

Mary, the Mother of God. There is no higher title that our Blessed Lady can have, but we in our affection for her, we are always making up other titles anyway, Golden Candelabrum, Mystical Garden, Unfading Rose, and this year we celebrate her as Model of Perfect Commitment. So why is commitment important? Why do we need a model, and such an exalted one? Commitment is what makes civilization possible. Without commitment, we are like animals, each following his own base desires, and, to quote Thomas Hobbes, life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Commitment makes a family out of a man and woman, and without that commitment, the children grow up selfish and self-seeking, just like their parents. Commitment makes the economy. Without the promises of debts and contracts, the trust that commitment creates, there are no crops, no production, and no trade. No one can save money, or plan for the future. Commitment protects our safety. The sworn oath of the soldiers and policemen, the reliability of firefighters and paramedics protect us from danger.

We have in the Mother of God, a spectacular example of total commitment to Jesus. From the first promise to obey God's will, even though it should have made her an outcast from society, through her commitment to follow Jesus around on his pedestrian preaching missions, when the rest of the family said, he is crazy, we have come to get him—to standing by the cross when he was abandoned by the justice system that should protect the innocent, and abandoned by his friends who should have been loyal to him. And then remaining with the Church, the Body of Christ after the Ascension, what a painful separation that must have been. Throughout this long and difficult to understand pilgrimage, the Mother of God remained faithful to the commitment that she made in front of the Angel Gabriel as a witness, "Behold the Handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word."

What did Mary have that allowed her to keep her commitment perfectly? She had something that all of you have, or should ask for if you don't, or rather I should have said she had *someone* that all of you have, the Holy Spirit. It is not humanly possible to keep all these commitments on our own, and indeed we are often driven to humble ourselves in the confessional because we failed in our commitments, but as Gabriel said comfortingly to Mary, "with God all things are possible". Each of you received the Holy Spirit, and by his power we can keep our commitments and even do the impossible.

St. Paul tells us in Galatians, "walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh." When presented with a choice, how can we discern whether we are choosing the flesh or the spirit? Well St. Paul gives us a little guide in the same passage. He says, "the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Taking these things a few at a time, we can see how each of them will destroy commitments, the social bonds that make us a family.

The first works of the flesh he describes are all about lust. In our time do I have to justify St. Paul's warning? Fifty years ago, American society decided to make lust into a virtue, and how many marriages have been destroyed, how many children have been raised in broken homes or even murdered in the womb because of lust. I remember fifteen years ago watching a grown man weeping uncontrollably because his wife found pictures on his computer while he was on a business trip, and she said she would never be in the same room with him again, ending a fifteen year marriage. Based on the intensity of his sobbing, I would say he must have loved her dearly. The FBI says that the number one predictor of whether or not a boy will go to prison as an adult is whether or not he has his father at home. And yet our country rushes farther down the road of this mad experiment, praising stranger lusts unheard of even in the Roman empire, and it is the children who suffer innocently, since after all, sex is for creating children in the first place, and so children are the final victim of this enemy of commitment. As this particular battle seems more and more lost today, how much more do we need to seek the Holy Spirit, and turn to the Mother of God for assistance.

Idolatry—why is idolatry the enemy of commitment? Idolatry is the worship of a creature, and since all creatures are temporary—eventually abandoning you—worshipping a creature makes all commitments empty and meaningless. Whether we worship money, or power, or popularity, or praise, or nature, or the weather, or the earth, all these will turn us against those who placed their trust in us, those to whom we made a commitment.

Sorcery is mentioned right after Idolatry. As people become more and more spiritually lost today, they wander and seek out strange gods in astrology, superstition, spells, fortune telling, and conjuring the dead. Be assured, the dark forces hiding in these things are not there to help you keep your commitments, but seek to destroy you and your family. When I have been called to a house darkened by witchcraft, it was the entire family who was under attack from forces

unleashed by one foolish young woman. Again we turn to Mary to fill us with the true Spirit, saying as she did, "Behold the servant of God, be it done to me according to the word of the True God, the Living God, the Almighty God of Abraham."

Enmity, strife, selfishness, dissension, division, I don't have to explain why these things are the enemies of commitment, but they always seem like the right thing to do at the time, they seem like the right thing to do when we are tempted. That is why we need St. Paul's warning. These things seem like the right thing at the time, but they are the works of the flesh, not the Spirit.

Envy—how many times affection has been lost because we felt sorrow at another's success or welfare? Most certainly it kills affection, and then loosens bonds, and breaking a commitment is the next step. I remember in the Purgatorio, I was mystified that the event in the life of Mary opposed to envy was the Wedding Feast at Cana. A woman in my parish explained it to me: she said Mary was denied her "dream wedding" by the arrival of the angel Gabriel. So when the Wedding Feast at Cana was headed for disaster, Mary could have gloated and taken pleasure in their problem. She could have thrown her head back and said, "it's their own fault", but instead she sought their good, not her own, and prayed to Jesus for them. Envy destroys family love—remember Cain and Able—it destroys friendships, business relations, and religious communities. Love stays alive when we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, not when we are envious.

St. Paul says, put aside the works of the flesh, so let's do just that and forget about them now. In contrast he says, "the fruit of the Spirit are these, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

We just celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration which St. Peter describes in his second epistle, so I would like to digress to a helpful passage as we seek the Spirit and his fruit. St. Peter says, "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love." St. Peter has given us a roadmap for getting to love, and we Americans love programs, don't we? It's sort of an eight step program for love.

As we advance in life we learn that love is a choice, an act of the will, not an emotion. And to strengthen our will to choose the good, St. Peter leads us along the path. We start as Christians with just faith, but he says supplement your faith, first with virtue—do the good things even if you don't understand them.

then with knowledge—always continue your education, never say, "I know everything I need to know about my faith". And so at first we do good things out of faith, without understanding why they are good, but then with knowledge and education we come to understand why they are good, and we don't do them only from faith.

St. Peter says these lead to self-control and then steadfastness, which now allow us to keep our commitments, even when they are difficult.

Next he says to add godliness, which means the practice of religion.

And that leads to brotherly love, which is still a slightly selfish love because we love our own, and finally we reach our goal, to love as God loves, unselfishly.

Returning to St. Paul, if we imitate Mary, and allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, if we say, "Behold the servant of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word," then the fruit of the Spirit make holy commitments possible and attainable, "love, joy, peace"—without joy and peace, our commitments become bitter and then unbearable, but with joy and peace from the Spirit, our commitments become light.

"Patience, kindness, goodness", these things make our commitments possible and even sweet. And finally, the Spirit gives us "faithfulness, gentleness, and self control". As St. Paul says, "against such things, there is no law." "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another."