

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
December 8, 2015**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here in this Cathedral Church dedicated to our Blessed Mother, under the title of her Immaculate Conception. Not only is this church dedicated to her, so too is our diocese as well as the United States. It is no understatement, then, to say that this truly is a great day of rejoicing for us as we gather for this Mass on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception.

For being such an important element of our Catholic faith, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is not the easiest teaching of our Catholic faith to understand. Some people confuse the Immaculate Conception with the Virgin Birth, erroneously thinking that the Immaculate Conception refers to Jesus being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit rather than the actual teaching that the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary being conceived without original sin.

During the times in our society when literacy rates were relatively low, catechesis on various aspects of our Catholic faith was communicated through the medium of artwork. Paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and stained glass windows all served to tell the story of different aspects of our faith. When it comes to the Immaculate Conception, artists were faced with a difficult situation.

Mary's being conceived without original sin is a rather abstract idea. The soul is invisible and therefore impossible to accurately depict through visible means. Yet, there are several attempts that have been made, many of which are quite beautiful, such as the image depicted here above the high altar. Even this image, however, is difficult to discern as being that of the Immaculate Conception, as it is often confused for the Assumption of Mary into Heaven. The image of Mary standing on the crescent moon, a symbol that is often associated with the Immaculate Conception, is what identifies this image accurately.

Many will also point to the absence of any explicit reference to the Immaculate Conception in the Scriptures as a challenge to understanding this dogma. This is not new to our Catholic faith, as there are other concepts and terms which we use that, while not explicit in the Scriptures,

are indeed well-grounded in Divine Revelation. Take for example the Trinity or Purgatory, words which never occur in the Bible, but are supported when seen in the “unity of the whole of Scripture” and the “living tradition of the whole Church.”¹

The readings given to us for this feast day provide us with a solid scriptural foundation for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. We begin by going back to the story of the creation of human life in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve abused the freedom that had been given to them as they chose to disobey the command that the Lord had given to them. At that point, God certainly could have given up on humanity, but He did not; instead, He put into motion a plan that would restore humanity’s relationship to God. We get a hint of what this plan will involve when we hear the Lord say to the Devil: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel” (Genesis 3:16). This passage is telling us already that God’s plan for restoration will involve humanity in some way.

In the Gospel for today’s Mass, we see how those words spoken by the Lord so long ago would come about through the Incarnation, through which the humanity of Jesus Christ would reconcile us back to that

relationship with God that had been lost through original sin. God chose to become man, to be like us in all things, except sin.² That includes being born through the womb of a woman, Mary. Because His coming into the world was so unique, it should not surprise us that God would choose a unique way in which He would come into the world, while still respecting the normal biological means of giving birth. And so He preserved this woman from any stain of original sin from the moment of her conception in the womb of her mother. This is what we call the Immaculate Conception. It is this mystery foretold in the verse from the Song of Songs that we find atop the mosaic above the high altar in Latin – “*macula non est in te*” – “there is no blemish in you” (Songs 4:7), that is, “there is no stain of sin in you.”

In the final analysis, even though we give special honor to the Blessed Mother on this day, the reason for this feast day, and all Marian feast days for that matter, is Christ. Mary’s being conceived immaculately was in preparation for that moment when the angel announced to her that she would become the mother of the Savior who would “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Pope St. John Paul II called the Immaculate Conception “the turning point in history of man's salvation,”³

for it was the first physical event in the execution of the plan formed long ago for our restoration to God.

On this day, Pope Francis has declared that the Church is to begin an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The Holy Father has chosen this day for the reason already mentioned, that “God did not wish to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil.” He says of this feast day that “[w]hen faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.”⁴

This Year of Mercy is an opportunity for us to experience this extraordinary gift of the Lord’s love and mercy for us, a mercy which is capable of overcoming every sin and weakness with which we struggle, so that we can move closer to our ideal of being “holy and without blemish before him” (Ephesians 1:4).

We are also invited to reflect on how we can then share that mercy with others through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The Holy Father speaks of these when he says the following:

Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us

rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead. We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged.⁵

On this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, this great moment of God's mercy toward humanity, let us turn to Our Mother and grasp her hand, asking her to lead us to a deeper experience of Her Son's mercy in our lives during this Jubilee Year of Mercy. Having experienced that profound gift, let us imitate her, that just as she went in haste to carry the merciful love of God to her cousin Elizabeth, we too may set out to be witnesses of this mercy to the world around us, thus advancing the Lord's plan to bring all of humanity into His Kingdom where there will be no end.⁶

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, §12.

² Cf. Hebrews 4:15.

³ Pope John Paul II, *Homily at the Basilica of St. Mary Major*, 8 December 1978.

⁴ Pope Francis, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, §3.

⁵ *ibid.*, §15.

⁶ Cf. Luke 1:33.