
FIRST THINGS

PRO-LIFE LITURGY

HOW THE ORTHODOX TRADITION TEACHES THAT LIFE BEGINS AT CONCEPTION

by
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An icon of the Annunciation appears on the central altar doors of every Orthodox Christian church. The “royal doors” are double doors, so the icon is a diptych, with Gabriel on the left and Mary on the right. As a young child, I found the movement of this icon mesmerizing as the doors opened and closed in synchronicity. At some point, I connected the location of the Annunciation image with the action of the liturgy: The priest bears the Eucharist out of the altar through the royal doors in order to commune the faithful. It became clear to me that the Annunciation makes the Eucharist possible; that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, his conception, is the seed from which the wheat and grapes—his body and blood—grow.

Although I would not have expressed it in those terms as a child, I internalized this truth from a very young age. This is one of the realities of liturgy: Through it, we experience and integrate the truth. Our souls and sensibilities are formed by our liturgical lives. In my own tradition, the Orthodox Church, the liturgy affirms that the salvation story begins with a conception. Furthermore, in its celebration of the Annunciation and its commemoration of other saintly conceptions, the liturgy embodies the mysterious beginnings of the human person that shape our understanding of conception today.

The recognition of each human person as created in the likeness of God and called to eternity is the hallmark of Christianity. In the Christian East and West, canons, dogma, and moral codes across the centuries have extended this understanding to those in utero. These things are true, well known, and inform the way Christians encounter reproductive technology and bioethics in our own time.

Through the experiential catechesis of the liturgy, we approach the conception of the human person from a perspective that has grown over the last two millennia as the liturgy itself has grown. What we hear, see, touch, bow before, sing, and honor in the liturgy presents the Christian understanding of conception in a different way than do dogma, moral theology, or their generated discourse. The Christian imagination fashioned hymns, icons, and church architecture in honor of the feast of the Annunciation. Over time, other feasts having to do with conception developed, including the Righteous Anna's Conception of the Mother of God and the Conception of John the Baptist. In the liturgy, we experience the truth that personhood is bestowed by God and that the origins of a new human being are beautiful, mysterious, and ultimately intangible. The liturgical experience—and *celebration*—of these truths offers a cornerstone for our encounter with reproductive technology and bioethics as Christians today.

The integration of the Annunciation into worship is likely very ancient, given that the entire Church is founded on this event. Many theorize that Mary's response to the angel (Lk. 1:38) and her Magnificat (Lk. 1:46–55) were, in fact, early Church hymns. A second-century image that most scholars believe to be either an Annunciation image or to have been understood very early as such is found in the Catacombs of Priscilla, a place of meeting and prayer for early Christians. Later, at least by the fifth century, prior to the feast of the Annunciation itself appearing on the Church calendar, a feast for Mary's motherhood of Jesus Christ was celebrated. With various names, including "In Memory of Holy Mary," the surviving liturgical texts of this feast honored Jesus's incarnation from the moment of his conception. In the Christian West, a similar commemoration took place the Sunday before Christmas with the reading of the Annunciation Gospel. Our early Christian counterparts prayed, sang, and remembered that Christ's incarnation was immediate and complete at the moment of his conception. The "Synaxis of the Mother of God" remains on the calendar of the Orthodox Church on December 26, but after inclusion of the Annunciation feast its focus shifted to Mary's birthgiving efforts.

The feast of the Annunciation was added to the Constantinopolitan calendar in the middle of the sixth century, under the reign of Justinian I. Annunciation falls during Great Lent, but the fasting restrictions that most Orthodox Christians observe are softened for this feast, allowing for wine, oil, and fish, so it tends to be a convivial, joyful celebration. We also chant or sing special hymns for the Annunciation, including one by the celebrated hymnographer and saint of the Church Romanos the Melodist, which has

Mary herself attesting to the immediacy of the conception of Jesus Christ in her womb. This 2017 translation is particularly forthright:

Such a greeting sounded richly in my ears, and when it faded
It had left me pregnant and radiant; so I have not knowledge of the embryo's conception . .
.

These lines from Romanos are part of the Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God that is chanted in some form during the Fridays of Great Lent in the Orthodox Church. But common to every Orthodox ear will be the Troparion, or short hymn, specific to the feast of the Annunciation, which comes from an unknown author at a later date:

Today is the beginning of our salvation,
The revelation of the eternal mystery!
The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin
As Gabriel announces the coming of Grace.
Together with him let us cry to the Theotokos:
Rejoice, O Full of Grace,
The Lord is with You!

Every year we affirm in hymns that the Annunciation is the “beginning of our salvation.” The Incarnation has occurred; it is not official on some later date of the pregnancy or on Christmas. Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan noted: “In the dramaturgic structure of the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the Annunciation constituted the narrative counterpart to the climax of the first chapter of the Gospel of John: ‘And the Word was made flesh.’” He wrote these words in the twentieth century, but they were being lived out in the early Church expression of the liturgy.

We also venerate the Annunciation icon. For the feast, it is placed in a central location in the church. Before and after liturgy, we make the sign of the cross before this icon while gazing at it. Annunciation icons convey action and movement in a way that few other icons do. Most other festal icons look like portraiture, but Annunciation icons are dynamic; Gabriel’s robes often billow up, his feet have barely

touched the ground, his wings are askew, he reaches toward Mary as he approaches her, and the dove of the Holy Spirit descends closer. Mary leans forward in anticipation. Sometimes she bows her head, indicating the alignment of her will with God's: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38).

The feast of "Righteous Anna's Conception of the Mother of God," as it is called in the Christian East, was added to the Eastern Church calendar in the eighth century. St. Anna herself had been a figure of veneration for some time; a number of churches had been dedicated to her prior to this period. The same event is celebrated on the Roman Catholic calendar on December 8 as the "Immaculate Conception," though it was slower to become a universal feast in the West.

The story of Anna's conception of Mary comes not from the New Testament but from Church tradition compiled and embellished in the second-century Protoevangelium of James. Although the Protoevangelium of James was never blessed as canonical Scripture, it was understood by the Church as a meaningful reflection on the life of Jesus and his mother and has influenced the liturgical and iconographic expression of the life of Mary, including the development of this feast.

The Protoevangelium of James starts with Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, arriving in old age childless, to their great disappointment and public shame. Joachim and Anna each pray to God for a child, and each in turn encounters a holy messenger who bears the news from God that their sorrow will soon end. The two rush home to meet each other:

And, behold, Joachim came with his flocks; and Anna stood by the gate . . . and she ran and hung upon his neck, saying: "Now I know that the Lord God has blessed me exceedingly; for, behold . . . I the childless shall conceive." And Joachim rested the first day in his house.

The phrase "rested in his house" intimates that Anna and Joachim unite sexually and conceive. Indeed, nine months later Anna gives birth to Mary, the Mother of God. This story is the basis for the feast that was inaugurated in the eighth century.

Like the Annunciation, the feast of Righteous Anna's Conception of the Mother of God celebrates a conception. Unlike the Annunciation, the feast of Righteous Anna's Conception celebrates a conception

that results from the sexual union of two human partners. This, in some ways, makes their experience more germane to our own and explains why Anna, Joachim, and Mary are more likely to be referred to as the “holy family” in the Christian East than Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.

In both Mary’s experience in the Annunciation and in Anna and Joachim’s conception of Mary in the feast of Righteous Anna’s Conception of the Mother of God, the Church understands and celebrates the complete incarnation of the new person. Mary is conceived on the day of her parents’ sexual union, the same day that Joachim “rested in his house.” We therefore sing this hymn on the day of the feast:

Today the universe rejoices,
for Anna has conceived the Theotokos through God’s dispensation,
for she has brought forth the one who is to bear the ineffable Word!

Mary is brought into being in the divine-human partnership that constitutes every act of conception, not just those that involve angelic messengers.

We see, touch, and venerate this story in its icon form. The icon of the Righteous Anna’s Conception of the Mother of God illustrates precisely the moment when Anna and Joachim rush to be together after hearing from the angel that they will finally conceive. They are in such haste that their garments are aflutter, perhaps suggesting imminent removal. They embrace; their faces are cheek-to-cheek. They look into each other’s eyes, which is especially noteworthy since most icons depict saints looking either at the viewer or off to the side. In most Orthodox examples, including the oldest ones, their marital bed is conveniently positioned just behind them. In other examples, Orthodox iconographers borrow from the Western Christian tradition of the Golden Gate, based on the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* composed by Jacobus de Voragine, which told of Anna and Joachim meeting at the Golden Gate of the Old City in Jerusalem after each one’s angelic encounter. Though they embrace in this icon type as well, the ambiance is not quite as sensual without the bed at the ready.

All details in both types of the Righteous Anna’s Conception of the Mother of God icons point to Joachim and Anna’s eagerness to unite in order to create the child that they are promised. Whereas the moment of conception can be modestly witnessed in the case of the Annunciation, this is not the case here. As a

teenager, I asked a priest the significance of the platform-shaped object behind Saints Joachim and Anna in their icon, which hung on the wall near where my parents and I always stood in church and was taken down for veneration on December 9. I was interested because St. Anna is my saint; my baptismal name is “Carrie Ann.” Without hesitation, he replied, “That is their marital bed on which they conceive the Mother of God.” This made a lasting impression beyond the momentary embarrassment I felt about unwittingly stumbling into a conversation about sex with my parish priest: Here the Church openly and positively acclaimed marital sexuality and celebrated the conception of a fully human person within that context.

The liturgy affirms the fullness of a human person upon conception in fresh ways in contemporary times. Though added to the Church calendar as early as the fifth century—and with an ancient iconographic prototype—a new type of icon of the feast of the Conception of St. John the Baptist has appeared in the past few hundred years. As best I can tell, this icon has a Russian provenance. St. John’s parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth, stand to one side, embracing. But rather than the marital bed waiting behind them as in the Righteous Anna icon, their son is standing next to them in full-grown, adult form.

As the Forerunner, St. John brings with him a gravitas beyond his years; he recognizes Jesus while they are inside of their mothers’ wombs (Lk. 1:44). From this perspective, it makes a certain sense that he appears as a man next to his parents. This icon additionally indicates that the full human person, the person that God knows in his smallest parts and knits together in his mother’s womb (Ps. 139:13), is there from the beginning and is continuous with the grown man that John the Baptist lives to be.

Even today, the iconographic tradition imparts these truths about conception within the Christian liturgy. There has been an increase in the images of a prenatal Christ visible in the womb of Mary in Annunciation icons. Though there are ancient prototypes supporting this variant, the most famous of which is the Ustyug Annunciation from twelfth-century Russia, it has been rare until recently. In these icons, Jesus is shown as a recognizable infant. Though often painted in a misty, suggestive manner, the point is clear: The Incarnation is complete at the Annunciation, at conception. There is a similar trend with icons of the Visitation, which are also now more frequently created with Mary and Elizabeth visibly pregnant (rather than appearing in ambiguously voluminous robes), sometimes with silvery prenatal images of Jesus Christ

and St. John. I suspect that there is a correlation between the increase of these images and the influx of women into the iconographic arts.

When we sing hymns of the Annunciation, when we gather for a weekday liturgy to remember Righteous Anna's Conception of the Mother of God, when we kiss the icon of the Conception of St. John the Baptist as he stands next to his parents, and when we receive the Eucharist that was borne through the royal doors with the Annunciation icon, we experience the truth that each one of us is fully a person from conception. And we celebrate the fact that we are, as soon as we are conceived, unique, irreplaceable, and infinitely valuable.

Our liturgical experience furthers our encounter with reproductive and medical technology today. The language of bioethics is insufficient to us as Christians because it, by design, attempts to keep pace with the ever-changing scientific understanding of prenatal development. The liturgy offers another way of knowing, one that will never be subject to revision. Through the experience of worship, we embody an integrated truth: that the nature of creation is ineffable and that conception is inseparable from the advent of a new person.

Conception is akin to a sacrament of the Church. As in a sacrament, the Holy Spirit, and not just the workings of humans, is involved. And as we do not seek to explain the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and the blood in the Eucharist, we need not square current embryology with the creation of a human person. Leaving this veil on the mystery of the creation of a new person untouched does not deny the biological mechanics of the union of a sperm and an egg and the development of an embryo after fertilization. Instead, we honor the coexistent but higher reality, the more mysterious one, of the beginnings of a human person.

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