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President's Page



Non-Theological Reflections on St. Luke's Gospel

For some reason the joyful mysteries have always been my favorite part of the rosary. Maybe it's because St. Luke was a fellow physician. I think we medical folk all share many of the same resonances of thought and expression. Luke's infancy narratives, from which the joyful mysteries are drawn, always give me a sense of being present in the intimate circle of the Holy Family.

I don't suppose that Luke was a nephrologist or a neurosurgeon. I suspect that he was a G.P., a family physician like me, struggling along with a sprinkle of knowledge and a gallon of ignorance, never quite sure if his prescriptions would help, or if they did, why. But he must have been surrounded by a fascinating constellation of human beings, many at crossroads in their lives: babies taking their first breath, adolescents on the verge of choosing a career or answering a vocation, young parents suddenly rendered mature by the acceptance of responsibility for a vulnerable firstborn, parents proudly and painfully yielding their just-grown children to the freedom and peril of adult life, grandparents and great-grandparents preparing to yield their souls to God. Luke had the eye to see the human beings behind the human condition. And he seems genuinely to have liked people.

The story of the Annunciation is one of the simplest and most beautiful of all biblical narratives. Yet it packs a theological punch unsurpassed by any other narrative I know. Just 13 verses long, it expresses either explicitly or implicitly many of the most central doctrines of the Christian faith: the Trinity (all three Persons are present), the Virginal Conception of

Jesus, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, Jesus' true divinity, His true humanity, God's steadfast love, Christ's redemptive mission, and more. Yet it is not burdened by grandeur, but remains a simple human story of a young girl's blossoming into love.

In Your Presence, Lord, help me to put away my physician's habits of authority and decision-making and, as Mary did, accept with complete trust Your loving Providence.

The Visitation, another story of deceptive simplicity, tells of Christ's first epiphany and, except for the Immaculate Conception, His first redemptive act. By the power of His Presence as an unborn child, both John and Elizabeth are filled with the Holy Spirit. Then Luke tosses off what is for many the most beautiful canticle in all of scripture, the Magnificat. But my favorite reflection on the Visitation is that Mary, in utter simplicity and humility, provides an example for all the midwives and all the obstetricians of all times. I don't know if she is officially recognized as their patron saint because of her visit to Elizabeth, but it would seem appropriate to me. After the mind-boggling news Gabriel brings Mary at the Annunciation, he mentions, almost as an afterthought, that her elderly cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant. (I wonder if Elizabeth was really a senior citizen or if Luke had slipped into doctor-jargon by thinking of her as an "elderly primip." A lot of thirty-five year olds have nearly slugged their doctors for using that loaded term.)

At any rate, Mary no sooner hears about Elizabeth's condition than she forgets all about herself and immediately goes to render help and comfort to her cousin. She doesn't even pause to tell Joseph or her parents her own astonishing news — no less than the long-awaited salvation of Israel.

Lord, how many times I have groaned and grumbled as I turned from another activity (usually sleep) to attend a patient. Help me to imitate Your mother's example of alacrity in selflessness.

The Nativity and the Adoration of the Shepherds, the Presentation, and the Finding in the Temple are each a successive epiphany — the gradual dawning of the light of salvation in Israel.

In the Nativity narrative, Luke betrays a bias that will recur throughout his Gospel: a bias for the poor. Here is a physician who probably had an abominable collection rate, whose fee was probably paid more often in vegetables than in copper, and more often not at all than in vegetables. But does he fawn over the rich, whose payments probably keep him alive? On the contrary, he ignores them completely! He doesn't even mention the Magi! For Luke, the adoration of the shepherds is the more important event. Christ's epiphany to the poorest of Israel was more essential to Luke than His epiphany to the great and wealthy of the world.

Lord, help me to follow Luke's example of caring for people just because they are people — Your people — not because I expect them to pay my fee. Help me to give the best care to those who need me most: the poor, the

broken in spirit, the emotionally crippled, the physically and socially unattractive, even the morally underdeveloped — like those who could pay me but don't (and who raise my self-righteous hackles with their "irresponsible" life-styles). Help me to provide a "two-tiered standard of care" for the rich and the poor, giving my time, my attention and my skills fully to the affluent majority and even more fully to those whose trade is less desirable but whose needs are greater.

At the Presentation in the Temple, the Messiah is revealed to a saintly old man and woman, while the powerful scribes, priests, and pharisees apparently ignore Him. Here Luke describes, through the words of Simeon, the ambivalence in the heart of every parent, the desire on the one hand that one's child grow to be a good and responsible adult who will accomplish much for the world, and the fear on the other hand that he will incur disapproval, opposition, or even persecution for his efforts. This fear, now made explicit by Simeon, must already have been buried in Mary's heart ever since Gabriel had come to her. She was not so naive in the ways of the world to have believed that Jesus' way would be an easy one. Interestingly, Luke is silent about Mary's reaction to Simeon's prophecy. Apparently she made no overt response: no surprise, no resistance, no fear. She had already made her Fiat. Her commitment was total. As her sorrows unfolded, there was simply no need for a further response. Her promise had been made; now it was to be lived out.

Lord, help me to keep the commitments I make even when they bring unexpected difficulties.

The story of Jesus' disappearance and retrieval in the Temple has always brought me up short. What a terrible thing for Him to do to His parents! Such thoughtless irresponsibility would merit serious disciplinary action in an ordinary child, but for Jesus it was even worse than thoughtless and irresponsible: He knew what He was doing. He knew the torment His parents would suffer, but He did it anyway! He could have told them before they left that He was staying on, that He would be safe, that He had made arrangements either to live securely in Jerusalem or to travel securely back to Nazareth later. But He didn't! What an unfeeling, ungrateful brat!

Lest anyone fear that I am blaspheming, I hasten to assure you that the above is a description of my *feelings* about the story. You know, "If any kid of mine pulled that trick, pow!" My feelings are such, but my judgment, perforce, is otherwise. I'm still not sure why Jesus did this to His parents — perhaps He was urgently engaged in saving someone's soul and didn't have a chance to tell His parents to go on without Him. Whatever the speculation, the fact is that He did what He did. Mary's reaction, unlike mine, was, as always, total acceptance. Even Joseph, who may have struggled with his feelings more than Mary did (and whose temptation to resentment may have been even greater because he was aware of how much *she* had suffered), seems to have avoided any overt expression of

disapproval. Perhaps the reason that it was Mary who asked Jesus for His explanation was that Joseph was busy resolutely biting his tongue. At any rate, whatever Jesus' reason for His seemingly insensitive behavior, the lesson seems to be that Mary and Joseph were willing to accept His decision. And though I'm sure their reaction was largely determined by their knowledge of Who He is, I think there may also be a lesson for us parents and for us counselors of parents.

We all know families, perhaps including our own, in which adolescence is a time of crisis, not only for the adolescent but also for the whole family. In some families, these storms seem to be weathered fairly well; in others they almost tear the family apart. Perhaps the lesson for all parents in the story of the Finding in the Temple is to let go a little sooner, to allow our growing children to make their own decisions about their lives, even if we don't understand or approve of these decisions. This doesn't mean that we have to become doormats, that our homes must be surrendered to loud music, irregular meal habits, or, even worse, to drug and alcohol abuse or unbridled sexual irresponsibility. If we are not to run our adolescent sons' and daughters' lives, then they are not to run ours either. We continue to set the tone for family living. But we do allow them the widest possible leeway in personal habits, dress, and choice of activities and companions. Sometimes they will make choices we don't agree with. We may have an awful lot of late night pondering in our hearts. But our respect for their freedom does not force us to remain silent in the face of self-destructive behavior. We don't step out of their lives altogether. They need us badly, and they really do depend on our advice and counsel. In our respect for their independence, we offer that advice tactfully. Not "What a ridiculous get-up," but "Are you sure that's the image you want to project?" Not "You look like a tramp," but "You know, boys may react in a way that you don't expect. Try to be careful of their feelings and respect them as you want them to respect you."

Most importantly, our relationship with our adolescents depends upon the foundation we have built since early infancy. If we have respected our children's needs, including the need to make choices, from the very beginning, we are much less likely to be swept away by a storm of rebellion when the dreaded teen years arrive.

Lord, help me to find the delicate balance between being too strict, which will hinder my child's maturation in freedom and responsibility, and being too lax, which is really just a cop-out from my own responsibility as one of the most important people in my child's life.

I guess maybe the main reason I like St. Luke is that, in spite of my own foibles and failings, in spite of my attempts to project an image of confidence and competence, I have a feeling that he would see right through my facade, and penetrating to the real me, would find that same

poverty, that same need for affirmation, that same incompleteness, that exists in the souls of all us sinners in this vale of tears. And finding that, I don't think Luke would turn away from me to someone more important, to someone more virtuous, or to someone who "has it all together." I think he might even like me.

Thank you, Lord, for Luke the Physician.

— William G. White, M.D.
