

HOMILY FOR THE RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS VOWS
Memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2017
Mass with the Sisters of the Cross and Passion, Elmleigh Convent, Ilkley

Today is the Memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (in the Temple) which recalls the tradition that the Blessed Virgin Mary, as a child around the age of three, was brought to the Temple and presented before the Lord. The practice of presenting daughters to the Temple was part of the Jewish custom. There, they would receive their formation—they would be educated and brought up by the holy women who lived there until around the age of 15, when they were ready to be married.

There is a tradition behind Mary's presentation. We know for many years of her marriage, St Ann was childless, and she began to pray earnestly for God to bless her with a child. And she made a promise to the Lord, that she would bring the child to the Temple to be raised in service to God.

And of course, God answered her prayers. So, St Ann was faithful to her promise, and brought Mary to the Temple. We know that from the moment of her conception, Mary belonged entirely to God. The Church Fathers also wrote how Mary herself desired to be brought to the Temple, to be presented to God in a formal, solemn, and public way to demonstrate to all that she really did belong to God.

This Feast commemorates therefore the Blessed Virgin Mary's dedication to the service of God and her complete and total obedience to his will. Even as a small child, the Blessed Mother knew how important it was to be aligned with the will of God. In a sermon given by St Francis de Sales on November 21, 1617 he said:

"Similarly, never was "so much perfume" and ointment offered to God in His Temple as the most holy Virgin brought with her on this day. Never until then had the Divine Majesty received so excellent and pleasing a gift as the offering He received from the blessed St. Joachim and St. Anne. They went to Jerusalem to fulfil the vow they had made to God to dedicate their glorious child to Him in the Temple, where young maidens were brought up for the service of the Divine Majesty."

St Francis continued his sermon by explaining how we, like the Blessed Virgin Mary, must make vows and be obedient to them as we walk this earth. It is common therefore for consecrated men and women to renew their vows of profession yearly on this Feast in memory of the offering of Mary to the Lord's service. Indeed, St Francis de Sales speaking of his own vows, said: *"This commemoration of our vows is made principally to strengthen our fervour, to renew our promises, and to reaffirm our good resolutions."*

When Pope John Paul II came to England and Wales in May 1982, he addressed religious men and women who had come together to renew their religious vows. In his homily he said to them:

"To most people you are known for what you do...Your true greatness, though, comes from what you are. Perhaps what you are is less known and understood. In fact, what you are can only be grasped in the light of the "newness of life" revealed by the Risen Lord. In Christ you are a "new creation" (Cfr. 2 Cor. 5, 17).

At some time in your lives, the call of the Lord to a special intimacy and union with him in his redemptive mission became so clear that you overcame your hesitations. You put aside your doubts and difficulties and committed yourselves to a life of total fidelity to the highest ideals of the Gospel. Your free decision was sustained by grace, and your perseverance through the years is a magnificent testimony of the victory of grace over the forces that struggle to tarnish the newness of your life in Christ. This "newness of life" is a gift of Christ to his Church. It is a proof of the Church's holiness, an expression of her vitality."

I pray that as you renew your religious vows, you will rejoice not so much in what you do or have done but in what you are: a witness to the new creation that Almighty God wishes so ardently to bestow on the whole of humanity through the graces which flow from the Passion, Death and Resurrection of His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose life was dedicated to the service of God and which was expressed most fully by standing faithfully at the foot of the Cross, you the Sisters of the Most Holy Cross and Passion, will continue to shine as a bright light of fidelity to the will of the Lord, and a proof of the Church's holiness in our world. Amen.

✠ **Marcus Stock, Bishop of Leeds**