

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
and the Closing of the Novena**

December 8, 2017

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

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is most fitting that we gather here today to give praise and thanks to almighty God for the gift of our Blessed Mother as we celebrate this, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Patroness of our Cathedral, of our diocese, and indeed of our whole country, the United States of America. In particular, I commend those who have participated in the Novena in honor of the Immaculate Conception, which we conclude at this Eucharist today on this magnificent Solemnity of Our Lady.

Given its place as one of the central teachings of our Catholic faith, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is not among the more simple teachings to understand. On the contrary, many Catholics, even those actively involved in the life of the Church, only have superficial and insufficient knowledge of the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception.

Some people even confuse the Immaculate Conception with the Virgin Birth of our Lord, whereby they erroneously think 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 the various truths of our Catholic faith was primarily communicated through the creation and study of sacred artwork. Paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and stained-glass windows all served to tell the story of different teachings of the Church.

However, when it came to the Immaculate Conception, artists were faced with a difficult reality, the reality that Mary's being conceived without original sin is a rather abstract concept. Due to its very nature as an entirely spiritual reality, the soul is invisible and therefore impossible to accurately depict through the visual arts. 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 of our Cathedral. But even this image is difficult to discern as being a visual representation of the Immaculate Conception. As a matter of fact, it is often confused for the Assumption of

Mary into Heaven. Rather, the image of Mary standing on the crescent moon is a symbol that is often associated with the Immaculate Conception and is helpful in identifying this image as depicting the Immaculate conception of our Blessed Mother.

Despite this difficulty that artists have experienced, the Church, in her great wisdom, provides us with readings for this solemnity that “paint” a clear picture of our belief concerning the Immaculate Conception, principally, that the “Blessed Virgin Mary, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, was preserved free from every stain of original sin.”¹

Today, in our first reading, from the book of Genesis, we see the first scriptural reference to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Toward the end of our reading the writer of the book tells us that God, speaking to the serpent (the personification of the devil), says “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.”² In this *proto-evangelium*, or first anticipation of the Gospel, Our Lord shows the opposition of Mary

to the devil through establishing a profound connection between our Blessed Mother and the salvific mission her Son.

The late Pope Saint John Paul the Great explains that “We observe that in Mary the enmity God put between the serpent and the woman is fulfilled in two ways. God’s perfect ally and the devil’s enemy, she was completely removed from Satan’s domination in the Immaculate Conception, when she was fashioned in grace by the Holy Spirit and preserved from every stain of sin. In addition, associated with her Son’s saving work, Mary was fully involved in the fight against the spirit of evil.”³ As a matter of fact, “We see her at the culminating moment of this ‘enmity’: at the foot of the Cross of Christ on Calvary. There ‘she’ will crush your head and you will strike her heel.”⁴

In the portion of his Letter to the Ephesians that we heard just a few moments ago, St. Paul writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him.”⁵ These words refer to our Blessed Mother in an extraordinary way, for she, more than anyone else, was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, because in a

unique a way she was chosen for Christ, she was chosen to be His Mother. Therefore, by the grace and favor of God, from the moment of her conception, she was preserved from the stain original sin, holy and without blemish before God, in order that in time she might become the mother of our Savior.

Our celebration of the Immaculate Conception comes during this season of Advent, when we turn our focus to preparing ourselves for the coming of our Lord. Although it is common to refer to two comings of Christ,⁶ the first being when Jesus was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary here on earth and the Second Coming of Our Lord when He will come “at the end of time to judge the living and the dead,”⁷ St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote that there are three comings of the Lord:

The third lies between the other two. It is invisible, while the other two are visible. In the first coming he was seen on earth, dwelling among men; he himself testifies that they saw him and hated him. In the final coming *all flesh will see the salvation of our God, and they will look on him whom they pierced.* The intermediate coming is a hidden one; in it only the elect see the Lord within their own selves, and they are saved. In his first coming our Lord came in our flesh and in our weakness; in this middle coming he comes in spirit and in power; in the final coming he will be seen in glory and majesty.⁸

The account of the Annunciation in our Gospel today provides us with one of the most poignant examples of the connection between the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the Solemnity of Christmas, giving us a model for how we must live, so that, when we are called to our judgment, we too will be found to be “holy and without blemish” before God. Like Mary in this account, we too must commit ourselves to living as Christ’s disciples on a daily basis and echo her *fiat*, by saying yes to what our Lord asks of us.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us look to our Blessed Mother as a constant source of assistance in our commitment to living the discipleship and stewardship way of life, to which we as a diocese recently committed ourselves at the conclusion of our Diocesan Synod last month. Mary shows us what it means to give oneself entirely to the Lord. Our Lord asks us to follow her example of how we should respond to God’s grace in love and so serve God each and every day.

May Mary, the Immaculate Conception, first and greatest disciple, guide us on our advent journey, enlightening us to see the Lord present in our daily lives as we await the final coming when He will be seen in glory and majesty. May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854.

² Genesis 3:15.

³ Pope John Paul II, General Audience of 24 January 1996.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, Homily, 8 December 1985.

⁵ Ephesians 1: 3-4.

⁶ See, for example, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. 15, 1-3: PG 33, 870-874*), quoted in the *Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours for Sunday of the First Week of Advent*.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 682.

⁸ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo 5, In Adventu Domini, 1-3: Opera Omnia, Edit. Cisterc. 4* (1966), 188-190; quoted in the *Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours for Wednesday of the First Week of Advent*.