

Who are You, *Kecharitoméne*? You are the Immaculate Mediatrix of All Graces

by Fr. Giacinto Marie Dagesse

“Hail, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.”

— Lk 1:28

“In the divine plan of
creation man was to have
had the purity and beauty
of the Immaculate Virgin.”

— Benedict XVI, 15 August 2009

INTRODUCTION

Full of grace: the Greek reads *Kecharitoméne*. Used only once in all of Scripture in Luke 1:28, *Kecharitoméne* is as unique in all of revelation as the Immaculate is in all of creation. Even Origen, who knew the Bible inside and out, wondered at its singularity (cf. *In Lucam* 6:7). The term touches upon the very identity of the Immaculate, both revealing and veiling the mystery of her whom St. Maximilian continually and lovingly contemplated: Who are you, O Immaculate Conception? We now take up this question, beginning with its scriptural root: Who are you, *Kecharitoméne*?

This heavenly title is the scriptural foundation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. “When the Fathers and writers of the Church meditated on the fact that the most Blessed Virgin was, in the name and by order of God himself, proclaimed full of grace by the Angel Gabriel when he announced her most sublime dignity of Mother of God, they thought that this singular and solemn salutation, never heard before, showed that the

The following word study of the Greek term *Kecharitoméne*—“full of grace” (Lk 1:28)—not only brings to a scriptural light the truth of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, but also reveals the Immaculate as the Mediatrix of All Graces.

Mother of God is the seat of all divine graces and is adorned with all gifts of the Holy Spirit. To them Mary is an almost infinite treasury, an inexhaustible abyss of these gifts, to such an extent that she was never subject to the curse and was, together with her Son, the only partaker of perpetual benediction” (Bl. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*).

Part I of our study confirms this association of *Kecharitoméne* and the Immaculate Conception. Part II examines the Old and New Testament parallels of *Kecharitoméne* and establishes a new correlation with Our Lady as Mediatrix of All Graces. St. Jerome makes this very connection, as he writes, “And it is well said, *Full of grace*, for to others, grace comes in part; but the fullness of grace in complete treasure was infused into Mary. She truly is *full of grace* through whom has been poured forth upon every creature the abundant rain of the Holy Spirit” (*Serm. de Assump. B.V.*).

METHOD

The spiritual sense of Sacred Scripture regards “not only the text of Scripture, but also the realities and events about which it speaks [as] signs.”¹ This means that the literal people, places, and things of the Bible possess an innate potential to point to realities beyond themselves. Such latent power is one reason why the Word of God is likened to a seed.

As a general rule, we can define the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, as the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when

read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the Paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. This context truly exists. In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is, therefore, quite acceptable to re-read the Scriptures in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit.²

The early Church Fathers readily tapped into this spiritual sense via a kind of connaturality with the Word of God, the Greek language, and the gift of a prodigious memory. We, on the other hand, standing afar off in many ways, approach this spiritual knowledge most swiftly, securely, and beautifully through imitation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, pondering the Word precisely as she did.

The first step of this Marian method is a “keeping together” of the Word.³ Every occurrence of the word of study is gathered up from the Greek of the Septuagint and New Testament. For example, if we find that a given word occurs X number of times in the Bible, then all of these passages are compiled, “kept together,” as it were.

The second step is “to cast together” this particular term with others related to it.⁴ That is, associations are formed between it and others found to be prevalent within its immediate context. In this way, etymological

1 CCC117.

2 Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1993 n. 85.

3 cf. *suntereo*, Luke 2:19.

4 cf. *sumballo*, Luke 2:19



Inmaculada Concepción, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, 1665-1675, Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain

trends are discovered. For example, two correlations of *Kecharitoméne* are observed to be “immaculate” and “predestination.” Several such associations, interwoven together, come to form a scriptural mosaic—a truly “new context”—and help bring into relief the spiritual sense of the passage.

The third and final step of this Marian method is a “keeping through” of the Word of God in faith.⁵ In this

5 cf. *diaterreo*, Luke 2:51.

step, the scripture passage is “re-read in the light of this new context.” At times this may require abandoning preconceived notions in order to reform them according to newly acquired insights. Withal, despite experiencing an initial obscurity, the path indicated by the prior steps is adhered to and faithfully followed. Thus, do we endeavor to allow the Word of God to be revealed, fully magnified, such that every word might contribute to and

accord with the final interpretation. The indispensable principles to be followed here, to be sure, are prayer, reverence, discovery and wonder. All understanding is a gift from God.

By way of illustration, we may envision the spiritual sense as being circumscribed, as it were, by each distinct word of the passage. As each word on this perimeter becomes more fully “opened” or revealed by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we come to glimpse in part, and ultimately to behold in full, the radiant center, which is this spiritual sense. Such is the nature of the Word of God. Received by the finite intellect as diverse rays of light in its words and concepts, these stream forth from the one, true Light: the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ.⁶

WORD STUDY

I. *Kecharitoméne* and the Immaculate Conception

Kecharitoméne is a verb, a perfect (or past) participle. As such, it indicates an action “perfectly” completed. Thus, the grace that *Kecharitoméne* signifies must have already been bestowed on Mary at the time of the Archangel’s greeting. This is an extremely important doctrinal point. St. Gabriel cannot here be referring to the grace of the Divine Maternity, as this grace is completed or “perfected” only with Her consent. Only with Her *Fiat* does the Immaculate become the Mother of God. And so, then, we must ask, what grace does the Archangel Gabriel attribute to Mary, a grace previously—and “perfectly”—accomplished?

KECHARITOMÉNE:

A PERSONAL AND “ACTUAL” NAME

6 This method should typically result in what we may call a *convergence of witnesses*, that is, recurring and intersecting themes from disparate words (i.e., various points on the perimeter), all of which inexorably converge upon the same spiritual sense. Like road signs, these provide some confirmation that the interpretation we are following is indeed authentic.

First, we note that the form of greeting, curiously, is neither a noun nor an adjective. Rather, a verb serves as the personal address of her name or title. The Archangel, sent and inspired by God with this greeting, had no better way of identifying the Immaculate than with the dynamism of action. Such is the angelic intuition of her essence. Moreover, "it is God himself who, through his angel as intermediary, greets Mary" (CCC 2676). Mary's very being is identified by act, and nothing less than a divine act. She is most beautifully named, from and by Heaven, as she who has been "fully graced."

In light of this, we come to understand more clearly the words of Our Lady at Lourdes: "I am the Immaculate Conception." For here again Mary's person is identified by an act: She is a conception, the Immaculate Conception. Now, conception indicates a beginning or origin. It is the very movement from potency to act realized. And so, fully in accord with the mind of the Church, we may rightly associate these two personal and actual identifications: *Kecharitoméne* and the Immaculate Conception.

KECHARITOMÉNE AND ETERNAL PREDESTINATION

Another similarity of the terms *Kecharitoméne* and "conception" plunges us into the tremendous mystery of predestination. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines "conceive" as "to hold in the mind, or form an idea of something." Our Lady as the Immaculate Conception was held, so to speak, in the mind of God from all eternity. The Church teaches: "God, by one and the same decree, had established the origin of Mary and the Incarnation of Divine Wisdom" (Bl. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*). This "origin" of Mary surely refers to her Immaculate Conception. Moreover, from the scriptural perspective, the Church also teaches: "As full of grace She has been eternally present in the mystery

of Christ" (St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 19). Yet again, a theological convergence of the Immaculate Conception and *Kecharitoméne* is evident.

II. *Kecharitoméne* and the Mediatrix of All Graces

KECHARITOMÉNO IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The closest parallel in all of Sacred Scripture to the Virgin's title "full of grace" occurs in the Book of Sirach (18:17).

¹⁵ My son, blemish not thy good deeds, neither use uncomfortable words when thou givest any thing.

¹⁶ Shall not the dew assuage the heat? so is a word better than a gift.

¹⁷ Lo, is not a word better than a gift? but both are with a gracious [*kecharitoméno*] man.

First, it should be noted that the context is an exhortation to be without blemish: that is, how one ought to be immaculate in good deeds. Next, St. John Chrysostom explains for us how a word may excel a gift, insofar as one's words become the gift: "For it is possible even with words to give alms" (*Homily 51, Comm. Mt 15:1*). Last, let us consider that the *gracious man* prefigured here is a type of Jesus Christ, *full of grace and truth*: He who is Himself Gift and Word. The passage in comparing "word" with "gift," contrasts that which is spoken versus that which is given. Yet both find an ultimate unity only in the "gracious (*kecharitoméno*) man," Jesus Christ, in whom Word is Gift and Gift is Word.

From the Old Testament let us now return to the New, to the Annunciation, with a broadened perspective of the term "full of grace." The Blessed Virgin Mary, as *Kecharitoméne* (*fully-graced*), is now understood to have been blessed with the same unity of word and gift as her Son. By way of illustration, we need only look to the following scene of the Visitation, as St. Elizabeth cries out: *As soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for*

joy (Lk 1:44). The very word of Mary's greeting has become gift, the gift of sanctifying grace for St. John the Baptist: for the Word Incarnate in her womb has now also become *her* word, and grace is conceived thereby.⁷ In this light, we see how at the Incarnation the Divine Word became as a creature, and the word of a creature became as though divine.

ECHARITOTSEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

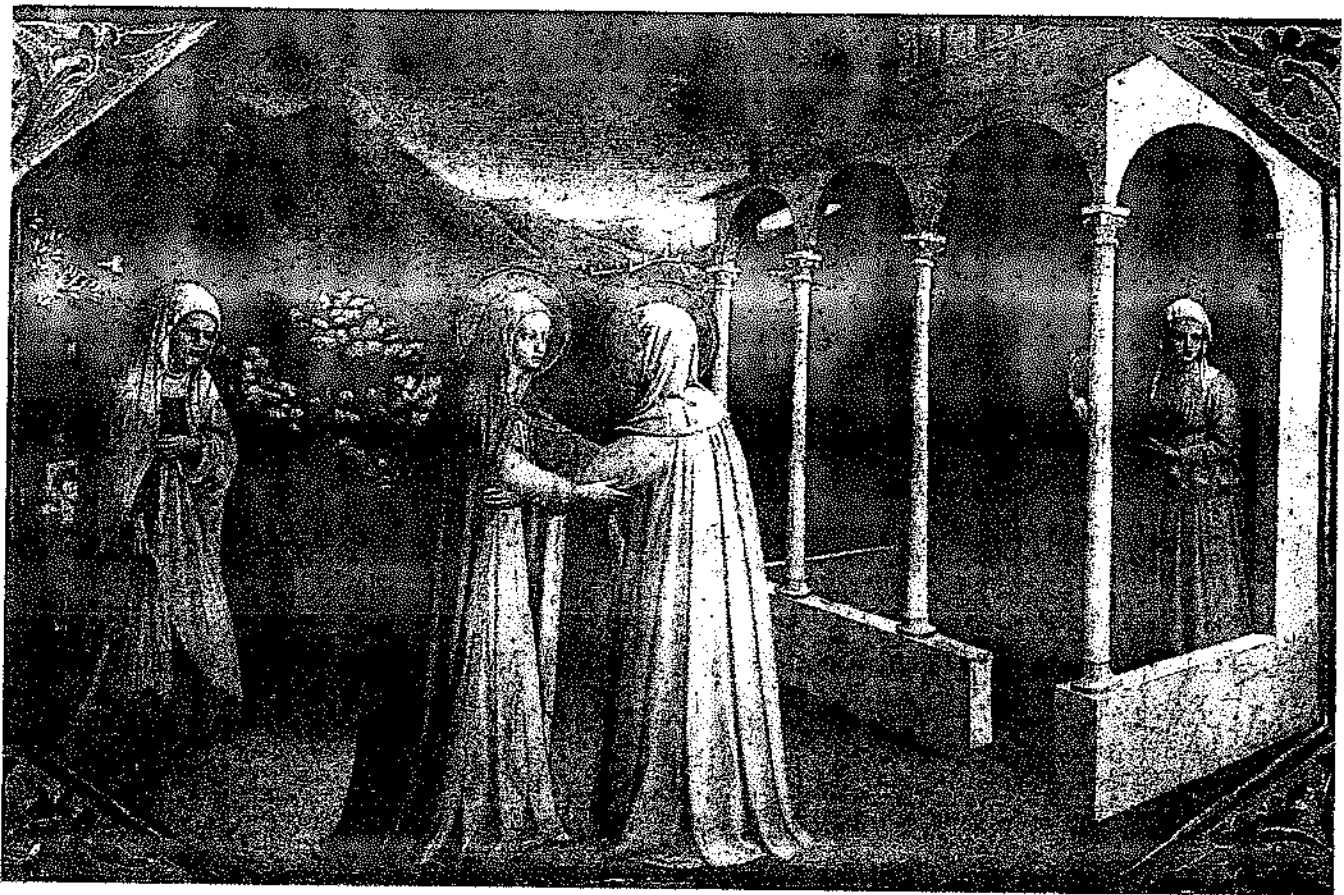
The closest parallel of *Kecharitoméne* as a verb occurs in Ephesians 1:6.

⁴ As He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and unspotted in His sight in charity. ⁵ Who hath predestinated us unto the adoption of children through Jesus Christ unto Himself: according to the purpose of His will: ⁶ Unto the praise of the glory of His grace, in which He hath graced [*echaritosen*] us, in His beloved Son.

Again, like the passage above from Sirach, the immediate context pertains to being "without blemish" (v. 4), which is simply another way of saying "immaculate." And again, like the magisterial teachings cited above, Ephesians here concerns the predestination of man. And so, in this one passage of Scripture we discover two significant and recurring associations: namely, being "immaculate" and predestination. What's going on here?

In order to discover a fuller sense of *echaritosen* in verse 6, we would do well first to look to the architecture of the passage. There exists in Ephesians 1, a remarkably strong parallel between vv. 4-6 and vv. 11-12. And the most important correlation to focus on is that the "has graced" (*echaritosen*) of v. 6 corresponds to—and

⁷ "St. Justin Martyr, in his dialogue with Trypho, uses a striking expression; he tells us that Mary, receiving the message of the angel, conceived 'faith and joy' (100, 5: PG 6, 710). In the Mother of Jesus, faith demonstrated its fruitfulness" (*Lumen fidei*, 58).



The Visitation, Fra Angelico, 1430-1432, Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain

may therefore reasonably be qualified by—the “before hoped” (*proelpizō*) of v. 12.

Before proceeding further, it seems opportune to review what has been said thus far regarding the dimensions of the word *Kecharitoméne*. Both the Old Testament and New Testament parallels point to the notion of being “without blemish” (Sir 18:15 and Eph 1:4). The Old Testament furnishes us with a Christological perspective, “the gracious man” of Sirach, in whom gift unites with word. Then, this same union of grace and word was seen in the person of the Mother of God during the Visitation, through her word of greeting and the consequent sanctification of St. John the Baptist. Now, in the New Testament, in Ephesians, the focus becomes the Christian and on how Christ *has graced us*. And, finally, our present conclusion is—given the parallel structure of

Ephesians 1—that Christ *has graced us* precisely with a *prevenient* (preceding or coming before) hope, namely, the “before hope” (*proelpizō*) of Ephesians 1:12. Such has been our inquiry of *Kecharitoméne* thus far.

But now what can be said of this *prevenient* hope? What does it mean for the Christian to “hope before”? The word *proelpizō* itself remains enigmatic, insofar as it occurs only in Ephesians and nowhere else in Sacred Scripture. Still, help may be afforded by a concordant verse in Colossians 1:5. The two passages are placed side-by-side in the following inset:

... we who **before hoped** in Christ. In whom you also, **after you had heard the word of truth** (the gospel of your salvation).

EPH 1:12-13

Both passages evidence five concordances: to *hope*, to *hear*, *word*, *truth* and *gospel*. And these, moreover, all occur in the same sequence. The

only difference between them is that whereas Ephesians speaks of a “before hoped,” Colossians speaks of a “before heard” (*proakouō*). And this *prevenient* hearing, akin to its counterpart, occurs but once in all of Sacred Scripture. And so, our investigation of *Kecharitoméne*, itself an absolutely unique verb, has yielded two other absolutely singular verbs, both of which are prefixed by *pro* (or *fore*-). Consequently, the little help gained by this tangential inquiry seems, at present, to be simply a reemphasis of the idea of being *prevenient*.

Let us now return to our source

For the **hope** that is laid up for you in heaven, which you have [**before**] **heard** in the **word of the truth of the gospel**.

COL 1:5

text of Ephesians 1:6 to regain some perspective. St. John Chrysostom writes beautifully on how *echaritosen* pertains to the grace of justification:

"Which He freely bestowed on us," he says. He does not say, "Which He has graciously given us," (*echarisato*) but, "wherein He has shown grace to us," (*echaritosen*). That is to say, He has not only released us from our sins, but has also made us meet objects of His love. It is as though one were to take a leper, wasted by distemper and disease, by age, and poverty, and famine, and were to turn him all at once into a graceful youth, surpassing all mankind in beauty, shedding a bright luster from his cheeks, and eclipsing the sun-beams with the glances of his eyes; and then were to set him in the very flower of his age, and after that array him in purple and a diadem and all the attire of royalty. It is thus that God has arrayed and adorned this soul of ours, and clothed it with beauty, and rendered it an object of his delight and love. Such a soul-angels desire to look into, yes, archangels and all the holy ones. Such grace has he shed over us, so dear has he rendered us to himself. "The King," says the Psalmist, "shall greatly desire your beauty" (Ps 45:11) (*Comm. Ephesians*, 1).

St. Thomas concurs that *echaritosen* refers to the bestowal of sanctifying grace, the grace of justification which makes one pleasing to God (cf. *Comm. Eph.*, c. 1, lecture 2).

Now, the notion of "prevenience" is prevalent in the Church's theology of justification. For example, the *Catechism* (1124) teaches: "The Church's faith precedes the faith of the believer, who is invited to adhere to it." And such precedence occurs not only within salvation history but also within the human heart. Hear the Council of Trent on "The Manner of Preparation" for justification:

Now, they [the adults] are disposed to that justice when, aroused and



aided by divine grace, receiving faith by hearing (Rom 10:17), they are moved freely toward God, believing to be true what has been divinely revealed and promised, especially that the sinner is justified by God by his grace, through the Redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:24); and when, understanding themselves to be sinners, they, by turning themselves from the fear of divine justice, by which they are salutarily aroused, to consider the mercy of God, are raised to hope, trusting that God will be propitious to them for Christ's sake; and they begin to love Him as the fountain of all justice, and on that account are moved against sin by a certain hatred and detestation, that is, by that repentance that must be performed before baptism (cf. Sess. XIV, c. 4.); finally, when they resolve to receive baptism, to begin a new life and to keep the commandments of God.⁸

Let us note carefully the contours of this prevenient grace. Primarily a faith received "by hearing," it subsequently arouses to hope. And we recall that such are precisely the two actions previously discovered in Col 1:5 (*proakouō*) and Eph 1:12 (*proelpizō*). In brief, our NT inquiry of *Kecharitoméne* has underscored not only the call of the Christian to be immaculate, "without blemish," but has also strongly indicated the role of a prevenient grace of hope toward that end in the process of justification.

CONCLUSION

Kecharitoméne is the divinely inspired title of the Immaculate. Like the Holy Name of Jesus ("God saves"), it signifies both identity and mission. Part I of this study confirmed the former, noting the congruence of being and act in *Kecharitoméne*, and the self-identification of Lourdes, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Part II then immersed us in the latter, the mission of *Kecharitoméne* (again, we recall that it is a verb). And here we discovered the term's correlation with a prevenient grace of hope in the process of justification.

Now, given that (1) "There is no fruit of grace in the history of salvation that does not have as its necessary instrument the mediation of Our Lady" (Benedict XVI, 11 May 2007); and (2) "We are in justice bound to recognize the hidden influence of Mary in obtaining the gift of faith and its salutary cultivation" (Leo XIII, *Adiutricem populi*, 1895); it follows that a concerted and vigorous effort is called for in future studies to explore this theme within the Marian biblical texts. For the moment, we suffice merely to begin a response to our initial query, thus greeting her from afar: Who are You, *Kecharitoméne*? You are the Immaculate Mediatrix of All Grace!