

# Mary, Full of Grace: The Meaning and Implications of This Greeting- I

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This article in its first part attempts to bring out the meaning of ‘full of Grace’ through an exegetical study of Lk 1,28 in its literary and historical context. The second part of the article studies the ecclesiastical tradition which interprets and lives the significance of this divine greeting especially in connection with the various Marian dogmas and devotions. Finally, based on Bible and tradition, the article discusses the theological and anthropological implications of this significant divine salutation for our lives today.

## 1. The Meaning of *Kecharitoméne*

The annunciation scene (Lk 1,26-38) begins with an angelic greeting, *rejoice! full of grace (chaire, kecharitoméne* Lk 1,28), which is unique and never heard before and so is admittedly very difficult to translate its comprehensive meaning<sup>1</sup>. This solemn greeting, which is very melodious and rhythmic play of words in Greek, introduces the great mystery of incarnation. This greeting also has a mystery aspect in the sense we may not fully comprehend it but we can understand and explain it to a certain extent. According to evangelist Luke, Mary herself was troubled by this

greeting as she could not understand its meaning: “But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be” (Lk 1,29). That is why after two thousand years we ponder with Mary the meaning and implication of that extraordinary greeting. Though a perfect translation may not be possible, we have to try to find out the closest possible translation of this divine greeting which renders its meaning both from the biblical and the philological perspectives.

### 1.1 From a Biblical Perspective

First of all, let us analyse the biblical context of this divine salutation, viz., the annunciation scene (Lk 1,26-38). The annunciation scene consists of a solemn introduction (Lk 1,26-27) and three dialogues between the angel Gabriel and Mary (Lk 1, 28-38)<sup>2</sup>. Unlike the annunciation to Zechariah, in this episode, the dialogues are more important than the experience of the vision. Zechariah was troubled because his prayer for a child has been heard (Lk 1,13). The word that causes trouble to Mary in the annunciation scene is the meaning of the angelic salutation, *kecharitoméne*: “But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be” (Lk 1,29). The explanatory words of the angel in v. 30 are related to the expression, *kecharitoméne*. Mary should not be afraid because she has found favour with God.

What does it mean to say that one has found favour with God? In Gen 6,8 we read, ‘But Noah found favour in the sight of God’. In Ex 33,12, Moses is said to have found favour with God. St. Stephen, the first martyr of the Church, in his speech refers to David as one ‘who found favour with God and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob (Acts 7,46). In the annuncia-

tion scene (Lk 1,26-38) we see that Mary, David and the house of Jacob have been given a decisive role. Both in the historical context and in the literary context the words of the angel to Mary, ‘You have found favour with God’ suggests that Mary is chosen by God to have an important role in realizing the graces promised to David. From this point of view, the greeting *kecharitoméne* may mean that Mary is processed and inserted by God into the unique state of grace to fulfil the promises to David. The angelic greeting, full of grace’ is related to her belongingness to the house of David and the promises made to David (2 Sam 7,4-17). The angel repeats the same promises made to David: “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1,32-33).

## 1.2 In Relation to *Chaire*

The meaning of *kecharitoméne* is closely linked with the word *chaire*. The two Greek terms *chaire* and *kecharitoméne* in the angelic salutation are very much interconnected. Mary is invited to rejoice as she is loved by God and filled with His grace in view of her divine motherhood. As for Mary, the divine grace is the source of true joy for the people of God of all times. The Greek imperative *chaire* (meaning rejoice) was the ordinary greeting used in the daily life of the New Testament times. In the Old Testament *chaire* appears in the context where Zion is invited to the future Messianic joy (Joel 2,21-23; Zeph 3,14; Zech 9,9)<sup>3</sup>. The joy that was announced by the prophets to the people of Israel - the woman Zion - is now focused on one person who in a way represents the desires and hopes of Israel<sup>4</sup>. We have examples for this greeting, used both in the singular and plural forms in the Gospels. In Mt 26,49, Judas greets

Jesus by saying: *chaire* Rabbi. In Mt 28,9, Jesus greets the women on their return from the tomb: *chairete*. The early Christians did not very often use the greeting *chaire*. They used another theologically significant term, *charis* (grace) usually combined with *eirene* (peace).<sup>5</sup> Then why did Luke use the common greeting *chaire* instead of the usual Christian greeting *charis*? The early Christian readers would have appreciated the word play in the salutation, using *chaire* for

*charis*. They would have also recognised the use of *charis* in *kecharitoméne*. This would lead them to ponder over the nuances of the fully and singularly graced status of Mary. To address Mary, *kecharitoméne* is more than a qualitative description of Mary,

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more than a title. It is a God given singular status that Mary has in the salvation history. Mary has been transformed by the grace of God in view of the task which she awaits, that of becoming the mother of the Son of God while remaining a virgin. Mary is the recipient of this unique gift and privilege in the history of salvation.

### 1.3 In the List of God-given Names

The very significant name of Mary given by God through the archangel Gabriel is *kecharitoméne* (Lk 1,28). For the Hebrews, name indicates the character, nature and qualities of a person or their roles in the history of salvation. In the angelic salutation (Lk 1,28) Mary's name is not mentioned but the Angel addresses her as 'Full of Grace'. The mystery of Mary is summed up in this God given name. According to Dave Armstrong, "it was as if the angel was addressing

Abraham, ‘Hail, full of faith,’ or Solomon, ‘Hail, full of wisdom,’ (characteristics for which they are noteworthy)”.<sup>6</sup> The angel greets Mary not with her name but with a new title ‘full of grace’. Pope St. John Paul II reflecting on this gospel passage said that ‘full of grace’ is “the name Mary possesses in the eyes of God”.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.4 From a Philological Perspective

Now let us examine from a philological perspective the meaning of *kecharitoméne*. *Kecharitoméne* is the perfect passive participle of the Greek verb “*charitoô*” which means *I bestow grace*. The verb “*charitoô*” has a causative value<sup>8</sup> and so it means that Mary is actually processed or formed by the benevolence of God<sup>9</sup>. The verb is in the passive form referring to the divine act. Moreover, the choice of the perfect tense points out that Mary is already under the influence of God’s favour and continues to be in this condition. The perfect form of the verb indicates the enduring effect of the divine act on Mary who has been fully graced. Mary has been in a state of grace (sinlessness) from the moment of her existence. The perfect passive participle would mean having been graced with a nuance of fullness<sup>10</sup>. Hence, the translations *full of grace* or *fully graced* are appropriate grammatically.

## 1.5 In Relation to *Charis*

In Lk 1,30 the noun *charis* again appears: “Thou hast found grace with God: behold, you will conceive a child, you will give him the name Jesus.” This time the meaning of *kecharitoméne* is explained as a functional

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grace to become the mother of God's Son. God's grace had a transforming effect on Mary, preparing her to accept the divine commission to conceive and bring forth the Messiah in her womb. It is interesting to note that the name Mary is not used in the angelic salutation. Instead, the angel salutes her with the beautiful title, *rejoice, full of grace*. The use of *charis* in Lk 1,30 helps us to clarify the meaning of the verb *kecharitoméne* in terms of grace. Though it is very difficult to translate the full meaning contained in the greeting addressed to Mary, the English translation *full of grace* which is a verbatim translation of the *gratia plena* found in the Latin Vulgate, which we use in the prayer *Hail Mary* is doing justice to the Greek verb than some other translations which we find in different versions of the Bible.

When we translate *kecharitoméne* as 'full of grace', we emphasise both the divine act and the intention of the divine act for which Mary has been graced<sup>11</sup>. She has been fully graced to conceive and bring forth the Son of the Most High. God's grace had a transforming effect on Mary preparing her for accepting the vocation<sup>12</sup> as the mother of the Son of God.

## 1.6 In the Theology of Grace

The most common meaning of the term *grace* is beauty and graciousness. It can also mean mercy, favour, and benevolence. In the Bible we find both these meanings. The first meaning of grace can be seen in Ps 45,2 where we read about the beauty of the royal spouse the following: 'You are the most handsome of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever'. Here the beauty of the spouse is seen as the effect of divine grace. A good wife is said to be graceful in Prov 5,19. The second meaning of grace is found in Ex 33,19 where God says, 'I will be gra-

cious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy'. From this verse it is clear that God's grace is a free, gratuitous gift. In Ex 34, 6 God's character is said to be 'abounding in grace and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousand generations'. Here also grace denotes favour and benevolence. In Mary we can see both these meanings. She is full of grace and she has found favour in the eyes of God. Her beauty consists in her holiness, in her perfect sanctity. In CCC No. 1997, we read, "Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life: by Baptism the Christian participates in the grace of Christ, the Head of his Body. As an "adopted son" he can henceforth call God "Father," in union with the only Son. He receives the life of the Spirit who breathes charity into him and who forms the Church".

We have a tendency to think about grace as an abstract concept. This thinking is not right. Pope Benedict XVI sees grace as a relational term. He writes on grace as follows: "it (grace) does not predicate something about an I, but something about a connection between I and Thou, between God and man. He goes on interpreting the meaning of "Full of grace": "Full of grace" could therefore also be translated as: "You are full of the Holy Spirit; your life is intimately connected with God." Grace in the proper and deepest sense of the word is not something that comes from God; it is God himself. .... "Full of grace" therefore means, once again, that Mary is a wholly open human being, one who has opened herself entirely, one who has placed herself in God's hands boldly, limitlessly, and without fear for her own fate. It means that

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she lives wholly by and in relation to God.”<sup>13</sup>  
(*To be continued in the next issue*)

## Notes

- 1 Luke uses the expression *pleres charitos* (full of grace) to describe Stephen (Acts 6,8), the first martyr of the early church. But he uses a unique expression *kecharitomenē* for Mary.
- 2 The structure of the annunciation scene (Lk 1,26-38) is as follows:  
God sends the angel Gabriel (Lk 1,26-27)  
The angel speaks (v. 28)  
Mary's response: silence  
The angel speaks (vv. 30-33)  
Mary's response: a question  
The angel speaks (vv. 35-37)  
Mary's response: Fiat (v. 38)
- 3 M. THURIAN, *Mary. Mother of the Lord. Figure of the Church*, N. B. CRYER (Trans.), London 1963, 20: “Mary is the one ‘Filled-with-Grace,’ and she may well rejoice at the joy proclaimed by the prophets to her who should become the Mother of the Messiah, that Daughter of Zion, the symbol of the people who wait for their God, which the Virgin has become by pure grace”.
- 4 The invitation to joy and a message of Messianic joy rebounds not only in the infancy narrative but also throughout the third gospel (Lk 1,46; 2,10). *Chiare* (rejoice) is “the word with which the prophets introduce the joyful tidings to Israel that God is coming to them, that their restoration is at hand (see Zeph 3,14; Zech 9,9; see also Joel2,21.23). Now Mary becomes the recipient of this messianic cry of joy. She is not addressed as a private individual, but as the representative of God's people. In her Israel experienced the saving presence of God”. S. MULLOPARAMBIL (ed.), *Dynamism of the Word of God and Biblical Personalities*, Bangalore 2009, 173.
- 5 We have many examples for this in the Pauline letters (1Cor 1,3; 2Cor 13,13; 1Thess 1,1; 1Tim 1,2; 2Tim 1,2). Cf. also Rev 1,4.
- 6 D. ARMSTRONG, *A Biblical Defence of Catholicism*, 1<sup>st</sup> Books Library 2001, 128.
- 7 JOHN PAUL II, Catechesis given to General Audience on 8 May 1996.



- 8 The verb “*charitoō*” is very rarely used in the NT. This verb is used only twice in the NT, in Lk 1,28 and in Eph 1,6. In both cases the verb is used as causative, viz., they indicate an action which effects something in the object. This verb in its aorist form (*echaritosen*) appears in Eph 1,6 and indicates the abundance of grace granted to us by the Father in his beloved Son. The Christians have been transformed by grace in the sense that they find redemption by his blood through the remission of sins. This grace takes away sins and redeems the human person. The past perfect participial form of the verb used in Lk 1,28 indicates that the action of the grace of God had already brought about a transformation in Mary. She had been transformed by grace of God in view of her vocation to be the mother of God’s Son, while remaining a virgin. Cf. IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, B. BUBY (Trans.), New York 1992, 17-19.
- 9 Both the noun and the verb forms of *charis* in the Bible, refer to God in most cases.
- 10 It is important to note that all the Greek denominative verbs in ‘oō’ have a sense of fullness and abundance.
- 11 We find different translations of *kecharitoméne* in different versions of the Bible. Most of the translations use either grace or favour to translate this verb. I am for the translations with ‘grace’ in the context of Lk 1,28. Grace implies a free gift, often connected to an interior gift of some kind. Favours can be external, deserved or gained. In the angelic greeting we have the angel speaking of a gift that Mary had already received, even before the annunciation took place.
- 12 The German Bible Scholar Klemens Stock considers the annunciation episode as having the literary form of biblical vocation narratives. In this episode Mary is called to participate in a unique way to collaborate in the divine plan of salvation for the Incarnation of His only Son. He observes many similarities between the vocation story of Gideon (Judges 6,11-24) and Mary (Lk 1,26-38). Cf. K. STOCK, “Die Berufung Marias (Lk1,26-38)”, *Biblica* 61 (1980) 457-491.
- 13 JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER & HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, A. WALKER (Trans.), San Francisco 2005, 61-69.