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APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SOLEMNITY 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 spiritual closeness and heartfelt best wishes as we celebrate the patronal feast of the United States and of this magnificent basilica.

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception recalls that 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.*" The Opening Prayer for Mass spoke of her being preserved "from every stain by virtue of the Death of" her Son, and the Prayer over the Offerings mentions that she was "untouched by any stain of sin" on account of "prevenient grace."

Mary is the New eve. From her would issue forth the fruit of redemption and a whole people, redeemed by her Son. Our First Reading recalls the sin of our first parents. God had made them without sin. God declared His creation "very good."

Nevertheless, our first parents disobeyed God. The devil tricked them into thinking that God would deprive them of their freedom and cast God as a rival to humanity rather than as a Father. The consequences of this deception were deadly. Sin has consequences, and God is just. But, He is also merciful. He offered consolation in the gift of children. Eve would become the "*mother of all the living.*"

In contrast to Eve, who through disobedience brought death into the world, we have Mary, the New Eve, who trusted God and surrendered everything to Him, bringing forth Christ, the life of the world. Today we honor and venerate her as one who was "*full of grace*", full of the grace and love of God and, as the "*Ark of the New Covenant*", who carried within her womb the One who is the definitive covenant of God with men.

St. Ambrose writes:

"God is the Father of the created world and Mary the mother of the re-created world. God is the Father by whom all things were given life, and Mary the mother through whom all things were given new life. For God begot the Son, through whom all things were made, and Mary gave birth to him as the Savior of the world. Without God's Son, nothing could exist; without Mary's Son, nothing could be redeemed."

Through the Immaculate Virgin, the Redeemer came into our world, and through Him, as Paul writes, the Father has "*has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ.*"

Saint Paul exhorts to be like Mary: to be “*holy and without blemish*” in the sight of God, inviting us to behave as true children of the Father, *for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in His Beloved Son*” (Eph 1:6)

To be holy and without blemish in the sight of God – what does this mean? It is a call to bear fruit that will last, which is possible in the measure with which we decide to be with Jesus, to love, to follow, to obey, and to announce Him. To be holy and blameless, we must begin to see things as Mary saw them. Thus, we will learn to grow in the “obedience of faith” and to persevere in it in the face of difficulties, and suffering (and we have had our fair share of suffering during these past years).

We will be holy and blameless to the extent that we try to imitate Mary, who made herself available and humble so that with her we might say, “*I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.*” To be available and humble: how much we need these virtues today in a society and culture that claims to not need God or does not want Him!

Today, it is pride – the sin of our first parents, who desired to be like God – that blinds many so that they do not understand that beyond their desires and hopes, needs and demands, interests and preferences, God is God. We need to let God be God in our personal life, community life, family life, and social life.

This is what Mary did. She allowed God to be God and surrendered to Him and so glorified God. Not far from here is the home of the Little Sisters of the Poor. Their foundress, St. Jeanne Jugan, who incidentally was from my home parish, said, “If you keep the spirit of humility and simplicity, never seeking the world’s esteem, then God will be glorified and you will obtain the conversion of souls.”

Availability and humility are more necessary than ever in giving witness to Christ. To follow Christ is not easy! To follow Christ demands a lot: to go against the false values that our world proposes; to continually put others before ourselves; to give up our own interests to concern ourselves with those of Christ. To follow Him means being with Him, even at the point of suffering and the Cross.

This too is what the Immaculate Virgin did. She, who was preserved from any stain of sin, remained faithful to God, not only in the hardships she endured at Christ’s birth, but even at the foot of the Cross, where she stood faithfully. But Mary was a woman of hope. She hoped in the promises of the covenant. She hoped in the promises of her Son. What does Christ promise those follow Him? Tiredness. Suffering. Persecution. The Cross. *But also*, the Resurrection and Life.

How do we follow Him and attain life? The Gospel reveals that first condition for following Him is to encounter Him personally. Mary knew Him personally and intimately, and so, she was actively ready to say *Yes* to the Life – the fullness of life – that God offered. She was actively ready to do God’s will and was humble before Him. She was holy and blameless – Immaculate – in His sight. Knowing Him and loving Him, the Virgin could not ignore her vocation, which came through the message of an angel. She said: *Yes – Let it be done to me!*

The call to be holy is a call for each of us, as the Second Vatican Council stated: “All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” (LG, 40) The relief of the Universal Call to Holiness at the back of this basilica is a reminder that with God all things are possible, even holiness. The Preface for this Mass speaks of the Immaculate Virgin

as a “worthy Mother” for the Son of God *and* as signifying “the beginning of the Church, his beautiful Bride without spot or wrinkle.”

What type of Church are we to be? Are we that Church that acts as His beautiful Bride without spot or wrinkle? We know that the path to holiness is not easy. Fortunately, the Preface for the Mass reminds us that the Immaculate Virgin who is “placed above all others” is for God’s People “an advocate of grace and a model of holiness.”

Mary, the Immaculate Conception, is our advocate of grace and is the supreme example of what God’s grace can do in a mere creature. The Good News is that through her surrender to God – through her *Yes* – the effects of the fall can be undone and we can become a new creation in her Son. In her Son, we too can be completely free from sin. Let us commend ourselves to our powerful Advocate to obtain for us and for this country that grace which helps us to be truly free, holy, and blameless in the sight of God.