

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
PILGRIMAGE TO THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
OF THE DIOCESE OF METUCHEN ON THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF ITS FOUNDATION
WASHINGTON, DC
SEPTEMBER 24, 2022

Your Excellency, my brothers and sisters in Christ, I am happy to be with you on the occasion of your Diocesan Pilgrimage to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, which providentially coincides with the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Diocese of Metuchen. As the Holy Father's personal representative in the United States, I want to assure you of his spiritual closeness and his prayers.

When your diocese was established, your first bishop described the events as "a great adventure in grace." Your presence here is a sign that this adventure continues. We give thanks to God for you and for the many graces and blessings he has poured out upon the bishops, priests, religious, and the whole People of God in Metuchen over these past 40 years.

Today your journey continues and you have arrived at this place of pilgrimage, dedicated to Our Lady, the patroness of your diocese. Pope Francis says:

"Pilgrimage is a symbol of life. It makes us think of life as walking, as a path. If a person does not walk, but instead stays still, this is not useful; it accomplishes nothing. Think of water: when water is not in the river, it does not course, but instead it remains still and stagnates. A soul that does not walk in life doing good, doing many things that one must do for society, to assist others, or who does not walk through life seeking God and inspiration from the Holy Spirit, is a soul that finishes in mediocrity and in spiritual poverty. Please do not stand still in life!" (Message to Participants in the 37th Nocturnal Pilgrimage from to Loreto, 6 June 2015)

Pilgrimage is a symbol of life and an opportunity to encounter the God of Life. God journeyed toward humanity and through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, the Eternal Word of God, His Only-Begotten Son, became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is also our Mother. She is the Mother of the Church, and today, we are celebrating a Votive Mass in honor of Mary, Mother of the Church.

In our Gospel, we hear the beautiful story of the Annunciation – of how Mary became Mother. As Mother, she is also a teacher, and she teaches us how to be disciples. Firstly, she recognizes that she is the disciple – the lowly handmaiden – not the Master. As a disciple, she is an attentive listener. Pope John Paul II called her "the woman of silence and listening."

The Pope wants us to be a synodal Church, a Church that journeys together, as you are doing on this pilgrimage, but another key element of synodality is listening. It is difficult to listen amidst the noise of our world. Mary had a spirituality of listening to the Word of God.

At the Annunciation, Gabriel would find her in silence and greet her. While many translations say, "Hail Mary, full of grace," in Greek, the Angel says, "*Rejoice, full of grace.*" Hearing these words, Mary must have immediately thought of the words of Zephaniah (3:14-17): *Rejoice, daughter of Zion; shout for joy, Israel ... the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.*"

What was spoken once to a whole people was now uttered to her! In Greek, the words joy (*chará*) and grace (*charis*) go together. In her would be fulfilled the promise of the Messiah – the one who brings joy and grace to the world!

It was in silence that she received Gabriel's joyful message. Unlike Zechariah, she did not refuse to believe, nor did she ask whether this will happen or become upset; rather, she merely inquired how it will happen. She received God's Word and tried to understand its meaning for her life. Mary is a model of faith. She thought about how God's plan might come about and asked: "*How shall this be?*" (Lk 1:34).

Her faith had grown over the years through an attentive listening to God, which allowed her to entrust herself to His plans for her life. She listened to the Word of God in order to abandon herself to His Word with her whole mind, heart, and will.

As individuals and as a Diocese, celebrating its fortieth anniversary, you can ask God: How are you calling me – us – to serve? Pope John Paul II once said that a vocation is "a gift whose purpose is to build up the Church and to increase the Kingdom of God in the world." As disciples, at times, we want our vocation on our terms. Mary teaches us that everything must be surrendered to God. This lesson is best learned in silence and contemplation.

The angel understood Mary's question and answered: *Do not be afraid.*" One must imagine the burden which she had to face, knowing that she would carry God within her! Mary could say "*Let it be done to me according to Your Word*" because she knew that God would carry her – support her, strength her. She would be willing to do whatever God told her; she freely and willingly surrendered herself to Him.

She gave her consent. She said *Yes* to God – a *Yes* which changed the world. If Eve brought sin into the world by listening to the voice of the serpent, now Mary, by listening to the voice of God, brings the Redeemer into the world. The Church Fathers say that "she conceived through her ears" – by listening to God.

But once she conceived, she could not keep this Good News to herself; she hastened to meet Elizabeth. She is not simply a disciple, but she is also a missionary disciple! She gives us the example of a Church going forth. Mary arrived at an important decision to say *Yes* to God and later to visit Elizabeth, by taking her time and thinking things through. Commenting on this passage, Pope Francis reminds us:

"It is difficult in life to take decisions. We often tend to put them off, to let others decide instead. ... In the Annunciation, in the Visitation ... Mary goes against the tide; she listens to God, she reflects and seeks to understand reality and decides to entrust herself totally to God. Although she is with child, she decides to visit her elderly relative and she decides to entrust herself to her Son with insistence so as to preserve the joy of the wedding feast." (Address of the Holy Father, 31 May 2013)

Mary gives us the good example of listening and reflecting, so that we may reach a decision to take prophetic action. How necessary this is for the Church today – to be prophetic – in welcoming the gift of life, in welcoming the stranger, in building a culture of encounter! It should be no surprise to us that Mary was gathered in prayer with the Apostles at Pentecost, when they went forth boldly on their mission to set the world on fire with the Gospel.

We learn from our Gospel, the difference her *Yes* to God made: it changed our world! She conceived the Savior! Even through the agony of the Cross, her *Yes* did not waver. Her *Yes* was extended to those whom Jesus loved: to the Church. As Mother and Queen of the Church, the effects of her *Yes*

extend to us here below on our pilgrim journey. It leaves us to ponder: what difference might our prophetic Yes make in our Church and our world?! It is not always easy to make the big decision or to be a prophet. In the dark moments, we must listen to the word of the Archangel Gabriel once more: *“Rejoice, full of grace!”*

To be prophets, we need God’s grace; therefore, I conclude with a prayer – the one with which we conclude the Angelus: *Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by his Cross, be brought to the glory of His resurrection, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Thus, may our pilgrimage end - in eternal glory!