

Here begin some reflections of Peter John on Our Lady, reflections worthy of note

[Question 1]

First, about the Virgin's consent at the Annunciation

Note that the action by which the Virgin Mary consented to the conception of Christ was of more merit and virtue than the action of any other holy person. This becomes clear as one considers the first principle of this action, its own special and formal development, and its final goal.

1. The first principle was fourfold.

{a} The **first and main principle** was the **elective love or will of God** choosing her to be the Mother of God's Son, that is, God's elective decision put to her by the angel requesting her consent. It is clear that a similar or equal elective grace and love of God could not be shown to any of the saints. It is clear also that when the elective will of God is shown to a person from a stronger and higher kind of love, this love moves the person more strongly. Also if God chooses a person in a proper and effective way for some difficult task, God should move the person in a way which is proportionate and necessary to meet the difficulty inherent in the task for which the person is chosen, especially when there is no rebellion or resistance in the person. The state of being the Mother of God, the state for which God chose the Virgin, was the highest state which could be given to a created person. Therefore, the elective love of God came to and moved in the highest way the heart of the Virgin for this task. Therefore, this task shared most fully in the perfection, influence and Godlike quality of the electing and inspiring love of God from whom it flowed.

{b} The **second principle** of this action was the **formal virtue and grace** of the Virgin. On the evidence of Luke 2:28 and the angel Gabriel, her virtue and grace were such that she could be said to be *full of grace* and blessed beyond others, and to her alone could be said: *The Lord is with you*. It is certain that she more than others was *full of grace*, to the extent that the habit of love and the other virtues were so much greater in her than could be in any saint while on earth. In view of this, I argue as follows: Every holy and discerning mind is more strongly bound, held to and raised to do some task in a worthy,

reverent and faultless way, to the extent that it feels and knows that it is more divine and a higher thing, requiring more virtue, effort, discretion and overall perfection to be able to do this in a way which is worthy, fitting and pleasing to God. But every faithful mind feels there is nothing greater than to conceive God and become the Mother of God; therefore, the mind feels or ought to feel that an action immediately connected with this has to be a most perfect action. Such was the consent of the Virgin. Therefore, when she was aware she had been chosen and prepared for this by God who asked for her consent, she had to bind herself from within by every effort of all her strength and virtue so as to dispose and open herself to so great, so singular and so unusual a grace and to accept it worthily and faultlessly. This was done by her worthy and correct consent. Therefore, this consent came from all her virtues and efforts, just as a huge stone is thrown from a machine by all the power of the machine and its parts.

{c} The **third principle** giving assistance to this consent was the **influence of the hierarchy of angels** by whose ministry, according to Dionysius,¹ our whole order is ruled. It is sure that in their whole ministry to us, they desire and work for nothing as much as for the total health and salvation of the elect. But in the hour in which the angel Gabriel was sent to the Virgin they all knew that, through the consent of the Virgin, God was to form the head and principle of our salvation, namely, Christ in so far as he is man. Therefore, in that hour the whole curia or hierarchy of angels by their ministry tried with all their desires and efforts to assist the Virgin to accept and complete such a great task. They did this by praying to God for this intention with all their strength and also by influencing the Virgin in a way consonant with the nature of their hierarchical order. Nor is it of importance whether all had an immediate influence or whether one did this while acting for all. Nor is it surprising if one acting for all was able to do more than could be done when acting for a few or by one's own power. For example, that part of the string of a bow which immediately holds and shoots the arrow, casts it much more strongly because it does so by the strength of the whole bow not just by one part of the bow. We see the same thing when the envoy of a large community or city, or of any large and strong army, influences and attracts the hearts of all to whom the envoy is sent, whether to fear, obedience or love. The envoy acts as the representative and by the authority of all the citizens and the whole community and so influences and attracts much more strongly than could be done were

¹ *De coelesti Hierachia*, c. 1, n. 3 (PG 3, 122).

the envoy to come with the backing of only a half or a third part or by the envoy's own authority.

{d} The **fourth principle** giving assistance to this consent was the **merit of the whole body of saints** who had gone ahead. This group desired nothing other of God, either implicitly or explicitly, than their Saviour for eternal life. For this reason the intentions, holy desires and merits of all of them strongly agreed in begging God to bring a Saviour; consequently, they were all concerned for her and her work through which and in whom the Saviour was to be given. If God in this work paid attention to the merits of all the saints and fathers who had gone before, it is clear that God gave to the Virgin and to her consent the grace already asked for by the merits of the saints.

2.A. **Second**, the **merit** of Mary's action is clear from a consideration of the special and formal development of the consent or action. The action of all the most perfect virtues of the Virgin came together most perfectly in her consent since its object was most high and it was done for most difficult reasons. Reflect on the object to which she consented, the object to whom she consented, and the object or reason why she consented.

{a.i} The **object to which she consented** was the Son of God that he might become her true and natural son, truly mortal, able to suffer death for the **remaking of the whole universe**, and for him to make satisfaction for all sins. But it was impossible for her to consent worthily and correctly to such an object, unless she centred, aroused and opened most fully all the affections of her mind on it. It was impossible unless, aware of the singular nature of the object and the singular offering or way of life being asked of her, she paid attention most perfectly, felt it most closely, believed without wavering and most strongly. It was impossible unless she subjected herself and made nothing of herself most humbly, so that forgetful of self, she might try to transform herself totally in him, so that, as love is capable of doing, she would become completely his or one and the same with him. This meant for her to be exalted and raised up into the abyss of the Trinity and Unity, that is, into the personal and original dwelling in which the Son existed and in which he related to the Father and to the Holy Spirit proceeding from him. It meant for her to be deeply rooted in that extraordinary humiliation of Christ which the Son of God wanted to take on, so that emptying himself, he might become an infant in her womb, subject to pain and about to undergo the most bitter punishments for the sins of all and to show forth to all a model of a crucified life. This is what it meant to consent that the crucified

one or the one soon to be crucified should be formed or taken from her and within her. This meant to consent to the price of a superabundant satisfaction for all sins, to the merit or what was deserved and to the prayers and mediation for reparation of all the elect.

{a.ii} Further, the **object to which she consented** was that wonderful **overshadowing** of her by the angel and what was promised her by God through the angel, namely, to make her holy to be worthy of such a Son, to fill and change her even bodily so as to form from her and in her a child in a most spiritual and supernatural way. We are aware that so great is the force of a change from a lower to a higher state that when one is on the point of or actually ascending to a higher religious state, or passing from this world to another, a person feels a certain death is close, a death by which one dies to the previous state or earlier way of life. A person feels a certain transcendent difficulty and a kind of strangeness or unaccustomed newness confusing all the senses, so that there sometimes occurs in the body a deep dread and rigidity. The first state of the Virgin was far more distant from the following state of her motherhood, than the state of the least faithful and good person differs from their previous state. Therefore, in the moment of her consent to that state she felt herself move by a kind of unspeakable death from her former state to a state which was completely of another world and to an unfamiliar place or mansion, namely, to the abyss, secret chambers and exalted places of God, in which she was settled and irrevocably absorbed. A woman or poor maid servant, awaiting an imminent visit of a king, immediately begins to be astonished, afraid from an excessive reverence, completely anxious and worried how she is to receive the king worthily. How much more was the Virgin, feeling the imminent coming upon her of the abundant and incomprehensible majesty of the Son of God and of the Holy Spirit, afraid of the awesome God and in reverence completely shaken, astonished, most worried and anxious how she was to receive him worthily. Who could express or imagine just how great all this was in her?

{b} Further, consider **to whom she consented**, namely, to God the Father who as to his spouse was offering his Son to her and was asking her consent to this. Therefore, I ask you to what extent by this offer did she feel obliged to God offering such a gift? She was obliged to love, obey and serve God far more than previously, to thank and acknowledge such a singular grace and love, namely, to be the spouse of the Father so that the Father alone might fill her mind and womb with his Son, and through the divine fervour of his Spirit might inflame and change her so that from her and in her might be formed a body for his Son so that he would truly be the Son of God and the son

of the Virgin. In what I have just said I do not wish to imply more than flows from the measure and proportion of the Father offering and the gift offered because that is sufficient to exceed beyond measure the merits of all the saints.

Consider also how much it was right and necessary for the Father to capture her mind and affections so that she might worthily agree with and consent to the eternal truth being presented to her in a way which to us is amazing and inaccessible; the unspeakable truth presented to her concerned equally the present and future or what was to happen. Nor were the preceding truths presented to her as to a simple old person, but rather to a person in whom the most basic foundations of the whole salvation of ourselves and of the world were soon to be placed and built. This was to be done though the medium of her faith, hope, and her loving, humble assent and consent as a handmaid.

{c} Third, consider also the **reason why she consented**, namely, the repairing and healing of the whole universe, in which was included her own salvation and rebuilding; and also for the sake of the praise and glory of God which would come from this. So I search out the extent to which she loved and desired this fruit and purpose! On this consent hung her own salvation and that of all the elect. Hence Augustine says in a sermon on her birth¹:

Blessed Mary, the whole world is your captive asking for your assent. You, Lady, have made the world a captive of your faith. Do not delay, Virgin; say the word quickly and take the Son; act in faith and experience the power.

Therefore, if her consent to God had to be raised up and broadened so as to be in accord with the measure of the purpose proposed to her, and if the salvation of all the elect was to depend on this consent of the Virgin, would not trustworthy reason dictate that God who predestined her had to give to this consent a worthy efficacy and power?

2.B. After considering how this action perfected her, consider how there was added to her the **perfections of all sublime actions**.

{a} **First**, I take the internal and high action of **martyrdom**, by which a martyr makes a rich offering of himself or herself to the Lord.

¹ *Sermo 194: De annuntiatione*, n. 3 (inter opera Augustini, PL 39, 2105s.).

This Virgin offered herself to that ineffable death spoken of above,¹ and to that ineffable burning in which she was completely inflamed in the very conception of Christ. If before this she was ready to expose herself to any death and martyrdom for the sake of God, how incomparably more was she ready in this hour! If all who by Baptism enter into Christ, are compelled, as the Apostle says, to be *baptized into his death* [Rom 6:3-6], and have crucified their *old self*, how much more was the Virgin crucified with Christ in the hour of his conception! For from the moment of his conception there was in the mind of Christ the whole internal decision by which he would make satisfaction to God for all people, by which he most readily laid himself open in his internal intention to every punishment and death pleasing to or demanded by God. It is sure that through the angel God proposed to the Virgin that Christ be conceived as the future redeemer and saviour of all. She was sufficiently illuminated in God to understand that the Son of God could become mortal and be born from her only for extreme and arduous reasons. Moreover, for a young, upright and chaste virgin who is engaged to be married and yet knows she is pregnant but not by her fiancé, nothing could happen more quickly or in a more public way, than that she be regarded by her fiancé as an adulteress, be denounced and rejected by him as an adulteress. No kind of distress or death is so distressing and horrible to a virgin as this distress. Therefore, the blessed Virgin by consenting to her pregnancy laid herself open to this distress which was more horrible to her than any other kind of distress and death. One might say that it can easily be thought that God, at least to avoid any insult to the Son, would not permit her to be open to such distress. But against this is the fact that because she knew the Son was to make satisfaction by bearing distress and pain proportionate to such a satisfaction she did not have grounds for suspecting that God would not permit this and even worse to happen to the Son. Moreover, in this can be seen at least the wonderful constancy of her heart that, as far as can be seen in Scripture, she did not ask the angel for a remedy against this distress, nor did she ask for a statement or some confirmation of the event itself. As a sign that the crucified Mother conceived the Crucified, God decided that Christ was to be conceived on the same day, even perhaps at the same hour, as when he suffered.

{b} **Second**, I take the action of **piety and mercy**. By this consent she longed for most deeply and obtained the salvation of all the elect; by this consent she dedicated herself in a most singular way to the salvation of all and to their Saviour so that she might from then on

¹ See above page 4.

carry all in her womb as a true mother carries her children. Augustine says in a sermon on her birth¹:

Blessed Virgin, who could worthily thank you and fulfil the task of proclaiming your praises, you who by your singular consent came to the aid of a lost world? What praises can the weakness of the human race offer to you who by your actions alone found the way to its healing? Therefore, accept our meagre thanks unequal as they are to your merits etc.

{c} **Third**, I take the action of **chastity and of mental integrity and purity**. These were present in a wonderful abundance in that consent in a threefold manner.

{i} First, **she fled completely from any human intercourse** even in the conception of the Son of God. Hence she said: *I do not know a man* [Lk 1:34 as in footnote].

{ii} Second, from the **promise of the angel**, from the coming to her of the Holy Spirit and from the refreshing overshadowing of the Most High, she was fully aware that the reason why she was to be purified from all stain of original sin was so that the one to be born from her would rightly be clean and holy. Therefore, in this consent she agreed with longing and from the depths of her heart to be completely purified and cleansed.

{iii} Third, God who is most **pure and chaste** cannot enter a **heart** which is not purified and clean not only from faults in the flesh but also from any fanciful thoughts. Clearly also the closer one comes to the divine, to that extent is the aura of divine purity experienced more strongly by the mind. Therefore, since the Virgin by her consent was close to God being conceived, it was necessary that this consent be filled with an experience and breath of the divine chastity. By this action is she rightly named Virgin of virgins. Anselm²: 'It was fitting that the Virgin who would conceive God should shine with such purity than which no greater could be thought of under God.'

{d} **Fourth**, I take the act of **faith**. The highest and most basic foundations of our faith were put before her so that she would not give a firm consent without believing in these most strongly. Her faith had to be not only a total belief in general but also in particular, namely, how these affected her at the precise moment in which she was to give her consent, so that this consent would lead truly to the conception of the Son of God. It was not without reason then that her act of faith was

¹ *Sermo 194: De annuntiatione*, n. 5 (inter opera Augustini, PL 39, 2106).

² *De conceptu virginali*, c. 18 (PL 158, 451).

commended in a singular way by holy Elizabeth who said: *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord* [Lk 1:45].

{e} **Fifth**, I take the act of **humility** which shines forth in the consent in a threefold way.

{i} First, she was **troubled** in her mind by the angel's greeting. Her trouble arose from her complete horror of being praised. Had the angel, greatly fearful as he would have been, said: Woe to you most vile of all creatures, she would have rejoiced in a wonderful way to be called the most vile of creatures, because such was how she felt about herself, namely, as being most unworthy and indescribable. When on the contrary she heard it said: *Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you in a singular way among women* [Lk 1:28 including footnote], she could not tolerate the statement of such praise.

{ii} Second, she felt a trembling **apprehension** at the wonderful overshadowing of the divine majesty; she felt that this was about to come upon her like a most huge mountain of infinite weight which would bury her under or within it and would hold her nothingness pressed down for ever by the weight of its eternity and total immensity. If blessed Job *always feared God as waves swelling over me, and his weight I was not able to bear* [Job 31:23 DRB], how much more would she fear, she in whom *a stone was cut* from the mountain of the divine majesty living in her, the stone which broke the statue of vanity and *became a great mountain and filled the whole earth* [Dan 2:34-35]. If we can hardly hear a syllable of the divine words without a feeling of reverence and fear, how much more did she tremble when she felt coming down directly upon her the thunder of the divine majesty with lightning of wonderful efficacy and power?

{iii} Third, she was resplendent in her prompt **dedication** to all the needs and demands of God the Father and the Son. She expressed this dedication in the words: *Here am I, the servant of the Lord* [Lk 1:38]. It must be understood that the more a mind feels itself to be called to higher and deeper aspects of God, the more it feels itself bound to a greater service of God for which one must have more humility towards God, reverence, fear, caution and solicitous diligence. I ask you: if we handle the sacrament of the Eucharist, that is the Body of Christ, with such humility and reverence, with what humility and reverence did the Mother of Christ handle and carry her infant whether in her womb, in the cradle or in her arms? It is clear that when she consented to the conception and birth of Christ she knew full well that she was to be totally dedicated to his service. Further, she knew the Redeemer and intercessor for the expiation of all sins was to be

conceived for the salvation of herself and of all, and to be born and nourished for the salvation of all. For this reason she felt herself to be inwardly and with a mother's affection joined to these humble actions by which he carried all the sins of the world upon himself, as if he were made sin by God [2 Cor 5:21]. Therefore, when she consented she felt herself to be dedicated by her consent and joined to the humiliations and humble duties of the Redeemer. For this reason in praising God her humility is paramount because she remembers that God looked on her; hence she said: *He has looked with favour on his servant* [Lk 1:48].

{f} **Sixth**, I take the act of **love**. I ask anyone how much love of God she expected to experience by her consent? If you can explain this to me I will tell you from how much love she consented to such great love. I have no doubt that this consent came from a flaming furnace of love in the abyss of infinite love. So it is not surprising if that consent was a fire of love.

{g} **Seventh**, I take the act of both the **active and contemplative life**. This action of itself and directly was completely contemplative, directed mentally to the conception of God. To the degree that this conception had to be from her body and in her body and to the degree to which she was totally committed to the service of her child, this consent was a most noble kind of active life, belonging only to the Mother of the Son of God.

From these seven acts of virtues as listed above one can easily see how all the acts of the most perfect virtues were present in the often mentioned consent of the Virgin.

3. **Third**, the principle involved is clear from considering the **final goal of this consent**. This goal was every dignity and perfection which comes from being the Mother of God both in body and mind. Certainly, this transcends anything else which can be thought of or uttered, apart from being the God-man. Therefore, if the wonderful goal was proportionate to her merit it follows that the meritorious perfection of this consent was equally proportionate to its goal.

Perhaps some stupid person will think, contrary to what has been said, that the Virgin, in so short a space of time, could not think of so many and such things. That this is stupid can be shown by an example which can be tested, by an argument of faith, and by a spiritual discernment.

{a} [**An argument which can be tested**]: Were the king of France through one of his eminent dukes or companions to give his betrothal

solemnly and most clearly to a poor young woman of his kingdom, it is clear that she would think immediately in that same hour with the highest admiration of the wonderful condescension and love of the king and of his counsellors, and of the complete magnificence of the royal dignity or kingdom. She would think also how much and what are being offered and given to her, to what she is being raised up, how she is to be adorned with gifts varied and precious, to what duties and delights she is to be committed, what familiar kisses and conversations with the king would be hers. Nor are you to wonder, if through one such act almost innumerable thoughts come to mind, because through one glance of the eyes the heavens with the stars, the air with the clouds and birds, the water with its waves, ships and fish, the earth with its vegetation, trees and animals, camps and cities, valleys and mountains, springs and rivers are present at the one time and as in one moment to our vision.

{b} **An argument of faith:** If wonderful illuminations of things divine and human were given suddenly to prophets and apostles, as befitted their apostolic and prophetic duties, who would feel that to her who was chosen to be Queen of the world and Mother of God, there would not be given a vision complete and proportionate to her dignity and state. This is especially true when the consent and action asked of her was such as could not be done worthily and properly without the highest visions and virtues.

Further, do not believe that the Virgin in that hour was ignorant of divine matters as if she were a common and ignorant young person. Recall that previously she has been addressed as full of grace and blessed among women. God was with her through a singular assistance. Recall also that from her first sanctification in the womb of her mother, she received such grace that she was able to and actually did avoid every sin even the least venial sin. This would not have been possible had she not received the highest wisdom regarding what to do and what to avoid, what to believe and what not to believe.

{c} An argument by a **spiritual discernment:** According to the Apostle:

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned [1 Cor 2:14].

The Spirit of God subtly penetrates the mind and inebriates it to the fullest, spreading and multiplying innumerable rays of divine light and wisdom. It comes into the mind like the rising sun entering the earth.

Wisdom 7:22-24 says: *There is in her a spirit which is unique, manifold, and subtle, and the wisdom from which it comes is more mobile than any motion and because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.* As it wishes, wisdom shows what is past, present and future. According to the Apostle: *The Spirit teaches everything, even the depths of God* [1 Cor 2:10]; and so *those who are spiritual discern all things* [1 Cor 2:15]. This Virgin then, inebriated with the Spirit, must have known the things which belong to the Spirit of God; rightly is she called Mary, that is enlightened or giving enlightenment. However, in comparison with what she received from the Spirit and from wisdom in the conception of Christ, what she had before was slight.