

{cimovie}Theotok.flv|Title|theotok.jpg{/cimovie}

What makes a modest village like Nazareth a reference point for Christians? In Jesus' time, Nazareth was but a group of houses wedged between the mountains of Galilee, in the north of Israel. By God's will, this small village became one of the most important places for the fulfillment of salvation.

In this town, lived a humble woman called Mary, betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, from whom -- according to God's promises to the prophets -- the Messiah would come, a Savior who would deliver man from the slavery of sin. More than 2 thousand years ago, God sent the Archangel Gabriel to proclaim the good news to Mary: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High." To these words, Mary answered: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

In this manner, the Savior who had been announced by the prophets descended to earth and was incarnated in the womb of a woman, the Virgin Mary. Thus, Nazareth would not only witness the annunciation of the Angel to the Virgin Mary and the incarnation of the Son of God, but also see Jesus grow under the guidance of his parents, Mary and Joseph.

We know from different historical sources that during the first centuries of Christianity, Nazareth -- more precisely the house where the Angel came to Mary -- became a place of worship for the faithful. Nevertheless, since the 8th century, the small village suffered several attacks, and its shrine was destroyed and rebuilt many times. The current Basilica of the Annunciation was built between 1960 and 1969 on the site of former churches, which in turn were built upon the grotto that has been identified as the place of the annunciation.

Though a constant presence, as the centuries went by, the number of Christians in the village decreased considerably. Currently Nazareth, which has become the administrative center of Galilee, has approximately 72,000 inhabitants, 40% of whom are Christians.

In 1964, during the construction of the basilica -- the biggest among the churches of the Middle East -- Paul VI visited and consecrated the basilica, which was only inaugurated in 1969 by Cardinal Garrone. During his visit, the Pope compared the house of Nazareth to a school, "the School of the Gospel," where "we learn to observe, to listen, to meditate and to penetrate the profound and mysterious meaning of that simple, humble and lovely manifestation of the Son of God."

On March 25th, 2000, the Year of the Great Jubilee, John Paul II celebrated Mass in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. At the beginning of his homily, he said "I have longed to come back to the town of Jesus, to feel once again, in contact with this place, the presence of the woman of whom Saint Augustine wrote: "He chose the mother he had created; he created the mother he had chosen" (Sermo 69, 3, 4). Here it is especially easy to understand why all generations call Mary blessed (cf. Lk 2:48)." The Pope ended his speech by consecrating all the families of the world to "Mary, the Theotókos, the great Mother of God."

The basilica is composed of two churches one above the other and interconnected: the upper

and the lower church. Mary has a privileged place in the upper church: in the mosaic in the apse, she is depicted sitting down as a queen. The walls are also decorated with images of the Blessed Virgin. In the lower Church, attention turns to the grotto hollowed out from the ground, where the remains of Mary's modest house are found; it is venerated as the place where Mary said "YES" to God's plan for her, and where the Son of God took on our human nature. The altar bears the inscription "Verbum caro hic factum est," that is "Here the Word was made flesh."

Prayer:

*"To Mary, the Theotókos, the great Mother of God, I consecrate the families of the Holy Land, the families of the world.
In Nazareth where Jesus began his public ministry, I ask Mary to help the Church everywhere to preach the 'good news' to the poor, as He did. In this 'year of the Lord's favour',
I ask her to teach us
the way of humble and joyful obedience to the Gospel
in the service of our brothers and sisters,
without preferences and without prejudices."*