

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
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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. I greet all those joining by live-streaming, social media and television, especially those joining through the Eternal Word Television Network.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was declared by Blessed Pope Pius IX in 1854 with these words:

“At the first instant of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of Almighty God and in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, the Virgin Mary was preserved and exempted from all stain of original sin.” (Pius IX, Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854)

With the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the Catholic Church affirms that Mary, on account of a singular privilege, came into existence already completely holy. From the beginning, Mary, a daughter of Israel, was absolutely exempt from original sin, and yet as a daughter of Adam, she was saved by Jesus Christ.

She was preserved from sin, in “pre-vision”, to use the term of the note Mariologist René Laurentin, of the merits of Jesus. Just four years after the dogmatic definition, Mary revealed herself at Lourdes to Saint Bernadette with the words: “I am the Immaculate Conception.”

The Feast is a reminder of God's love for us and of his plan to save us. From His own people, who had not always been faithful to the covenant, by a singular favor, there would be a bud of grace from which the Flower of Jesse might blossom forth, a renewal of purity within which this same people might give birth to God its Savior. Mary would be “full of grace” and symbolizes the recreation of man by grace and the rejuvenation of a world that had grown old under the burden of sin. Her son would be the new Adam giving life to the world through the forgiveness of sins.

Today's celebration reminds us that there is only one thing that truly lowers us – sin. The world has lost the sense of sin, and, with it, a loss of the sense of a need for a Redeemer. The world and the market present their products and events as sinful to make them more attractive.

Marketers use terms like “guilty pleasures”; “sinfully delicious”, and so on, to entice. Sometimes people even relish in sinning boldly. Instead of deliverance from sin, many people focus on liberation from regret over sin. Instead of fighting against sin, we fight against the idea of sin, replacing it with “guilty feelings.”

We deny the problem rather than resolve it. It is similar to trying to bring down a fever rather than curing the illness, of treating symptoms rather than the disease. The world appears to be afraid of

everything but sin. The people of our day are rightly afraid of the coronavirus, but they seldom take precautions against the contagion of sin, which includes both personal sin and structural sin, which manifests itself in contempt for the poor and the most vulnerable members of society, that is, in a “throwaway culture.”

The First Reading from Genesis reminds us that it was the first Eve who was instrumental in bringing pain and suffering, the result of sin, to the whole world. The Gospel reminds us that it will also be a woman, Mary, the New Eve, who will be instrumental in bringing salvation and healing to a world suffering from sin, with her words: “*Let it be done to me according to your word.*”

With her consent and the overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit, the Redeemer of the World, came to dwell in her. Sin exists and has terrible consequences, but the dogma of the Immaculate Conception tells us something very positive: God is stronger than sin. It reminds us of Saint Paul’s words in the letter to the Romans (5:20) that where sin abounds grace abounds even more.

Mary is the sign and proof of this. The whole Church, after her, is called to become “*glorious, without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, that she might be holy and immaculate*” (Eph 5:27). It is in her that the Church begins, and thus God can say, “*You are wholly beautiful and without blemish.*”

The Second Reading tells us that all of us have been called by God to share His love and blessings long before we even existed. This is even more true of Mary, who was singled out from eternity by God to be the Mother of His Son. Saint Paul reminds us of the holiness to which we are called; the whole purpose of our lives is to live and to exist for the praise and the glory of God. The way that we can best do that is through our intimacy with Mary and with Jesus and in our imitation of them.

Mary shows us, through her obedience at the Annunciation (and throughout her life), how to be holy, how to trust in God. She is what God wants for each person, and she models for us how we, though fragile and weak, can fulfill God’s desire by responding to His call. All of us must admit that we do not perfectly respond to God’s call.

While Mary is immaculate, we know all too well that we are not. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that:

“But while in the Most Holy Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she is without spot or wrinkle, the followers of Christ still strive to increase in holiness by conquering sin. And so, they turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues.” (Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, 65).

What does Mary teach us? She teaches us to welcome divine grace; to allow that grace to bear fruit in our life, and to let that grace radiate forth to others. The Immaculate Virgin teaches us how to entrust ourselves to God. In doing so, we are freed from sin so as to live in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

She, who described herself as the *lowly handmaid of the Lord*, is also the fairest daughter of our race, and thus, all generations call her blessed. The Immaculate Virgin, our Mother and Teacher, is proof that when we turn to God and trust Him, we do not become smaller, as the devil suggested to our first parents; rather, we become greater – greater in our capacity to love.