, to follow the current fashion; at times we know what we ought to do but do not have the courage to do it, or it seems too difficult because it means swimming against the tide. In the Annunciation, in the Visitation ... Mary goes against the tide; she listens to God, she reflects and seeks to understand reality and decides

to entrust herself totally to God. Although she is with child, she decides to visit her elderly relative and she decides to entrust herself to her Son with insistence so as to preserve the joy of the wedding feast.” (Address of the Holy Father, 31 May 2013)

Mary again gives us good example of listening and reflecting, so that we may reach a decision to take prophetic action. How necessary this is for the Church today – to be prophetic – in welcoming the gift of life, in welcoming the stranger, in building a culture of encounter!

How did Mary arrive at her decision to “go out” to encounter Elizabeth? She did not simply listen and reflect. She actually *went out!* She went in haste as Elizabeth needed her. As Saint Ambrose says, “There is nothing slow about the Holy Spirit.” (Exposition on the Gospel of Luke, II, 19: *PL* 15, 1560) She went in haste, with a prophetic Spirit, bearing the Savior within her on a mission of love and communion. There are some things in life which simply cannot be put off – forgiving others, receiving healing, being reconciled. There are some things which have an urgency to them – caring for the poor, the sick, and the elderly or even saying to a family member, “I love you.”

Being a Catholic or a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice, following rules, or complicated ideas, but it is the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Mary went so that her cousin Elizabeth and her child, John the Baptist, could *encounter* the Savior who brings us joy. Let us follow the example of the Blessed Virgin – listening, reflecting, and acting – so that during this Holy Season, we too may create a culture of encounter, bringing joy to the world!