

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
 SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION – DECEMBER 8, 2018
 BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
 WASHINGTON, DC**

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father, I greet you in his name and express His Holiness's personal closeness and heartfelt best wishes as you celebrate the patronal feast of the United States and of this glorious basilica. Just one year ago, the Trinity Dome of this Shrine Basilica was dedicated. In addition to the Blessed Trinity and the models of holiness we find in the saints who adorn the dome, there is the magnificent figure of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, the New Eve, who brilliantly reflects the holiness of God and the beauty of His creation.

Our first reading is taken from the Book of Genesis. It describes the fall of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from Paradise through disobedience and sin. At the conclusion of the reading, the man finally calls his wife Eve, *because she became the mother of all the living*. Up to this point, she had been referred to only as the *woman*. In contrast to the first Eve, there is Mary, the New Eve. She is referred to as *woman* only twice in the Gospels – at Cana and at Calvary. At Cana, she invites Jesus to perform His first miracle and to show forth his glory; it is the beginning of the new creation. At Calvary, Jesus, the offspring of the New Eve, conquers the Evil One through His Passion and Death and entrusts us to Mary with his words, "*Woman, behold your Son.*"

In contrast to the first Eve, who fell through pride and disobedience, Mary, the New Eve, triumphs through her humility and through her surrender to God. Today's Gospel recounts the beautiful story of the Annunciation in which Mary says, "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.*"

Through Mary's Yes to God, the Messiah is conceived; her offspring will conquer the devil. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons writes: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the Virgin Mary set free through faith." (Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3.22.4)

Mary was greater than the first Eve, for although both were conceived without sin, the first used her freedom to commit sin, while the New Eve used it to defeat sin. Mary's freedom from sin and her Immaculate Conception were not the result of her own efforts but were a pure gift of God's grace.

But how was Mary conceived without sin? The Catechism teaches:

"The Christian tradition sees an announcement of the 'New Adam' who, because he 'became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,' makes amends superabundantly for the disobedience of Adam. Furthermore, many Fathers and Doctors of the Church have seen the woman announced in the Protoevangelium as Mary, the mother of Christ, the 'new Eve.' Mary benefitted first of all and uniquely from Christ's victory over sin: *she was preserved from all stain of original*

sin and by a special grace of God committed no sin of any kind during her whole earthly life.” (CCC, 411)

Mary’s freedom from sin does not have to do with her parents’ sinlessness, nor does it come about by her efforts, rather it is by a “special grace” of God, flowing from Jesus’ victory over sin. It is what the Prayer over the Offerings will refer to as God’s “prevenient grace” by which she is said “to be untouched by any stain of sin.” This, in fact, is what Blessed Pius IX wrote, when in 1854, he declared the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception – Mary was preserved from all stain of original sin by a “singular grace of God” by “virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ.”

It is no wonder that the Archangel Gabriel greeted her with the words, “*Hail, full of grace*” or “Hail, highly favored one.” Mary is literally one “who has been graced”. The use of the verb *charitoō* indicates the bestowing of favor on Mary, not because of the angel’s message but as an action completed in the past with effects that continue to the present. In view of her mission, by a singular grace, Mary has been transformed, and this transformation defines her identity as the Immaculate Conception and the Mother of the Redeemer. Mary is the highly-favored daughter who rejoices because the Lord is with her. Free from sin, her heart was free to say Yes to God. Immaculately Conceived, through her faith, she conceived the One who brings salvation. Her offspring will crush the head of the serpent definitively.

What does this have to do with us? The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is a reminder to us of what God’s grace can do within a mere human creature. It is a celebration of Good News, which we are invited to share, namely that salvation comes to us through Christ. It is the inauguration of the New Creation by which the effects of the fall of Adam and Eve are undone and by which sin and death no longer have the last word.

It is also a summons to holiness and mission, as St. Paul expressed in our second reading: “*In love, he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved. In him, we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ.*”

The beautiful relief at the back of this basilica of the universal call to holiness shows us that sanctity is not for the privileged few but for all of us. The Immaculate Virgin and the saints who surround her in the Trinity Dome remind us of the power of God’s grace and what it can accomplish in us. The Holy Father’s last exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* called the whole Church to pursue this holiness, deeper union with God.

The events of these past few months lead many, both inside and outside the Church, to conclude that the Church is anything but immaculate; nevertheless, this Solemnity reminds us of the power of God’s grace to begin again. We need to begin again from Jesus Christ. Let us ask the Immaculate Virgin to intercede for the Church and for the nation, that there may be a great outpouring of grace – the grace of conversion – so that we might live a life worthy of our calling as true sons and daughters of the Eternal Father.