

**Homily for the Mass and Final Commendation for Gabriel "Gabe" Chiaro
Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
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 that we are here" (Mt 17:1-9). These are the words that Saint Peter exclaimed when he saw Christ transfigured in His glory on the high mountain. We can also say that most fittingly at every Mass and even at this Mass today. How can that be? How can we say that it is good to be at the Mass and Final Commendation for Gabriel "Gabe" Chiaro? It is good to be here because the Eucharist is when we give thanks to God, and today we give thanks to God for the life of Gabe Chiaro, and we pray for God to welcome him into the heavenly Kingdom.

Born to Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel Chiaro, Sr. in Chicago, on September 9, 1943, Gabe was the fourth of five children. We extend our sincere condolences to his sisters, Rita (Chiaro) Barton and Bernadette Chiaro; his loving wife of 53 years, Velma Chiaro; his children and their families, Brandon (wife, Angie; and sons, Collin and Corbin), Brett (wife, Kristen;

step-daughter, Victoria; and son, Cameron) and Blake (wife, Erika; daughter, Cecily; and son, Conrad).

In 1980, he and his young family made a home in Springfield and thus began a long career of thriving family enterprises. Gabe was a notable businessman in the area known for his vibrant personality and charitable heart. He partnered in the opening of several restaurants and Gabe's Corner at the Illinois State Fair. In 2003 he opened Gabe's Home Improvement, which is now continued by his sons Brett and Blake. With a reputation built on honesty and integrity, he has left a lasting mark on his community.

He found genuine joy in family gatherings, honoring his heritage by serving as President of the Roman Cultural Society. His obituary says he rooted for his favorite Chicago teams: the Blackhawks, Cubs, and Bears. Well, two out of three is not bad! Being from the south side of Chicago myself, I asked Brett how someone from the south side of Chicago could possibly have been a Cubs fan! Brett said that his Dad actually was a White Sox fan when he lived in Chicago, but switched to the Cubs when he moved to Springfield since the Sox were not on television here. Well, I guess we can forgive him for that. After all, no one is perfect!

Gabe was very generous to youth sports, t-ball, bowling, and hockey. Gabe's son Brett is the Head Coach of Sacred Heart-Griffin High School's Cyclone Hockey Club, and I have worked with Brett as one of his assistant coaches for the past several years. We dedicated our game this past Wednesday night against Suburban Peoria in honor of Gabe. The boys played their hearts out, and we won 6-5! It is a tribute to Coach Chiaro and his Dad that so many members of the team are here for this Mass today.

It was a great blessing that I was able to administer Last Rites to Gabe with the Apostolic Pardon and Commendation of the Dying at St. John's Hospital in Springfield on Thursday, November 30th. He died peacefully just a few hours later surrounded by family. He was 80 years old.

Gabe's family says that he leaves behind the blessed memories of a life well lived. His body of work is one of kindness and commitment to the greater good. He was a true gift and will be sorely missed.

It is fitting that we celebrate this Mass for Gabe on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception here in this Cathedral Church dedicated to our Blessed Mother, under the title of her Immaculate Conception. Not only is this church dedicated to her, so too is our diocese as well as our country, the United States of America.

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. Some people confuse the Immaculate Conception with the Virgin Birth, erroneously thinking that the Immaculate Conception refers to Jesus being conceived by 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.¹ 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,”² for it was the first physical event in the execution of the plan formed long ago for our restoration to God.

Since sharing in the joy of heaven in the presence of the boundless love of God is the goal for each and every one of us, we should therefore live our lives with the hope of being reunited someday with Gabe and all our loved ones in the presence of our loving God, where we can all say, "Lord, it is good that we are here."

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cf. Hebrews 4:15.

² Pope John Paul II, *Homily at the Basilica of St. Mary Major*, 8 December 1978.