

HOMILY

# **In Praise of Virginity**

The Sunday following the Presentation of the Theotokos in the Temple, November 22<sup>nd</sup>

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**The Presentation of Our Lady Theotokos in the Temple:** In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. It was just yesterday (Nov. 21<sup>st</sup>) that we celebrated here the Most Glorious Great Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady the Theotokos in the Temple. Her most pious parents, Ss. Joachim and Anna, had received Mary as a miraculous gift from God in their old age and as an answer to their lifelong prayers, and yesterday they fulfilled their mutual vow to give her to God. And so, when Holy Mary was but three years old, her pious parents adorned her in royal garments fit for a queen, called together their relatives and friends, assembled a great throng of young virgins placing lighted tapers in their hands, and made their way to the Temple in Jerusalem from their home in Nazareth. On the third day they reached the Temple precincts. In a great procession, similar to the procession of King David leading the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem one thousand years earlier, Ss. Joachim and Anna escorted the Virgin to the steps of the Temple. There were fifteen large steps at the top of which waited the Priest Zacharias, the Father of St. John the Forerunner. Her parents placed her on the first step, and of her own accord the child Mary ran to the top step. Then St. Zacharias, as if leaving his normal state of mind and controlled directly by the Holy Spirit, took up the Most Pure Virgin and bore her into the Temple, past the court of the virgins, behind the first veil, and even into the Holy of Holies, where even the High Priest did not dare to go but for one occasion a year. There, in the Temple, Our Lady would spend the next nine years or more of her life, in devotion and humble seclusion, passing much of her time in handiwork, and in sacred reading and prayer in the Holy of Holies. There she conversed regularly with the Archangel Gabriel and was fed directly

by the angels. When she came of marriageable age she made clear to the priests that she had pledged her virginity to God, and had no intention to marry. Though this was against all Israelite custom and had never before been practiced (believing-marriage at that time holding the preeminence in honor), the priests arranged for the All-Holy Theotokos to be given in betrothal to the aged Joseph, and in this way to fulfil the appearance of custom while guarding and protecting the consecrated virginity of Holy Mary. It was in this virginal purity that she lived and prepared herself to become the True Temple of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, and it is in this virginal purity that she conceived and bore our Savior, lived out her entire earthly life, and reigns as the Queen of Heaven at the right hand of her Son even as we speak.

**The Glory of Virginity:** This morning I rouse myself to proclaim to all of you pious and Orthodox believers the glory of the virginity of our Lady and that of all who imitate her by consecrating their souls and bodies to Christ God in virginal purity! How ready is my tongue to sing the praise of her virginity together with the entire Apostolic Church! And how solitary is the voice of the Church in our corrupt and adulterous society. Who today speaks of the praise of virginity? Virginity, if it is even mentioned, is more often mocked and vilified. We live in the midst of nearly unimaginable social impurity and corruption. For decades now virginal purity has been under full-scale assault. Our culture has been weaned on impurity, grotesquely explicit sexual images in literature, music and movies, and adultery. Immodesty and fornication is the rule. The chalice of the wine of immorality has consistently increased in volume until it has reached the very top of our country, and spilled over in the unspeakable and foul crimes of our President and that of a corrupt populace so inundated with, experienced in, and accepting of sexual immorality that his crimes actually boost his popularity. We have become strangers to virginity, and enemies of the All-Holy Virgin. In the midst of this cultural ocean of lust and impurity the voice of the Church is raised on this feast! Nothing is as glorious as virginity! Nothing is so valiant! Nothing so pleasing to God! Nothing evidences greater strength! Nothing warrants a greater crown! Nothing is a greater treasure!

**Holy Virginity is the Angelic Way of Life:** Those who consecrate themselves and their virginity to Christ live the life of the angels on the earth. They live in bodies as though bodiless. They deny the natural passions of the body in order to devote themselves to the purity of the soul, and in so doing they enjoy converse with the angels. This is what true virginity is. Physical celibacy is but the outward expression of a soul completely focused on doing the will of God. This is why we called monasticism the “angelic life”. This is why the Most Holy Theotokos had such intimate converse with the angels, why they fed her with their hands, why they instructed her in the doctrine of the Church and praised her. Such was her purity that even the spotless angels were undone by it.

**Holy Virginity is the Original Life of Paradise:** Those who live in consecrated virginity also make a huge step forward in the recovery of the pristine beauty of humanity as created by God and placed in the Garden. There, in the Paradise of delights, pre-fallen man shown in glory. Adam was naked but without shame, being clothed in the resplendent glory of the Holy Spirit as in a garment greater and more beautiful than any animal skin or fig-leaf skirt. Man shone as the sun. Our bodies followed the perfect guidance of our souls, and even the animals served us. When Adam and Eve lost their virginal purity by joining league with the evil one they fell a great fall, and found themselves no longer the benevolent master of the beasts but beasts themselves! Man became a slave of his passions. Man took on a heavy, carnal existence, and found it difficult to bring his body into submission to the good intents of his soul. In order to reproduce, and continue the race, sexual intercourse came into existence. It was not until the fourth chapter of Genesis, following the fall, that we read: “Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain”. And so, even the marriage bed, which is undefiled and sanctified by the Sacrament of Marriage (Heb. 13:4) was not God’s original intention in man’s creation, nor will it continue into the kingdom of heaven. It is of this earthly and carnal life alone.

**Holy Virginity is the Life of the Kingdom of Heaven:** It was our Savior who taught us that Virginity is the life of heaven. When confronted by the Sadducees our Savior explained, “For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are

like angels in marriage” (St. Matt. 22:30). Consecrated virginity, then, radically manifests the Kingdom of God. It is living the life of the coming Kingdom in the here and now. This is the principle reason for monasticism in the Church. It is our eschatology. It is because the Kingdom of God is at hand! There is no despising of Christian Marriage in Monastic Virginity. God forbid! Rather, those who consecrate themselves in virginity, like our Lord and Master Jesus Christ Himself, the All-Pure Virgin Theotokos, St. John the Baptist, and all of our greatest saints like St. Cecilia whose memory we keep today, do so because of the nearness of the Kingdom of God. If one is able to embrace holy virginity, the way of life which is of the kingdom and eternal, instead of a way of life which is blessed- but by necessity earthly and temporal, one should! Hear St. Paul, “I wish all men were even as I myself am [in celibacy]...I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided...And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord (1 Cor. 7: 7, 32-33, 35).

This “undistracted devotion to the Lord” is the way of life in the Kingdom, and is the glory of our Lady, the Ever-Virgin Theotokos. So come now you faithful, in the midst of a crooked and adulterous generation, let us praise and honor the Holy Virgin! Come, you lovers of virginity, faithful children of the Virgin, let us honor and adore our Virginal Lord, Jesus Christ! Let all alike, virgins and married, emulate the consecration of the Theotokos. Let us see the day when the Holy Spirit will raise up from this parish those who will live in the angelic state as monks and nuns. Let our families do homage to the most exalted state of virginity by honoring the Virgin Mary, and preserving virginity of soul and a united consecration of our family life to our Lord. This is spiritual virginity in Orthodox Marriage! Let the married live with restraint and tenderness, often fasting from the desires of the flesh, and in mutual devotion to God, not using the cloak of marriage to hide what is, in reality, bestial lust. Let the married emulate as much as we can the “undistracted devotion” of our monastics (the Chief of whom is our Lady) making our homes small monasteries and churches, filled with the incense of prayer, repentance, and the knowledge of God. Come now our widows and widowers let us remember the Holy Anna, and live in consecrated continence and anticipate the kingdom of God. Come now young people, remember our Lady and guard the precious treasure which is your virginity. Keep yourself completely for God! And if He calls you to marry, give your virginity as a precious gift to your spouse. And come now, you who have defiled your virginity, find restoration in confession. Christ is the only Bridegroom who can take a wife who is not a virgin and turn her back into a virgin once more through the sacrament

of repentance! To our Lord Jesus Christ be glory, together with His Unoriginate Father, and the All-Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.