
“AFTER¹ ANNUNCIATION” BY MADELEINE L’ENGLÉ

L’Engle, Madeleine. *The Ordering of Love* (Writers' Palette Book) (p. 343). Originally in her collection *The Weather of the Heart* (1978). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

This² is the irrational³ season
When love blooms⁴ bright⁵ and wild.⁶
Had Mary been filled with reason
There’d have been no room for the child.

¹ It is curious that L’Engle uses this preposition, rather than, say, “before”. What it suggests to me is that Mary was set free to be “bright and wild” *after* she had given her consent to the Archangel Gabriel.

² “This” – It is unclear which “this” she means.

³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**irrational**” – “Contrary to or not in accordance with reason; unreasonable, utterly illogical, absurd.” It also means, “A being not endowed with reason; one not guided by reason.”

⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to bloom**” – “*figurative and transferred*. To come into full beauty; to be in fresh beauty and vigour; to flourish.” Her use of this verb suggests that the “This” – the first word of the poem” – means **Springtime**, when the Earth “blooms” after a long Winter. The annual feast of the Annunciation is on March 25th (nine months before December 25th). Further, to associate LOVE with BLOOMING is interesting, because none of us can explain the Mystery of Growth – “the seed growing secretly ... we know not how.” In this regard, LOVE is irrational in the sense that, like growth, we cannot explain how LIFE does this. What we humans do have the power to do: we can destroy life, wreck the ability of something to grow ... like love.

⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**bright**” – “Of a day or part of a day, the weather, etc.: characterized by plenty of light, esp. sunshine. Of a season, climate, etc.: characterized by fair or sunny weather.” But it also means, “Of a person, place, abstract thing, etc.: full of, radiating, or characterized by goodness, glory, honour, distinction, etc.; excellent, sublime; glorious, splendid; brilliant, illustrious.” But it also means, “Of a person: that displays a cheerful, companionable, or animated personality or demeanour; friendly; vivacious; upbeat.”

⁶ “**bright and wild**” – What is interesting to me is that “bright” as an adjective can be contrasted with “dark” or “dull”. But “bright” is an adjective a teacher may apply to *an especially intelligent (rational) student*: “She is bright.”

THE PROBLEM OF THE WORD “IRRATIONAL”

Notice how the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “**irrational**”, in a way distorted by the Enlightenment.

The “irrational” is a very unfriendly way of speaking about the “intelligence” of the *affects* – Blaise Pascal’s famous insistence: “the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.”

What seems “irrational” to one person – acting “without reason” – could mean that this person had chosen **to act according to the hidden reason of Another**.

But most importantly, LOVE causes people to act, completely clear and confident about what they are choosing, though not able to explain it ... except to say that “I followed what LOVE directed me to do.” Consider the dramatic instance of a parent choosing, irrationally, to go out in front of an oncoming speeding car to grab his or her child from harm.

“Such [Enlightenment] Christians, however, sometimes fail to reckon with the further and deeper implications of their rejection of God’s continuing presence and power in creation, which touch on essential elements of the Creed. **With the explicit denial of the miraculous comes as well an implicit rejection of convictions for which centuries of believers lived and died—convictions concerning precisely extraordinary manifestations of God’s presence and power (Johnson 2003)....** If it is impossible for God’s Word to be visibly present in the world today, for example, then neither can the Word have been made flesh in the person of Jesus, and any talk about the incarnation becomes nonsense (Hick 1977). If Jesus is not raised from the dead and exalted to God’s right hand, to become the life-giving Spirit that transforms the lives of believers, then, as Paul declares, Christian faith is empty and hope of a future resurrection is foolish (1 Cor. 15:19). Note how directly Paul connects the general conviction concerning God’s capacity to act in the world (the resurrection of the dead) with the specific claim as to how God acted in the world in Christ (his resurrection from the dead).”⁷

“The forms of Christianity that suppress or deny the miraculous are consequently deracinated,⁸ cut off not only from the testimony of Scripture, but also from the Creed and from centuries of living testimony given by the saints. Small wonder that Christianity so defined sometimes appears to be little more than a place for moral uplift and social improvement, lacking both a firm grasp on the good news of Scripture and a generous vision of

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Miracles: God’s Presence and Power in Creation*, ed. Samuel E. Balentine, First edition., Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 22.

⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**deracinate**” – “*transitive*. To pluck or tear up by the roots; to uproot, eradicate, exterminate. *literal* and *figurative*.”

God's power in the present. **Having staked its future on a form of rationality that increasingly seems inadequate to life's genuine mysteries, such Christianity drifts, passionless and pointless, sustained mainly by institutional inertia and residual loyalty among its adherents.** Before turning to some of the specific ways in which the miraculous is a problematic category for such Christians, it may be helpful to devote a little more attention to the reasons why the denial of the miraculous has taken such hold among them.”⁹

From an essay I wrote on Augustine's *de Virginitate* while studying at the Patristic Institute in Rome from June 1989 to June 1990:

In Part I (I.1—XXX.30), I will argue that Augustine's main purpose is to talk about the nature of “*personal* relationship.” He will teach a *higher* kind of “kinship” that has nothing to do with normal societal, “blood” kinship, **but everything to do with human freedom under the impulse of love.**

In short, for the Old Testament parents, marriage and its fruitfulness were based not on their human relationship to each other (*corporaliter*) but on their relationship together toward Christ (*spiritaliter*) through obedience. Augustine, precisely in the most obvious and basic of human communities—marriage—*prima itaque naturalis humanae societatis copula vir et uxor est*¹⁰—is proposing a radical restructuring of meaning.

What Augustine is driving at is that any relationship that is merely by “blood” (*corporaliter*) is really no relationship worth mentioning; it is pre-human. Thus, in the Scripture text Augustine sees Jesus giving it no notice whatever. Only when a relationship becomes an act of personal freedom by which one chooses to live “for the sake of” another through obedience or love —*perchè chiunque fa la volontà del Padre mio*—does it become a genuine relationship (*spiritaliter*).

It is exactly along these lines that Augustine goes on to explain just where the excellence of Mary lay. That is, Augustine will argue that Mary, who of any human that ever lived could claim the closest possible human closeness to Jesus—his very mother—was most profoundly related to Jesus **not** through her womb (*corporaliter*) but **through her prior choice** for perpetual virginity “for the sake of” God through love (*spiritaliter*)—*sic et materna propinquitas nihil Mariae profuisset, nisi felicius Christum corde quam carne gestasset.* (III.3) So, Mary was “mother of Christ” (*spiritaliter*) long before she was “mother” (*corporaliter*). In the same way the Old Testament parents' offspring were

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Miracles: God's Presence and Power in Creation*, ed. Samuel E. Balentine, First edition., Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 23.

¹⁰*De bono coniugali* I.1

“prophetic” (the future Body of Christ, the Church);¹¹ in the same way holy virgins of Christ can be “mothers.” At no point in his tract is Augustine clearer on this point of relationship *according to the spirit*. More closely, then, what does Augustine say?

This vow was Mary's extravagant (counter-cultural!¹²) act of personal freedom in love to live only “for the sake of” God:

virginitatem deo dicavit, cum adhuc quid esset conceptura nesciret, ut in terreno mortalique corpore caelestis vitae imitatio voto fieret, non praecepto, amore eligendi, non necessitate serviendi. (IV.4)

So, instead of choosing to **enable** His birth by a miracle, God instead chooses to **confirm** the “miracle” of Mary's *amore eligendi* by taking it a step further: making her virginity perpetual. In short: what was valuable in **Mary's virginity had nothing to do with biological integrity but everything to do with her love drawing her freedom to choose God whole-heartedly**—*nisi felicius Christum corde quam carne gestasset*. (III.3)¹³ In this way, Mary stands as the perfect model of all holy virgins, be it the Church or individual persons in it.

¹¹*De bono viduitatis* VII.10: *cum ipse populus ea... nihil aliud esset quam propheta Christi, ex quo nasceretur etiam caro Christi*.

¹²See Peter Brown, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church," in vol. 16 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, edited by Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 427-43. An excellent, valuable perspective.

¹³See also at VIII.8 and *De bono coniugali* XXI.25.