

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO  
VESPERS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 22, 2018  
IMMACULATE CONCEPTION CHAPEL  
ST. GREGORY THE GREAT SEMINARY, SEWARD, NEBRASKA**

Your Excellency, Reverend Fathers, Beloved Seminarians, Distinguished Guests and Benefactors,

Once more, as the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I offer my heartfelt congratulations on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the founding of this seminary and I assure you of the prayers, spiritual closeness, and paternal affection of our Holy Father, Pope Francis.

I want to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of Father Eickhoff and the faculty and staff of the seminary. You are doing important and difficult work shaping our future priests, whom the Holy Father described as "uncut diamonds, to be formed both patiently and carefully, respecting the conscience of the individual, so that they may shine among the People of God." (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE PLENARY OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, 3 OCTOBER 2014) I also want to thank our guests and benefactors. Your sacrifices are a commitment to the future of the Church and a sign of support for the seminarians, who have courageously responded to the call, precisely at a moment when the culture is less supportive of priestly vocations.

Each night during Vespers, the Church sings a canticle of praise uttered first by another young person, who responded generously to the Lord's call – the Blessed Virgin Mary. Saint John Paul II wrote:

"Every aspect of priestly formation can be referred to Mary, the human being who has responded better than any other to God's call. Mary became both the servant and the disciple of the Word to the point of conceiving, in her heart and in her flesh, the Word made man, so as to give him to mankind." (POPE JOHN PAUL II, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *PASTORES DABO VOBIS*, 15 MARCH 1992, 82)

The Blessed Virgin Mary is the Mother of the Church. She was and is also the Mother of the Eternal Priest, Jesus Christ, in whose priesthood every ordained priest shares. The Mother of God, as spiritual mother, teaches priests, her spiritual sons, about the priesthood by example. Three aspects of the life of the Virgin are instructive: her consent to God's will; her prayerfulness; and her missionary spirit.

*First: Mary's Consent - "Let it be done to me according to your word."*

The connection between Mary and the priesthood is rooted in the Mystery of the Incarnation. The priest makes Christ present in the Church, especially at Mass. In desiring to save humanity, God required the cooperation of one of his creatures. Through the message of an angel, God asked Mary to be the mother of His Son. Mary's answer of Yes to God had to be freely given. Her Yes prepared the way for Jesus to offer Himself as a gift in love on the Cross for our salvation and for Him to offer Himself as the Bread of Eternal Life. There is a connection between the Virgin's Yes and the mystery of the Priesthood and Eucharist.

Mary says Yes to the call without knowing all the answers and without seeing her future. She says Yes to the visible and invisible; to the difficulties and to the joys. She consents to

everything that God can make from her Yes. She can say Yes because she trusts that in God's hands everything will work out, even if the future involves suffering.

The seminarian or priest asks, "How can I say 'Yes' like that?" Knowing himself and his weaknesses, and attentive to the struggles of the Church today and her needs, he questions whether he is up to the task. He has an inkling of the mystery and demands of the priesthood, but it is only an inkling. The office of the priesthood invites yet intimidates. It is precisely in this dynamic that the one called must enter into the spirit of the Mother's consent – a spirit rooted in faith in God and a confidence in Divine Providence. Many candidates for the priesthood do not see the potential latent within themselves, but God sees it. Upon hearing the call, the words of the Virgin must arrive at one's lips: "*Let it be done to me according to your word*", which means putting oneself at God's disposal – offering oneself freely in love for others – to make Christ present.

### *Second: The Blessed Virgin as a Model of Prayer and Divine Worship*

Finding the courage to say Yes to God and surrendering one's being to Him is a work of the Spirit, who is encountered in prayer. Pope Benedict XVI stated that the priest must "first and foremost be a man of God." (POPE BENEDICT XVI, LETTER TO SEMINARIANS, 18 OCTOBER 2010, 1) People expect their priest as a man of prayer to lead them in the worship of God. The Virgin, though not a priest by office, teaches her sons how to pray. In his encyclical *Marialis Cultus*, Blessed Pope Paul VI proposed Mary as a Model of the Church in Divine Worship. (POPE PAUL VI, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *MARIALIS CULTUS*, 2 FEBRUARY 1974, 11).

Mary is the *Virgin in prayer*. Every seminarian and priest who prays the Liturgy of the Hours enters deeply into the spirit of Mary's prayer in the recitation of the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55). Her prayer reminds the priest that being an instrument in God's plan is a great joy. Joyfully she says, "*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.*" Her *Magnificat* also teaches the need for humility as it highlights, not her personal greatness, but the Lord's. Furthermore, Mary's prayer is rooted in the hope of God's promises. In the Acts of the Apostles, Mary is joined in continuous prayer with the Apostles (Acts 1:14), awaiting the promised Spirit. She accompanies the Church and priests in their prayer.

Mary is the *Virgin who offers*. She teaches the power of offering what is best to God. Mary's Presentation of the Child Jesus highlights the role of offering in salvation history. Through her offering the "*Light of Revelation to the Nations and the Glory of the People of Israel*" (Luke 2:32) is made known.

In making her offering, she is told that a sword will pierce her heart. She accompanies the priest even in his suffering. At Calvary, the hearts of Jesus and Mary are united, as the Son offers Himself as the perfect sacrifice to the Father. It is this same sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated through the ministry of priests in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Before dying, Jesus saw his Mother beneath the Cross with the beloved disciple, a figure of the priest. Jesus says: "*Woman, behold, your son!*" and asks his Mother to the care for the disciple as a son. He continues: "*Behold, your mother!*" From that hour, the beloved disciple took his mother Mary "*to his own home*" and into his inner life. For the priest, this means introducing Mary into his spiritual and pastoral work.

The man, casting his gaze on the Virgin, discovers the depths of his relationship with his mother and begins to understand that she intercedes for him with her prayers in the face of many challenges. The Virgin earnestly desires for men to answer Yes to the priesthood, and she assists them because she sees in each priest the configuration to Christ her Son. As the Virgin at prayer, she never abandons those committed to the mission of her Son.

*Third: The Virgin Mary and the Mission and Spirit of Evangelization*

Pope Francis calls each of us “to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.” (POPE FRANCIS, *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 20) This idea of “going forth” as a missionary disciple is seen in Mary’s Visitation to Elizabeth. What was the result of this encounter? Joy! The Mother of God and Her Son bring joy to our world. This encounter was the context for her *Magnificat*.

Mary arrived at her decision to *go forth* to visit Elizabeth, by patient, careful discernment. Mary gives us a good example of listening and reflecting, so that we may reach a decision to take *prophetic* action. How necessary this is for the Church today – to be prophetic – in protecting gift of life, in welcoming the stranger, in building a culture of encounter, and even in embracing celibacy for the sake of the kingdom!

The Holy Father notes a “Marian style” to the work of evangelization:

“She is a woman of prayer and work in Nazareth, and she is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from her town “with haste” (Luke 1:39) to be of service to others. The interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others, is what makes the ecclesial community look to Mary as a model of evangelization.” (cf. POPE FRANCIS, *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 288)

The Virgin teaches her sons how to surrender everything to God through consent, freely given. She teaches her sons the importance of attentive listening, unceasing prayer, and sacrificial offering in the service of evangelization. Rightly, she is the Mother of priests and priests are sons of Mary. The words of Saint John Paul II ring true:

“With her example and intercession, the Blessed Virgin keeps vigilant watch over the growth of vocations and priestly life in the Church.” (Pope John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 82)

May she continue to watch over all of you and all those priests who will be formed in this seminary.