

## Symbolism in the Annunciation Shrine Glass Sculpture



In the Scripture narrative of the Annunciation found in Luke 1:26-38, the young maiden, Mary of Nazareth, is suddenly approached by a being of light, the Archangel Gabriel, sent to her with a message from God. Gabriel greets Mary and acknowledges her holy state—“full of grace.” He tells her not to fear, that the LORD has found favor with her, that she is to bear a son, the Savior long awaited by her people, the Hebrew nation. Mary’s first words are logical. She asks the angel, “how can this be since I do not know man?” Gabriel just as logically explains how this is all to take place. He tells the young Virgin that the Holy Spirit of God will overshadow her, that she will conceive in her womb, that therefore the Child will be holy, and will be called the Son of God.

### Encircled by the Cloud

Throughout the Old and the New Testament God spoke to his people from within a dense, surrounding cloud. In the

Sinai desert, God led the Israelites through with a Pillar of Cloud by day (Exodus 13:21), spoke with Moses from within the cloud atop Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20:21, Exodus 24:15-16), and made his presence known to them within the Tent of Meeting while a dense cloud filled that place (Exodus 33:9,10a, Exodus 40:34-35). At the Lord’s Baptism God spoke from within a cloud (Matthew 3:17; Luke 3:21-22). At the Transfiguration a cloud enveloped the three Apostles, revealing Moses and Elijah with the Lord (Mark 9:7). The cloud is the place from whence God alone may speak his Word.

Mary is depicted in a moment outside of time, an eternal, cosmic moment. The cloud-like imagery encircling her alludes to this same phenomenon—God speaking to us, his people, from within the cloud as Mary, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, conceives the Lord of Life, the Lord of the Cosmos, within her spotless womb.

## **Womb**

The Womb of the Virgin is symbolized by a swirling nebula—a majestic and truly wondrous thing—named after the Latin word for “cloud.” Here, the God of the Universe crosses the threshold of time to become the God-Man.

## **Gabriel**

To the right is the Angel Gabriel, messenger of God, seen as a being of light. He is depicted both in subtlety and power: subtlety because it is the message he bears, not his own presence, which are central in this moment. And power because, as God’s own messenger, the light that fills and forms his being is the very Light of God. The name “Gabriel” means “God is my strength.”

## **Lily**

In his hand Gabriel bears a single lily, gift from the Holy Spirit to the Blessed Virgin, God’s Holy Spouse. This lily, a beautiful, earthly thing, held in the hand of the angel, an other-worldly being, is like a symbol of the miraculous that is about to take place, as Heaven and Earth, Human and Divine, are oned in Mary’s womb.

## **Mary, “Ark of the Covenant”**

Because of her centrality in Salvation History, Mary is sometimes referred to as “Ark of the Covenant,” meaning that it is through her that God effected the fulfillment of his Covenant of Salvation with his people.

In Exodus, God gives explicit directions for building the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:10a-22). He tells them the size and shape of the ark, what materials to use. He tells them to fashion angels to either side of the Ark, two cherubim, whose wings are to be upstretched, overshadowing the Ark (Exodus 25:18-20). He then tells them to build a “Mercy seat” in the middle between the angels (Exodus 25:17a,21a). It is from this place that God tells them that he will speak to his people (Exodus 25:22b).

On the two front pieces of glass there’s an upward rising movement. This imagery recalls the wings of the two cherubim which God said to place at either side of the Ark of the Covenant. Between them, in the area where God said to build the Mercy Seat from where he would speak to them, is found the symbol of the Virgin’s Womb, from where God speaks the Word made Flesh to mankind in his only Son, the Lord Jesus, incarnate in Mary’s womb.

## **Droplets of Rain / Open Golden Circle / Three Descending Gold Shapes**

Subtly piercing through the clouds above the Virgin are small droplets of rain, symbolizing a passage from Isaiah “Let the clouds rain down the Just One, and the earth bring forth a Savior” (Isaiah 45:8). Uttering her “FIAT,” the Creator of the cosmos, her Maker and her Husband (Isaiah 54:5) is rained down from the heavens and dwells in safety within her.

The circle of gold alludes to a “halo,” an aura of holiness. It is open at the top, symbolizing her openness to the Holy Spirit of God.

The three descending gold shapes symbolize the Triune God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The sweep of Mary’s garment evidences the presence of the “Ruah”—the Holy Spirit, the Breath of Life, coming upon her from above as she stands in still reverence to this most sacred moment of Incarnation. Her posture speaks of inner humility, dignity, composure. Her centrality in the work, a symbol of her centrality in Salvation History.

## **Mary’s Feet**

While Moses was tending to his father-in laws’ flock at Horeb, suddenly he witnessed a bush that was on fire but was not being consumed. As he approached the bush he heard a voice, the Voice of God, saying “remove the sandals from your feet for the ground on which you stand is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). Alluding to this scripture passage, the bare feet of the Virgin symbolize the “Sacred Ground” on which she also is standing in this moment.

## **The Twelve Gold Stars**

“A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun...and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child...” (Revelation 12:1-2a).

### *Note from the artist:*

*I am grateful and indebted to both the donors of the Shrine of the Annunciation, and to the Catholic Community of St. Thomas More for giving me the opportunity to create this work. May it be a place of prayer for many for years to come.*

*Ad Major Dei Gloriam.*

*Claire M. Wing*

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