

December 8, 2020 12:10 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

### **Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception/Beginning of “Year of St. Joseph”**

I’m so very happy to be able to celebrate this Holy Day Mass with all of you, and in particular, with so many of the children joining us from our great St. Augustine Grade School. I’ve missed being able to be with you---to see you on the playground---to celebrate Masses with you, or any of our Children throughout the Diocese since I haven’t been able to travel around to any of our parishes over these last many months of the restrictions we’ve all been having to deal with. I also welcome all those who are joining us virtually on this very important Holy Day honoring our dear Blessed Mother.

As you probably know, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception is the special Patroness of the United States, which means that this is not only a special holy day for us Catholics, but also for all people in our country as we pray that Our Lady will watch over, protect and keep our country safe, and help all of us to always stay close to God.

I wonder if any of you are able to think back to when you were only a little baby, when you were learning how to crawl, then walk---and when you could begin to say words. In my extended family, there are two babies who are just at that point. In these days of virtual visits, I get to see little videos of them quite regularly, and I’m reminded that one of the words that they find so easy to say, and to say so regularly, is “NO!”. Do you remember doing that?

I got thinking about how that almost instinctual response of “no” is so much a part of our human nature. In the case of children, as a result of a loving upbringing by the parents who continually reinforce what are the right choices to make, hopefully those “no’s” become less frequent and not as automatic. But as we become adults, we must consciously choose whether our answer will be “no” or “yes”.

Our First Reading today reminds us of that moment when, at the very beginning of Creation, Paradise was lost because of that one word, “No!”. God, our Loving Creator, had created the human person as the highpoint of all Creation----making them both Male and Female---made exactly like Himself---“in His image and likeness”---and with “free will”, that is, the freedom to choose whether to love Him in return or not. As we heard in our Reading, the first, Original Sin was when Eve, and then Adam, both said “No” to God’s command, and chose to eat the one and only fruit that God had told them not to have.

The Reading from Genesis helps us to see the incredibly disruptive consequences that one word had. Until their disobedience, Adam and Eve had walked about the Garden of Eden just the way that God had created them, and often times shared their walks in the Garden with God Himself. But now the relationship was broken: Adam and Eve hid from God, they were ashamed of what they had done; and Adam and Eve were now “at odds” with one another---Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the Serpent. There was “shame”, “fear”, “division/separation”, and “enmity” as a result of that original sin.

It was precisely at that point when God began to develop His plan for salvation----a “back-up plan”, so to speak, that would take some time for human beings to be ready to receive----a plan that would take place “in the fullness of time” when God would send His only-begotten Son to be the Savior---to bring about Salvation---to restore unity, to take away fear, and to restore the relationship of Love between humanity and our Loving God.

And that is what our dear Blessed Mother has done through her generous, open and courageous “Yes” to God’s invitation, as we heard in our Gospel passage today. But she was

given the grace to be able to say “Yes” to God instead of “No” because of what we celebrate today---the fact that at the moment of her own conception in the womb of her dear mother Anne, Mary was kept free from the effect of Original Sin---the effect which makes us have that tendency toward saying “No”. When the Archangel Gabriel came to make this incredible Announcement to Mary, and to the world, he greeted her by saying: “*Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.*” Mary had been “full of grace” since the first moment of her conception.

We heard St. Paul in our Second Reading today in his letter to the Ephesians tell us that God’s desire---His wish---for ALL of us is that He “*chose us in Him(Christ), before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before Him.*” In other words, that’s what God intends for ALL of us---to be free from the effects and influence of Original Sin. Baptism, as we know, is what washes away Original Sin. Baptism into Christ is what takes away the shame or any sense that we need to hide from God; in fact, through Baptism we are restored to that status of being precious sons and daughters/children of God. Baptism is what originally shows us God’s Love and Mercy, and gives us the same ability as Mary had: to say “Yes” to God, rather than to give in to the “No” of sin.

This beautiful Feast of the Immaculate Conception reminds us that we, too, are called to be like Mary---sinless, open, generous, and willing to say “yes” to what God asks of us.

But today’s Feast is even more special today because Pope Francis has given us a very special Gift on this Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Pope Francis loves to talk about “the God of Surprises”---that we need to always be ready for what “surprises”, that is “opportunities” or “unexpected situations”, God brings into our lives. And while they may be unexpected, or even challenging, they are usually ways for us to grow more deeply in our Faith, if we allow them to be.

Well today, Pope Francis has “surprised” the whole Church by designating, beginning today, a special “Year of St. Joseph”. How beautiful that he chose today with St. Joseph being the Husband of Mary, the Foster Father of Jesus, and the Protector/Guardian of the Church. This special “Year of St. Joseph” begins today and lasts until December 8, 2021.

The Holy Father wrote a beautiful Apostolic Letter entitled “*Patris corde*”, that is “*With a Father’s Heart*”, which I haven’t had a chance to read yet. But from what I’ve read about it, and some of the quotes taken from it, Pope Francis has used the occasion of this awful and distressing time of the worldwide COVID-19 Pandemic, to focus on what he called “the importance of ordinary people who, like St. Joseph, don’t seek the limelight, but just do what needs to be done for the good of others---such as the frontline workers, medical people, scientific researchers, and all those working so hard to defeat this Virus and to protect all of us. As Pope Francis wrote, St. Joseph had the deep and strong faith to “courageously and firmly be proactive” and to “accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments.” He also wrote toward the end of this Letter, this beautiful message: “As the Guardian of Jesus and Mary, Joseph cannot be other than the Guardian of the Church”, of her motherhood, and of the Body of Christ. “Consequently, every poor, needy, suffering or dying person, every stranger, every prisoner, every infirm person is the “child” whom Joseph continues to protect.”

So, with this wonderful “Surprise”, we get to celebrate this year’s Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception with even greater joy. May St. Joseph, Protector of the Church, watch over us, especially through this ongoing Pandemic, and help us to feel God’s continued Love, presence and Protection. And may our dear Blessed Mother, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, be our constant Inspiration, and teach us that, with God’s Grace, we need to keep

turning our “No’s” into the “Yes” that will lead us to Heaven and to be with Jesus, her Son and our Lord, forever and ever.

Let us pray the Prayer Pope Francis asks us to pray: *Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted His only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you, Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life. Obtain for us grace, mercy, and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.*