

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
MASS OF INVESTITURE FOR THE FEDERAL ASSOCIATION
IN THE UNITED STATES OF THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA
SAN JUAN DEL RIO CHURCH
JACKSONVILLE, FL
APRIL 25, 2021**

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 Monsignor James Watkins and the people of St. Ann Parish for hosting this sacred liturgy as we offer a Votive Mass in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, venerated under the title of Our Lady of Philermo. I take the opportunity to also thank the Knights and Dames of the Sovereign Order of Malta, as well as those being invested, for their commitment to serving the sick, especially this year, as well as their commitment to peace and to the protection of those persecuted for their faith.

The Knights have a long and noble tradition, which has evolved over the centuries, but while the mission of the Knights has adapted to the times and circumstances, the mission remains essentially the same – to help others to recognize and truly know Christ. Effectively, this means giving witness to Christ in both word and deed. Pope Paul VI wrote that “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41).

As I mentioned we are celebrating a Votive Mass of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary on this Sunday. As you know, there has been great devotion to the icon of Our Lady of Philermo, especially in Rhodes, and later in Malta. The Nativity of Mary 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. 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.

This celebration comes at a moment of anxiety and hope. There is still a lot of fear surrounding the pandemic, and yet, with more people getting vaccinated, there is a hope, maybe even an expectation, that things will gradually return to normal. The anxiety and expectation remind us of the world before the coming of the Messiah. Mary's birth lies at the confluence of the two Testaments - bringing an end to the stage of anxiety, expectation and mere promises and inaugurating the new times of grace and salvation in Jesus Christ. Mary, the Daughter of Zion and ideal personification of Israel, who is also “the hope and the dawn of the whole world.”

The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary was not accidental. It was well prepared by God from the beginning of history. Already in the Garden of Eden, God promised our first parents, Adam and Eve, to send them a Savior through a Woman, whose “seed will crush the head of the serpent.” Mary's birth heralded the coming of the promised Messiah, who was to destroy the power of Satan, reopen for us the

gates of heaven, and assure divine blessing to the entire human race. With Mary, after a long expectation of the promises, the times are fulfilled and a new economy is established. Fear, anxiety, and expectations give way to a new time of grace.

This certainly was what was foretold by the prophet Micah from whom we heard in our First Reading. The fifth chapter of that book began ominously: *Now you are walled about with a wall; siege is laid against you; with a rod they strike upon the cheek the ruler of Israel.* From darkness and gloom would come forth *one who is to be ruler in Israel* who would *stand and feed his flock.*

Micah foretold the coming of Jesus. Today, throughout the Church, is Good Shepherd Sunday. Christ is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His flock. He is the Good Shepherd who feeds His flock with His very Body and Blood. He is the one who in Micah's words stands and feed his flock in strength and majesty. He is the one who will be *great to the ends of the earth.*

Yet, his origins are humble. He was born in the little town of Bethlehem. He was born of a lowly handmaiden, and his foster-father was a simple carpenter. Still, God the Father has exalted Him in the Resurrection and has seated Him at His right hand. The Gospel we heard, of course, is not that of Mary's birth but is Saint Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. Here, the central figure is Joseph.

Joseph had intended to divorce Mary quietly when the angel appeared to him in a dream and explained what happened. In his Apostolic Letter on Saint Joseph, Pope Francis noted that it was Joseph's obedience that made it possible for him to surmount his difficulties and spare Mary. He was an obedient father, but the Holy Father describes Joseph also as an accepting father, writing:

"In his hesitation about how best to act, God helped him by enlightening his judgment. Often in life, things happen whose meaning we do not understand. Our first reaction is frequently one of disappointment and rebellion. Joseph set aside his own ideas in order to accept the course of events and, mysterious as they seemed, to embrace them, take responsibility for them and make them part of his own history. Unless we are reconciled with our own history, we will be unable to take a single step forward, for we will always remain hostage to our expectations and the disappointments that follow." (Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Patre Cordis*, 8 December 2020, 4)

As Knights and Dames of the Sovereign Order of Malta, you have an illustrious history and a tremendous responsibility to be "good shepherds" of the gifts of God in caring for the sick; in bringing hope to the imprisoned; and in protecting and defending the vulnerable, including those persecuted for their faith. With great gifts comes great responsibility. In this regard, the Holy Father points out that Joseph was certainly not passive, but was courageous and pro-active, noting that "in our own lives, acceptance and welcome can be an expression of the Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude."

Joseph found his courage and responded to the angel's exhortation: *Do not be afraid!* Setting aside any disappointment that things didn't turn out the way he had expected, with both courage, he embraced the call to be the foster-father of the Redeemer and to be the Husband of Mary. Because of the trust of Joseph and Mary in God, a Child was born, whom Joseph named Jesus, which means God saves.

God is calling you, especially the new members, to be courageous. God is calling you, and as St. Paul pointed out in the Second Reading: *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who*

love him, who have been called according to his purpose. If God is at work in you, then others will know His Son, Jesus, who brings salvation.

That is what we celebrate during this holy season of Easter: God saves us from our sins and offers us new life. He turns disappointments and failures into new opportunities of grace and joy. He shows Himself through His Son to be a loving Father who knows how to give good gifts to His children. With gratitude for the many gifts and graces he has bestowed upon the members of this Order, as well as those who will be invested today, let us courageously accept our responsibility to shepherd the People of God, asking for the intercession of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.