

Echoes of the Annunciation: the *Angelus* and a Spirituality of Time and Space through Hearing

Sr. Maria Theotókos (Elinor) Adams, SSVM
Church History MA Graduate Student
The Catholic University of America

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In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:26-28)

The ensuing dialog between Mary and Archangel concludes ten verses later with this final response and the miraculous conception of Jesus:

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38)

The biblical scene just recounted from the Gospel of Luke is known as a whole as the Annunciation and understood by Christians as the moment in which Mary's acceptance of the angelic message leads to her virginal conception of Jesus, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Annunciation has lent itself to visual depictions from the very beginning of Christian art in the Roman catacombs where a scene of a woman seated on a throne receiving words from a standing messenger is found in the second century Catacomb of Priscilla as well as the Catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus.¹ An almost identical version of the seated woman appears at Santa Maria Maggiore in a fifth century mosaic.

Central to the Christian faith in the Incarnation, the Apostles' creed includes the two-point summary of the Annunciation: *conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria virgine* ("conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary"). Subsequent liturgical and devotional life of the early Church honors the Annunciation as a moment worthy of contemplation, one which strongly invokes

¹ The second century frescos of the Annunciation found in the Catacomb of Priscilla as well as the catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus. While art historians were once divided on the identity of the seated woman and messenger in the Catacomb of Priscilla, the same motif of figures found in the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus as part of a cycle with the Infancy narratives as since confirmed the scene as that of Mary and the Angel at the Annunciation. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d' Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, Paris, 1907ff, I: fig. 761.; and J. Wilpert, *Ein cyclus christologischer Gemälde aus der Katakombe der Heiligen Peterus und Marcellus*, Frieberg, 1891. Cited in Don Denny's *The Annunciation from the Right from Early Christian Times to the Sixteenth Century* (1977), Garland Publishings, Inc. New York, p. 6, n. 6, n. 7.

the visual imagination. In a fifth century homily, Pope Leo the Great describes how: “Not only our memory but somehow our eyes as well contemplate the conversation between the angel Gabriel and the wondering Mary...”²

Set against the present context of the exhibit *Picturing Mary*—which itself features at least a dozen Annunciations among its selections of Marian art—my present work seeks to reveal the multivalent qualities of the Annunciation rendered through hearing: “echoes of the Annunciation.” The prayer known commonly by its incipit, the *Angelus*, recalls the Annunciation by recreating the time and space of Nazareth in the imagination and experience of the one at prayer through a series of antiphons and recitations of the *Ave Maria* prayed three times a day, at 6:00am, noon, and 6:00pm. The structure of the prayer itself is formed through three sets of anticipated “calls and responses” which recreate Mary’s spiritual posture of hearing the Angel, and then freely disposing herself to the plan of God. Unlike other central Christian prayers like the *Pater Noster* or the *Gloria* which have no narrative event attached to them, the *Ave Maria* and the *Angelus* are specifically tied to evoking the scene of the Annunciation in Nazareth under multiple points of view using scriptural and liturgical antiphons.

As we will examine in this paper, the standardized practice of the tolling of bells from local monasteries and cathedrals specifically to mark the prayer of the *Angelus* spread through towns and cities in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as another sign of the increased devotion to

² Sermo 26, I; PL 54, 212-213; CCL 138, 125. *Non solum enim in memoriam, sed in conspectum quodammodo redit angeli Gabrihelis cum Maria stupente conloquium.* English translation from Gambero, Luigi, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought* (1999) trans. by Thomas Buffer from Italian, *Maria nel pensiero dei padri della Chiesa* (1991), Ignatius Press, San Francisco; p. 308.

the Virgin Mary so characteristic of the period. Hearing the bells throughout a medieval town or city had become an integral part of marking time for monastic and civil life, but a different ring pattern was assigned to signal this prayer. The particular triple rings created moments of the day which were at once both public and private, intended for both monastics and laity alike, and lent itself to structured prayer not only within a church but at home or in the fields. The development of some fifteenth century Flemish and Italian depictions of the Annunciation develop wider distances between Mary and the Angel and include urban scenes out the background windows even suggests greater attention on hearing and the pauses within the dialog.³ These visual changes may reflect the lived experience of the contemporary devotional practice of the *Angelus*.

In order to focus on the place of hearing in the memory and spirituality of time and space, I have invited some of my religious sisters to intone the *Angelus* for us, accompanied by the tolling of a small bell (on the screen you may follow the English translation of the Latin):

[INTONED ANGELUS]

Grammatical Form and Spirituality

The body of this paper will now follow the three sets of the *Angelus* antiphons and the diversity of perspectives offered by each one according to its content and grammar. I contend that this variety itself contributes to the experience of the auditory prayer by creating a visual scene in the imagination, and reflects the way this prayer has shaped Marian spirituality over time.

³ Verdon, Timothy, *Mary in Western Art* (2005), Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, Washington, DC, p. 9, 98-99, 104-105.

The first phrase retells the event in a simple perfect active indicative statement in the third person which reports the facts and names of all the parties involved: the Angel, the Lord who sent him, Mary, the Holy Spirit, and the fact of conception, implicitly pointing to the Incarnate Word. Temporally, we cover the whole scene from the beginning to the end in one phrase.

The second phrase suddenly draws the perspective into a solitary focus on the Virgin Mary at her most essential moment, her decisive words, the “fiat” of consent found in Luke 1:38 which closes the scene. In this case, the language is very bold: exclamatory (*ecce*), self-identifying in relation to God (*ancilla Domini*), subjunctive (*fiat*), first person singular (*mihi*), and relational to the other (*verbum tuum*). Even more strikingly, the speaker now pronounces Mary’s own most intimate words without any frames or disclaimers: “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word.” To apply a liturgical expression in a very analogous way, this portion of the prayer invites the one at prayer to speak *in persona Mariae*, identifying directly with her consent and her relationship to God’s will.

Finally, the third phrase pans way out to a macro-vision of the most profound significance of the Annunciation, *et Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis*.⁴ This final antiphon recapitulates the whole Christian theology of creation, the fall, the incarnation, the redemption, and the Church in time. The one at prayer is faced with John’s Gospel both in its contextual allusion to the Book of Genesis⁵ as well as inserting a contemporary pronoun *nobis* (“us”). Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) explicitly links them in a homily where he places this phrase on Mary’s lips: *Verbum, quod erat in*

⁴ Jn 3:14, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us.”

⁵ Jn 1:1, *In principium erat Verbum* (“In the beginning was the Word”); Gen 1:1, *In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram* (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”).

principio apud Deum, fiat caro de carne mea secundum verbum tuum. (“The Word, who was in the beginning with God, was made flesh from my flesh according to Your word”).⁶

The ongoing presence of the Incarnate Word “among us” has been understood by the Church as a reference to the Eucharist and Christ’s words at the Ascension, “behold I am with you always, even until the end of time (Mt 28:20)”. For this reason, in the final portion of the paper we will consider how the third antiphon frames the ecclesial significance of the *Angelus* prayer.

I. “The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived by the Holy Spirit”: The Ave Maria and the Historical Rise of the Angelus Prayer

The structured devotion of the *Angelus* has had a gradual and organic development based on the evening *Ave Maria*, a progression which is sometimes hard to trace since it does not belong to the formal liturgical rubrics established in medieval missals and lectionaries.⁷ However, like this first antiphon set which summarizes the whole event of the Annunciation and features the three main protagonists, we will endeavor to establish the basic facts by first briefly considering its principle constituent part, the *Ave Maria* prayer itself, and then the historical rise of the *Angelus* from a simple Marian prayer at sundown to the structured prayer known through formalized proclamations and papal indulgences.

The Formation of the Ave Maria

⁶ *Homiliae super ‘Missus est’*: hom. : 4, par. : 11, vol. : 4, pag. : 57, linea : 9

⁷ Thurston, Herbert, “Angelus” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907), Volume I, p. 486: “The history of the Angelus is by no means easy to trace with confidence, and it is well to distinguish in this matter between what is certain and what is in some measure conjectural.”

The *Ave Maria* stands as the prayer *par excellence* for honoring Mary since it offers the scriptural response to the question: “how should one address Mary, the Mother of God?” The prayer pairs the angelic salutation (*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum*, Lk. 1:28) with the exclamation of her cousin Elizabeth at the Visitation (*Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui*, Lk. 1:42).

The juxtaposition of these two texts and can be found in a well-known homily of uncertain authorship on the Annunciation⁸ composed in a “Cappadocian environment between 370 and 378.”⁹ The homily addresses the entire dialog between the Angel and Mary, allowing for only one external insertion: that of the exclamation of Elizabeth “blessed are you among women” immediately following “the Lord is with you”. Another notable early pairing of these gospel scenes in a prayer is found in Greek on a Coptic ostrakon¹⁰ dated to the sixth or seventh century which reads:

*Hail Mary,
full of grace;
the Lord is with you,
the Holy Spirit too.
[Your priests shall be robed in justice,
they that honor you shall rejoice and exult.
For David's sake, your servant, Lord,
save, Lord, your people, bless your chosen
portion.]*

*Hail to the glorious virgin,
Mary, full of grace.
The Lord is with you.
Blessed you are above all other women
and blessed is the fruit of your womb:
for him you conceived was Christ, the Son of God,
and he has redeemed our souls.*

⁸ Pseudo-Chrysostom, *On the Annunciation to the Mother of God and against the Impious Arius*; PG 62, 765-68

⁹ “The only conclusion that can be accepted as very likely is that the text was composed in a Cappadocian environment between 370 and 378.” p. 273, Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*; referenced to 1985 *Marianum* publication by Gambero; and R. Caro *La Homitetica Mariano Griega en el Siglo V*, Marian Library Studies 4, vol. 2 (Dayton, 1972), pp. 511-22.

¹⁰ “An ancient form of the *Ave Maria*.” See Adalbert Hamman, ed., *Early Christian Prayers*, trans. Walter Mitchell (Chicago: Regnery, 1961), 76. Cited in Nicholas Ayo, C.S.C. *The Hail Mary* (1994) p. 6-7, n. 5. Ayo adds in endnote 5 (p. 211): “This text, written in Greek on a Coptic ostrakon, was discovered in the late nineteenth century in the area of Luxor in Egypt. Its condition was fragmentary, and it was reconstructed by F.E. Brightman and edited and published by Walter E. Crum, *Coptic Ostraca* (London: Kegan and Paul, 1902), Text #518, p.3. The date of origin is sixth or seventh century. ... See Gabriele Giamberardini, *Il Culto Mariana in Egitto, vol. 1 pubblicazioni dello Studium Biblicum Franciscanum*, analecta 6 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1975), 226.” *χαίρε κεχαριστωμένη Μαρία. ο Κύριος μετὰ σου. ευλογημένη συ εν γυναιξί και ευλογημενος ο καρπος της κοιλιας σου οτι τον του θεου τον Χριστον συνελαβες λυτρωτην των ψυχων ημων.*

In the West the pairing of the texts of the Annunciation and the Visitation can be found earliest in the sixth century where Gregory the Great (d.604) combines them for the offertory of the Mass of the Fourth Sunday of Advent.¹¹ The pairing can also be found at the turn of the eighth century where Bede (673-735) joins them and attributes them all to the Angel in an unusually imprecise expression: *Et ingressus angelus ad eam dixit: aue gratia plena, dominus te cum, benedicta tu in mulieribus.*¹²

The “Little Office of Our Lady,” begun in the tenth century¹³ and increasingly wide spread throughout the Middle Ages, made frequent use of the simple form of the *Ave Maria* and thus further popularized it in private devotional life. Beginning in the twelfth century the *Ave Maria* is found in a wider ecclesial context where it is often assigned to the laity together with the *Pater Noster* and the *Credo* by various bishops and councils.¹⁴

The addition of the name of Jesus, and the formulaic conclusion to the *Ave Maria* can be found in the seventh century in a text attributed to a bishop known as Severus of Alexandria who

¹¹ PL 78, 645 Off. *Ave, Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui.* The surrounding antiphons are also drawn from the Annunciation in light of the fulfillment of the ages: *Vers. Veni, Domine, et noli tardare; relaxa facinora plebis tuae.* *Vers.1. Quomodo in me fiet hoc, quae virum non cognosco? Spiritus Domini superveniet in te, et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi.* *Vers. 2. Ideoque quod nascetur ex te sanctum, vocabitur Filius Dei.* *Com. Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium, et vocabitur nomen ejus Emmanuel.*

¹² *In Lucae euangelium expositio* (CPL 1356) [lib. : 1, cap. : 1, linea : 465]

¹³ Graef, Hilda, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion, Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation* (1963), Sheed and Ward, London and New York, p. 230, and n. 4 “[The Office of Our Lady] appears first as a private devotion in the tenth century and is attested in the Life of Bishop Ulrich of Augsburg (d. 973) written by his contemporary, Gerard, Provost of Augsburg Cathedral (PL, 135, 1016D).” *quandocunque ei domi manendum aliae occupationes consenserunt. Insuper autem unum cursum in honore sanctae Mariae genitricis Dei, et alterum de sancta cruce, tertium de omnibus sanctis, et alios psalmos plurimos, totumque psalterium omni die explere solitus erat, nisi si eum impediret aliqua inevitabilis necessitas.*

¹⁴ Roschini, Gabriele, OSM, “Ave Maria” in *Dizionario di Mariologia* (1960), Editrice Studium, Rome, p. 73.

authored a manual of pious writings for the African dioceses. The text reflects a Latin translation of the Greek gospel not derived from the Vulgate, and also includes several dynamic new features:

*Pax tibi, Maria, plena gratia, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu inter mulieres, et benedictus fructus qui est in utero tuo, Jesus Christus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis, inquam, peccatoribus. Amen.*¹⁵

In the West, the inclusion of the name of Jesus and a formula for conclusion appears in an eleventh century homily for the Annunciation by St Aelred of Rievaulx in Yorkshire (c. 1110 – 1167) :

Aue Maria, gratia plena, Dominus te cum,
benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus uentris tui,
Jesus Christus Dominus noster, qui cum Patre et Spiritu
Sancto uiuit et regnat Deus per omnia saecula saeculorum.
Amen.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you,
Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of
your womb, **Jesus Christ our Lord**, who with the Father and
the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, God for all ages upon ages.
Amen.

Many various forms like these began to appear more widely in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but universal standard usage for second part of the *Ave Maria*¹⁶ began cannot be attested to until the sixteenth century.¹⁷ In 1568 the complete prayer as known today was promulgated by the Dominican pope, Pius V, in his reform of the Roman Breviary.¹⁸

Historical References to the Practice of the Angelus Prayer

¹⁵ Roschini, p. 74. "Peace be with you, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit who is in your womb, Jesus Christ. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, us sinners I say, Amen."

¹⁶ *Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.*

¹⁷ Royo Marin, Antonio, OP "5. El Angelus", *La Virgen Maria: Teologia y espiritualidad marianas*, Segunda Edicion (1996) Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid, p. 456.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 456.

By the early thirteenth century we find St Anthony of Padua (1195-1231) recommending that the faithful pray three *Hail Marys* in the evening,¹⁹ and influential monastic women like the Benedictine St Mechtilde of Helfta (1241-1298), mentor of St Gertrude the Great (1256-1301/2), also praised this practice in her widely disseminated written *Revelations*.²⁰

Blessed Benedict of Arezzo (1190-1282), another thirteenth century Franciscan, may have been responsible for assigning the known Marian antiphons which compose the full *Angelus* prayer. In the *Vita Beati Benedicti Aretini* (1302), one reads that: “He instituted for the brothers an antiphon, which is to be sung after Compline: ‘The Angel spoke to Mary,’ which he used to recited and to sing with the greatest devotion.”²¹ Presiding as General Superior over the Chapter of the Order of the Friars Minor in 1269, St Bonaventure ratified canons calling for the friars to honor the “glorious Virgin” on Saturdays and to instruct the people to “salute the Virgin”(pray the *Ave Maria*) at the ringing of a bell in the evening after Compline.²²

¹⁹ *Nos vero miseri, a facie oculorum Dei in mare proiacti, omni hora, procellis concussi, in confinio mortis positi, clamemus omni hora: Ave, Maria.* Sermones festivi; vol.: 3, sermo in annuntiatione s. Mariae, pars: 5 (sermo allegoricus), par.: 14, pag.: 162, linea: 20. (“We truly miserable ones, cast in the sea away from the face of the eyes of God—every hour let us call out!—violently shaken by tempests, pushed to the very region of death—every hour let us call out: *Ave Maria!*”)

²⁰ Luppino, Giuseppe, “Short History of the *Angelus*”, *L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English; 4 September 2002, page 6.

²¹ *Instituit fratribus suis Antifonam, quae cantatur post Completorium: Angelus locutus est Mariae, quam semper maxima devotione recitabat et cantebat.* I express my gratitude to Fr. Michael Cusato, O.F.M. for providing me with this important detail as well as for the citation of the canon of 1269 in the following note. He has further suggested a possible influence of the Muslim practice of calling to prayer on the formation of the *Angelus* antiphons since the muezzin’s call was important to St. Francis during his time in the Holy Land, and would have been well-known to Bl. Benedict of Arezzo who served as provincial superior in the Holy Land in this early period of Franciscan presence in the Middle East. Further research is needed to explore this line of influence. See Domenico Cresi, O.F.M. “Il beato Benedetto Sinigardi d'Arezzo e l'origine dell'Angelus Domini” (1927, reprint 1958: Firenze: Convento di San Francesco).

²² Canon 1. *Ordinamus ob reverentiam gloriose virginis, ut in quolibet sabbato ad ipsius honorem dictator sollemniter missa, quando fieri poterit bono modo.* Canon 2. *Ad cuius etiam honorem fratres predicent populo, quod quando auditor campana Completorii, ipsa beata Virgo aliquotiens salutetur.* A. G. Little, “Definitiones capitulorum generalium Ordini fratrum minorum, 1260-1282,” *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 7 (1914). Footnote to canon 2 indicates a further source: *Vita Beati Benedicti Aretini*, O.F.M., in which one reads c. 1250: “*Instituit fratribus suis Antifonam, quae cantatur post*

The practice also extended outside of Franciscan circles where promotion of the *Angelus* is claimed by Bonvicino de Ripa (d. c. 1314) of the penitent Order of the Humiliati in Milan whose epitaph identifies him as “the one who first had the bells rung for the *Ave Maria* in Milan and the surroundings.”²³ The Order of Preachers (Dominicans) is noted to have recommended the practice in Frankfurt in 1317, shortly before Pope John XXII’s proclamation in 1327 that the *Angelus* bells should toll in Rome as well.²⁴

The first written account of the form of the *Angelus* known to us today appears in an indulgence issued by Pope Paul III in a catechism printed in Venice in 1560, followed closely by the same modern form of the prayer in an edition of the Short Office of the Virgin approved by Pope Pius V in 1571.²⁵ From that time forward, various popes have added indulgences and adaptations to the prayer as we will see in the final portion of this paper.

II. “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to Thy word”: Personal Prayer and Devotion of the Laity through the Hearing of Bells in the Evening

The second intonation echoes the intimate response to the Angel from Mary’s own lips (Luke 1:38). Suddenly the one who prays now assumes the first-person terms of identity (*ecce ancilla Domini*) as well as the active acceptance of the divine will on God’s terms (*fiat mihi secundum*

Completorium: Angelus locutus est Mariae, quam semper maxima devotione recitabat et cantebat.” 676-82, esp. 679. With further reference to Golubovich's *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa*, I (Quaracchi, 1906), p. 146.

²³ *qui primus fecit pulsar campanas ad Ave Maria Mediolani et in comitatu.* Tiraboschi, *Vetera humiliatorum monumenta*, in-fol., Mediolani, 1766, t. I, p. 299.; as cited by W. Henry, *Dictionnaire D’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* (1924) ed. F. Cabrol, H. Leclercq, Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané; vol I: col. 2070, n. 6.

²⁴ Graef, p. 308.

²⁵ Royo Marin, pp. 493-494.

verbum Tuum). This middle versicle of the *Angelus* prayer illuminates its nature as a private, domestic, and particularly feminine devotion which allows lay and religious to enter into an *imitatio Mariae* from wherever they hear the bells, be it in a monastery cloister or in a small medieval urban home near the central bell-tower. Like the Angel coming suddenly to Mary in her chamber, so too, the bell reaches the ears of ordinary people in the midst of their regular activities.

Two points which shaped the *Angelus* devotion here converge: the long-standing tradition of honoring Mary at the evening hour, and the functional tolling bells at sundown to mark curfew and times of prayer. Each of these has deep roots and direct connections to the Annunciation.

Evening Hour to Honor Mary

The origin of Marian prayer at evening in the home may be linked to a practice of the early Church of making meditations on the Passion of Christ throughout the day. Tertullian (c.160 - c.225) and Hippolytus of Rome (d. 236) both insist that all Christians pray three times a day as existed in the Jewish tradition and which correspond naturally to “those common hours that mark the intervals of the day, the third, sixth and ninth.”²⁶ Hippolytus encourages Christians to mark the hours of the day according to the moments of Christ’s passion: third hour, Christ being nailed to the Cross; sixth hour, Christ hanging in His agony and the daytime made dark; ninth hour, Christ’s side is pierced and the Passion is complete, night prayer thus oriented in hope to the resurrection of the coming morning.²⁷

Josef Jungmann, SJ suggests that this early tradition of recalling the Passion throughout the day remained strong in lay spirituality and gave rise to the medieval Book of Hours, despite such a

²⁶ *De Oratone*, c. 25; translation from *Tertullian’s Treatise Concerning Prayer, Concerning Baptism* (trans. Alexander Souter, New York, 1919), p. 41, 42; cited in Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy* (1959, 2nd ed. 1962), p. 99.

²⁷ *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition*, 62, v. 2-5; Jungmann, p. 101-102.

devotion not informing the canonical hours of the monastic life.²⁸ In particular we find that the far into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the decorative image for Vespers in the Book of Hours is often the Virgin Mary holding the dead Christ—the image known generally as the Pietà, but still called in German *Vesperbild* “Vesper-picture.”²⁹ Sundown then finds Mary holding her dead son in a moment of deep contemplation, alone to face the night with her faith and hope in the coming Resurrection.

The early Church also held that the Annunciation and the Passion both took place on March 25. St Augustine twice testifies to this belief, in *De Trinitate* as well as in *De diversis quaestionibus*.³⁰ Some liturgists consider the primacy of March 25 for the Annunciation as a possible source for the dating of Christmas at December 25—not the other way around.³¹ The belief of the Annunciation and the Passion as occurring on the same day in the evening hour forges a link between Mary’s experience holding her dead son at the evening moment of the deposition and the visit of the Angel at twilight.³² The time of sundown is related to the universal recitation of Mary’s *Magnificat* prayed “everyday with the evening psalms” at least as early as the late seventh century in England as

²⁸ “This linking of the hours with the various phases of our Lord’s Passion did not survive in the later development of the canonical Hours. But to some extent it did remain alive in the piety of the people all through the Middle Ages. This is particularly true of the numerous Books of Hours (*livres d’heures, libri d’ore*) or primers which represented popular abbreviations of the canonical Hours and contained such devotions as the well-known *Officium parvum B.M.V.* or similar types—*Officium parvum SS. Trinitatis* and *Officium parvum S. Crucis*.” Jungmann, p. 104.

²⁹ Jungmann, p. 105; citing J. Stadlhuber, “Das Laienstudengebet vom Leiden Christi in senem mittelalterlichen Fortleben,” *Zeitschrift für kath. Theologie* 72 (1950), 282-325.

³⁰ *Octavo enim Kalendas apriles conceptus creditor quo est passus (De Trinitate, IV, 51 CCL 50, 172); octavo kalendas Aprilis, quo die conceptus Dominus creditor, quia eodem die etiam passus est (De diversis quaestionibus, 56; CCL 44A, 96.)* cited in Calabuig, Ignazio, O.S.M., “10: The Liturgical Cult of Mary in the East and West” (p. 219-297) in *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, Vol. V: Liturgical Time and Space (2000), ed. Anscar J. Chupungco, OSB, Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, p. 238.

³¹ Calabuig, p. 238, citing V. Loi “Il 25 marzo data pasquale e la cronologia giovannea della passion in età patristica,” *EphLit* 85 (1971) 48-69; A. H. Scheer, “Aux origins de la fête de l’Annonciation,” *QL* 58 (1977) 97-169.

³² Jungmann, p. 105.

attested to by Bede.³³ He indicates that the practice is specifically in order to recall the Incarnation and recall *exempla genitricis illius* (“the example of the His Mother”).³⁴

In the sixth century we find Isidore of Seville (c.560-636) developing the popular image of Mary as *stella maris* (“Star of the Sea”) and *inluminatrix* (“enlightener”) relating her name “Maria” to a guiding star which appears over the sea at sundown and shines in the night; fitting too since she gave birth to the *lumen mundi* (“light of the world”).³⁵ The ninth century hymn *Ave Maris Stella* further popularized this Marian title and applied Mary’s role against the darkness of this life.³⁶ Notably, the second verse of this evening hymn honors Mary in the intimacy of her receiving *illud Ave* (“that Ave”) coming from the mouth of Gabriel.³⁷ In the Chapter of 1263 in Pisa, the Friars Minor exhorted the friars to lead the people to “salute Blessed Mary” when the bells of Compline were rung “because it is the opinion of some most solemn teachers that that was the hour in which she was greeted by the angel.”³⁸

³³ PL 94, 22A; CCL 122, 30; Homeliarum euangelii libri ii (CPL 1367) lib. : 1, hom. : 4, linea : 349. *Fit autem largiente domino ut si beatae mariae semper actus et dicta recolamus semper in nobis et obseruantia castitatis et uirtutis opera perseuerent. Nam et optimus ac saluberrimus in sancta ecclesia mos inoleuit ut hymnus ipsius cotidie cum psalmodia uespertinae laudis ab omnibus canatur quatenus ex hoc animos fidelium et frequentior dominicae incarnationis memoria ad affectum deuotionis accendat et recogitata saepius exempla genitricis illius in uirtutum soliditate confirment.* “...Now a most excellent and salutary custom has arisen in the holy Church: daily [Mary’s] hymn is sung by all, together with the psalms of evening praise, so that a renewed remembrance of the Lord’s Incarnation enkindles the hearts of the faithful to feelings of devotion and a more frequent meditation on the example of the Lord’s Mother makes them strong, firmly established in the virtues.” English translation in Gambero (2000), p. 40.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Maria inluminatrix, siue stella maris. Genuit enim lumen mundi.* Etymologiarum siue Originum libri XX (CPL 1186) lib. : 7, cap. : 10, par. : 1.

³⁶ Gambero, Luigi, *Mary in the Middle Ages* (2000, Engl. Trans. 2005), Ignatius Press, San Francisco. “The oldest manuscript in which the hymn is found, Sangaliese 95, dates from the ninth century.” p. 69, further citing n. 10: AnHymn 51:140-42; H. Lausberg, “Der Hymnus ‘Ave maris stella’”, *Abhandlungen der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 61 (Opladen, 1976).

³⁷ *Sumens illud Ave / Gabrielis ore, / funda nos in pace, / mutans Hevae nomen.*

³⁸ *Chronica XXIV Generalium* (1263): *quia aliquarum solemnium doctorum est opinio quod illa hora ipsa fuit per angelum salutata.* W. Henry, *Dictionnaire D’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* (1924) ed. F. Cabrol, H. Leclercq, Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané; vol I: col. 2070

This brings us now from the origins of Marian devotion at sundown to the question of the evening bells themselves used for religious and secular purposes and how the *Angelus* connected back to hearing. For, it cannot be overlooked that the daily life of medieval lay people—both in rural areas as well as the towns and cities—had a background sound of monastic bells which might recall to them in a general way that “someone somewhere is at prayer.” This may be likened to modern urban life where the sirens of ambulances and police cars can be heard as if in the background, though with reflection one might note that “someone somewhere is in trouble.” As a devotional prayer possibly directed to the laity first as a replacement for the canonical office, the *Angelus* may find its place in the nexus of liturgical and daily life.

Evening Bells for Curfew and for Prayer

The *Angelus* bell has been often associated with the curfew (*couvre-feu*) bell rung at 8:00pm ordering all open flames to be covered until morning. The practice of curfew is found in place in England from the time of King Alfred (849-899) as well as known in Normandy in the 11th century.³⁹ The Norman ordinances of 1055 indicate that the sound of a public signal will be the ringing of the church bell.⁴⁰ Others consider the evening bells to have always had a double usage, both to mark the transition to the monastic office at the end of Compline to the prayer of Matins as well as to mark the curfew. Debate over which really came first is itself a standing question. Surely the prevention of fire was of great concern and became the principle meaning for the laity of this night-time tolling.

³⁹ *Church bells: their uses, their romance and their history* (1903), by Sir W. C. Leng and Co. (“Sheffield Telegraph”) Limited, High Street, Sheffield, p. 38. Accessed December 27, 2014 from the University of California.

⁴⁰ Council of Lisieux, J.-D. Blavignac, *La cloche* (Paris, 1877), p. 69. Cited in Percival Price, *Bells and Man* (1983) Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 119, n. 1.

Some scholars have identified the social benefit of safely being at home by nightfall with the institution of prayer as further incentive and blessing on the practice.⁴¹

However, additional precepts for ringing the bells as well as named bells suggest that the *Angelus* did distinguish itself from the mere curfew bell fairly early on. In England there is the explicit religious intention of the bell from the beginning of the twelfth century when Henry I abolished the curfew law in 1100, to the time of the sixteenth century Reformation when Henry VIII abolished the ringing of the *Angelus* bell.⁴² The 1061 Synod of Caen in Normandy declared that prayer of the *Ave Maria* should accompany the bells of nightfall not only at monasteries but in local parishes as well.⁴³ A bell dated 1234 is found in Helfta with the marking: *Ave Maria Gratia Plena Dominus Tecum*. Similar *Ave Maria* markings are found on the bell of Santo-Domingo de la Palma in Majorca dated to 1308, as well as on a bell in Saalfeld dated 1353 which protests: *Non ego cesso piam sonitu laudare Mariam* (“I do not cease to praise good Mary with my ringing”).⁴⁴

Spirituality of Time and Space Through Hearing

The devotion of the *Angelus* seeks to honor Mary’s role in the Incarnation but also spiritually to imitate her fruitful hearing and acceptance of God’s will. The idea of her *conception per aurem* (“conception through the ear”) was promulgated in especially in England through the texts like the Old Martyrology which reads for March 25: “and on that day St Mary became pregnant in the town of Nazareth through the word of the angel and through the hearing of her ears, like the trees when

⁴¹ Price, p. 119.

⁴² Ibid., p. 37.

⁴³ W. Henry, W. Henry, *Dictionnaire D’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* (1924) vol I:col. 2073.

⁴⁴ Ibid. editorial translation.

they blossom through the blowing of the wind.”⁴⁵ While this phrase came to be a point of derision against the Virgin Mary in later English history, it allows us to see the medieval value for the experience of hearing at the Annunciation and its place in the *Angelus*.

The importance of hearing for the Annunciation can also be reflected in two trends in fourteenth and fifteenth iconography. First, the insertion of a scroll with the words of the Angel and those of Mary emphasizes the power of the words themselves. In some depictions, like Van Eyke’s famous Annunciation (c. 1434/1436) at the National Gallery of Art⁴⁶ here in Washington, the opening words of the Angel and the final response of Mary are superimposed in gold lettering over the scene, as if to summarize the whole dialog. The other iconographic feature to highlight hearing is the prominent inclusion of Mary’s ear, often holding back her long hair and made a point of focus when her posture presents only her profile or three-quarter turn. This emphasis on hearing also depicts Mary bare-headed and as a particularly young woman in her private chamber.

The setting of Mary in her bedroom at evening is further drawn out by the two possible ways to receive sound of the *Angelus*: in waiting or in interruption. Perhaps most particular to monastic life, waiting for the *Angelus* occurs when the schedule to pray follows a known pattern that repeats itself daily. One may consider religious arriving to the refectory for a meal minutes ahead of the *Angelus* bell. The expectation and preparedness form an eloquent silence engaged to receive the sound of the bell. The figure of Mary is somehow both prepared (“full of grace”) and surprised (“how can this be?”). Visual depictions of the Annunciation often include details to imply Mary’s

⁴⁵ Clayton, p. 213-214, his English translation of the Old English found in *Das altenglische Martyrologium*, ed. Kotzor II, 43-4.

⁴⁶ Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.39

interrupted activity which preceded the Angel's arrival such as a prayer book in hand or a spindle for yarn.⁴⁷ She is both totally prepared by virtue of her special graces and freedom from sin, and at the same time alone and quietly occupied at the time of the Angel's arrival.

The second experience of the *Angelus* bells is to be caught off guard by the bells tolling, and to be allowed the freedom to respond or not. While this may be a part of the monastic setting as well, the surprise of the *Angelus* bells as marking time in the midst of work fits particularly well into the life of the laity in the times before private timepieces. The sound of the bells comes upon one suddenly, in an almost invading, penetrating way into the home or the fields. Consider a bell in the distance being heard by a young woman in the intimate setting of a Vermeer interior. There is no external or communitarian obligation to pray; no one will know if one prays it or not. The tolling of the bells in the domestic scene offers the lay faithful a moment of freedom to choose to recite the prayer or to ignore the bell as if one "never really heard it anyway".

Here we can consider the *Angelus* prayer as a Marian devotion which forms a spirituality of imitation of Mary through hearing in time and space. The times come either in the form of communal response to an expectation or of free response to an interruption. The space in which the prayer can be prayed is not only ecclesial that of the daily moment: the kitchen, the alleyway, the shed—or in modern times—the bus, the town loud-speaker, even the television as has been the

⁴⁷ Miles, Laura Saetveit, "Mary's Book: The Annunciation in Medieval England" (2011), Doctoral Dissertation, Yale University. This work provides ample examples of the presence of a book in the depictions of the Annunciation.

tradition on Ireland's state television station, Radio Telefis Eireann, which rings the *Angelus* bells at 6:00pm while showing on the screen an image of the Madonna and Child.⁴⁸

The *Angelus* bell tolling in the distance forged a deeply interior spirituality of memory from hearing which inspired many poets, even famously non-religious ones as well as Protestants. The fifteenth century French author François Villon (1431-1463?) known for the "sarcasm and vulgarity" of his poetry, concludes his *Legacy* with a nostalgic reference to the *Angelus*:⁴⁹

*J'oy la cloche de la Sarbonne
Qui toujours à neuf heures sonne
Le salut que l'ange prédit.*

I hear the bell of the Sarbonne
Which always rings out at the ninth hour
The greeting that the angel announced.

So, too, in Post-Reformation England we find the scientist mystic Thomas Browne (1605-1682) in his *Religio Medici* (1642) confessing that he remakes, but does not ignore the *Angelus* bell:

*I could never heard the Ave Marie Bell without an elevation, or thinke it a sufficient warrant, because they erred in one circumstance, for me to erre in all, that is, in silence and dumbe contempt; whilst therefore they directed their devotions to her, I offered mine to God, and rectified the errors of their prayers by rightly ordering mine owne.*⁵⁰

The interior dimension of ignoring the bell which echoes the voice of Gabriel, recalls the imitation of Mary who received the message and consented to the will of God in her life, that which all Christian believers are called to do in whatever state of life. Even Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) during his time

⁴⁸ Gaffney, Edward McGlynn. "The *Angelus* still has appeal" (1997) originally published in U.S. Catholic, July 1997.

Accessed December 27, 2014. <http://search.proquest.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/docview/225361362?pq-origsite=summon>

⁴⁹ Vitz, Evelyn Birge, "The Liturgy and Vernacular Literature" pp. 503-563, in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church* (2005, 2nd ed.), ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter, Medieval Institute Publications: Kalamazoo, MI, p. 554; text from H. Thurston, "The *Angelus* Bell" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907), Volume I, p. 488; editorial translation.

⁵⁰ Section 3, *Religio Medici* (1642, 1st edition), which includes the following internal note of explanation about the *Angelus*: "A Church Bell that tolls every day at 6. and 12. of the Clocke, at the hearing whereof every one in what place soever either of house or street betakes him to his prayer, which is commonly directed to the *Virgin*."

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/relmed/relmed.html> accessed 3/18/2015; cited by Dr. Gatty and referenced in *Church bells: their uses, their romance and their history* (1903), by Sir W. C. Leng and Co. ("Sheffield Telegraph") Limited, High Street, Sheffield.

living in the Bronx near Fordham University is said to have been moved by the unknown bells which a Jesuit later told him were the bells of the *Angelus*. Poe then composed “The Hymn” (1835)⁵¹ first as a poem sung by one of his characters, and later published under the title “The Catholic Hymn” in 1845, much to his chagrin.

During his solitary confinement in Lubianka, the notorious Soviet prison for political prisoners and intellectuals in the middle of Moscow, Servant of God Fr. Walter Cizek, SJ adapted a routine based on his religious training as a Jesuit to pass the days of his five-year imprisonment. He writes: “I said the *Angelus* morning, noon, and night as the Kremlin clock chimed the hours.”⁵² The penetrating sound of the public bells entered into his prison cell and invited the response of Mary to the Angel entering into her chamber. Through hearing, time and space again replay the dialog and echo the Annunciation, echo the free response of a soul to God, despite the condition of prisoner.

III. “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us”: The Ecclesial Dimension

Finally, this paper applies the spirituality of engaging in the dialog between the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary to a wider sacramental and incarnational ecclesiology. For, the final antiphon, *Verbum caro factum est, [alleluia, alleluia] Et habitavit in nobis, [alleluia]*, taken from the Gospel of John and established by Gregory the Great for the minor hours of the Feast of the

⁵¹ “At morn—at noon—at twilight dim— / Maria! thou hast heard my hymn! / In joy and wo—in good and ill— / Mother of God, be with me still! / When the Hours flew brightly by, / And not a cloud obscured the sky, / My soul, lest it should truant be, / Thy grace did guide to thine and thee; / Now, when storms of Fate o'ercast / Darkly my Present and my Past, / Let my Future radiant shine / With sweet hopes of thee and thine!”

⁵² Cizek, Walter, *With God in Russia* (1964, reprint 1997), Ignatius Press, San Francisco, p. 88.

Nativity,⁵³ recapitulates the whole Christian theology of creation, the fall, the incarnation, the redemption, and the Church in time. The devotion of the *Angelus* forges a place for contemplation of the great mysteries of the faith in rhythm of common life—mixing the functional curfew bell with a moment of prayer and pardon promoted by the Franciscans and sanctioned by the Popes.

The prompt application of indulgences for the praying of the *Angelus* which emerged in the fourteenth century⁵⁴ tied all those who pray it to the Church of Rome and the life of the sacraments. For this express reason in England Henry VIII abolished the ringing of bells in his Injunctions issued in 1538:⁵⁵

That the knolling of the Aves after service and certain other times, which hath been brought in and begun by the pretence of the Bishop of Rome's pardon, henceforth be left and omitted, lest the people do hereafter trust to have pardon for the saying of their Aves between the said knolling, as they have done in times past.

However, in many places of Northumbria and particularly in Lincoln, the old habit of ringing the bells could not be extinguished.⁵⁶ Very likely, even in places where it had been, pious people continued to apply the old devotion privately to the merely secular bells as we have seen in previous examples.

Since the sixteenth century, the popes have continued to maintain the indulgences and further promote the devotion. We find the prayer in significant Counter-Reformation prayer books like the 1570 devotional issued by Pius V as well as the widely distributed *Manuale catholicorum*

⁵³ PL 78, 736B and 736D

⁵⁴ Clement V in 1314, and John XXII in 1317 and 1318. *Chronicon Linaelaceuse*, in-4, Stadt am Hof, 1748, p. 166, 170. Cited by W. Henry, *Dict. Achaer. Chret. et Litur.* Vol. 1: col. 2071.

⁵⁵ *Church bells: their uses, their romance and their history* (1903), by Sir W. C. Leng and Co. ("Sheffiled Telegraph") Limited, High Street, Sheffield, p. 37. Accessed December 27, 2014 from the University of California.

⁵⁶ Leng, p. 38 "For centuries it has continued to toll "the knell of parting day," and as an old writer has said of it, "few who have been accustomed to its sound would not feel, were it hushed, that a soothing sentiment had been taken out of their lives."

published by Peter Canisius, SJ in Anvers in 1588.⁵⁷ In 1724, Benedict XIII grants 100 day indulgence each time it is prayed and one plenary indulgence a month for those who pray it on their knees at morning, noon and night at the tolling of the bells.⁵⁸ Benedict XIV established as a universal observance the substitution of the *Regina coeli laetare* for the *Angelus* during the Easter season.⁵⁹ In 1815 Pius VII added the three *Glory Be's* at the close of the prayer in honor of the graces bestowed upon the Virgin Mary by the Trinity.⁶⁰

In response to the modern conditions of public life, factories, and mass communication, popes have continued to encourage the prayer of the *Angelus*. At the end of the nineteenth century Leo XIII adapted the instruction for the contemporary conditions of the workplace: not only in fields but in factories as well.⁶¹ Pope John XXIII established a new tradition on February 11, 1959 of praying the Sunday *Angelus* with the people in St Peter's Square and then delivering a short message and offering personal words of greetings to the pilgrims gathered in Rome. In the 1974 Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul VI recognized the perennial value of the *Angelus* prayer⁶² because of its essential characteristics which he names as "its simple structure, its biblical character, its historical origin which links it to the prayer for peace and safety, and its quasi-liturgical rhythm which sanctifies different moments during the day, and because it reminds us of the Paschal Mystery,

⁵⁷ Henry, W.; *Dict. Arche. Chret. et Litur.*, Vol I, col. 2077.

⁵⁸ *Iniunctae nobis* (September 14, 1724).

⁵⁹ Royo Marin, p. 494, established on April 20, 1742.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Leo XIII, decree of March 15, 1884.

⁶² "The *Angelus* does not need to be revised, because of its simple structure, its biblical character, its historical origin which links it to the prayer for peace and safety, and its quasi-liturgical rhythm which sanctifies different moments during the day, and because it reminds us of the Paschal Mystery, in which recalling the Incarnation of the Son of God we pray that we may be led "through his passion and cross to the glory of his resurrection." (109) These factors ensure that the *Angelus* despite the passing of centuries retains an unaltered value and an intact freshness." *Marialis Cultus* (1974), Pope Paul VI.

in which recalling the Incarnation of the Son of God we pray that we may be led ‘through his passion and cross to the glory of his resurrection.’”⁶³

The “Gratiam Tuam,” the Eucharist, and the Annunciation

The addition the *Gratiam Tuam* as the closing prayer of the *Angelus* leaves us with the most clear evidence for the incarnational and sacramental dimension of the devotion. This text is an ancient liturgical text found as the collect for the 4th Sunday of Advent and subsequently used as post-communion prayer of the Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 25. The prayer links the message of the Angel to the Incarnation and subsequently redemptive suffering of Christ in the flesh and final resurrection. Recalling the singular moment of the Annunciation leads the one at prayer through the full paschal cycle at the heart of Christianity.

Conclusion: Echoes of the Annunciation

The role of the *Angelus* as an “echo of the Annunciation” has been one of promoting lay spirituality and deepening contemplation on the Incarnation of Christ through the eyes of Mary. We conclude with two influential passages of St Bernard of Clairvaux, the “troubadour of Mary”, who so much shaped the rise of medieval Marian devotion in the West.

Adding to the phrase closing phrase of the Annunciation narrative, *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*, Bernard places Mary’s *fiat* through hearing in the context of the progressive revelation throughout the Old Testament⁶⁴ as described in the opening lines of the Letter to the Hebrews:⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid.

Of old God has often spoken variously in many ways to our fathers through the prophets: and it is to be recalled that the Word of the Lord was made by some in the ear, by others by the mouth, and also by others in the hand; for may it be done me also by the mouth, in order that your Word may be thus [made] close by in my womb.

To apply this line of thought to the actual experience of the Incarnation itself, Bernard⁶⁶ puts words from the First Letter of John⁶⁷ on Mary's lips now offsetting the hearing with all the other senses due to her as mother. The imagination of the one who prays the *Angelus* also follows Mary to contemplate with her this petition:

Fiat mihi non tantum audibile auribus, sed et visibile oculis, palpabile manibus, gestabile humeris.

Let it be done to me not only by that what is audible to my ears, but also by what is visible to my eyes, what is palpable to my hands, and what can be borne by my arms.

⁶⁴ *Homiliae super 'Missus est'*; hom. : 4, par. : 11, vol. : 4, pag. : 57, line : 18. *Porro multifariam multis que modis olim Deus locutus est Patribus in Prophetis: et aliis quidem in aure, aliis in ore, aliis etiam in manu factum esse verbum Domini memoratur; mihi autem oro, ut et in utero fiat iuxta verbum tuum.*

⁶⁵ Hebrews 1:1-2 (1) *Multifariam et multis modis olim Deus locutus patribus in prophetis, (2) in novissimis his diebus locutus est nobis in Filio, quem constituit heredem universorum, per quem fecit et saecula;*

⁶⁶ *Homiliae super 'Missus est'*; hom. : 4, par. : 11, vol. : 4, pag. : 57, line : 10.

⁶⁷ 1 John 1:1-3 (1) *Quod fuit ab initio, quod audi vimus, quod vidimus oculis no stris, quod perspeximus, et manus nostrae contrectaverunt de verbo vitae (2) — et vita apparuit, et vidimus et testamur et annuntiamus vobis vitam aeternam, quae erat coram Patre et apparuit nobis — (3) quod vidimus et audivimus, annuntiamus et vobis, ut et vos communionem habeatis nobiscum. Communio autem nostra est cum Patre et cum Filio eius Iesu Christo.* “(1) What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life - (2) for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us - (3) what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

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