

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION – DECEMBER 9, 2019
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, DC

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father, I greet you in his name and express His Holiness's personal closeness and heartfelt best wishes as you celebrate the patronal feast of the United States and of this glorious basilica. In the beautiful Trinity Dome of this Shrine Basilica, we see the magnificent figure of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, who brilliantly reflects the holiness of God and the beauty of His creation.

Today's Solemnity recalls that Mary benefitted first of all and uniquely from Christ's victory over sin: *she was preserved from all stain of original sin and by a special grace of God committed no sin of any kind during her whole earthly life.*" One hundred sixty-five years ago, Blessed Pope Pius IX declared the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. It is not simply that Mary was delivered from sin; she was preserved from sin. She was the holy remnant of Israel, referred to by the prophets. In her was the hope of Israel, and amid the winter of human history, she sprouted. From her would grow the tree of redemption and a whole people, redeemed by her Son.

At times in the darkness of history, even from the beginning with the sin of our first parents, recounted in the first reading, to the Babylonian exile to even the present difficulties in the Church, it seems that the forces bent on dominating us are winning or that God has abandoned us. Some claim that God is dead, while others believe that God failed. Mary reminds us that God does not fail. In and through the young woman of Nazareth, God began His plan for victory. In and through her, God came to save His people, and still He comes to save us. God does not save us from history; rather, through Mary, He saves us in history.

It was in history that our first parents sinned. The Tempter tricked them into believing that they could not trust God; that somehow, if they depended on God, they would be less free and less human. The devil tricked our first parents into thinking that God would deprive them of something, and so he set God up as a rival to humanity. He deceives them into thinking their relationship with God is based on power, not love, and the consequences are quite literally deadly.

God does not want to make us miserable or to deprive us of the good life. He has made us for love. In fact, love is not dependence, but is a true gift from God. Freedom too is a gift from God, but it is a freedom for something – freedom for love – not a freedom from something. If we live in the right way – obedient to a loving God – then we discover what Adam knew when he first saw Eve: we are made to live with another and for another. Freedom, when rightly used, helps us to be more fully human. The devil convinced our first parents to live in opposition to love, in opposition to trust, and in opposition to the truth of who God is.

But this mindset of Adam and Eve – the lack of trust in God – is true even in our lives. The drama of freedom, rebellion, sin, and violence continues, but must it always be this way? In the Immaculate Conception we begin to see that it does not always have to be this way! In the Virgin Mary, we find a

person who trusts God and in trusting God changes the world. In surrendering to Him – *Let it be done to me according to your word* – she does not become less in God’s hands; rather, she becomes more – she becomes the Mother of the Redeemer, and her Immaculate Conception is the first fruit of Redemption.

The person who entrusts himself or herself to God does not become a slave to sin or to the passions but becomes freer. She who described herself as the *lowly handmaid of the Lord* will be called blessed by every generation! When we turn to God, we do not become smaller but greater – greater in our capacity to love. A person who follows the example of Mary and opens his or her heart to God becomes more sensitive to spiritual things and more sensitive to the things of God – including loving the people that God loves. Rather than selfishly withdrawing into oneself, the person who has fallen in love with God and shares in His life is able to share in God’s love for the children of God and for all creation.

Mary remained close to God her whole life – from her conception onward, and because she is close to God, she is also close to us. Who of us gathered in this basilica can honestly say that we have not felt the closeness of the Virgin Mary, even when we have experienced great loss or when we have fallen into sin? Who can say that Mary abandoned them? Just as God does not fail, neither does the Immaculate Virgin. She gives us her Son who saves us! The Immaculate Virgin not only brings us the Redeemer, but she gives us encouragement. She encourages us to trust God – to take the risk of loving another. She reminds us that God is not our rival, and in her immaculate and pure heart, she holds us tenderly, reminding us that with God we become truly great, truly free, and truly holy.