

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
December 8, 2021**

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Reverend Fathers, Deacons, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

We are in the middle of the week in the middle of Advent—and probably in the middle of many other things. Mary was probably in the middle of her work, in the middle of her prayers, in the middle of her home, and maybe even in the middle of preparations to get married, when the angel Gabriel and appeared to her. In the middle of all Mary’s activity and ours, however, God reminds us that the present and the past are always preparation for the future, one that we can hardly imagine.

Today is indeed a special day liturgically as we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the patronal feast of our Diocese, of our Cathedral, and of our country, the United States of America. Today’s Holy Day turns our attention back to that fact that from the moment of her conception, Mary was kept free of the stain of sin and prepared to say yes to the request from God brought to her by the angel Gabriel. Mary’s *fiat*—her *yes*—reverses the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve.

In the Book of Genesis (Gen 3:9-15, 20), we read how God created a good world for the benefit of Adam and his wife. Both the man and his wife, fashioned in God's image and likeness, had the benefit of God's protective word steering them away from the fruit of the tree of knowledge with its hurtful consequences.

The first clue that something has gone very wrong is the fact that God must call out for the man. Beforehand, apparently the man and his wife would readily approach whenever God was present. But now they fear to do so because they are ashamed to stand naked before their Creator. Clearly there is now some injury in their relationship with God. It also becomes clear there is injury between the man and his wife. Adam, who was initially overjoyed at the gift of his wife, now coldly describes her as "the woman." He even seems to place blame on God for putting the woman in his life to begin with. The woman blames neither Adam nor God; she candidly declares that she was tricked by the serpent's clever argument. Eating from the tree of knowledge has also brought injury to the relationship between man and animals. There is enmity between the woman's offspring and that of the serpent. Fittingly, the serpent must crawl about on the dust of the earth to which man must now return as a result of the serpent's deception.

Despite all this, the reading concludes with a focus on goodness and blessing rather than on death. Adam calls his wife *Eve*, a name which plays on the Hebrew word for life. She becomes the mother of all those born into this world.

In contrast to first disobedience described in the Book of Genesis, we have the Gospel account of the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38), which tells of Mary's free and humble obedience to God's call. Because she sets aright mankind's relationship with God, the early Church fathers Justin Martyr and Irenaeus rightly called her the New Eve. More with heartfelt trust than understanding, Mary offers her *fiat*: "Let it be done to me according to your word."

In contrast to Adam's disobedience, we have the obedience of St. Joseph. Today's Gospel passage starts out by introducing Mary as "a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David." He agrees to take Mary as his wife despite the mysterious message that she would conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is fitting that we also honor St. Joseph today on this feast day of his beloved wife since today marks the close of the Year of St. Joseph proclaimed by Pope Francis, which began a year ago on December 8 and now concludes

today, one year later. Pope Francis declared this Year of Saint Joseph to recall the 150th anniversary of the declaration of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church. In his Apostolic Letter entitled *Patris corde* (“With a Father’s Heart”), Pope Francis describes Saint Joseph as a beloved father, a tender and loving father, an obedient father, an accepting father; a father who is creatively courageous, a working father, and a father in the shadows.

Patris corde highlights “the creative courage” of St. Joseph, which “emerges especially in the way we deal with difficulties.” “The carpenter of Nazareth,” explains the Pope, “was able to turn a problem into a possibility by trusting in divine providence.”

Joseph is also a father in obedience to God: with his ‘*fiat*’ he protects Mary and Jesus and teaches his Son to “do the will of the Father.” Called by God to serve the mission of Jesus, he “cooperated ... in the great mystery of Redemption,” as St. John Paul II said, “and is truly a minister of salvation.”

Pope Francis describes Joseph’s fatherhood of Jesus as “the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father.”

“Fathers are not born, but made,” says Pope Francis. “A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child.” Unfortunately, in today’s society,

children “often seem orphans, lacking fathers” who are able to introduce them “to life and reality.” Children, the Pope says, need fathers who will not try to dominate them, but instead raise them to be “capable of deciding for themselves, enjoying freedom and exploring new possibilities.”

This is the sense in which St. Joseph is described as a “most chaste” father, which is the opposite of domineering possessiveness. Joseph, says Pope Francis, “knew how to love with extraordinary freedom. He never made himself the center of things. He did not think of himself, but focused instead on the lives of Mary and Jesus.”

In his letter, Pope Francis notes how, “Every day, for over forty years, following Lauds [Morning Prayer]” he has “recited a prayer to Saint Joseph taken from a nineteenth-century French prayer book of the Congregation of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary.” This prayer, he says, expresses devotion and trust, and even poses a certain challenge to Saint Joseph,” on account of its closing words: “My beloved father, all my trust is in you. Let it not be said that I invoked you in vain, and since you can do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power.”

At the conclusion of his Letter, he adds another prayer to St. Joseph, which he encourages all of us to pray:

*Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted his only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.
Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself a father
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy, and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.*

On this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, we pray that we may learn from the example of Mary and Joseph in their obedience to God, that, like them, and through their intercession, we may always say “yes” to God and to His invitation share eternal life at the heavenly banquet in His Divine Kingdom.

May God give us this grace. Amen.