

**Homily for the Dedication of St. Mary's Church
Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
December 8, 2014**

**Holy Trinity Parish - St. Mary's Church
Brussels, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: in the middle of the 19th century, roughly around the time of the founding of this parish, an Advent tradition that has become very popular was begun in Germany. This tradition is the counting of days to Christmas on what is known as the Advent Calendar. These calendars come in various sizes and designs, with some of the more popular versions including small gifts, such as candy, behind a little door for each day. These little gifts are like early Christmas presents as one prepares for the great gift of the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ on Christmas morning.

Today, our Advent journey has brought each of us to another door. This time, it is not a door on a calendar, but the doors of this church. Just under three years ago when I visited this church to inspect the damage that had been done by a devastating fire on Christmas Eve, all one could see as we looked through the doors of this church were the charred remains of a

place that had been gutted by that tragic fire. Today, as we walked through those same doors, we were treated with the remarkable gift of this beautiful church, newly restored and more beautiful than ever. This early Christmas present is one which fills our hearts with gratitude and rejoicing as we gather to dedicate this church as a house of God where we will continue to assemble for years to come in order to receive the abundant gifts of God's grace and mercy.

Our celebration this evening is quite unique. Normally, the Rite of Dedication of a Church comes after a new church has been built, either as a new parish is erected, or when a new church building replaces an older one for an existing parish. This is not the case here, for the building itself is not new, as the exterior walls of this church, which survived that fateful fire three years ago, date back to as early as 1863, as seen above the entrance to the main doors as you enter the church.

This rite is also used whenever an existing church has undergone some sort of significant restoration or renovation, as was the case with our cathedral in Springfield in 2009. This gets a little closer to our celebration this evening, although it does not quite fit the normal plan. Generally, restorations are planned and are the result of the desire of the parish to

renew the beauty of their place of worship. The circumstances that have brought about this rededication are quite different. The fire that ravaged this church was not planned and it was certainly not the desire of the parish. That said, it *was* the desire of this parish and my wish as well to take the little that remained of this church and to restore it to be once again that sacred place where we come to be united with God and one another as we celebrate our Catholic faith together. Today, that desire has been brought to fulfillment and we gather to dedicate this place in solemn ritual to be once again a place sacred to the Lord.

As you look around the church, you will notice a blending of the old and the new. Many of the elements were rescued from the fire and have been returned to this church, marking the continuity that exists in this church from before and after the fire. At the same time, we see many new elements which enhance the beauty of this sacred space. Some of the elements, though new, closely resemble those of the old interior so as to maintain that continuity once again.

Among those elements are the various medallions on the molding around the ceiling of the church. These medallions represent various titles of the Blessed Virgin Mary, under whose patronage this church is

entrusted. These titles come from the Litany of Loreto and they describe Mary with different images and symbols from the Scriptures and Tradition of the Church. I would like to briefly reflect on three of those titles of Mary as they help to express the sentiments of what we celebrate this evening.

The first title of Mary that I would like to call to our attention is Mary as Comforter of the Afflicted. When they experience some sort of injury or setback, children often turn to their mother for comfort, as mothers are particularly good at showing tenderness and love. The same is true for us with our Blessed Mother. We turn to her when we struggle and suffer in our lives of Christian discipleship. We seek her tender comfort as we grieve in the midst of our afflictions.

It was to our Mother, Mary, that many of us turned when faced with the tragedy of the fire here of Christmas Eve in 2011. Many of you, I am sure, grasped your Rosary beads, asking Mary for that consolation in the middle of a very difficult situation. I am certain that her intercession has had a major part to play in strengthening this parish to move forward in hope, trusting that the Lord would provide for what was needed to restore what had been lost.

From that profound experience of affliction has come an equally powerful experience of joy, and so I offer for our next title, that of Mary, the Cause of Our Joy. We can say that Mary is the cause of our joy because she is the mother of Jesus, who is the source of joy in our lives. Her 'yes' to God at the visit of the angel Gabriel opened the door to Christ coming to dwell among us, an event of great joy, one that we are preparing to celebrate in just a few weeks at Christmas.

Mary also shows us that we can find joy in the midst of suffering. Even as she watched her son die on the Cross, she had the joy of knowing that His death would bring about salvation for all mankind. We see, then, how this title is connected with the previous one, for our turning to her in the midst of affliction is done with faith and hope that God can and will bring good out of every situation. Mary has been with us in that journey from sadness to the joy that we experience today.

This brings us to the third and final title of Mary, that of Mary as Queen conceived without sin. We celebrate this dedication today on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, a day of great joy in the Church as we commemorate that event in salvation history when Mary was conceived in the womb of her mother, St. Anne, without any trace of

original sin. This title of Mary as our Queen conceived without sin is also a nice synthesis of the other two titles on which we have reflected.

Mary's immaculate conception came in the context of an affliction that had been brought upon all of humanity as a consequence of the sin of our first parents. Their disobedience to God resulted in our being separated from our relationship with Him. This is signified in the Scriptures by Adam and Eve being placed outside of the Garden of Paradise. This affliction of being separated from God was not to last, however. God had already begun to set a plan in motion that would result in our being restored once again to Him, a plan which, as we heard in our first reading, would involve a woman and her offspring.¹ That woman was Mary and her offspring is Jesus, the Son of God who would restore us to union with God.

The Immaculate Conception, then, is a very significant event in the unfolding of this plan of salvation, and thus a bridge from affliction to joy. As one author explains: "With the Immaculate Conception, the first new spark of authentic joy came silently into the world."² Though initially hidden, that joy would continue to grow as God's plan became more and

more visible through the Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

Because of the important part that the Immaculate Conception plays in this great plan of salvation, this feast day is one for great rejoicing for the Universal Church as we marvel at God's loving concern for His Church. Added to that is the fact that both our country and our diocese are under the patronage of the Immaculate Conception. And last, but not least, this church of St. Mary's in Brussels is also under the title of the Immaculate Conception and it is a source of exceeding joy that we have the dedication on this day.

It is my prayer that this feast day will be a continued reminder to all of the members of this parish of how strong God's love is for you and how Mary, our Mother, will always be with you, both in times of affliction and joy, as she accompanies you in your journey and as we all look forward to joining her in being united with her Son and all of the saints in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ cf. Genesis 3:15.

² Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God – Daily Meditations Volume Seven: Special Feasts: July – December*, (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2003), 297.