

His Eminence  
The Most Reverend  
Metropolitan JOSEPH

The Right Reverend  
Bishop THOMAS



Archbishop of New York and  
Metropolitan of  
All North America

Diocese of Oakland, Charleston,  
and the Mid-Atlantic

## ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA

### Annunciation of the Most Holy Theotokos

Beloved in Christ,

I greet you with special joy on this feast – the advent of our salvation, our freedom from imprisonment (Psalm 141), and the dawning of the Good News.

Archangel Gabriel greets the Most Holy Theotokos, “Rejoice Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.” (Luke 1:28-29) According to Saint Gregory Palamas, the Most Holy Theotokos was already full of grace before the day of the annunciation. Living in the holy of holies in the Temple, she had reached that same place spiritually. She had achieved deification through her hidden ascetic life.

According to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, “She had used a special method for knowing God and communing with Him, as Saint Gregory Palamas interprets in a wonderful and inspired way: it is hesychia, the hesychatic way. The Panagia understood that one can reach not by logic, sensation, imagination, and human fame, but through one’s ‘nous’, which is sometimes called the eye of the heart.” (The Twelve Feasts of the Lord, p.25)

This is vitally important for contemporary seekers of God who are told that there are many paths that lead to God. Yet, Holy Scripture and the testimony of the holy fathers tell us that there is only one way – the road taken by the Most Holy Theotokos.

A contemporary father of the Church, Saint Justin Popovic echoes these sentiments when he writes, “The cleansing of the intellect is not a dialectical, discursive and theoretical activity, but an act of grace through experience and is ethical in every respect. The intellect is purified by fasting, vigils, silence, prayer, and other ascetic practices.” (Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ, p.136)

Silence and the non-acquisitiveness that the Most Holy Theotokos learned while in the Temple were the cause of Archangel Gabriel being able to exclaim, “Hail Mary, full of grace!”

According to Saint Arsenios, silence and non-acquisitiveness are two essential features that lead to deification. Both calm the nous so that the work of repentance may begin. According to Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, non-acquisitiveness “is the same as being mortified toward everything, as holding the mind in freedom from everything earthly; and silence, when turned into a habit, gives it all the freedom to gaze unceasingly into the heart.”

*“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11: 26)*

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Saint Ignatius continues to explain this spiritual principle by referring to the parable of the Hidden Treasure, a treasure so wondrous, the seeker sells all that he has to purchase it. Saint Ignatius writes, “What is the meaning of ‘he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field?’ Non-acquisitiveness. Everything – you have to sell everything: every attachment, every inclination of the heart, in order to buy repentance. It is not sold any other way. If a trifle is held onto by the heart, the heart cannot inherit repentance: this trifle will distract him.”

In one of his letters to a spiritual child, Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov laments the outward disturbances and commotions of this life precisely because silence is required for repentance and, as Saint Ignatius writes, “my heart was hardened in bitterness and insensibility – the inescapable characteristics of a heart in the absence of repentance. From repentance is born contrition: contrition illumines the chamber of the soul, bringing a spiritual light into it from the Light of Christ.”

The Most Holy Theotokos sought silence and non-acquisitiveness because she desired union with God, deification. Today’s feast and her example of the ascetical life in the Temple point us in the direction toward God.

The Most Holy Theotokos was greeted by the Archangel as full of grace because she attained what her heart desired through constant ascetical struggle. May we follow her example as we journey through another Great Lent. May the Most Holy Theotokos protect you and guide you and may the thrice holy God bless you and give you strength.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bishop Thomas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small cross-like mark at the beginning.

Rt. Rev. Bishop THOMAS (Joseph)  
Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Oakland, Charleston, and the Mid-Atlantic

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