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**Homily for the Dedication of the Marian Shrine**

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception - Kansas City , Missouri  
150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Dogma of The Immaculate Conception  
December 8, 2004

One hundred and fifty years ago today on December 8, 1854 Pope Blessed Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

Surrounded by 53 Cardinals and 144 Archbishops and Bishops from 27 nations, in a resplendent liturgy enhanced by the cadences of Gregorian chant and sacred music, the Pontiff solemnly declared that:

“the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her Conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.”  
(*INEFFABILIS DEUS, 12-8-1854*)

Among the six American Prelates who participated in this historic event was the saintly Bishop John Neumann of Philadelphia who was canonized in 1977.

This official declaration was not some sudden inspiration of the Holy Father. It was the culmination of a growth in doctrine which began with the incarnation when Mary assented to the invitation of divine motherhood and Gabriel addressed her as “full of grace.” That interchange indicated she ought to be and had to be the holiest of God’s creatures.

Although the Holy Father went to great pains to ensure that the dogma had a legitimate theological lineage by seeking the opinions of esteemed theologians and consulting bishops worldwide, in retrospect, one may be tempted to wonder if such was necessary. The intimacy of Mary’s cooperative role in the story of our salvation was acknowledged from the earliest days of the Church. She was venerated with a litany of titles embellished with superlatives in every language to such an extent that the simplicity and the humility and the holiness of the young lady God selected and prepared to be the mother of his son was sometimes overshadowed. It gave sense to the old adage of “gilding the lily” and was certainly one reason why some Protestants felt that such adulation was excessive and detracted from the recognition we must always give to Christ our Savior.

Founded on the definition of the Council of Ephesus in the third century which declared Mary to be *THEOTOKOS*, Mother of God, Catholics from all walks of life have never been less than ebullient in voicing the praises of the one who mothered Christ. There is almost the innate conviction that he would want it that way, affirmed, if such affirmation is desired, by the belief we celebrate today, her Immaculate Conception, described for us in the well-known words of William Wordsworth, the English poet, “our tainted nature’s solitary boast.” (*Ecclesiastical Sonnets, pt. ii, No. xxv. The Virgin*) Incidentally, Wordsworth died in 1850, four years before his

acclamation was declared an article of faith.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception goes to the heart of the matter. God is the author of Mary's holiness. Our flattery, if we can call it that, is in imitation of his selection of somebody very special to bear and nurse and raise the divine child. He prepared her from the first moment of her conception for the unique vocation of divine motherhood and, then, when the "earthly course of her life came to an end," a life with no immunity to pain and suffering, he took her, body and soul, to be with her son in glory.

The widespread belief in Mary's unsullied holiness naturally found its expression in language and art from the earliest centuries. No great cathedral was ever built without the inclusion of a Mary chapel in close proximity to the place where the Real Presence of the Eucharistic Christ was adored. The first known artistic depiction of Mary, shown with her child, is carved on the chalky wall of the catacomb of St. Priscilla outside Rome. Just two weeks ago in that same city, I celebrated Mass with the bishops of the Midwest in the basilica of St. Mary Major at an altar overshadowed by an ancient painting of Mary which the Romans call the *Salus Populi Romani*, the Protectress of the People of Rome, which is attributed to St. Luke.

Across the Tiber to the west one enters St. Peter's Basilica by passing Michelangelo's famous *Pieta*, a meditation in marble of the almost unfathomable grief of a widow as she embraces the broken body of her only son. In medieval times, one noted Spanish artist, Murillo, no doubt inspired by his Franciscan connections, painted so many versions of the Immaculate Conception that his name and fame are synonymous with the subject. (As an aside, one of his originals of an Immaculate Conception is among the holdings of the local Nelson-Atkins Art Gallery but due to the extensive building program in progress on the site the work is currently in storage.)

All of us have our favorite images of Mary. Their roots are often hidden in the memories of childhood, schooling, study and travel. We need art to express the inexpressible, to seek some, albeit always inadequate, understanding of the intangible, to provide ourselves with a temporary comfort zone as we contemplate faith and the promise of that greater life after death when we shall behold our God "face to face." Like the sacraments, which are palpable signs of eternal relationships, we treasure our religious symbols which remind us of our destiny and encourage us as we run and stumble through the bright ways and the dark valleys of life's pilgrimage.

Some months after the solemn declaration of Mary's unique privilege the sons of King Ferdinand of the Two Sicilies brought the Pope the unexpected princely sum of 40,000 ducats. He commissioned a statue of Mary Immaculate which tops a column of cipolin marble dominating the Piazza de Spagna close to Rome's fabled Spanish Steps. Here the successors of St. Peter come each December 8<sup>th</sup> to record the passing of the years and to venerate the divinely-chosen Mother of God.

We do the same this evening on this Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Through the wonderful generosity of Bill and Janice Clarkson and the extraordinary artistic abilities of Claire Wing, assisted by local artist David Nesbitt, we will inaugurate the Lady Chapel of this Cathedral featuring a representation of the Blessed Mother in sculptured glass, a new medium which takes its place with the marbles and the bronzes and the ebonies of bygone years. Let me invite you to ponder her countenance, her eyes and her welcoming hand. Here is the Mary of the Scriptures' foretelling, the Immaculate One, pregnant with the Child of Redemption, spouse

of the Holy Spirit, the Christ bearer. Here is the Mother of the Universe, reflective of the sensitivity of Cana, the intimacy of Nazareth, the hope of Guadalupe, the healer of Lourdes, the apprehension of a lost child and the numbing and unimaginable sorrow of Calvary's hillside and the indignity and the poverty of a borrowed sepulcher. But here, too, is the love and the kindness and the power of the woman who said "yes" to God and who through the fidelity of her unstinting cooperation with the sacrifice of her divine son inherited the mantle of becoming the mother of all who would believe in him.

Here in the Cathedral dedicated to her memory this new representation of Mary will stand in close proximity to our local Calvary, the altar on which the sacrificial death of her son is repeatedly reenacted. It is also close to the Eucharistic presence of the Christ whom she nurtured and mourned. For this reason she was born, for this mission she lived, for this purpose she was gifted above all others.

May this image of Mary enrich the imaginations of those who come to pray here, console those who are struggling, challenge those who are skeptical and most of all gently introduce all who search for the meaning of life to her son, who welcomes all, be they saints or sinners. As this Mass concludes we will ask God's blessing on those preparing for parenthood. The recent political campaigns in our country highlighted, sometimes acrimoniously, the immorality of abortion. We must never allow the stridency of campaign rhetoric to overshadow the love and the generosity of those who welcome their cooperation with the creativity of God in the nurturing of new life. There is an appropriateness to such a blessing on this day when we honor the one God selected to be his mother. Mary knows. Mary understands. Along with Joseph, that's what brought her to Bethlehem.