

HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
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HOLY MASS FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As the personal representative of the Holy Father to the United States of America, it is my privilege to convey to all of you the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of Pope Francis. It is a special joy to be with you for the patronal feast of this Shrine, which is also the feast day of this country. May God fill each of us with his grace today, and may he bless this nation.

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“The LORD God called to [Adam] and asked him: ‘Where are you?’”¹

At first glance, this would appear to be an ordinary, simple question. And yet, in light of the event that had recently occurred – Adam’s original sin – this question was both profound and haunting. It was also a question filled with love and mercy: the question of a loving Father for his son who had become lost. Indeed, Adam *was* lost. Having allowed trust in his Creator to die in his heart,² he had grasped for the only thing in God’s creation which would take away his peace. Having eaten of the fruit of that tree, Adam now experienced two things for the first time: he was ashamed of himself, and he was afraid of God.

And so God said to Adam, “Where are you?”

When God asks Adam “Where are you?” he is evoking in Adam a consideration of his changed condition. He, who was the personal friend of God in paradise, is now afraid and hiding from the one who loves him. For the first time, Adam perceives his naked body as a reason for shame, rather than the image of God in human flesh. What we encounter in this reading from Genesis is the first moment in history of humanity’s alienation from God.

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The Immaculate Conception, which we celebrate today, is God’s healing response to the rupture between the human creature and himself. It is the beginning of a kind of *re*-creation by God. Mary *is* the Immaculate Conception. When the Holy Father made his first papal visit to the *Piazza di Spagna* in Rome, the “Spanish Steps”, he prayed to the Virgin: “You are all-beautiful, O Mary!”³ We know, by a kind of instinct of faith, that Mary’s beauty surpasses and encompasses every beauty and every virtue to be found

in the human race. It is why we call her “Queen”. She is, as the poet William Wordsworth called her, “our tainted nature’s solitary boast”.⁴

To Adam, and to each of us who are the children of his original sin, God must often ask, “Where are you?” We must hear this question from God, in order to ask it of ourselves. *Where am I?* To what place have I strayed from God – in heart, mind, spirit, or action? In what way am I hiding from God? In what way do I look at myself or others with shame, instead of looking at humanity with the loving gaze of God, in whose image we have been created? “Where are you?” says God to the sinner – to you and to me. During Advent especially, we are given a special time to hear this question. To examine the status of our relationship with ourselves, each other, and God, and to propose how we might draw closer to him once more.

But to Mary, his Immaculate Conception, God never needs to ask, “Where are you?” At all times Mary says, “Here I am.” When God visited her through the angel Gabriel, she said, “May it be done to me according to your word.”⁵ This was an echo of what David said in Psalm 40: “Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.”⁶ And both of these declarations of obedience find their fulfillment in the fruit of Mary’s womb, Jesus, whose whole life “motto” is: “Behold, I come to do your will, O God.”⁷ Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, was always in the presence of God. She never had to hear from God, “Where are you?” nor to ask herself, *Where am I?* She was, and is, always where God lives. So much so that the Holy Spirit of God was able to overshadow and to make her the Mother of God’s own Son.

This means that, through Mary, a new relationship was created between God and his people. Before the fall, Adam and Eve “walked and talked” with God in the Garden of Eden. But God did not share with them their own human flesh and nature. Through Mary, God would come not merely to walk with his creatures in a metaphorical way, but to inhabit their human flesh, to be born from the womb of his own creature, and to live a life on earth as a true man.

This, then, is the fulfillment of the prophecy hidden in our first reading from Genesis. When God told the serpent that he would give to Eve an offspring who would strike at the serpent’s head, God was foretelling his plan to raise up Jesus as the Victor over sin, shame, and death. Not only was the relationship between human beings and God restored through Jesus, but it was taken to an even higher level. Now, not only do we “walk” with God and talk with him; we actually share a human nature with him! This is why the great Easter proclamation, the *Exsultet*, is able to proclaim: “O truly necessary sin of Adam... O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!”⁸ Yes, it was Adam’s sin that earned us a Redeemer. But it was Mary’s sinless “yes” to God that welcomed the Redeemer into this world.

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With Mary as the Queen of all Saints, we thank God also that countless men and women after her have lived lives of heroic sanctity. This marvelous Shrine displays many of those heroes of faith, including

those in the Trinity Dome directly overhead. At the conclusion of this Mass, we will dedicate a statue of yet another holy one, Blessed Michael McGivney, the founder of the Knights of Columbus and the most recent American citizen to be beatified. Like Jesus, and like Mary, Fr. McGivney was completely given to the will of God.

Mary, holy Mother, you are indeed “our nature’s solitary boast”. Like us in all things, and yet without the stain of sin, you show us what God has chosen us to be: “holy and without blemish before him”.⁹ O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.¹⁰

¹ *Genesis* 3:9.

² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 397.

³ Cf. Pope Francis, Act of veneration to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Spanish Steps on the occasion of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 2013.

⁴ William Wordsworth (1770-1850), *The Virgin*.

⁵ *Luke* 1:38.

⁶ Cf. *Psalms* 40:8-9.

⁷ *Hebrews* 10:7.

⁸ *Exsultet: The Easter Proclamation*, Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition.

⁹ *Ephesians* 1:4.

¹⁰ Inscription seen by St. Catherine Labouré in the apparition of Mary on November 27, 1830.