

**Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception/Opening Mass for the  
Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy**

December 8, 2015, 12:10 p.m., St. Augustine Cathedral

Just a couple weeks ago, I was very happy to be able to celebrate Thanksgiving dinner with my family back in Pittsburgh. There were 44 of us tightly squeezed around multiple tables in my sister's modest home. Many of those 44 are very young children. I was reminded over and over again, that one of the most often-used words of a child is "no!", in one form or another.

I got thinking about how that almost instinctual response of "no" is so much a part of our human nature. In the case of children, as a result of a loving upbringing by the parents who continually reinforce what are the right choices to make, hopefully those "no's" become less frequent and not as automatic.

But as we become adults, we must consciously choose whether our answer will be "no" or "yes".

Our First Reading today reminds us of that moment at the very beginning of Creation when Paradise was lost because of the decision to say "No!"

God, our loving Creator, had created the human person as the highpoint of all creation----and then made the human person into male and female---made exactly like Himself---"in His image and likeness"---and with the freedom to choose whether to love Him in return or not.

As we know the first, Original Sin was when Eve, and then Adam, said "no" to God's command by eating the forbidden fruit on the one tree they were told they could not have. The reading from Genesis today gives us the evidence that there was now something drastically wrong: up until their disobedience, Adam and Eve had walked about the Garden of Eden just the way that God had created them, and often times shared their walks in the Garden with God Himself. But now the relationship was different: Adam hid from God, he was ashamed that he was naked and so he covered himself up with a fig leaf, Adam and Eve were now "at odds" with one another---Adam blaming Eve, and Eve blaming the Serpent. There was "shame", "fear", "division/separation", and "enmity" as a result of that original sin.

It was precisely at that point when God began to develop His plan for salvation----a plan that would take some time for human beings to be ready to receive----a plan that would take place “in the fullness of time” when God would send His only-begotten Son to be the Savior----to bring about Salvation---to restore unity, to take away fear, and to restore the relationship of Love between humanity and our loving God.

And that is what our dear Blessed Mother has done through her generous, open and courageous “yes” to God’s invitation, as we heard in our Gospel passage today. But she was given the grace to be able to say “yes” to God instead of “no” because of what we celebrate today---the fact that at the moment of her own conception in the womb of her dear mother Anne, Mary was kept free from the effect of Original Sin---the effect which makes us have that tendency toward saying “no”.

When the Archangel Gabriel came to make this incredible Announcement to Mary, and to the world, he greeted her by saying: “*Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.*” Mary had been “full of grace” since the first moment of her conception.

We heard St. Paul in our Second Reading today in his letter to the Ephesians tell us that God’s desire---His wish---for all of us is that He “*chose us in Him(Christ), before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before Him.*”

In other words, that’s what God intends for all of us---to be free from the effects and influence of Original Sin. Baptism, as we know, is what washes away Original Sin. Baptism into Christ is what takes away the shame or any sense that we need to hide from God; in fact, through Baptism we are restored to that status of being precious sons and daughters/children of God.

Baptism is what originally shows us God’s love and mercy, and gives us the same ability as Mary had: to say “Yes” to God, rather than to give in to the “No” of sin.

This beautiful Feast of the Immaculate Conception reminds us that we, too, are called to be like Mary---sinless, open, generous, and willing to say “yes” to what God asks of us.

Today, as we know, is also the day when the entire Church officially enters into and begins celebrating the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. Pope Francis has already launched the Year of Mercy and opened the Holy Door of Mercy much earlier today at St. Peter Basilica in Rome. Pope Francis also gave us two very important reasons why he chose today, December

8<sup>th</sup>, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, as the day to launch this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The first is because, as he wrote: “When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God Who is ever ready to forgive....On the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, I will have the joy of opening the Holy Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons and instills hope”, just as Mary did through her “Yes” to Gabriel’s invitation. The second reason why Pope Francis chose this Feast is because it celebrates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. Again, as Pope Francis wrote, “With the close of the Council, the Church entered a new phase of her history. The Council Fathers strongly perceived as a true breath of the Holy Spirit, a need to talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way.” He quoted Pope Paul VI who said: “

We point out how charity (and mercy) have been the principal feature of this Council....the old story of the Good Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the Council.” It is that point that we continually are called to proclaim to our world so that we may contemplate the Face of Mercy.

And so beginning on this Holy Day---the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, all of us are called to enter into this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy in ways that will draw each of us closer to Christ, the Face of the Father’s Mercy. By God’s Grace, may we have the generosity, courage and strong Faith of our Blessed Mother to say “Yes” to whatever it is that God calls us to do, wherever He calls us to go, and to whomever He calls us to be imitators of the Good Samaritan and instruments of God’s forgiveness, love and mercy.

God bless you now and always.