



**Vocations Holy Hour  
Sunday 16 August 2015  
Homily**

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In the final words of Pope Francis' message for this year's World Day of Prayer for Vocations, he invites us to turn our attention to Mary, the Mother of the Lord. In particular the Pope asks us to remember Mary's courage in giving her "yes", her "fiat" to his call to her to become the mother of the messiah. Because of this courage, the Pope assures us, Mary is the model of every vocation. As we gather to reflect together and pray for the gift of vocations, especially to the priesthood and religious life, here in the presence of our Eucharistic Lord, I want to invite you to consider for a moment the nature of this courage.

Mary's "yes" comes at the end of the story of the Annunciation in St Luke's gospel. That story begins with Mary's fear. The angel appears to her and greets her in a remarkable way and Mary is afraid. God has, we might say, invaded her life in a totally unexpected way and Mary is overwhelmed and, as the familiar translation puts it, deeply troubled. The angel seeks to reassure her and explains that God is calling her to something very special. Rather than putting her mind at rest, however, the angel's message now gives rise to great confusion. She cannot understand how what the angel is telling her, can fit into what she has already decided she must do with her life. It is then that the angel tells her that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that the power of God will overshadow her. And it is when Mary hears these words, and believes them in her heart, that she lets go of her fear and her confusion and entrusts herself to God's will for her.

The courage of Mary, then, to which Pope Francis refers, is born of her faith and grounded in her faith, and it is this which enables her to say "yes". It will be the same for anyone who begins to suspect that God might be calling them to the religious life or to the priesthood. There will be moments of fear and turmoil, and there will be moments of confusion and doubt - surely God cannot be asking this of me; how can this possibly fit in with the decisions I have already made about my life?; how can I possibly take on such a challenging and difficult task? - but if God is calling, and if you can allow yourselves to hear in your hearts the same words the angel spoke to Mary - then you will discover within yourself the same gift of courage which Mary discovered.

If Pope Francis, at the end of his message, invites us to turn our attention to Mary, it is only because at the start of his message he directs our attention to Jesus the Good



Shepherd. To be called to the religious life or to the priesthood is to be called to walk in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. This of course is the call to every Christian, but in our Catholic tradition we know that we cannot on our own be faithful to this call. We need people to inspire us by their example, by the radical nature of their own fidelity, and by the challenge their lives and ministry set before us. This is the great task of priests and religious. In this Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis has called on religious sisters, brothers and priests to "wake up the world" to the beauty and power of the gospel, and he has also reminded us all that the great challenge for priests is to allow him to be, through them, present in the lives of his people as their Good Shepherd, who leads and guides his people into safe places.

As we reflect on the extraordinary nature of the call to religious life and to the priesthood, we might be tempted to think that it is too exalted, and perhaps too demanding, a call for us. After all, who would dare to think that he or she is actually worthy of such a call or perfectly equipped to meet the challenges? But this question only brings us back to the figure of Mary. She too recognised her unworthiness. In fact, she speaks of it in the hymn we know of as the Magnificat: "God has looked upon me in my lowliness - the Almighty has done great things for me". But Mary came to understand that it was not a question of her worthiness or her qualifications. It was a question of the Holy Spirit being with her and the power of God overshadowing her.

And so it is for us. If God is calling, God is also assuring us of his presence with us to enable us to do, and be, through his grace, what we could never do, or be, on our own.

So today we pray for all those whom God is calling, both those who already have some sense, perhaps as yet very faint, of that call and those who, for whatever reason, have as yet been unable to hear the call in their hearts. May the prayers of Mary support them in their journey and may they, and we, know that the Holy Spirit is with us and that the power of the Most High God covers us with its shadow.