

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
December 8, 2016**

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

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

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, the patroness of our diocese as well as the United States. Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Many of you have been participating over the past nine days in the Novena to the Immaculate Conception, which culminates with this Eucharistic celebration today. I commend you for your fervent devotion to our Blessed Mother and I assure you that she cannot fail to hear the prayers of her faithful sons and daughters and will entrust them to her beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, just as she did at the wedding feast of Cana.

The observance of this solemnity originated in the seventh century feast which was first known as the "Conception of Mary by Saint Anne," highlighting the fact that this mystery celebrates the dogma that Mary was conceived without original sin, not that Jesus was conceived by the Holy

Spirit, as some people mistakenly believe. Pope Clement XI established this solemnity for the entire Church in 1708.

Pope Pius IX, in his apostolic letter *Ineffabilis Deus*, issued on December 8, 1854, wrote that God filled Mary “with the greatest abundance of His celestial gifts, and her participation in the divine nature exceeds that of all the angels and saints together. Her life reflects so great a fullness of innocence and sanctity that a more exalted creature cannot be conceived of, except in the Creator Himself.”

Saint John Paul II, in his address of December 8, 1982, said that we look up to Mary “as on a Star that guides us, shining through the dark clouds of human uncertainty. The annual Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception shines bright from within the background of the Advent liturgy. We contemplate Our Lady in the divine economy of salvation as the ‘Gate of Heaven’ through which the Redeemer comes into the world.”

To us this may seem a rather esoteric festival, a theological peculiarity, particularly in light of the earthiness of this season, the earthiness of a poor couple wandering the earth in search of home, the hominess of the King of the Glory silently insinuating Himself through the power of the Holy Spirit into the womb of a poor Jewish girl.

The solemnity today may seem more relatable to us if we have a pretty firm image of St. Ann and St. Joachim, the old couple whose life was incomplete without the little girl who would be their destiny *and* the destiny of the nations and the ages.

Today we celebrate a spark, a moment in time when the world was changed forever. Today we celebrate something different. Today we celebrate not something that was. Today we celebrate what will be. Today we celebrate what we can become.

What have we become? What do we want to become?

We want to be good, but sometimes we find it to be a struggle.

We want to be holy but sometimes it's difficult to resist temptation.

During this season of the year, we might meditate on a famous Christmas carol. I know it's not quite time yet, but it is very fitting for this solemnity and we never sing it in this country. It's an old English hymn called "In the Bleak Midwinter."

The words are by the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti. Here are the last two verses. These verses capture this season perfectly.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered here
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air
But only his mother
In her maiden bliss
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss

What can I give him?
Poor as I am
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb
If I were a wise man
I would do my part
Yet what I can I give him
Give my heart

Brothers and sisters, in light of this great mystery, can we, like Ann and Joachim, can we, like Mary, can we open our hearts, can we give our hearts?

Can we put aside any petty differences we have?

Can we see with eyes that allow us to see the potential for the miraculous? Can we see in the bread and wine the potential to become something infinitely greater? Can we see in ourselves the potential to become something greater?

God saw fit to invite the Blessed Virgin Mary to become someone greater. God sees us as fitting to become greater. He invites us just as he did the Blessed Mother.

Today is about a simple spark, a moment in time in which everything was changed forever.

Will we turn our lives over to God like Ann and Joachim did, like Mary did, like the baby Jesus did?

Brothers and sisters, will this day mean anything to us?

Will we see our brothers and sisters here around us, our family members, our coworkers, our fellow Catholics, even complete strangers and think about opening ourselves to them? Will we give our hearts, freely to God, freely to one another, those known and unknown?

That is what we celebrate today, the possibility of being open to what God desires to do with us and for us. Whatever God calls us to do, we know and we trust that it will be something great.

May God give us this grace. Amen.