

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**  
**FEAST OF OUR LADY OF PHILERMO**  
**SEPTEMBER 15, 2019**  
**SAINT ANN CHURCH, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I greet you in his name, assuring you of his prayers and spiritual closeness. I thank Ambassador Michèle Bowe for her kind invitation to preside at this liturgy, as well as all the Knights and Dames of the Sovereign Order of Malta and all the benefactors of the Holy Family Hospital of Bethlehem Foundation, who truly provide for the most vulnerable infants in the place of Jesus' Birth. I also thank St. Ann Parish, which is celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, for hosting this sacred liturgy.

As you know, there has been great devotion to the icon of Our Lady of Philermo, especially in Rhodes, and later in Malta. The Birthday of Mary (and today we are in the Octave Day of that Feast) is celebrated with great solemnity and joy in thanksgiving for overcoming hostile forces during the Turkish siege of Malta on September 8, 1565. We have much reason to give thanks to the Blessed Virgin, most especially for her Son. As the Mother of God, she brought the world great hope in her Son, the Mediator of salvation. We recall the birth of Mary from Saint Ann. The flesh she received from Joachim and Ann would be the flesh she would hand on to Jesus. The Word became Flesh; it was in the flesh that Jesus saved us from our sins.

The Gospel deals with Jesus' birth rather than the birth of Mary, but both go hand in hand. In the longer version of the Gospel, we hear the genealogy of Jesus' birth, and in the shorter, we hear the events immediately preceding His birth. The Gospel deals with where Jesus is "from". Matthew, appealing to the Jewish expectation of a Messiah, makes use of three sets of fourteen generations, wanting to demonstrate that Jesus is born of the house of David, with Mary being betrothed to Joseph, thereby establishing a legal bond to the Davidic house.

On the other hand, we are surprised, because Matthew is repetitive in his genealogy, telling who begat whom, until he arrives at Joseph, whom he does not say was the father of Jesus; rather he describes Joseph as *the husband of Mary of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ*. Although Joseph is the legal father of Jesus, it is clear that Jesus is from above.

Jesus is the Son of God and the Son of Mary. Matthew explains how Mary was found with child and how the Lord explained these events in a dream to Joseph. Joseph, *being a just man and unwilling to expose her to shame*, responded to the Lord by taking Mary as his wife and raising Jesus as his son, allowing the prophetic word to be fulfilled.

Returning to Jesus' origins, we can say that through the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived her only Son. In her, the words of the prophet Isaiah are fulfilled: *Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means God is with us)*. Jesus, born of Mary, is from "above". God has come down from heaven to be with us. Why has He come? The Gospel tells us: *You shall call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*.

And who are His people? It is not simply the Jewish people to whom He was sent. In the genealogy, in addition to Mary, four women are named – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite, that is, Bathsheba. These women are named not so much for their sins or cunning, but rather, because they are foreigners. God comes to save *all* the nations – Jews and Gentiles.

These women were included in God's plan for our salvation and because, like Mary, they were all impregnated by someone other than their husband. Mary conceived by the power of One greater than Joseph. In contrast to the lifestyle of Rahab, Mary, who is pure of heart and ready to willingly surrender herself to God's plan for our salvation, rescues her people – not by deception – but by faith in God's Almighty power to save.

While Ruth had said to Boaz: *You are most gracious to me, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your maidservant*, Mary would joyfully cry out: *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for He has looked with favor on his lowly handmaiden*. Even though Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba, was given the gift of wisdom, Mary, who is called the Seat of Wisdom, carried Wisdom itself in her womb, and her Son would teach the elders in the Temple, even from an early age.

Yes, Mary and her Son far surpass the previous generations. In the mystery of the Incarnation, God has done something entirely new. He has made things new for us. He has brought His people not only hope but also salvation. In continuing to celebrate Mary's birth, we also celebrate the first bright rays of the dawn of our salvation – the presence of Christ among us.

This same Christ who was born at Bethlehem and who suffered upon the Cross is alive. He is Risen! He is alive and present now in His Church. What enables the Church to carry on – even amid crises – to witness to the presence of Christ is not our abilities – as able as we may be – but is really His very presence. The One, who came to us first through Mary, continues to enter our lives and into our personal history – our story. The fact that God came in history and was born at Bethlehem should not be something of mere nostalgia; rather, the fact that He came has changed us and history permanently. Through the Blessed Virgin Mary, God came in the flesh in time and was victorious over sin and death in time, over time and within time.

The challenge for us is whether what began with Mary's consent can continue, whether it can be ours, whether the Risen Lord can generate a new creature in us, an authentic witness whose relationship with Him is not deferred until after death, so that His presence can be experienced now. For this reason, Pope Francis says, "The one who fills us with His grace, the one who liberates us, transforms us, heals and consoles us is someone fully alive. He is the Christ, risen from the dead, filled with supernatural life and energy and robed in boundless light." (*Christus vivit*, 124)

Yes. Mary's Son, the Presence of the Living God, is alive, and He wants to be alive in you. What are the consequences of His Birth, Death, and Resurrection – His Presence – in your life? I believe there are consequences in your life and that is why you support works like those of the Holy Family Hospital – so that others may know the power of Christ to give and to generate new life. Just as Mary's fidelity generated something new in history, so too your faithfulness to Christ not only changes you but also generates something new, something good, something beautiful for God and something beautiful for the littlest ones of the human family. May Our Lady of Philermo continue to sustain and strengthen you.