

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
Monday, December 9, 2024**

**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 in this Cathedral Church dedicated to our Blessed Mother, under the title of her Immaculate Conception, the patroness of our diocese as well as the United States. Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Many of you participated over the past nine days in the Novena to the Immaculate Conception. I commend you for your fervent devotion to our Blessed Mother and I assure you that she cannot fail to hear the prayers of her faithful sons and daughters and will entrust them to her beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, just as she did at the wedding feast of Cana.

Most of us at various time in our lives have wished we could do something over, e.g., retake a test with more study, finish a task with more care, treat another person with more consideration. Today's feast celebrates God's desire for us to have a second chance at living in paradise.

Today's second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians gives a thumbnail sketch of God's plan. We hear words that lift us up: every spiritual blessing in the heavens, holy and without blemish, destined for adoption to Himself, praise of the glory of God's grace. God had these wonders in mind for us before the foundation of the world. When creation was complete, God saw that it was all very good.

Unfortunately, the first human beings resisted God's will for them, as we are reminded in our first reading from the Book of Genesis. Resistance to the will of God has characterized us humans throughout the ages, with catastrophic results. We experience those today, as we can see by reading the daily news. But God did not want to leave humans in their naked, embarrassed, frightened, sinful condition. They would get a second chance. God would make a New Eve the mother of all Adam's descendants. This time God's own Son would become one of them, a New Adam born of the New Eve.

God made the New Eve, Mary, sinless from the first moment of her existence. Because the New Adam, Jesus, was to take human nature in her human body, she was preserved by the grace of that New Adam from the taint of the sin of the first Adam and Eve.

Today's Prayer over the Offerings calls this "prevenient grace," a theological concept that refers to freely-bestowed divine grace that precedes any human decision or action. Prevenient grace exists prior to and without reference to anything humans may have done. While the phrase might be obscure, the meaning is important. It means that Mary was preserved free of sin – not because of anything she herself had done or would do to merit such a blessing – but in anticipation of the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ. Mary was saved by Jesus, as we all are!

The Annunciation story brings out an important difference between the first Eve and the New Eve. Eve was not forced to do the will of God; neither was Mary. But Eve and Adam freely refused to obey God. Mary freely said yes to God: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."

Mary's willingness to do God's will gives us hope that a New Creation can occur. It has already begun in her, in the New Adam, Jesus Christ, and in all who have followed in the way of Jesus. Why then are we not yet living in a heavenly world? The answer lies in human freedom. God will not force us to be saved. We have to choose to imitate Mary, to follow Christ's way of salvation with our own free will. She who is our life,

our sweetness, and our hope, our new Eve, our Mother, is praying that we will join her. Mary was “full of grace.” We are never more full of grace than when we receive Jesus, the New Adam, in Holy Communion, and never closer to reaching the heavenly kingdom of God’s blessed plan.

In this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, we call to mind how the stain of sin was kept from Mary from the moment of her conception, how God destined her to be a holy vessel for the Lord. But more than that, what we celebrate today is the fact that she remained holy and blameless her entire life. God chose her as His own, and her life is a fulfillment of the will of God. When we look at our own lives, we see how we undoubtedly fall short of the mark set by Mary. While we have not been kept from Original Sin as Mary was, God has destined us for holiness, nonetheless. Through Baptism we have the guilt of Original Sin removed, and through the other sacraments we are showered with the gift of God’s very self, giving us the strength to follow Mary’s example, holy and blameless as God has called us.

May God give us this grace. Amen.