

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE ANNUNCIATION
MARYLAND DAY
ST. CLEMENT'S ISLAND, MARYLAND
MARCH 25, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Happy Maryland Day! It is my joy to gather with you on St. Clement's Island, and to celebrate Mass at the very place where Fr. Andrew White, a Jesuit priest, offered the first Mass in the English-speaking Colonies on this date in 1634.

As the personal representative of the Holy Father to this country, allow me to convey to you the spiritual closeness of Pope Francis (also a Jesuit, of course!), and to assure you of his communion with you and with all who live in this nation.

For the Catholics who were part of that first voyage to Maryland 389 years ago, their choice to land on March 25th was deliberate: not only was this date the civil new year in those days, but it was also the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord.

What we celebrate today is expressed concisely by the words from the Letter to the Hebrews: "Behold, I come to do your will."¹ These words are placed on the lips of Christ, whose total commitment to the will of the Father is the Sacrifice that saves all humanity. In the Annunciation, the Blessed Virgin Mary gives her *own* perfect obedience to God's will, which opens the way for Christ's coming into the world. The first Maryland colonists sought to do God's will, with a mixture of success and failure. And although we, like our ancestors, fail to live God's will perfectly, we can repent of our sins and turn back to the LORD, especially during this season of Lent.

Let us look briefly at the ways in which the obedience of God's people both fails and succeeds throughout history: first, with Ahaz the King; then, among the colonists of this land and ourselves; and finally, with Mary our Mother.

In the first reading from Isaiah, the King Ahaz is invited to trust God's plan to protect the people of Judah. Pretending to be pious, Ahaz refuses to trust God. Instead, he depends on a foreign alliance that gives the nation material security, but which leads them into religious corruption and idolatry. In spite of the resistance of Ahaz, God still gives His sign – a child who will be called *Emmanuel*, meaning "God-with-us"² – but the government of Ahaz is a religious disaster, and the faith of the people suffers greatly, all because Ahaz refused to do God's will.

¹ *Hebrews* 10:9

² cf. *Isaiah* 7:14

Moving forward in history to the time of the American colonization: the first English settlers of this land were a group of about 140 people, both Protestant and Catholic. Motivated by Gospel values, they were seeking a land where they could do God's will with greater freedom. For them, this meant both economic and religious freedom. They commemorated their journey with explicit reminders of their Christian faith. The island was named for St. Clement, on whose feast day they had embarked from England. They gave biblical names to the ships that carried them: "The Ark" and "The Dove". The first capital of the State of Maryland was called "St. Mary's City".

To the Catholics who landed here, it was important that their first action be to celebrate the Eucharist. In doing so, they consecrated their new home to God through the offering of Jesus Christ. This implied that everything they were about to do in forming a new society, was to be done in the name of Jesus to the glory of God the Father. While in many ways they fulfilled this pledge to honor God, there were other ways in which they failed, sometimes gravely. One glaring example of this was the institution of slavery which they eventually adopted, and through which they denied to a portion of God's people the very freedom that they sought for themselves.

Virtue and vice... obedience and rebellion... faithfulness and failure: this is the story of God's people from the beginning, and this is *our* story: the story of a people who are invited by God to trust in him, and who struggle to obey. In the middle of this story, and at the center of human history, stands the Annunciation of the Lord. When the angel Gabriel gave Mary an astonishing message – "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear...the Son of the Most High"³ – she did not try to escape the call to trust in God, like Ahaz did. Instead, Mary was *open* to what she heard. She did not understand this mysterious message; but she did something that *a good Jesuit would do (!)*: as if schooled in the prayer of discernment taught by St. Ignatius, Mary entered into a "colloquy" with God. That is, she engaged in an intimate conversation with God about a mystery that was happening in her life. "How can this be?" she asked.⁴ Then, being told by the angel that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and the power of the Most High would overshadow her,⁵ she responded with bold and trusting faith: *Yes!* "May it be done to me according to your word."⁶

Mary shows us how to be in relationship with God – how to be children of God in the image of Jesus His Son. Being like Christ means having "ears open to obedience", like the Psalm says.⁷ We are called to "listen with the ear of the heart", as Pope Francis has reminded us⁸ – to be receptive to God's word and will, and to offer a faith-filled "yes". While we recognize that we have failed many times to do this, just as our ancestors have, God's mercy invites us to repent and to turn back to him. Lent is a special time to do this. "Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."⁹ Today, let us renew our communion with the will of Christ, by participating fully in his perfect offering to the Father at this Holy Mass.

³ Luke 1:31, 32

⁴ *ibid.* 1:34

⁵ *ibid.* 1:35

⁶ *ibid.* 1:38

⁷ Psalm 40:7

⁸ cf. *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 56th World Day of Social Communications*

⁹ 2 Corinthians 6:2