

THE CALL TO HOLINESS

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Rejoice, highly favored one: the Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." Then Mary said to the Angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her, who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Day One

ROOTED IN THE SACRAMENTS (Full of Grace)

The greeting that the Archangel Gabriel gives to Mary, betrothed wife of Joseph, is "Full of Grace, the Lord is with you." These are words which reveal the spiritual condition of the Virgin Mary: the Lord is with her, who is full of grace. By means of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the Church teaches us that she was conceived without Original Sin, completely "filled" with supernatural grace, the one woman in whom God and His divine life dwell entirely uninhibited. She lived her entire life free from all sin, both original and personal. Original sin did not corrupt her nature, and she never disobeyed the Lord. In all truth the Lord is with her.

Our holiness, to which we are all called, begins with purification from the original sin we have at birth and from which we are freed on the day we receive the Sacrament of Baptism. From that day forward we are new creatures (cf. 2 Cor 5:17), sharing in the divine nature (cf. 2 Peter 1:4); the same divine nature in which the Virgin Mary shared from birth. From that day onward, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, dwells in us.

Behold here the first fundamental element of holiness: the Lord is with us because we live in grace; we live immersed in his divine life (the Greek word “baptize” itself means “to immerse.”). This immersion happens when we saturate ourselves in the grace of the Sacraments: how important, therefore, is our relationship with those Sacraments, the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the True Body and Blood of Christ given to us so that between Himself and us there might exist a reciprocal relationship; He in us and us in Him: **“He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in me, and I in him”** (John 6:56).

Here it behooves us all, especially we who are consecrated and receive the Eucharist daily, to pause and consider the danger that this interaction might become habitual. Reception of the Eucharist becomes a habit when we no longer think about Who we are receiving, or why. We receive Christ in order to live for Him: **“Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father; so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me”** (John 6:57).

So we ask ourselves: Do I receive the Eucharist out of habit? Do I think about Who I am receiving and why? Do I receive the Eucharist in order to live according to what Christ asks of me? Do I prepare myself devoutly to participate in the Holy Mass, dedicating adequate time to attune both body and soul to its celebration? Do I participate in Holy Mass attentively, free from distraction?

Another Sacrament that is fundamental to our life of holiness is the Sacrament of Confession/Reconciliation, given to us through the sacred ministers so that we might receive forgiveness of our sins: “And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained’” (John 20:22-23).

It is a foundational Sacrament because, in that moment in which we commit sin—the moment we disobey the Word of God—Christ’s presence within us diminishes, or even dies, depending on whether the sin we commit is venial or mortal. To live in a state of spiritual weakness or death profoundly affects both the impact of the Eucharist on, and the fruit the Sacrament of the Eucharist is able to produce in, our lives.

And once more we ask ourselves, “Am I aware of the state of grace I am in?” Do I know whether the Lord’s grace is present in me in to its fullest degree, or is it weakened—or worse yet, dead? Do I place myself before the Lord and His Word in honesty and humility, letting Him shine a light in my inmost being to illuminate my true spiritual health? Am I confident in my own righteousness, even to the point of despising others (cf. Luke 18:9)? Am I the Pharisee, when I should be the Publican (Cf. Luke 18:10-12)? Do I, like the Pharisee, compare the righteousness of my own soul with that of others, or together with the Publican do I look to the Lord and His Righteousness,

bowing before Him in humility and acknowledging myself a sinner, asking His forgiveness because I am sorry for the sin I have committed (c. Luke 18:13-14)?

The Archangel Gabriel and the Lord look at the Virgin Mary and see a woman filled with grace. When the Lord looks at us, what does He see?

In the Sacrament of Confirmation, we are consecrated as witnesses to Christ and inundated with the Holy Spirit, who brings His gifts of Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety and Fear of the Lord. This Sacrament lets the Holy Spirit work within our faculties—our mind and heart, our intellect and our emotions—enabling us to live the life to which the Lord calls us, to be His witnesses, His light in the world. Mary’s question to Gabriel, after having heard that God wanted her to become the Mother of His Son, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” (Luke 1:34), is a question she asks by means of the gift of wisdom, for she wishes to understand the method through which what God is asking of her would be accomplished. Understanding all the various ways and means of accomplishing the will of God are important, because it is through them that what the Lord asks of us is fulfilled. The Lord chooses both what He wishes done, and how He wishes it to be done. The Virgin Mary will be the Mother of the Most High, not through sexual intercourse, but through the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 1:35).

The Anointing of the Sick is a Sacrament particularly important for those who live with chronic illness or prolonged suffering (cf. James 5:14-16). It is a sacrament not of death but for life, because it brings the possibility of physical healing, it forgives sins, and it gives the one who suffers strength to bear the Cross of Christ: to accept and live their suffering with the patience necessary to offer it, in Christ, for the salvation of people other than themselves. This Sacrament calls us to attend to, and care for, our fellow Sisters who are sick or elderly; those who, due to infirmity or advanced age may live with certain individual afflictions—whether physical or spiritual. The care and consideration we show our fellow Sisters, that enables these women to live with illness or to an advanced age well, helps them to do so while dedicating their lives to the salvation of souls. That very same care and consideration that we show them enables them to, in their turn, assist we who follow after them—it enables them to light the way forward as we all walk toward holiness, an image of true communion within a religious community.

Day Two

NOURISHED BY THE WORD OF GOD

A relationship with the Sacraments is necessary to begin and to nourish the life of grace within us: it begins with Baptism and continues through the Eucharist, Confirmation, Confession and the Anointing of the Sick. Our Lord's Divine, supernatural grace accompanies us our entire lives, from cradle to grave, so that our human nature might remain immersed in His Divine Life. The Sacraments make sure that our humanity might be able to obey the Word of the Lord.

The Virgin Mary, full of Grace, always lived in the will of God, in obedience to the Law and to the Word of God without any obstacle, difficulty or even hesitation regarding what the Lord asked her. Her human nature was not weighed down in the least by sin. Her conversation with the Angel Gabriel concludes with the affirmation that is the model of every consecration and a precious truth for us: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

This statement lays bare the heart of holiness: Holy is the one who obeys the Word of God out of love, who puts oneself at its service out of love. The Sacraments lend grace so the one who receives them can be able to do the Lord's will—obey His Word. Such is the life of the Heart of Jesus Christ: His food is to do the will of His Father (cf. John 4:34), so much so that He was obedient to the point of death on the Cross (cf. Philippians 2:8).

Our relationship to the Word of God, and above all to the Gospel of Jesus, which brought an end to Divine Revelation, is immensely important in order to be holy—in order to live in intimacy with the Lord. Jesus Himself says so, exalting the greatness of His Mother Mary, she who listened to the Word of God and kept it: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). The secret of Our Lady's holiness was simply this: to have heard and lived the Word of God, always. "While Jesus was saying these things, one of the women in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, 'Blessed is the womb that carried You, and the breasts at which You nursed!' But He said, 'On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and follow it' (Luke 11:27-28). Her cousin Elizabeth says much the same thing once she receives the Holy Spirit when the Virgin Mary greets her: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. **And blessed is she who believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled**'" (Luke 1:41-45).

Our Lady's holiness teaches us that one who is holy both listens to and lives the Word of God always, until the end of their life. In fact, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clearly states, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:21-23). The hope of entrance to Paradise is dependent upon completion of God's will during life on earth.

Jesus knows those who live His word because His Word in action is the trail, the ladder which He and His Father traverse to take up residence within us. Look at what He Himself says in the Gospel of John: **"Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me.** And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him. . . . **Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him"** (John 14:21, 23).

To live the Word of God is a sign that one loves Him: one lives according to His Word precisely *because* one loves Him. And here lies the question for each of us: What is my relationship with the Word of Jesus, with His Gospel, like? Do I struggle to live out what the Lord asks me in His Word, or, like the Virgin Mary, do I not resist, do I obey easily? Our response, deep within our hearts, lets us each know how much love we love Jesus, and what His presence looks like in our lives.

It is by living out the Word of God in practice that we begin a life together with Jesus and His Heavenly Father, through the Holy Spirit, that is one of great intimacy and familiarity, a life of communion and connection beyond that of mere roommates.

So we see that the Sacraments come to fruition in a life lived in the Word of Jesus, making us capable of loving obedience to what the Lord requests of us. We are then able to say, following Mary's example, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." She, full of grace, immersed in the Lord, obeys Him in love.

The Sacraments of grace and the Word of the Lord are the two pillars, the double foundation of holiness for everyone. On this universal foundation of obedience to the Gospel sustained by the grace of the Sacraments, each person responds to the unique call of the Lord in their life, building up a holy city reflecting each individual, personal, irreplaceable vocation to holiness.

At the Annunciation, the Most Holy Virgin Mary responded to her own personal vocation: to be the Mother of the Son of the Most High. Her holiness grew as she welcomed the specific desire God had for her. The same is true for us: in welcoming

our own personal vocation, we continue along our own path of holiness. So long as we remain rooted in the Gospel lived through Sacramental grace, we deepen our own personal call to holiness. Sin, understood in this context as disobedience to the Word of Jesus, negatively impacts our personal journey; it can weaken our growth in holiness to the point of destruction.

And so we must begin our journey from those two universal pillars: the holiness of the consecrated religious, who has decided to give all of herself—spirit, soul and body—to the Lord, will crumble unless it is built the universal foundation of loving obedience to the Gospel of Jesus, supported and sustained by Sacramental grace.

As the Virgin Mary said in reply to her own incredibly personal call from the Lord; so also have we, each in our own way, answered “Yes” in reply to His call, unique to each of us, to live a deeper, more complete, more radical and radically intimate life of consecration completely and only for Him.

Now that we have the foundations set, we will consider what it means to live our response to this unique call to holiness within the religious life at greater depth through the remainder of these Spiritual Exercises.

Day Three

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN

Scripture: Luke 15:8-10

Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost. In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*

Jesus used parables to grab the attention of ordinary people by giving common examples drawn from daily events. Each parable contained a significant message. The Parable of the 10 Silver Coins found in Luke’s Gospel, is one such interesting parable.

Within the Jewish culture, when a girl is engaged, the bridegroom’s family ties a band on the forehead of the girl, holding 10 silver coins. The headband is clearly visible to everyone. The headband with coins would remain on her forehead until the day of her marriage. The girl is expected to safely secure the coins. Loss of even one coin would not only be frowned upon, at times, but it can end up in cancelling the marriage. It is contended that a girl, who cannot even safely keep 10 silver coins, would not be fit to handle her responsibilities of married life. Apparently, when a coin is lost, the bride

would desperately search for the lost coin until she finds it; and when she does find it, it's an event to celebrate.

In the parable of the 10 Silver Coins, Jesus talks about a woman who lost one of the 10 silver coins. Having lost a coin, she does three things: light a lamp, sweep the house, and diligently looks for it in every nook and corner. Let us take a closer look at this parable, using our life as a prism, and be conscious of the 10 precious coins we are given for safekeeping!

1. Our Baptismal Call

Pope Francis, in his own poetic style says, "Baptism is your identity card". The Church is not only of bishops, priests and religious. The Second Vatican Council reminded us that the Church is made up of all the Baptised. We, who are baptised, are all children of God. "We are the Church and people of God" (Perfectae Caritatis, PC 1). We are the privileged ones.

John the Baptist challenged the religious leaders, who came to him for baptism, asking them to produce evidence of their conversion. The key moment for Jesus was his baptism at the river Jordan. "You are my Beloved Son" (Mk 1: 9-11). After this event, Jesus couldn't continue to live a life as before. In times of vexation, he would revisit the Jordan Baptismal Experience: "He went away across the Jordan to the place where John at first baptised him" (Jn 10:40).

Baptism is a call urging us to be consistent in carrying out good works and to follow Jesus. Baptism is a commitment to live life differently! Paul exhorts us, "Live a life worthy of your calling" (Eph 4:1). What does the Baptism of Jesus mean to you?

Let us not lose this Silver Coin- *the Baptismal identity*. We must protect it until the end of our life.

2. Our Vocation

The divine call is the second coin we can't afford to lose. The Church acknowledges vocation to three walks of life: Married life, Religious life and Single life. No one vocation is superior to the other. Whichever call you have received, live it fully and faithfully and guard it safely. Jesus did not ask for volunteers. "He called those whom he wanted" (Mk 3:13). One can only be chosen!

We are called to be God-seekers, Mystics and Prophets! We are not here by chance or option; but by God's choice. Our vocation is a providential gift from God. It's God's amazing grace! Let us appreciate our call and count our blessings! The Psalmist says, "You have multiplied them" (Ps 40:5). Let us be ever grateful to this vocation and bear fruit that is lasting (Jn 15:16).

3. Our goal and purpose

Our motivation and commitment is the third silver coin. We are all called to be exuberant messengers of hope, animators of communities and spiritual guides for others; and we are to go after the lost sheep and bring them back to Jesus.

Let us reflect on the following questions: What is your purpose? What are your priorities? Do you have the passion and fire of our Foundress and predecessors? What happened to your zeal and enthusiasm that you had in the beginning? Are we God's chosen people or frozen people? Are we stuck in our way of praying, relating with others and rendering our ministries? Do we remember the needy? How do we make God visible? "I fought the good fight" (2 Tim 4:7-8). Our fight is not against external forces. It is against our own demons such as deafness, blindness, hardness and indifference to the suffering of others.

4. Our Love for God

This is the fourth coin we are called to keep safely. This century is a God-forgotten century. The deep desire for prayer is missing. We recite so many prayers, yet we haven't learnt to pray. Have I become a better person and more compassionate and gentle as a result of my relationship with God? Jesus went to lonely places to relate to his Abba (cf. Lk 5:16). The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray; they did not ask him to teach any other skill. Jesus gave us a formula and taught us to pray from the heart and to learn to talk to God like a child/friend. Jesus left the crowd often and went up to pray. Let us leave the crowd (cf. Mk 6:46). Remember, prayer is not meant to change the mind of God, but to understand the mind and plan of God.

Who is the God we encounter every day? Before he became Paul, Saul asked the Lord this question: "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus said: "I am Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 22:8). With Fr Stan Swamy SJ let us also say: "I want to follow the Jesus of Nazareth and not Jesus of Christians". Before involving in a mission, let us encounter our God in silence, in stillness and in solitude. "Lord Jesus, teach me to pray like you and to follow you!".

5. Our relationship with others

This is the fifth coin we need to protect today. Our love for God should be reflected in our love for others. "It is a lie if you say you love God who is invisible and you don't love your neighbour, who is visible!" says John, the Evangelist. Today's sin is indifference. As Pope Francis says: Indifference has been globalised. "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9) echoes even today. Relationships exist only on a functional level. There is dearth for passion and compassion and there is rarely a deep, sincere, trusting and intimate relationship among the members in the communities we live.

Technology today facilitates easy communication. But we often hear complaints about lack of communication, communication gap, cross communication and so on. We have successfully landed on the moon but are still groping about how to land in our neighbour's heart. Phone lines are engaged continually, yet people are experiencing terrible loneliness. We are glued to smartphones and the Internet yet our communication is still rudimentary.

We converse with people who are miles away but maintain a distance with those who are living close to us. We build more walls than bridges. Technology gives us information; but lacking in formation and transformation. Let us regularly analyse our relationship with others. "A new Commandment I give you that you love one another ... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples (Jn 13:34-35).

6. Faith

This is the sixth coin we cannot afford to lose. In the Bible Jesus speaks repeatedly of Faith. We cannot exist merely on scientific facts and answers. When the disciples were afraid of the storm, Jesus rebuked them: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (Mk4:39-40). When Peter was afraid of getting drowned in the water and he let out a cry, "Lord, save me." Jesus said to him: "O man of little faith why did you doubt?" (Mt 14: 30-31). When the disciples asked Jesus, "Why are we not able to cast out the demon, Jesus said: "Because of your little faith. If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you can move the mountain" (Mt 17:20). Seeing the Centurion's faith, Jesus marvelled and said: "Truly I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Mt 8:10).

Finally, the apostles asked the Lord, "Increase our faith" (Lk 17:5). In these challenging times, let us ask the Lord to increase our faith. "Lord! Give us the gift of faith that we may not succumb to the temptations of the world!"

7. Our dignity

This is the seventh precious silver coin! Let us not lose our worth as a human person. You are special. You are unique. There is no comparison or competition. God never made a mistake when He created you. You are God's poem. You are God's art. "I know you by name" (Ex 33:17). "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a careful thought of God. Each of us is willed; each of us is loved and each of us is indispensable" says Pope Benedict XVI.

As we are created in God's own image and likeness, we have our own worth and dignity. As Christians, we have a singular dignity. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "you are called to be saints" (1 Cor 1:2). Don't lose your holiness. Don't abuse others and don't allow yourself to be abused. Adam and Eve lost their dignity; David and Samson lost their dignity; and Judas lost his dignity for 30 silver coins.

Remember your true worth. “Lord! Help me to fulfil your purpose by augmenting myself with the fullest potentials”.

8. Reconciliation

The gift of forgiveness is the eighth silver coin we can't afford to lose. Jesus has reconciled us with God and he himself has entrusted us with this ministry (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19). Be a reconciled person. Carrying grudges will hurt you first. Don't give anyone rent free accommodation and rent free space in your mind. Anger is an acid that does more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to the person on whom it is poured. Don't expect others to be the way you expect. They have their life to live, in the way they want. Don't allow others to dictate what you have to be. Live your life on your own terms. It should matter the least to you what they think of you or how they see you.

The most beautiful verse in the parable of the Prodigal Son is: “While he was still far off, his father saw him, filled with compassion, ran towards him, embraced him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). Did the son deserve this? No. Yet, that much is the compassion and mercy of the father. We have an amazing God!

Let us ask God to help us not to keep past grudges in our mind but to live as reconciled persons. “Let all bitterness, wrath and anger and slander be put away from you... and be kind to one another, ...as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Eph 4:31-32).

9. Mission

We are called for mission- another coin, which is an integral part of our life. Jesus commanded us: “Go into the whole world...” Founders of Religious Orders heard the cry of God through the cry of the people in their context. They were disturbed and they responded with creativity and courage. That became our charism. Today we need to interpret the same charism in the light of the changing situation. Continuing traditional and routine practices and rituals is easy. There will be neither criticism nor challenges, when one follows the routine. Routine makes people complacent in their own comfort zones.

Our Pope Francis is challenging us: If a Church doesn't take a prophetic stand, it is a dead church. Knowledge detached from passion for justice is meaningless! Truth without action leads to paralysis. Only a mystic can be a visionary and missionary. Be a mystico-prophetic religious in today's context. The challenge today is not lack of academic excellence. Preaching about God is Religious mission and Revealing that God to others is Social Mission. St Francis of Assisi said it very aptly: It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.

10. The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the most precious coin: Paul exhorts us: “Walk in the Spirit and be led by the Spirit; don’t quench the Spirit. Be aglow in the Spirit” (Gal 5:16,18; I Thes 5:19); If you ask anything in my name, I will do it” (Jn 14:14). What to ask? Ask for the Holy Spirit (cf. LK I:13). After the Apostles received the Spirit, the diffident became confident, the coward became courageous and the fearful came out boldly proclaiming the Good News. It is our bounden duty to keep the coins safe. If, by any chance, a coin is lost, how do we go about recovering it?

The woman in this parable does three things to get back the lost coin (cf. Lk 15: 8).

She lights a lamp: “Your Word is the Lamp” (Ps 119:105). “Your Word is Spirit and Truth” (In 6:63). Read the Word of God as often as you can. This is the living voice of God. God instructed the kings of Israel to always keep a copy of his word nearby and read it regularly! (cf. Deut 6:6-9). Reading the Bible daily, will keep you in the range of God’s voice (cf. Acts 17:11b).

She sweeps the house: This calls us for an examination of conscience (1 Cor 11:28). It’s important that we do a personal audit on a daily basis. If we fail to accept today’s mistake, we risk the danger of forming a bad habit; it would be hard to get rid of it later. Be open to receive honest feedback from others.

She seeks diligently until she finds it: Perseverance! Let us not give up. We cannot expect fruit today from a seed we planted yesterday. Consistency in our efforts is important. Let us seek constantly and continuously and get back our lost coin. Then celebrate our life. There will be more joy in heaven! This is the fruit of our life and this is the Joy of the Gospel!

Points to Ponder

1. What are the implications of this parable for your life?
2. Is there anything that you lose often? How do you search and find it?