



My Beloved Ones,

This weekend, we are blessed to commemorate two individuals of great faith: the first is our Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary (on Saturday, March 25th), and the second is St. John Climacus (on Sunday, March 26th). Since the feast of the Annunciation & the Sunday of St. John of the Ladder fall so close together this Lenten season, it seemed appropriate to consider how the Theotokos can serve as a guide as we seek to journey toward Her Son's Heavenly Kingdom.

St. John's The Ladder of Divine Ascent imagines our journey towards *theosis* as though we are climbing up a ladder to reach heaven. The bottom steps here on earth begin with a renunciation of the world, which is necessary so that we continue on to repent & resist earthly sins like slander & greed, before nearing the top of the ladder and learning how to acquire, *ἡσυχία*, or peace of the soul. St. John's Ladder was first written for fellow monastics, who wished to deepen their practices of asceticism. Indeed, guides for the laity have been carefully produced, so that they may be correctly guided by a spiritual father who

understands the text. Today, let us take a simple path and consider the life of our Panagia, who can be said to have practiced these steps, centuries before St. John wrote The Ladder.

According to Holy Tradition, the Virgin Mary was dedicated to the ascetic way of life when her parents, Saints Joachim & Anna, brought her to God's Temple as a child. Though the Gospels are silent on her earliest years, we can see from her question to the Archangel Gabriel during the Annunciation that she was subject to those human feelings such as doubt, confusion, and even fear. Though she spent all her days praising God and meditating on the Scriptures, she still wondered how it was possible for God to accomplish a miracle that was beyond human reasoning. Even so, when Gabriel explained how God's salvific plan was to be accomplished through the Incarnation, our Lady only said, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*" (Luke 1:38). The Annunciation would mean very little if the Theotokos were perfect, like an angel. Instead, it is because she was a human being that we can turn to her as a model for how we all should live. She too climbed the ladder and was just as subject to the arrows of pain and human weakness. However, it was because she practiced perfect obedience to God that we call her blessed above all other human beings.

Therefore, as we prepare ourselves to complete the Great Lenten journey, and to even go to Golgotha with our Lord, may we prayerfully think of the young girl who trusted, not in her own understanding, but left all things in God's hands. Unworthy as we are, in a few weeks we will stand with the Theotokos at the foot of the Cross. She understands our pain, and our struggles, and so we would do well to ask for her intercessions on our behalf, so that one day, we may receive entry into Christ's Heavenly Kingdom.

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Metropolitan of Atlanta