

## Answering Christ's Call to Serve: Finding Your Vocation

Central Verse:

“Behold, here am I Lord, send Me!”  
Isaiah 6:8

Dear Fathers,

Glory be to Jesus Christ!

Thank you for being here this week at Camp Nazareth. Your willingness to take time away from your parish work, as well as from your families, and perhaps other work, is truly a sacrifice, but one that rewards you as well as the children you will be instructing. May our Lord bless and inspire you this week as you both lead our children in worship and instruct them in our faith.

Thank you again.

With love in Christ,  
Fr. Stephen

### **Introduction**

This week we will be talking to the children about vocations. This will not be a discussion about vocations to the Holy Orders or to the Monastic Order, but rather will be a discussion about the broader notion of vocation defined as one's “unique and ongoing response to Christ's call to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourself.” (Definition from “Our Youth and Their Vocation” by Ann Bezzerides, Nicholas Belcher, and Mary Long. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Office of Vocation & Ministry). The definition of vocation is purposefully broad enough to include discussion of specific vocations, but we will not limit ourselves to those discussions. Rather, we will attempt, with the help of specific Scriptural passages and saints, to illustrate for the children what it means to be called by God in a unique and ongoing way and what it means for us and those around us to answer that call.

The main Scriptural verse for the week's theme comes from the Prophecy of Isaiah 6:8 – “Behold, here I am Lord, send me.” Next to St. Mary's response at the time of the Annunciation, it is perhaps the most beautiful response to God's call to serve that we find in the Holy Scriptures. It is Isaiah's response to the Lord's question, “Whom shall I send, and who will go to this people.” While this is the week's central verse, we will use St. Mary's response at the Annunciation, the “story” of Jonah, the Apostle Peter, and the Martyr Polycarp, to illustrate different responses to Christ's Call as well as the “challenges” (crosses) we bear as part of Christ's call to us. From St. Mary's response to the Archangel we will discuss what it means to accept Christ's call for us and for those around us. From Jonah we will learn what happens when we resist or run away from the Lord's call to serve. From St. Peter we will learn what it means to deny a vocation, and how we “recover” from such temptation. And from the discussion of the the Martyr Polycarp we will learn what it means to be joyful, courageous and steadfast in any particular vocation.

While you will be provided with the material to cover for the week, your discussions will by no means be limited to the material provided. However, a word about what we are planning is required. This Vocations Curriculum will be discussed next Summer as well. We are beginning to do 2 year cycles on the same themes in order to dig through them a little deeper. During the 2011 Summer Season we will expand/deepen the discussion of Vocations by bringing in Monastics to talk about their specific vocation, other priests to talk about the Holy Orders, and other “groups” (like our St. John the Compassionate Mission in Toronto and the Lived Theology School, OCMC, IOCC, etc.). We will take what we have taught this year, and begin to instruct our children in the possibilities open to them within the Church to fulfill vocations. This year’s curriculum will lay the foundation for next year’s discussions.

Again, thank you for being at Camp and ministering to our diocesan children.

With love in Christ,  
Fr. Stephen Lopusky

## Monday

The Annunciation: Accepting God's Call to Serve

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

*Subject:* Mary's Response to the Archangel – working through her fear and accepting the Lord's call to her.

*Quote:* "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to Your word." (Luke 1:38)

*First:* Read or summarize the biblical passage of The Annunciation

*Then:* Continue with the discussion points below. You may want to use the material below the discussion points for background and to help facilitate the Faith Enrichment session.

### *Discussion Points*

- Mary's acceptance of her vocation meant salvation came to all of us.
  - Corresponding point with vocations: Our response to God's call doesn't just affect us, but all those around us. If God calls us to something, to a particular vocation, then it is for our salvation AND the salvation of those around us. **St. Mary teaches us (as God's word reveals to us) that it is everyone's vocation to look beyond/outside our own individual concerns and address the needs of the hurting, the stranger, and the weak. Mary did this by laying aside her own fears and accepting God's call to serve, her vocation to be the Mother of God**
- Mary was afraid, but she "worked through" that fear.
  - Corresponding point with vocations: Sometimes we will be/are afraid of Christ's call to serve, but what the angel said to Mary is what is said to all of us, "Do not be afraid..."
- Mary completely submitted to the will of God in her mind, heart, body and soul. Not just acceptance of God's call, but humble and obedient submission.
  - Corresponding point with vocations: We are called to emulate Mary's humility and obedience in our own answer to Christ's call to serve.
- God had prepared Mary for this "vocation". She had been raised in the Temple of the Lord.
  - Corresponding point with vocations: God already knows what he has planned for us. We don't have to "figure anything out." We just have to accept His will for us.
- Mary's vocation as the Mother of God is unique and ongoing. She continues to be the Mother of God as she protects and intercedes for us.
  - Corresponding point with vocations: Answering the call to serve the Lord in the way He desires of us leads us into a deep and ongoing relationship with Him. While we may change jobs many times during our lives (on average we will change jobs/careers 7 times during our lifetime) yet Christ's call to serve others remains the same.

### **Narrative**

You may have heard of Alternative History Books. These books change 1 or 2 events in history and see how that change would have effected the rest of our history. So for example there are books that consider what would have happened to America if Abraham Lincoln had not been assassinated. Other books trace alternative history if Germany had won World War II and what that would mean for our country now. They are fascinating books because they show us how our everyday life would be affected by a change in someone's decision(s) in the past.

We might ask the question, if we were to write an alternative history book about the Church, “What would have happened to us if St. Mary had not accepted God’s will for her in being/becoming the Mother of God.” The thought is really unbelievable but it leads us to think about our own decisions and how they affect those around us. Can we think of situations in our lives where, when we have looked back on them, we wish we had handled the situation differently and that it could have gone better for us and for others if we had?

Think about what St. Mary, as a young girl, had to go through in order to accept what God had in store for her. She was afraid at what the Archangel Gabriel’s greeting meant. In fact the Archangel had to say to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). This is a very important part of this Gospel passage for us. It shows us that St. Mary had to struggle with her vocation like we might struggle with what God is calling us to. We might be afraid to answer the call to serve. We might be confused and uncertain. We might not know what to do at first. We might not even be aware of what God is calling us to. But if we follow the passage of the Scripture reading we see very clearly that though St. Mary struggled with what God was saying through the Archangel Gabriel (it says that she “considered” what God was saying to her through the Archangel) nevertheless she maintained her faith in Him. She believed and accepted the Archangel’s words even though she did not fully understand what they meant. And this is another important for us to consider. We don’t always have to understand with our minds what God is calling us to, but we must always have the faith that says in our hearts that God knows what we need at all times and is providing for us. St. Mary knew this and even though she could not understand with her mind, she believed in her heart.

This belief led to her complete and humble submission to God’s will. But that belief and her response was not just a “spur of the moment” decision. Mary herself had been prepared to be the Mother of God. She had been raised in the Temple according to our Tradition from a very young age (3). God knew His plans for her and for our salvation and in His plan (often called Salvation History or the Divine Economy) she needed to be brought to the Temple in order to be raised there and in order for her to be able to say “yes” to His call. (We celebrate Mary’s Entrance into the Temple on November 21/December 4). In fact, it has been said that it took all the generations of Israel, all of salvation history up to that point, in order for Israel to “produce” 1 person capable of giving the response that St. Mary did to God, to completely and humbly submit to His will.

We for our part need to consider that God is preparing us in order to respond to Him in a way that will be for our salvation when He calls us to serve, so to speak. He knew what His people needed in the person of Mary, and He prepared her for this. Likewise, He knows what His plans are for us, and we need to trust Him. We are often told to “figure things out” and that we better “figure out what we want to do”, but the Annunciation to Mary, and her being raised in the Temple, teach us among other things, that God already has it “figured out”. We need only accept what is His will for us, because from before He even created us, He knew His plans for us. That means that we do not need to be troubled or anxious (like St. Mary was) about “figuring things out.” We need, like St. Mary, to humbly submit to His Holy Will.

When we do that, as St. Mary did, others around us are affected. In St. Mary’s case, because she accepted God’s will for her, the Son of God took on our flesh/was conceived in her womb and by doing so is our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. We have been saved because Mary accepted God’s will for her. She was prepared to respond to our Lord, but she still had to accept God’s vocation for her as the Mother of God. What is God’s call for us? What are His plans for you and I? Each calling, each vocation, is unique/special and is ongoing. Mary continues to be the Mother of God. She continues to protect us and intercede for us. She will always be the Mother of God at the very throne of her Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When we answer Christ’s call to serve Him, we find our relationship deepened with Him, and we will find, if we persevere, a place for us in the Lord’s Kingdom as well.

*Making it Relevant (Questions and/or Thoughts to prompt thought and discussion)*

- When it comes to choosing our colleges and careers whom do we listen to, whom are we told to listen to: parents, family, friends, school counselors, ourselves, recruiters, etc? Where in all of those answers is God? Where is that part of us that is called to emulate St. Mary and listen to the Lord?
- For teenagers: How many of us will choose colleges that are near an Orthodox Church? Most of us will not. We will choose based on major, cost, location, job potential, etc. Again, where in all of this is God? St. Mary stayed within the Temple. That is, she was completely devoted to God. Her parents (the Grandparents of the Lord, Joachim and Anna) wanted her to be close to God. How many of us will care that we are close to an Orthodox Church when we move away from home? Part of answering a call to serve is preparing to answer that call. If we do not remain close to our Lord through church how can we answer that call.
- How do we “hear” Christ calling us? Through prayer, fasting, Bible reading, almsgiving, etc. How do we “hear” what the Lord calls us to? How do we hear a call to serve? If the Lord does not speak to us through His Divine Word, that is the Holy Scriptures, what can/does He speak to us through? There is a story of a pastor who when he was confronted with a decision to make he would pray about it 3 times and would read the Bible 3 times just from the daily readings to see how God would speak to Him. He trusted that God would speak, would REVEAL, to him His will if He asked in prayer and listened to God’s word in the Holy Scriptures. Do we realize that reading the Bible as the word of God is essential to answering a call to serve, and certainly essential for daily living in a Christ-like and godly manner.
- For Younger Campers (and Older): Do you think it was easy for St. Mary to be raised in the Temple, to be away from her mother and father (Joachim and Ann)? Don’t you think at times it was difficult for her? Isn’t it difficult to be at home sometimes, or to go to church sometimes, or to be around our brothers and sisters sometimes? But like St. Mary God calls us to listen to Him, to follow Him and to trust Him. If He has given us a church to go to, He wants us there. If He has given us a brother or sister, He has given them to us as a gift. If He has given us a mom and/or dad to take care of us, then He wants us to respect that gift and give thanks to Him for it.

## Tuesday

The Prophet Jonah: Resisting Christ's Call to Serve  
Scripture: Prophecy of Jonah (4 chapters)

*Subject:* Jonah tries to flee/run from God's call to serve

*Quote:* "...Jonah rose to flee...from the presence of the Lord." (Jonah 1:3)

*First:* Read or summarize the Prophecy of Jonah. Focus especially on where Jonah resists or complains against God (1:3, 4:1-3, 4:8-9).

*Then:* Continue with the discussion points below. You may use the text below the discussion points to help lead/facilitate the discussion.

### *Discussion Points*

- Jonah resisted God and did not want to fulfill God's mission for him. But why? In part because He knew that God would save the Ninevites if they repented and he did not want to look foolish by telling them they would be destroyed when he knew God would save them. How does this relate to vocations? Sometimes we might feel embarrassed about what Christ is calling us to do at any given moment in our life: go to church, help another person, pray before meals, standing up for our faith in front of others, etc. When Christ calls us to something, we are meant to follow Him without hesitation and without concern for what others might think of us.
  - **The most important and first vocation of all of us is to have what is referred to as the "Mind of Christ", to continually seek to know and be formed by the Word of God.** How do we do this? By reading, and listening to, the word of God, the Holy Scriptures everyday and letting God through His word make us who we are. The Bible = the mind and will of God for us. Reading the Bible is not just so we can remember facts about it. Hearing what the Bible says is meant to form us into the Christians God calls us to be so that we can answer the call to serve.
  - Remember that St. Mary was raised in the Temple of the Lord. There, everyday, she heard and listened to the word of God being spoken, chanted and talked about. This helped St. Mary have/gain what we call the Mind of Christ and was the most important part of her accepting her vocation, her call, to be the Mother of God.
  - Reading/hearing the Holy Scriptures helps break down our resistance to God. Our vocation to be God's new people, requires us to continually respond to His call in order for us to remain citizens, worthy citizens of the Kingdom of God.
  - Jonah lost "sight" of God's continuous call for us to be "lights" to the entire world, and that if we turn inwards in order to feel secure by excluding others then we no longer can be called children of God.
- Jonah was angry with the Lord for having saved Nineveh. But why? He thought they should not have been saved since they were not Jews. How does this relate to vocations? Anytime we are talking about vocation(s) we are talking about Christ's call for us to help others, to be a part of God's plan to save them. When Jonah became angry with the Lord for having saved the Ninevites he had lost "sight" that God was calling him to preach in order to save others, not destroy them.
  - **Another vocation of us all is to serve our neighbor rather than ourselves; to help the poor, the weak, the vulnerable. This is part of everyone's vocation.** But so often we lose sight of this vocation when we are told to find the right job, to make the most money, to be the most successful, etc. In other words, we are told to serve ourselves first and then if we have something left over we can serve others. **This is a necessity in any society**

**that seeks to preserve itself: the powerless are sacrificed for the preservation of that society.** This is especially important in the context of vocation – Christ calls us at every point of Scripture to help the powerless, but the world calls us by necessity to strike them down in order to lift ourselves up.

- **But that is not what God commands Jonah to do, nor is it what Christ commands us to do.** We are to first love God and then to love our neighbor. When Christ gave this command He did not say love ourselves.
  - **Please note the difference between a job and our vocation.** Our vocation really never changes, but our jobs/careers do. Our vocation(s) never really changes, but we may be called by God to live out this vocation(s) in a different way, to different people, in different places. **In other words, the demand of our God boils down to love He and our neighbor. Whatever job/career we have, this love must be our vocation.**
  - **Finally, having the “Mind of Christ” that we talked about leads us to the inevitable conclusion that Christ Himself came to about vocation: only service to our neighbor can make us a wise servant of God who is eligible for citizenship in God’s kingdom.**
- While Jonah complained to the Lord about saving the Ninevites, about how he looked in their sight and about the withering of the plant that shaded him, he also prayed a beautiful prayer/psalm while in the belly of the whale. Surprisingly it is a Psalm of Thanksgiving, not a petition for help. It shows that while Jonah might have had a bad temperament he still believed in God and knew that if God called him to serve, he would not allow him to perish in the belly of the whale.

### **A word about vocations and relating it to Jonah:**

The entire Bible teaches us that we are called to assist our needy neighbor without regard to whether they are Christian or pagan, inside the Church or outside it, appealing or repulsive, acceptable or unacceptable in society. Vocation is not a matter of choosing among our inner aptitudes or personal preferences, but of responding to God’s call to care for the weak and defenseless and to bring His Word to a world in desperate need of it. We are called to lead our neighbor into the Kingdom which is God’s and not ours.

Vocation goes beyond job, it transcends a career. It has to do with serving Christ and must therefore of necessity serve the neighbor. In whatever place, in whatever situation, in whatever job/career we find ourselves, the Christian vocation to love God and love our neighbor is always operating, always in effect, always what we are called to do. This requires no “talent” beyond the gift, the blessing, of love which God has given us. To unwrap that “gift” each time it is called for is the Christian vocation – it may be called for in church, in our homes, on the street, in the school, on the sports field, in private, in public, etc. Because of this, our salvation depends on how we fulfill our vocation, not on how well we do our job. Vocation is a matter of the heart, mind, body and soul. A job or career may be a matter of the mind, it may also be a matter of the body, and it might even be a matter of the heart, but a job or career is never a matter of our soul (unless of course we pursue an inherently evil job/lifestyle – thief, drug dealer, etc.). The completion of a job or career may bring us esteem from others, worldly wealth, success, but it can never save our soul. The fulfillment of our vocation however is directly related to the salvation of our souls.

The “conventional” wisdom of our time, which in Western and especially American culture bases itself on self-fulfillment, urges us to “follow our dreams,” and “do what we love”. Even the churches have picked up on this line of thought, so that “personal growth in Christ” and “unlocking our spiritual potential” have become watchwords for “discerning” our callings from God, not to mention the idea that developing one’s innate talents can be equated with one’s Christian vocation. But these approaches focus inward on the self, not outward to the neighbor. God’s gifts come from God, not from oneself, and are made by God according to current needs. This is the point: That each of our gifts/talents has been given because God has foreseen/knows what those around us (our neighbors) need. He has given us diverse gifts

in order to meet the needs of others and in so doing we work out our own salvation. We tend however, in this day and age, and in this country, to look at our talents/gifts as things we possess rather than as things we are to give away in the service of God and in therefore in the service of our neighbor. “Freely you have received, freely give” was Jesus’ command to His Apostles.

The same command is given to us as we seek to Answer Christ’s Call to Serve, to “find”, so to speak, our vocation. None of the prophets or apostles were careerists. As we know from the stories of their calling, many of them vigorously protested their calling by God. In the end, they sought only to do His will, and for them, as it is for us, that meant to acquire the “Mind of Christ”. That mind is ultimately and perfectly expressed on the Cross in direct fulfillment of Christ’s instruction love God and our neighbor which command is most perfectly fulfilled in this: love your enemies, love even those who hate you. That was Christ’s vocation. It is ours as well. In the end, Jonah himself had to come to this conclusion with regard to the Gentile city of the Ninevites. You even have to love those whom you hate. God gave Jonah the gift of prophecy, to speak His word, and it was given to him to address the need of the sinful Ninevites. What a powerful and beautiful expression of what it means to fulfill Christ’s call to serve: to find one’s vocation. In so doing, Jonah, whether he realized it or not, was saving his own soul from the sinful prejudice and bigotry that threatened to overcome him.

### **How you might Proceed:**

Some scientists believe in the existence of “wormholes” in space. These are “highways” that allow you to jump from one end of the universe to the other in the blink of an eye. It is fascinating to think that we could be orbiting Earth one second and in the blink of an eye be dropped off in another galaxy thousands of light-years away. Do you know the story of the Prophet Jonah? Well Jonah was swallowed by a “wormhole” of sorts appointed by God to take Jonah from where He was to where God wanted him to be. Most of us have heard of how Jonah was swallowed up by the whale for 3 days and nights and how he survived, but what many of us may not know is the reason why Jonah had to be swallowed by a whale. Simply put, Jonah was trying to run away from God.

Very simply put Jonah resisted God. He ran away from what God was calling Him to do and to say. This sounds strange to us of course because this man was a prophet of God. In fact, when Jonah was asked by the sailors of the ship what his occupation (his job) was and where he had come from, Jonah responds by saying, “I am a servant of the Lord, and I worship the Lord God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” (Jonah 1:8ff) And even though Jonah said this, he still ran away from God, and still tried to escape from God’s mission/vocation for him.

What was God calling Him to do that he resisted and why did he resist? Well, Jonah was asked to go to the city of Nineveh, which at that time was the capital of a great empire called the Assyrian Empire, and to tell them that the city would be destroyed because its people were wicked. (Capital cities are usually large and are great centers of prosperity/wealth. Nineveh was like this, but because it enjoyed lots of wealth, it was also very sinful. The Prophecy of Nahum describes the wickedness of Nineveh) We have to understand that the Ninevites were non-Jews and so Jonah did not want to go to them. He was prejudiced. He might have thought it was better for them to die than God to save them, which was a poor attitude to have.

Further, he did not want to go and tell the Ninevites that they would be destroyed because he knew that God would be merciful to them and not destroy them. He said to the Lord, “O Lord, were these not my words when I was yet in my land? Therefore I saw the need to flee to Tarshish; because I knew You to be compassionate and merciful, long-suffering and abundant in mercy, and willing to change your heart concerning evils.” (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew that if he told the Ninevites that they would be destroyed, and they did stop sinning, that God would not destroy them. Jonah would then have helped save non-Jews and further this would make him look bad. He tells them that they would be destroyed but then they are not destroyed. Jonah’s pride would be hurt and he would have a hand in saving non-Jews. So for these reasons Jonah basically runs away from God and what God was calling him to do.

Have you ever run away from something you were supposed to do? Why did you run away? Did you not want to do the work? Were you afraid you would not be able to do what you were asked? Did you feel like it wasn't your job to do? Did you simply not want to listen? Jonah felt some or all of these things and so ran away from God. But God came after him and would not let him get away, because he had a purpose for Jonah, a plan, a ministry, a vocation. He both needed and wanted Jonah to do this task, to preach to the Ninevites about their wickedness and destruction, so that they would repent and be saved.

What does this mean for us? It means that God has a plan for us too, a plan that He has "seen" from before we were born, from before He even created us. From before creation He knew who we were and what He would call us to in our life. Why is this important? Because so often we are told we have to figure out what we want to do and should do. But we don't have to do that at all because God already knows what He has called us to. All we have to do is trust in Him, follow Him, call on Him, pray to Him, listen to His word (unlike Jonah, at least at first, because Jonah will eventually listen to God) because for each of us he has a special and ongoing plan/vocation that will save us and save those around us. Remember what we said the other day in talking about St. Mary, the Mother of God. Each of us is called to a special/unique and ongoing vocation and like the Mother of God, we are an important part of God's plan of salvation for all of us. To run away from God, to resist His call, is not something that just affects us, but many around us, as it did with Jonah.

## Wednesday

### The Apostle Peter: Denying our Vocation

*Scripture:* Peter's Denial and Subsequent Healing (Mt.26:30-35, 56-75; Jn. 21:15-22)

*Subject:* Peter denies his vocation, while Thomas doubts his vocation, but both are "healed" by Christ

*Quote:* "But he denied it...again he denied it with an oath...Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man...And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus...And he went out and wept bitterly."

*First:* Read or summarize the Scriptural passages of Peter's denial and healing. Perhaps ask a camper to summarize it, or ask questions to see how well the group knows the Scriptural passages.

*Then:* Continue with the discussion points below. You may want to use the text below the discussion points to help lead/facilitate the Faith Enrichment session.

#### *Discussion Points:*

- Though Peter stated clearly and forcefully that he would never fall away from Christ (see Mt. 26:33), when it came time to say He was a friend of the Lord's in public he denied Him.
  - Corresponding Point on Vocations: We are called to reveal Christ's presence in the world at all times, not just when it is "safe" or when we feel like it. This is part of our Vocation as Orthodox Christians. When we deny this vocation for any reason, we cease to be the blessing on the world that our Lord calls us to be.
- As baptized Orthodox Christians we are each a sign of God's presence in the world. This means we are literally a living, breathing vocation.
  - Corresponding Point on Vocations: What happens when we who are called to be the "salt" of the earth, cease to be salty? That is, what happens when we through whom Christ blesses the world, cease to allow Him to do that? What happens when we ourselves have a "St. Peter Moment" and actually deny our call to serve?
- Even when we feel strongly about our vocation, our calling by Christ, there will be moments of "failure", where we deny our Lord and His call to serve.
  - Corresponding Point on Vocations: We cannot absolve ourselves of the responsibilities associated with being Orthodox Christian and having a vocation to be a blessing on the world by simply ignoring or denying Christ in our lives.

#### *Questions to Prompt Thought/Discussion:*

1. What does it mean to be a blessing on the world?
  - Think of a time when you were a blessing on the world, when you fulfilled what Christ was calling you to.
  - Think of a time when you were not a blessing on the world, when you "slipped" into your secret non-Orthodox superhero identity. What happened?
2. Who does Christ call us to be? -- Those who deny Him or those who serve Him even when it involves being rejected and abused as He was. Those who call down the blessings of God upon the world, upon our families, our schools, our churches, our friends, our classmates, upon everyone and everything.
3. What can we change in our life to better fulfill Christ's call to be a blessing on the world?

#### 4. How can we live out our vocation to reveal/show Christ to the world in day to day life?

##### **Food for Thought:**

Every superhero in the comic strips and in the movies has a secret identity. Clark Kent is Superman's secret identity. Bruce Wayne is Batman's secret identity. When they are wearing their masks, that is, when they are protected from being known for who they are, they accomplish great things, but when they are playing their secret identities they cannot afford to do those things because they do not want to be discovered. Well, what happened with St. Peter the Holy Apostle was a little like being a superhero by day, but by night being helpless like an ordinary man.

We might have known the story of his denial before we read or heard about it today. Well what Peter did is a lot like what we do every day. We practice our faith by going to church, maybe saying our prayers in private, maybe doing a little fasting, maybe reading the Bible a little bit, but when it comes stepping outside the doors of the church, we shed our superhero identity, our Orthodox Christian identity. And then, despite having practiced our faith, when it comes to the real "game", that is, when it comes to talking about Christ to our friends, when it comes to showing others where Christ is in our lives, when it comes to crossing ourselves in public, when it comes to fasting on Friday though we are with our friends at a party, we suddenly forget our identity as Orthodox Christians and hide it. We often do this to "fit in", to not be made fun of, because we are afraid people will think we are weird or they won't like us, or they won't continue to be our friends. When we do this, we do exactly what Peter did, we deny Christ, we deny our vocation as Orthodox Christians to be the blessing on the world that Christ has called us to be. Peter denied Christ and his apostleship, because he was afraid of being killed by those who were torturing Jesus. We deny Christ not because we are afraid of dying, but because we are more afraid of what others think of us than what God Himself thinks of us. In that way we are what some call "Practice Player All-Americans" – in "practice" (that is in church) we're great, we're the perfect Orthodox Christians (maybe), but when it comes to the real "game" (out in public, with our friends, at school, in our homes) we aren't so great, in fact we completely deny who we are and what Christ calls us to be. We deny our vocation, our God-given vocation, to be His blessing on the world.

And that is our vocation, it is the vocation of each and every one of us who are Orthodox Christians – we are called to be a blessing on the world, to show the world that Christ is still present in it, to be lights in the world that show and reveal the one True Light who is Christ Himself whom the world needs so badly, but whom the world tries to push away or worse, destroy. This is what Peter confronted when He followed Jesus that night all the way to the house of the high priest. He came face-to-face with the world which was seeking to destroy the only Light it had, that was seeking to kill its own life, that is the life of its Savior, Jesus Christ. And when Peter was confronted by this world, even though he had said he could take it, even though he had been around Christ for 3 years, even though he had seen His miracles and listened to His teaching, and even though He had confessed Him to be "the Christ, the Son of the Living God," still He denied Him because He feared for His own life. And when He did this, and when He remembered that Christ told Him He would do this, we cried terribly. Why?

Because St. Peter knew what we should know right now: that we are called by God as Orthodox Christians to show the world that Christ is still present in it, that He cares for each human being, that He desires only our salvation, and that we are all His people. St. Peter knew what we should know: Christ calls us to serve the world by being a blessing in it. And that's what made Peter weep bitterly...Far from being a blessing, far from being a friend to Christ who was in need, far from living up to what he knew he should do, he put on a "secret identity" so that nobody would recognize him, so that he would not be harmed in any way.

Isn't this what we do all the time: put on a secret identity once we leave our churches so that nobody will know that we are Orthodox Christians, so that we won't be "harmed", that is so that no one will make fun of us, so that we will just fit in/blend in like St. Peter tried to do. (He just tried to be one of the crowd, so to speak). And don't we just try to be one of the crowd among our friends, or when at work, or when in school, or when we're with our sports teams, or when in public places like a restaurant,

or when we're in the grocery store, or at Wal-mart. When it comes to those "St. Peter" moments, how often do we deny our vocation to be a blessing on the world, and simply try to be like everyone else? (Think of those times, those moments – list a few and talk about why we put on a secret non-Orthodox Christian identity. And then think about what our actions/inaction means for the world when it is we who are called by Christ to show Him to the world, to reveal His presence, to be that blessing. What does it mean for the world (and for us) if we are simply **secret** superheroes of Orthodox Christianity?)

St. Peter seemed to be fine when He was alone with Christ and with the other Apostles, but when he was in public, when he was around others who were not Christ's followers, he denied Jesus. Not only that he got progressively "worse" in that denial. First he tried to play "dumb" by saying, "I don't know what you mean." Next he denied Jesus with an oath saying "I do not know the man." Finally he invoked a curse on himself and swore he did not know the man (Mt. 26:70ff). Far from being the sign of God's presence in the world, Peter denied the presence of God in the world. Wow!

Because each of us is a baptized Christian, we are therefore a sign of God's presence in the world. This is according to the Scriptures, it is fulfilled in the Liturgy, and it must be lived out in the world. We can't be superheroes of Orthodoxy in the Bible, while at Church, and then suddenly "change" back into a lesser person. That is definitely not what Christ is calling us to, that is definitely not how we are being called to serve the world. We are called to bring Christ's love and forgiveness to a world which is living in sin and darkness. This is our calling, each of us, no matter who we are, what we are doing, and who we are with. Peter knew what he was supposed to do, but because of those who were around him, and because he was thinking what they might do to him, he moved away from Christ, even going so far as to invoke a curse on himself.

What did Peter fear the most? Death? Maybe. Torture? Perhaps. But maybe also rejection. And for Christ Himself, this is what may have hurt him the most, that those whom He came to save simply rejected Him as Peter did when the "going got tough." But in order to fulfill our vocation as Orthodox Christians to be a blessing on the world, we all need to share in Christ's sacrifice as St. Paul says in his Epistle to the Hebrews. We are all called to share in that sacrifice because by sharing in it we offer our sacrifice of praise to God as Christ praised His Father every moment of His life. We must not only do this in Church, but we are called to do this at every moment of our lives as well. The question is, when will we confront our "St. Peter" moments? When will we refuse to keep our identity secret any longer and become what we were created to be, a blessing on the face of the earth?

Because we see what is happening all around us and what the world tends to focus on – the killing, the disasters, the famines, the war, the crime, economic misfortune, scandals, etc. Why does the world focus on such things. First because that is the fallen nature of the world, but really it is because we as Christians are not giving the world any alternative. We love the Church, but deny It/Him when we step outside its walls.

We cannot absolve ourselves of the responsibilities that come along with being who we are and who we are called to be by Christ. We cannot accept our responsibilities while in church and then deny them when we leave it behind. Who we are in Church is who we are when we are outside of it. St. Peter realized what he had done and he cried over it. He had ceased to be what Christ was calling Him to be and that realization hurt him deeply. As baptized Orthodox Christians we are called to exercise our vocation, our vocation to be a blessing on the world, our call to serve, out in the world where we are needed the most. So whatever we choose to do – whether as a teacher, a fireman, an accountant, a musician, a priest or a truck driver, we are called to act as our Lord did. Wherever we are – but especially out in the world – all of us are called to reveal the presence and the love of Christ.

## Thursday

The Martyr Polycarp: Joyful Acceptance of a Vocation

*Literature:* The Martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna

*Subject:* St. Polycarp's Martyrdom, circa 155 A.D.

*Quote:* "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you..." (John 15:18ff)

*First:* Read or summarize the story of Polycarp's Martyrdom. The Martyrdom of Polycarp is the oldest account of the martyrdom of a Christian for his faith, outside the pages of the New Testament, that has come down to us.

*Then:* Continue with the discussion points below.

### *Discussion Points:*

- It is possible to accept a vocation, a calling from our Lord, with joy, even if He calls us to be one of His martyrs, his witnesses in the world.
  - St. Polycarp's martyrdom was called a martyrdom conformable to the Gospel. That means it must have been like Christ's own martyrdom: he must have gone willingly, out of love, and even joyfully to his death.
  - It says of St. Polycarp's martyrdom that he looked not only to what concerned himself, but what would be helpful to his neighbors. In this way martyrdom BECAME the vocation Christ called him to, because it became about others, not himself. Point:
  - St. Polycarp because of his vision/dream knew he was going to be burned alive, and yet he went voluntarily, willingly, like Christ did to the Cross. It is recorded in the account of His martyrdom that he prayed, "...I bless You, because You have deemed me worth of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Your Christ, for 'resurrection to eternal life'..."
    - Polycarp was actually grateful/thankful to God for letting Him be a martyr.
  - Further in the account of His martyrdom it says that "...he was **inspired** with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace, so that not only did it not fall with dismay at the things said to him, but...the proconsul was astonished..."
    - God inspired him with courage and joy, and then Polycarp used them to inspire others. "Freely you have received, freely give."
- Faith and courage are gifts from God. They are given for His purposes, not ours. They are given to help others have faith and be courageous.
  - It says of St. Polycarp's and other martyrdoms that they endured with such courage and patience that those who watched took pity on them and wept. Point: HOW we fulfill our vocation is just as important as having a vocation.
  - His captors tried to persuade him to call Caesar "Lord" and to offer incense to him as to God, but he would not. Then they threatened him. Eventually he says this, "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" And then, "...listen plainly: I am a Christian..." Point: Answering the call to serve takes trust in God and knowing who we are very plainly.
  - It says of Polycarp that the Christians gathered, as it was possible, where his bones were buried, in joy and gladness to celebrate the day of his martyrdom...and to train and make ready those who would follow in his footsteps. – Point: His martyrdom continued to inspire the generations after him.

- Eventually we all must repeat the words of our Savior, whose words Polycarp repeated: “God’s will be done” when it comes to His call and the vocation He has for us.
  - This represents the acceptance of St. Mary. St. Polycarp could have escaped from those who were trying to persecute and kill him, but he did not. In fact, in a funny scene in the account of his martyrdom he went downstairs to his captors and began to talk with them and actually served them food and drink. TRUE or FANTASTIC exaggeration?
  - **Vocation is about God’s will for us. Career and job is typically about our will, our desires, our wants.**

## St. Mary's Vocation

Obedience

Chastity/Purity

Mother – recall also Christ giving her to us (when given to St. John as mother and he to her as son)

Reared in the Temple from early age

Young Girl

Pondered these things (and later with events of Christ's life)

Intercessor

Helper

Refuge

Consolation

These are all words we use to describe her in prayer, song, and services

With vocation:

Alternative history books – what if Mary had said “no” – in a sense salvation history would have come to an end. God had prepared his people Israel to produce one person pure enough, capable enough, to say “yes” to Him in this unique and for us ongoing way. Mary became Mother of God and she remains Mother of God – continues to intercede for us to her Son.

Mary's vocation began long before she said “yes” to the Archangel Gabriel – she was (according to Tradition) reared in the Temple in Jerusalem – reared to be the Mother of God, brought up there in prayer, fasting, vigil, purity, godliness, in order to become what we call her – the Living Ark, the Rod that budded forth life, the jar of manna, etc. – (note: see the hymns for Her feastdays)

Where do we find ourselves in the life of St. Mary? We know her as Mother: Mother of God, mother of us all (in a sense) -- (remember that she was “given” to the Holy Apostle John by Christ while He was on the Cross – in a sense that act gave her to all of us as Mother), but does she reflect virtues that we are called to have? Did she live a life that we are called to live?

Yes to both!! In fact the whole of our life is spent “conceiving” Christ in us by our obedience. We are called to “grow up” in Christ yes, but to “grow” Him in us. The result of Mary's obedience was God taking on flesh in her. The result of our obedience is that Christ would “grow” in us.

As Mary was Pure – we call her the All-Pure One. Why do we call her the All-pure One? We do not teach the doctrine of Immaculate Conception – that St. Mary at the moment of her conception was by the special grace of God and by special privilege, for the sake of the future merits of Jesus Christ, preserved exempt from all stain of original sin. (Bull of Pope Pius IX – December 8, 1854 – in doing so the Roman Throne appropriated ability to change doctrine on its own, though it had listened to the bishops of the Roman Church, and the result was that only 16 years later the same Pope proclaimed that Roman Popes were infallible in matters of faith (1870).) In other words she was placed in a state where it was impossible for her to have personal sins. (Worthy of note that for several centuries the controversy over this innovation in church doctrine continued in the West. Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux and the Latin Dominican monks preached against it, while Duns Scotus and the Franciscans supported it. Turned out as well that some on both sides claimed to have revelations concerning the teaching. Bridget of Sweden (14<sup>th</sup> century) claimed Mary herself appeared and told Bridget that she was conceived immaculately. But Catherine of Sienna affirmed by her own revelation that the Holy Virgin Mary participated in original sin. (This teaching seemed to exalt highly the Virgin Mary but in reality denied all Her virtues. It is in fact “zeal not according to knowledge” (Rm. 10.2) and “contradictions of knowledge falsely so called” (1 Tim 6.20)-- In this new teaching it was said that it was not a new teaching but held by the church from before and many Holy Fathers were quoted, but the references speak only of the exalted sanctity of the Virgin Mary and of her immaculateness, and purity and spiritual might, but nowhere is there mentioned immaculateness of Her conception. In fact these same Fathers say in other places that only Jesus Christ is completely pure of every sin, while, all men, being born of Adam, have borne a flesh subject to the law of sin.) Further, none of the ancient Holy Fathers say that God in miraculous fashion purified the Virgin Mary while yet in the womb; and many directly indicate that the Virgin Mary, just as all men, endured a battle with sinfulness, but was victorious over temptations and was saved by Her Divine Son. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is a misguided attempt to glorify Mary beyond what is proper, and yet there is the opposite extreme in the Protestant Churches which virtually eliminate Mary's vocation as the Mother of God and give her virtually no honor, no reverence, no attention as one intercedes, protects and prays for us. They in fact demean Mary and her vocation.

This is very important for our own vocation. Because while Mary is not God, and did not receive a body from heaven, but from the joining of man and woman, SHE WAS PREPARED TO TAKE PART IN THE DIVINE ECONOMY. And this is an essential part of our special and ongoing vocation. We too are part in our own way (God's way) of God's plan of salvation for us and for the world. We have a part to play so to speak, a special part, unique to who we are, but essential for all those around us. (Give an example from the animal world – part to play; or the insect world; or example of one stone upon another to build a pyramid – in fact study the making of a pyramid and talk about the connection of one stone to another – the

importance of each doing its part, fitting together to build the entire structure – this may be the analogy to use with vocation – unique and important.

Why is this important for Mary's vocation and for us? Because she too had to struggle with being obedient to God. She too had to struggle against her fallen human nature in order to give the most pure response to the Archangel Gabriel. Her response was most pure not because she was sinless, but was in fact most pure because it was forged through a struggle against the human nature that doesn't understand God, that rejects His will, that seeks its own. But She having struggled against this part of fallen human nature that was in her too, gave the most pure answer. **In fact there is no victory without an adversary.** (Think in terms of sports – no victory without an opponent. The struggle and intensity of the battle makes the victory even sweeter.) In this case, as with others, the adversary works within us to lead us away from the "right" answer. And this answer was for all humanity. She said yes to her vocation as it was ordained and called for by God, but it was neither a quick, unthinking answer, nor was it simply the response of St. Mary's mind/brain, but a total submission in being to God's purpose, God's calling, God's vocation for her. This total submission to the will of God "produced" the Incarnation of the Son of God, who is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Just think of it! Without this one young girl's response, where would all of humanity be? It is unthinkable really. But this young girl, who was visited by the Archangel Gabriel, who herself was afraid (remember the Archangel's word to her, "Do not be afraid"), did say yes to her unique and ongoing vocation to be the Mother of God and we celebrate this truly unique, truly special person/mother/woman. What does this teach us? That Mary herself was afraid, that she, like us, experienced fear, that she was not immune to the temptation to doubt and be troubled. In fact we sing in our liturgical music during the Lenten Season about the sorrow that pierced her heart (according to the prophecy of St. Symeon). And yet, she answered God's call for her with faith, with trust, in obedience, in purity and this serves as a model for us when it comes to answering God's will for us. We are so plagued with doubt, with mistrust, with confusion, and so distracted by the life we live/lead/are led into, that we, unlike Mary, never say "yes" to our Lord. Far from totally submitting to God's will, we give Him only part of us, which is in the end none of ourselves. This was the great "advantage" Mary had – she was reared/raised in the Temple of Jerusalem according to Tradition. In other words, she was raised in the "church" at that time. She spent her days in prayer, fasting, services, hearing the Law of God, serving Him with her life in the Temple. In fact according to Tradition, the Archangel Gabriel visited her while she was in the Temple and there announced to her the wonderful plan God had for all of creation, for all of us, His plan to save all mankind. (Have an Icon of the Annunciation to show the children – talk about her posture, the greeting, the Gospel, the buildings/Temple, about how we refer to her now as the Living Temple of God, how there is no longer the Ark of the Covenant but the Living Ark). These are all part of her unique and ongoing vocation/plan of salvation for her as the Mother of God. See what good comes from saying "Yes" to God. (Have you seen the movie "Yes Man" – the premise is to say "yes" to life and in the movie you see the good things that come from saying yes to life, to not being afraid of everything. Well in a certain sense the same applies to saying "yes" to our Lord when it comes to His will for us. There are special blessings that await us if we, like Mary, submit to His Holy will, and with our whole being say, "Here I am Lord, I am your servant/do what you want of me/send me/I am your servant.

Again, were we to believe in the teaching of the Immaculate Conception, there would have been no struggle for Mary to be obedient to God's holy will, no temptation to disobey, and therefore no real faith expressed on her part in the acceptance of God's will for her. In fact, if Mary were exempt from original sin by a special grace of God her obedience to Him at the time of the Annunciation would not be obedience at all but a pre-programmed result of that special grace given her. In Mary's effort to accept God's unique and ongoing call to her, Her vocation, we see our own struggle to answer His unique and ongoing call to/for us. There is no automatic, pre-programmed response in us to God's unique "plan"/vocation for us. We have, as did the Mother of God, the opportunity to say no to God, to reject His call, to deny His "plan" for us and therefore to exercise the freewill He has given us in a way that separates us from Him and from His "plan". As she continues and will forever continue to be the Mother of God and therefore "Mother" of us all in the faith before the throne of her Son, so too we are called and struggle to answer our own unique and ongoing call/vocation.

In Mary's struggle to be obedient to God's will we see our own.

We are "taught" to listen to and hear the wisdom of many different people within our life: from parents of course, to our priests, to our teachers, to our big brothers and sisters, to child sitters, and many others who we oftentimes should and need to listen to. However, we are also trained by our society to listen to others whose call may prevent us from answering God's unique and ongoing call to us. Mary had to lay aside what she might have thought about what others would say about her. She also had to lay aside what Joseph had to say about her (Remember and consider the Nativity Icon and how in the hymns Joseph is asking Mary what she has done to him – child conception without the touch of man, but Joseph does not understand and debates whether to put her away privately. In the Nativity Icon this is show by an old man dressed in raggedly clothing in front of Joseph – it is the Evil One and he is tempting Joseph to doubt—hymns of the Church bring this out at the time of the Nativity of Christ.) So Mary had to struggle to remain true to her vocation through all of this, true to God's unique and ongoing call, despite misunderstanding, fear, uncertainty, the unknown, and yet she does remain true to it and continues to be Mother of God. Far from finishing her vocation, Mary's continues in Heaven from where she protects and intercedes for us.

So why the All-pure One? Not simply because St. Mary was a Virgin, and we call her the Ever-Virgin, but also because purity has to do with how we see the world and live in it beyond the aspects of physical intimacy. Because we can not be physically intimate, and yet be completely impure. Take marriage – called to have a chaste marriage bed.

St. Mary's Presentation: What must it have been like for her in the Temple from such an early age? Do you think she was scared? Do you think she wondered why she was made to do this?

Hymn from Great Vespers of the Feast of the Presentation:

ANNA, THE ALL-BLESSED CRIED OUT REJOICING: ZACHARIAH, TAKE HER WHOM THE PROPHETS OF GOD PROCLAIMED IN SPIRIT, AND LEAD HER INTO THE HOLY TEMPLE, THERE TO BE BROUGHT UP IN REVERENCE, THAT SHE MAY BECOME THE DIVINE THRONE OF THE MASTER OF ALL, // HIS PALACE, HIS RESTING PLACE, AND DWELLING FILLED WITH LIGHT!

AFTER YOUR BIRTH, LADY AND BRIDE OF GOD, YOU WENT TO THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD TO BE RAISED AS A CHILD CONSECRATED IN THE HOLY OF HOLIES. THEN GABRIEL WAS SENT TO BRING YOU FOOD, UNDEFILED VIRGIN. ALL THE POWERS OF HEAVEN STOOD AMAZED, SEEING THE HOLY SPIRIT DWELL IN YOU! THEREFORE, PURE AND UNDEFILED MOTHER OF GOD, GLORIFIED IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, // SAVE YOUR PEOPLE!

COME, LET ALL THE FAITHFUL PRAISE THE ONLY IMMACULATE ONE, FORETOLD BY THE PROPHETS AND NOW OFFERED IN THE TEMPLE: THE MOTHER FORE-ORDAINED BEFORE THE AGES, MADE MANIFEST AS THE THEOTOKOS IN THE LAST DAYS! // BY HER PRAYERS, LORD, GRANT US YOUR PEACE AND GREAT MERCY!

ANNA, TRULY BLESSED BY GOD'S GRACE LED WITH GLADNESS INTO THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD THE PURE AND EVER-VIRGIN WHO IS FULL OF GRACE, AND SHE CALLED THE YOUNG GIRLS TO GO BEFORE HER WITH LAMPS IN HAND. "GO, CHILD," SHE SAID, "TO HIM WHO GAVE YOU TO ME; BE TO HIM AN OFFERING AND A SWEET SMELLING INCENSE. GO INTO THE PLACE WHICH NONE MAY ENTER: LEARN ITS MYSTERIES AND PREPARE YOURSELF TO BECOME THE PLEASING AND BEAUTIFUL DWELLING-PLACE OF JESUS, // WHO GRANTS THE WORLD GREAT MERCY!

TOGETHER LET US HASTEN TODAY TO THE THEOTOKOS; LET US HONOR HER IN SONGS AND SPIRITUALLY CELEBRATE FOR SHE IS OFFERED IN THE TEMPLE AS A GIFT TO GOD.

TODAY THE TEMPLE HAS BECOME A WEDDING HALL; A FAIR CHAMBER FOR THE VIRGIN. IT RECEIVES THE LIVING BRIDAL CHAMBER OF GOD, THE PURE AND SPOTLESS ONE WHO SHINES MORE BRIGHTLY THAN ALL CREATION.

Annunciation Hymns:

YOU APPEARED TO ME IN THE FORM OF A MAN, SAID THE UNDEFILED MAID TO THE CHIEF OF THE HEAVENLY HOSTS: HOW THEN DO YOU SPEAK TO ME OF THINGS THAT PASS MAN'S POWER? FOR YOU HAVE SAID THAT GOD SHALL BE WITH ME, AND SHALL TAKE UP HIS DWELLING IN MY WOMB. HOW SHALL I BECOME THE SPACIOUS HABITATION AND THE HOLY PLACE OF HIM THAT RIDES UPON THE CHERUBIM? DO NOT AMUSE ME WITH DECEIT; FOR I HAVE NOT KNOWN PLEASURE, I HAVE NOT ENTERED INTO WEDLOCK. // HOW THEN SHALL I BEAR A CHILD?

Note: The hymns express the struggle of the Most Pure One to answer God's call to her through the Archangel Gabriel. Mary did not doubt God as did Zechariah, the father of St. John the Baptist, but rather in her purity asked the Archangel what his greeting meant knowing full well she had not entered into marriage nor known a man. In this we can find/see our own struggle to understand and accept God's unique and ongoing call to us. While we are not called to Mary's unique vocation, we are called to emulate her purity, her obedience, her faith, and her chastity. Here is where we find common ground with her as we struggle to hear, answer and accept God's unique plan for us which is both an everyday event as well as a plan which extends throughout our whole life. For example, God may call us to be a friend to someone one day (and that may mean listening, offering comfort, protecting someone, encouraging them, etc.) and we must answer that call, but He will also guide us where He wants us to be with work, family, relationships, etc. These are all part of our own unique and ongoing call which God has foreseen from before all eternity and set before us to accept or reject.

THEN THE BODILESS ANGEL REPLIED: WHEN GOD SO WILLS, THE ORDER OF NATURE IS OVERCOME, AND WHAT IS BEYOND MANKIND COMES TO PASS. BELIEVE THAT MY SAYINGS ARE TRUE, ALL-HOLY AND IMMACULATE LADY. AND SHE CRIED ALOUD: **LET IT BE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD**, AND I SHALL BEAR HIM THAT IS WITHOUT FLESH, WHO SHALL BORROW FLESH FROM ME, THAT THROUGH THIS MINGLING HE MAY LEAD MANKIND UP TO HIS ANCIENT GLORY, // FOR HE ALONE HAS POWER SO TO DO!

Note: In the hymns we find this ongoing dialogue/meditation about the event of the Annunciation, when Mary would, accept and completely submit to the will of God for her. Here in this hymn of the Feast we find the words of Scripture echoed, "Let it be to me according to your word..." In these words together with "Behold the handmaid of the Lord..." we find St. Mary's complete submission to the will of God, her obedience not just in thought but with her whole being to the vocation God had prepared her for, that is to be the Birthgiver of God. It has been said that it took all the generations of the nation of Israel to produce 1 person capable of responding to God in this way. It took all of Israel's history to produce this one woman, this one young girl who in the Divine Plan of Salvation for us all was called to be the Mother of God. But not only was St. Mary capable of responding to God in this way, but she took all that she had been given up to that point: the teaching of her parents, the raising in the Temple, the grace of God given to her, and offered it back to Him in the purest and most complete way she was able. The result was the Son of God taking on our flesh in her womb and the salvation of all mankind. This all came from Mary's "yes" to God

Discussion:

Despite the temptation to doubt, to question, to talk and ask, Mary simply said "yes". In fact the angel of the Lord says to her (a young girl) "do not be afraid" and this is said to all of us "Do not be afraid". Consider what it was like for a young girl to here the Archangel's greeting.

