

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Yesterday, was the feast of the Annunciation to Mary. This is when God sent the Archangel Gabriel to a young woman named Mary. She was an incredibly holy young woman although only a teenager. When Mary was entering her fifteenth year, after having spent eleven years of living and serving in the Temple of Jerusalem, the priests informed her that, according to the Law, she could not remain in the Temple but must be betrothed and enter into marriage. The Mary surprised the priests when she told them that she had dedicated her life to God and that she desired to remain a virgin until death.

Then, Zacharias, the high priest and father of the John the Baptist, under the inspiration of God, arranged the marriage of an elderly man named Joseph of Nazareth to Mary. This was to preserve her virginity and he would care for her. His wife had died and his family was nearly grown. When the fullness of time had come, as prophesied by Daniel the Prophet, and when God was pleased to fulfill His promise to the banished Adam and to the Prophets, the Archangel Gabriel appeared in the chamber of the All-Holy Virgin. As some priestly writers wrote, precisely at that same moment when she held open the book of the Prophet Isaiah and was contemplating his great prophecy: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son! (7:13)" Gabriel appeared in all of his angelic brightness and saluted her: "Rejoice, highly favored one! The Lord is with thee, Blessed art thou among women!"

Mary, being a very humble young woman, was troubled by this greeting and wondered why the Archangel was greeting her in this manner. The Archangel then said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God. And behold, thou wilt conceive in thy womb and bear a son, and you shall call His Name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of His kingdom there will be no end."

Hearing this, Mary knew that this child would be the Messiah, the long awaited anointed one whom God had promised centuries before. Many people were anxiously awaiting his coming. Many events were happening in Israel pointing to the fact that the Messiah would soon come. One of them was the fact that there was no longer a king on the throne of Israel who was of the bloodline of David.

Just like St. Simeon had questioned, when he was translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek, Mary asked the Archangel how was this possible since she was a virgin. St. Simeon wanted to translate the Hebrew word for virgin to be the Greek word for a young maiden, since it was impossible for a virgin to give birth. God told him that his original understanding of the Hebrew to be “the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son” was the correct translation. This only makes sense since what miracle is it for a young maiden to have a child. A virgin having a child was truly an extraordinary miracle. And so, Mary answered “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

Although it seems, from reading of Scripture, this was an easy answer for Mary. What else could she say, she truly loved God. But this cannot have been easy for her. Mary knew that when Joseph found out that she was pregnant he would assume that some other man had made her pregnant. This would automatically lead to him divorcing her. In those days when one was engaged to be married if the marriage was canceled for any reason it was considered a divorce. Even today in our church, if an engaged couple called off their marriage and the engagement had been blessed by the church, this would be considered a divorce by the church. Which is why Metropolitan Philip ordered the priests not to bless the engagement until just at the beginning of the marriage ceremony.

What was she to do? She was fully expecting Joseph to put her out and she would be on her own living in humiliation. Since her parents were both dead, and she had no siblings, there would be no one to care for her. Today, many people might say to her "have an abortion". But this would be murder and God forbids us to murder. Also, abortion was specifically forbidden in the law of Moses.

Thankfully, when Joseph was contemplating what to do, an angel appeared to him in a dream and said “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” In obedience to the angel Joseph took Mary to be his wife.

This annunciation and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Virgin, leading to the incarnation of our Lord, began the salvation of mankind and restoration of all creation.

Gabriel's announcement emphasizes two truths. First was that Mary would conceive in her womb: the Lord Jesus took His flesh, that is, His human nature from Mary herself; and second that this is the divine Son of the Highest in Mary's womb. Thus the one Person, Jesus, the eternal Son and Word of God, is both fully human and fully divine. This truth was crucial in the defeat of the heretic Nestorius, who taught that Mary conceived a mere man who was later joined by the divine Son of God. The Church's true teaching is proclaimed in the festal hymn of Annunciation, which declares, "The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin as Gabriel announces the coming of grace."

Today, the Church celebrates the Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel on March 26, since it is the day following the Feast of the Annunciation. The word Synaxis means, in this instance, a gathering together of the faithful to celebrate the Divine Liturgy on the day following a major feast in honor of the saints involved in the primary celebration. Since the Archangel Gabriel played an important role in the feast of the Annunciation we celebrate is the Synaxis today.

The name *Gabriel* comes from the Hebrew meaning "Man of God." The Holy Fathers, in speaking about the Annunciation, tells us that an archangel with such a name was sent to signify who and what the child would be like, who must be born of the All-Pure One. Therefore, He will be Man-God, mighty and powerful God."

Gabriel and Michael are the archangels who figure most prominently in the Bible. In the Old Testament, Gabriel is mentioned by name in two visions of the Prophet Daniel. Here Gabriel explains to Daniel the future of Israel. Holy Tradition also credits Gabriel with inspiring the Prophet Moses to write either Genesis or possibly the entire Pentateuch. Later Jewish Rabbinical literature states that he was the angel who taught Joseph the 70 languages needed to rule in Egypt, but this is not in the Genesis account.

The reason why Gabriel is most celebrated, though, is his role in the Annunciation and other events in New Testament times attributed to him by Tradition (although his name may not be mentioned explicitly in the text). Starting in Luke, Gabriel first appears to Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist. Zachariah initially refuses to believe that his barren wife, Elizabeth, and he will have a child in their old age. This is the moment in which Gabriel says, "I am Gabriel. I stand before God, and I have

been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news" (Luke 1:19). He then strikes Zachariah mute until the birth of his son because of his disbelief. Some of the Fathers understood that this same Gabriel appeared to Joachim and Anna concerning the birth of the Virgin Mary.

Often Gabriel is also recognized as the angel who announced the birth of the Theotokos to her parents Joachim and Anna and who came to Joseph the Betrothed in a dream, telling him that Mary's pregnancy was indeed miraculous and that he should protect and care for her. He then appeared to the shepherds near Bethlehem, telling them of the Nativity of the Messiah. Thus, he was the key figure in revealing to humanity the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Tradition also has it that Gabriel will announce the Second Coming of the Lord by blowing a trumpet.

Today, we also commemorate Father John Climacus. He is called Climacus due to his authorship of the great spiritual work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. His commemoration is designated by the Church on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent since his life and writings affirm him as a supreme bearer and proponent of Christian asceticism. The ascetic example of this great Saint of the Church inspires us in our Lenten journey.

Saint John Climacus was probably born in the second half of the sixth century; but his country and origins are alike unknown. We only know that, from the age of sixteen, after having received a solid education, he renounced all the pleasures of this life for the love of God and went to Mount Sinai, to the foot of the holy mountain on which God had in former times revealed His glory to Moses.

John submitted body and soul to an elder called Martyrios and set himself, free from all care, to climb that spiritual ladder at the top of which God stands, and to "add fire each day to fire, fervour to fervour, zeal to zeal." John gave perfect submission to his elder. In spite of this, Martyrios kept him as a novice for four years and only tonsured him when he was twenty, after having tested his humility.

Strategios, one of the monks present at the tonsure predicted that the new monk would one day become one of the great lights of the world. When, later, Martyrios and his disciple paid a visit to John the Savaite, one of the most famous ascetics of the time, the latter, ignoring the elder, poured water over John's feet.

After they had left, John the Savaite declared that he did not know the young monk but, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he had washed the feet of the Abbot of Sinai. The same prophecy was confirmed by the great Anastasios the Sinaite (April 21), whom they also went to visit.

When the Saint had been in the desert for forty years, he was charged by God to be the abbot of the monastery at the foot of the holy mountain (c. 650). It is recounted that, on the day of his enthronement, six hundred pilgrims were present, and when they were all seated for the meal, the great prophet Moses himself, dressed in a white tunic, could be seen coming and going, giving orders with authority to the cooks, the cellarers, the stewards and the other helpers.

The Abbot of Raitho, having been informed of the wonderful manner of life of the monks of Sinai, wrote to Saint John, asking him to explain briefly but in a methodical way what those who had embraced the monastic life should do in order to be saved. He presented a treatise as a Ladder of thirty steps. In his Orthodox Summa of the spiritual life, which has remained for centuries the outstanding guide to evangelical living, both for monks and for lay people.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent is a great spiritual guide, but I would recommend that you are careful when you read it. It should be read under the guidance of a Spiritual Father. Instead of reading the original, I suggest that you read **Thirty Steps to Heaven** by Vassilios Papavassiliou or *Ascending the Heights: A Layman's Guide to The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by Fr. John Mack.

We have *Thirty Steps to Heaven* by Vassilios Papavassiliou in our bookstore.