

**Homily for the Mass preceding the
Fathers in Faith and Family Prayer Breakfast
Quincy, Illinois**

**The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
December 8, 2012**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

[Reverend Monsignors], Fathers, Deacons, fellow Knights of Columbus, my dear brothers [and sisters] in Christ, it is a joy to be here with you this morning as we celebrate this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the patroness of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois

As we gather for this first Men's Prayer Breakfast in Quincy, Illinois, I am reminded of the father who meant well in speaking to his son, but what came out was, "Remember, Johnny, that you are very special—just like everyone else!" With today's feast we celebrate someone who truly was and remains very special—unlike everyone else!

In the midst of these Advent days, Mother Church bids us to rejoice today with Mary because of the answer she has given to the Lord. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord," she said, "May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

We have often heard this account in previous years and we will hear it again several more times throughout the next several weeks. Our familiarity with this passage – so rich in meaning despite the poverty of the Lord’s Incarnation – sometimes leads us to take it for granted that Mary assented to the will of the Lord. Reflecting on this passage is an excellent way for us to grow in faith and to spiritually prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas with proper joy and devotion.

It was his own reflection on this passage - in which life itself hangs in the balance - that led the great Saint Bernard of Clairvaux to encourage Mary, saying:

The price of our salvation is offered to you. We shall be set free at once if you consent. In the eternal Word of God we all came to be, and behold, we die. In your brief response we are to be remade in order to be recalled to life....

Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal word.”ⁱ

Though she may have hesitated to give her assent, Mary seems not to have needed too much time for consideration; she does not seem to have stumbled in answering such an unprecedented question, so mysterious and wondrous in its implications. How could she have responded in such a manner, with simple and humble trust?

We could say that Mary lived well the spirit of these days of Advent, of watching and waiting for the Lord, fostering a longing to perform God's will and to serve her brothers and sisters. By turning to Mary, by pausing in the midst of the busyness of these days, we, too, can learn how to be open to the will of the Lord and to welcome him into our lives. Mary will show us how "to be holy and without blemish before" her Son (Ephesians 1:4).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

ⁱ Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Hom.* 4, 8-9.