

**Homily for the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

March 4 and 5, 2017

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Reverend Monsignors and Fathers,
Deacons,
Consecrated men and women,
Catechists and sponsors,
Catechumens and candidates,
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our gathering today in this Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is a poignant reminder to us of our having been chosen by God. Out of the depths of His great love and the favor of His generous grace, He has called each one of us, in the first place, to repentance and, in the second place, “to go out and bear fruit that will last” (John 15:16). We have here in this mother church of the Diocese the images of several sainted people whom the Lord God likewise called; in particular, I would like to focus on three of them: the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Peter, and Saint Paul.

First, I call your attention to the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception depicted in the mosaic above the high altar in the sanctuary. God called the Virgin Mary to cooperate

with His grace and allow the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity to be conceived by the Holy Spirit within her womb. With Mary's great and humble *fiat*, her acceptance of the divine plan, Love took on human flesh, walked among us, taught us, and died for our redemption and sanctification. Mary had no personal sin of which to repent because the Lord, knowing she would cooperate with His plan, preserved her from the stain of original sin at the moment of her conception. This is why we call upon her under the title of the Immaculate Conception and why the Latin inscription above her image says to her, *Macula non est in te*, "There is no stain in you," that is, "There is no stain [of sin] in you."

We might say the lasting fruit produced by Mary is both her maternal concern for us, her spiritual sons and daughters, and the witness of her faithful love of her Son. In the constant embrace of His Mother, Jesus, even on the Cross, "could feel at His feet the consoling presence of His mother and His friend;" if we ask her, Mary can teach us to maintain such constant and faithful friendship with her Son.¹

Now, if you raise your eyes high above you and look to the left and to the right, you will see (unless you are seated very near the sanctuary) two colossal statues of the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul. The figure of the

Prince of the Apostles towers above us on the left, holding the keys of the kingdom Jesus entrusted to him, while the figure of the Apostle to the Gentiles towers above us on the right, holding the sword, symbolic both of his reference to the word of God as the “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17) as well as the instrument by which he was beheaded.

Both of these martyrs repented of their personal sins, particularly of thinking they knew better than the Lord Jesus. Saint Peter, you will recall, attempted to persuade Jesus from taking up the Cross. Saint Paul persecuted the Church – and in doing so, Jesus, as well – because the followers of the Way seemed to him to contradict the law given to Moses. Both had to convert their way of thinking to that of the Messiah and so produced a fruit that will last.

The fruit of Saint Peter is both the office of the Bishop of Rome passed on to his successors, now Pope Francis, and the example of his weeping over his sins that led to a deepening of his friendship with Jesus. The fruit of Saint Paul is both the example of his tireless preaching of “the message of the truth” to all people, the message of our sin and our salvation in Christ, and the power of his written words telling us how to maintain our friendship with Christ (James 1:18).

The Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Peter, and Saint Paul, each experienced the friendship of the Lord Jesus in a unique way and desired to remain within His friendship, no matter the cost. They knew, as Pope Emeritus Benedict once observed, “once you enter into friendship with God, everything in your life begins to change.”²

You, dear catechumens and candidates, have heard the Lord Jesus say to you, “I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father” (John 15:15). Indeed, you have learned that,

As you come to know Him better, you find you want to reflect something of His infinite goodness in your own life. You are attracted to the practice of virtue. You begin to see greed and selfishness and all other sins for what they really are, destructive and dangerous tendencies that cause deep suffering and do great damage, and you want to avoid falling into that trap yourselves. You begin to feel compassion for people in difficulties and you are eager to do something to help them. You want to come to the aid of the poor and the hungry, you want to comfort the sorrowful, you want to be kind and generous. And once these things begin to matter to you, you are well on the way to becoming saints.³

Is this not why you, dear catechumens, have asked of Mother Church to be baptized into the death of the Lord Jesus? Is this not why you, dear

candidates, have asked to complete your initiation into the life of Christ that first began at your baptisms?

In these last days leading up to what Saint Augustine called “the mother of all holy vigils,” that is, the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, we who have already completed our Christian initiation look to you to be renewed by the example of your joyful love of the Lord Jesus. As we see your desire to be counted among the friends of Jesus, we ask that our consciences will be troubled and disturbed by the sad “fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.”⁴ We cannot fail to offer them God’s friendship, “His blessing, His word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith.”⁵ The presence of so many of you catechumens and candidates reminds us that although the friends of the Lord Jesus experience the hatred of the world, the friendship offered by Jesus still attracts men and women because it satisfies the deepest desires of the human heart (cf. John 15:18-19).

We are soon to embark upon our fourth Diocesan Synod, beginning on Tuesday of Holy Week at the Chrism Mass when I will bless and

consecrate the sacred oils with which your Christian initiation will be sealed. I hope many of you – if not all – will be able to join us again that evening. I have called for this gathering of the local Church because, with Pope Francis, I have recognized that “sometimes we lose enthusiasm for mission because we forget that the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters. If we succeed in expressing adequately and with beauty the essential content of the Gospel, surely this message will speak to the deepest yearnings of people’s hearts.”⁶

I hope you will join us in prayer to prepare for this synod as we ask the Lord to “open our hearts and minds to know [His] will, to speak the truth with love, and to hear each other, that together we might plan, with the help of [His] grace, for the strengthening and growth of our diocese.”⁷ Because you, dear catechumens and candidates, are now filled with the fervor of the faith and of friendship with Jesus, it will be important for us to hear your voices and to learn from your experiences of the call to friendship with the Lord. I urge you, then, to take part as fully as possible in the work of this synod so that we might happily put into practice all that the Lord has commanded us (cf. James 1:22-25).

Let us pray, dear brothers and sisters, that throughout these days of Lent and the coming synod, the Lord will stir up within our hearts a renewed desire for His friendship and a sincere sorrow for our sins. Let us pray, also, that our heavenly patroness, the Immaculate Conception, as well as Saint Peter and Saint Paul, will help us, through their intercession, to go out and bear fruit that will last, each according to the circumstances of our lives. By tasting this fruit, may many more people know they have been chosen by God to enter into His friendship and respond as you, catechumens and candidates, have done.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 285.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Pupils at the Sports Arena of St. Mary's University College, September 17, 2010.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁷ Prayer for the Fourth Diocesan Synod.