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APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
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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, which is adorned in the Trinity Dome with the magnificent figure of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, who brilliantly reflects the holiness of God.

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.*" In 1854, 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.

This is what theologians call "prevenient grace." In the first reading, after Adam and Eve sinned, God took the initiative and announced the redemption, telling the serpent He would place "*enmity between you and the woman and between her offspring and yours.*"

Mary is the one who had nothing to do with the devil, and her Offspring, Jesus, was the one who defeated him once and for all. Mary received the fruits of Jesus' triumph in time before he accomplished it eternally on Calvary. The prevenient grace she received from the first moment of her existence is a sign of God's initiative and the beginning of the final phase of the unveiling of God's plan of redemption.

This initiative is proclaimed in the letter to the Ephesians, which relates that "*before the foundation of the world,*" God the Father "*blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him ... to be holy and without blemish before him.*" God has these blessings planned before we were conceived, before the world was created.

God takes the initiative with Mary, not only in her Immaculate Conception, but also in the sending of the Angel Gabriel to announce to her, "*Rejoice, you who have been filled with grace.*" She was filled with every spiritual blessing and the greatest of all, God himself, in her soul, her heart, and then, through her generous Yes, her womb. *Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*

Mary reminds us that God, who seizes the initiative with humanity, does not fail in His plans to redeem and bless us. 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 even now 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 deceived 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.

In contrast to the first Eve, who fell through pride and disobedience, Mary, the New Eve, triumphs through her humility and through her surrender to God. Today's Gospel recounts the beautiful story of the Annunciation in which Mary says, "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.*"

Through Mary's Yes to God, the Messiah is conceived; her offspring will conquer the devil. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons writes: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the Virgin Mary set free through faith." (Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3.22.4)

In Mary, we learn to have both faith and trust in God, who always seeks to bless us. In the Virgin, we encounter a person who trusts God and who, 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. Her Immaculate Conception is the first fruit of Redemption.

Mary's response to the angel and her surrender to God remind us that while God seizes the initiative with us, He does not force His love upon us. Mary demonstrates a humble receptivity to the grace God was extending, using her freedom in the service of life – her Son's and ours. She reminds us of the need to be humble and receptive and to not be selfish with our freedom.

Not only does she remind us of the necessary spiritual dispositions – faith, trust, humility – but she gives us an example as to how we ought to live: as a handmaid of the Lord, consecrated to the Lord's service, not just allowing but with all her heart desiring her life to develop according to God's will. She shows an unequivocal response to God's blessing. Her response is not a "maybe" but a definitive Yes.

As our Mother, she wants us to have a heart like hers: open to God, open to others. Like all mothers, she wants her children to succeed. She prays for us and for this country. She prays that we would have a living and trusting relationship with God. As the "Seat of Wisdom", she knows that 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. In my travels throughout the world, I have never found a Catholic who did not experience the maternal tenderness of Mary, but Mary is the model disciple, the image of the Church in her perfection. To honor the Virgin and to show our closeness to her, let us make a concerted effort this Advent to trust God – to take the risk of loving Him and loving Him in our neighbor. We keep in front of us the powerful lesson: God is not our rival. With God we become truly great, truly free, and truly holy.

Entrusting ourselves and this nation to her, we pray: *O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee.*