

**Commentary on El Greco's
Virgin of the Immaculate Conception (1613)**

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Doménikos Theotokópoulos (1541-1614) better known as *El Greco* ('The Greek') was a painter, sculptor, and architect, and a native of the Greek island of Crete. El Greco moved to Venice, Italy in the late 1560's, where his painting style was influenced by Titian and Tintoretto. He relocated to Rome in the early 1570's where he was further influenced (like all artists of that time and place) by Michelangelo. After "daring to insult the memory of the *Divine Michelangelo*" - El Greco had brazenly offered to paint over Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, which had come under criticism in certain circles due to the risqué nature of its subjects - he fled to Spain for his safety where he sought "royal patronage" from King Philip II. El Greco lived out his life in Toledo, Spain where he became an epic contributor to the Spanish Renaissance. El Greco used "brilliant highlights" in his artwork, and did not like to paint bloody scenes, despite the Spanish penchant for "gruesome depictions of martyrdom".¹

The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception was completed late in El Greco's life (1613) and depicts the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the painting we see Our Lady being lifted to heaven, surrounded by a chorus of angels and celestial attendants replete with various musical instruments, symphonically announcing the arrival of the Queen of Heaven. The horizon is set low on the canvas, providing the viewer with a perspective of looking down on the landscape below. Yet, El Greco's use of energetic, Byzantine-inspired highlights upon the robes of the angels, their toes pointed downward as they ascend with Our Lady - heavenly contrails wisping in their wake - gives a powerful sensation of swift movement upward. The viewer's eyes are focused on and lifted with Our Lady as she soars toward heaven. We feel as if we are climbing through the air with Mary, blessedly borne to our salvation, she "the safest, easiest, shortest, and most perfect way of approaching Jesus."²

As she rises, Our Lady appears oblivious to the lively and spirited celebration surrounding her; instead, her gaze is fixed unshakably upward upon her divine spouse, the Holy Spirit, situated at the top of the canvas in the form of a radiant, white dove. Mary's expression is simultaneously that of wonderment, reverence, and humility, reminiscent of the *Magnificat*. "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed"

¹ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 5 lecture

² Saint Louis de Montfort, *True Devotion to Mary*, 1712

(Luke 1:46-48). Our Lady's hands and arms are clasped upon her bosom, forming a cross over her heart symbolic of the sorrows prophesied by Simeon - "And you yourself a sword will pierce" (Luke 2:35) - while also representing her contemplative tranquility; "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). The dove's eyes are set equally steadfastly upon Our Lady, she who, in the words of Dante, "so ennobled human nature that its very Creator did not disdain to share in it". The dove's focus on the ascending Mary reflects her eternal role in salvation history as "the Mother of mothers, the world's first love...the woman whom even God dreamed of before the world was made."³

There are many symbolic images situated on the lower (landscape) portion of the canvas, selected from a homily by Saint Germain.⁴ These include a ship in the lower right, alluding to the port of salvation; a bouquet of lilies and roses, emblematic of Our Lady's purity and her love of God; a palace, representing the spiritual bridal chamber; and a flowing fountain signifying baptism, and the life-giving holy water of Christ.

El Greco illuminates our comprehension of Mary's dual role as Mother of God and Mother to all, given to us by Christ from the cross; "Behold, your Mother" (John 19:27). The sun and moon are positioned prominently over the landscape, reminiscent of *The Beauty of the Woman*; "Who is this that comes forth like the dawn, beautiful as the white moon, pure as the blazing sun, fearsome as celestial visions?" (Songs 6:10). Mary, though immaculate and resplendent herself, remains peaceful and quiet, submitting to God's divine intentions and his great gathering force as he lifts her to himself, while she forever reflects the light of his Son. "God, Who made the sun, also made the moon. The moon does not take away from the brilliance of the sun. The moon would be only a burnt-out cinder floating in the immensity of space, were it not for the sun. All its light is reflected from the sun. The Blessed Mother reflects her Divine Son; without Him, she is nothing. With Him, she is the Mother of Men."⁵

³ Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, *The World's First Love*, 1952

⁴ James Patrick Reid, Franciscan University Steubenville, CST 801, Week 5 lecture

⁵ Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, *The World's First Love*, 1952