



Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception - Homily

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The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is an invitation for all of us, once again, to turn our eyes to Mary, the Mother of the Lord, and allow her to help us understand the beauty and the mystery of our Christian faith. We know that the Lord, as He was dying on the cross, gave Mary to us to be our Mother and we know, too, that when He fulfilled His promise to send His Holy Spirit to the Church, that Church gathered in the presence of Mary to pray for, and await, the coming of the Spirit. Both the presence of Mary at the foot of the cross and her presence in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost remind us of just how closely tied Mary is to the Church. Blessed Pope Paul VI gave expression to this when, during the Second Vatican Council, he formally proclaimed Mary as "Mother of the Church". At a time when the Church is facing many challenges, Mary's role and her prayerful presence among us are more important than ever.

The feast we are celebrating today which is, of course, the patronal feast of our Cathedral and of our Archdiocese, is very closely tied to another feast in the life of the Church, the Feast of the Annunciation, and this feast, in its turn, points us very directly to the great Feast of Christmas which is now so close.

The Feast of the Annunciation is the celebration of Mary's "yes" to God's call to her to become the mother of the Saviour. As the beautiful prayer, the *Angelus*, reminds us, because of that "yes", the Word became flesh and lived among us. Without Mary's "yes", without her "let it be done to me as God wills", the Lord Jesus would not have been born and we would not now be preparing to celebrate His birth in just a few weeks' time.

We can begin to understand, then, just how vital Mary's response to the Angel Gabriel was. God was offering to His people, to us, the gift of the Saviour but, just as that gift was freely offered to us by God, so the gift had to be freely accepted and received by us. God does not and will not force Himself upon us - He awaits for us to respond to Him in freedom and in love. And this, of course, is what being truly free means.

We know, sadly from our own experience, that it is sin which holds us back from saying "yes" to all that God asks of us. That sin can manifest itself in fear, in selfishness, in narrow ways of thinking, and these can all cut us off from the Lord. For our "yes" to God's gift of the Saviour to be fully free, profoundly human, with no hesitation or reluctance, we needed someone who, speaking in our name and expressing what is the very best in us, could give this "yes" on our behalf. Mary, who was never, not even at the very beginning of her life in her mother's womb, compromised or diminished by sin, did this for us. At the crucial moment in human history, she was our representative. Her sinlessness meant that there was nothing



stopping her from responding fully, freely and courageously to God - and the Word became flesh and lived among us.

We may struggle sometimes, even often, to give our total "yes" to God but we should rejoice that, when it was needed most, one of us was so free, through God's grace, that she could on our behalf and in our name say "yes" to the gift of the Saviour.

May the prayers of Mary help all of us to say "yes" to God more often, more joyfully and more totally. Then, like Mary, we too will become instruments through whom the Word can come into the lives of those we love and serve,

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.