

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the
Closing of the Diocesan Year of the Eucharist
December 8, 2023**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you this evening to close our Diocesan Year of the Eucharist and to conclude our Centennial Celebration of the 100th anniversary of the transfer of our diocese from Alton to Springfield. We do so on this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the patronal feast of our Diocese, of our Cathedral, and of our country, the United States of America.

A few years ago, after my installation as Bishop of our Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, I was going through some papers in the files of my predecessors in a file cabinet at our Cathedral Rectory in Springfield and I came across this letter dated November 3, 1923, addressed to Reverend Monsignor James A. Griffin, Pastor of St. Mary's Church in Joliet, Illinois, when Joliet was still part of the Archdiocese of Chicago. The letter was signed by Archbishop Pietro Fumasoni Biondi, Apostolic Delegate, which

meant he was the Pope's representative to the United States of America. In his letter, Archbishop Biondi wrote:

Right Reverend and Dear Monsignor,

It affords me great pleasure to inform you that His Holiness, Pope Pius XI, has graciously appointed you Bishop of Alton, Illinois. I offer you my cordial congratulations on the appointment, and I beg you to accept the assurance of my best wishes for your happiness and success in the Episcopacy.

Right behind this letter in the file was a second letter from Archbishop Biondi dated just 19 days later, on November 22, 1923, addressed to Rev. James A. Griffin, Bishop-elect of Alton, in which the Apostolic Delegate wrote:

Reverend and Dear Father,

I have the honor to inform you that His Holiness, Pope Pius XI, decided to transfer the present See of Alton to Springfield, the Capital of the State of Illinois, where you will take up your permanent residence.

According to this provision the diocese of Alton will assume the name of "Diocese of Springfield - Illinois", while the present diocese of Springfield will be known as "Diocese of Springfield - Massachusetts".

In order to facilitate the Decree of the transfer, will you kindly let me know as soon as possible what Church in Springfield will be designated as the Cathedral. You will receive the Decree in due time.

Asking for an early reply, I am,

With kindest regards and in union of prayers,

Sincerely yours in Xt.,

/s/ † P. Fumasoni Biondi, Apostolic Delegate

We know now that the official decree translating the See City of our diocese from Alton to Springfield was actually signed by Pope Pius XI on October 26, 1923, but we have to remember that there were no fax machines, internet, or email in those days, so apparently word of this did not get communicated across the Atlantic Ocean until the following month.

Bishop-elect Griffin initially designated St. Mary's Church in Springfield as the "new" Cathedral, but many people thought that church, which was built in 1859, was antiquated and unfit to serve as the mother church of the diocese. So Bishop Griffin took up the task of building a new Cathedral to coincide with the diocese's Diamond Jubilee in 1928. That lofty goal was accomplished with the dedication of our present Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception on October 14, 1928.

The observance of this solemnity originated in the seventh century feast which was first known as the “Conception of Mary by Saint Anne,” highlighting the fact that this mystery celebrates the dogma that Mary was conceived without original sin, not that Jesus was conceived by a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit, as some people mistakenly believe. Pope Clement XI established this solemnity for the entire Church in 1708.

Pope Pius IX, in his apostolic letter *Ineffabilis Deus*, issued on December 8, 1854, wrote that God filled Mary “with the greatest abundance of His celestial gifts, and her participation in the divine nature exceeds that of all the angels and saints together. Her life reflects so great a fullness of innocence and sanctity that a more exalted creature cannot be conceived of, except in the Creator Himself.”

Saint John Paul II, in his address of December 8, 1982, said that we look up to Mary “as on a Star that guides us, shining through the dark clouds of human uncertainty. The annual Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception shines bright from within the background of the Advent liturgy. We contemplate Our Lady in the divine economy of salvation as the ‘Gate of Heaven’ through which the Redeemer comes into the world.”

For being such an important element of our Catholic faith, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is not the easiest teaching of our Catholic faith to understand. As I said, some people confuse the Immaculate Conception with the Virgin Birth, erroneously thinking that the Immaculate Conception refers to Jesus being conceived by a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit rather than the actual teaching that the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary being conceived without original sin.

During the times in our society when literacy rates were relatively low, catechesis on various aspects of our Catholic faith was communicated through the medium of artwork. Paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and stained-glass windows all served to tell the story of different aspects of our faith. When it comes to the Immaculate Conception, artists were faced with a difficult situation.

Mary's being conceived without original sin is a rather abstract idea. The soul is invisible and therefore impossible to accurately depict through visible means. Yet, there are several attempts that have been made, many of which are quite beautiful, such as the image depicted here above the high altar. Even this image, however, is difficult to discern as being that of

the Immaculate Conception, as it is often confused for the Assumption of Mary into Heaven. The image of Mary standing on the crescent moon, a symbol that is often associated with the Immaculate Conception, is what identifies this image accurately.

The readings given to us for this feast day provide us with a solid scriptural foundation for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. We begin by going back to the story of the creation of human life in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve abused the freedom that had been given to them as they chose to disobey the command that the Lord had given to them. At that point, God certainly could have given up on humanity, but He did not; instead, He put into motion a plan that would restore humanity's relationship to God. We get a hint of what this plan will involve when we hear the Lord say to the Devil: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel" (Genesis 3:16). This passage is telling us already that God's plan for restoration will involve humanity in some way.

In the Gospel for today's Mass, we see how those words spoken by the Lord so long ago would come about through the Incarnation, through which the humanity of Jesus Christ would reconcile us back to that

relationship with God that had been lost through original sin. God chose to become man, to be like us in all things, except sin (cf. Hebrews 4:15). That includes being born through the womb of a woman, Mary.

Because His coming into the world was so unique, it should not surprise us that God would choose a unique way in which He would come into the world, while still respecting the normal biological means of giving birth. And so He preserved this woman from any stain of original sin from the moment of her conception in the womb of her mother. This is what we call the Immaculate Conception. It is this mystery foretold in the verse from the Song of Songs that we find atop the mosaic above the high altar in Latin – *“macula non est in te”* – “there is no blemish in you” (Songs 4:7), that is, “there is no stain of sin in you.”

In the final analysis, even though we give special honor to the Blessed Mother on this day, the reason for this feast day, and all Marian feast days for that matter, is Christ. Mary’s being conceived immaculately was in preparation for that moment when the angel announced to her that she would become the mother of the Savior who would “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Pope St. John Paul II called the Immaculate Conception “the turning point in history of man’s salvation,”¹ for it was the

first physical event in the execution of the plan formed long ago for our restoration to God.

As we conclude our diocese's Year of the Eucharist today, we now focus on bringing the Eucharistic Revival more deeply into each of our parishes and the lives of our parishioners. I continue to hear much glowing praise and appreciation for our historic and memorable Diocesan Eucharistic Congress celebrated with 5,000 people at the BOS Center in Springfield on October 28th, which was certainly the high point of Year of the Eucharist. Rather than let this event become simply a happy memory that we recall with fondness, we should strive for our Diocesan Eucharistic Congress to be a continuing source of inspiration for a deep devotion to our Eucharistic Lord in our parishes and in our hearts.

As we receive Christ at this Mass in Holy Communion, may we remember that the "Lord is generous to us with his grace; and so we, by his grace, should always humbly ask him to give us what we need. ... Let us adore Jesus who ever remains with us, on all the altars of the world, and lead others to share in our joy!"²

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Homily at the Basilica of St. Mary Major*, 8 December 1978.

² USCCB, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, November 2021, nn. 58-59.