

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – December 8, 2017
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Parochial Administrator

When we were children, my parents used to take my brother and me to visit my father's aunt and cousin. They lived in a beautiful home in North Memphis that was filled with cut glass and porcelain figurines. And it was immaculate – perfect, if you will. There was nothing out of place. Our family's home was arguably clean – but with two boys and their toys and games and school books and laundry – well, if you were trying to describe our home, “immaculate” would not be the first word that came to mind. “Lived in” might be a better description. So for a ten year old boy from a “lived in” home, an immaculate home can be quite intimidating. You are almost scared to breathe in an immaculate home. You are afraid that just by walking in you have brought along some dirt – and heaven forbid you should touch something and risk breaking a priceless cut glass bowl. Your only hope in an immaculate home is to escape as quickly as possible.

Because of such experiences, just the word “immaculate” can be intimidating for many of us. We don't lead immaculate lives, how can we relate to someone who is – by definition – immaculate? Perhaps we have let our experiences color our understanding of the Blessed Virgin Mary. True, Mary was preserved from the stain of original sin from the first moment of her existence. Her soul was and remained immaculate, but her life was far from perfect. She knew when she said yes to the angel Gabriel, as we heard in the gospel today, that she could face the condemnation of being found pregnant and unmarried. Accepted by Joseph, still she had to travel hundreds of miles while expecting, and then be forced to deliver her child in a stable. She and her husband had to flee into exile to keep her newborn son alive, away from a hostile king. Years later, she met her son on the road to his execution – and stood at the foot of his cross to watch him die. Mary is not some squeaky clean, picture-perfect cartoon character who led a charmed life. Mary is real – flesh and blood – one who experienced to the full the joys and the sorrows, the hardships of this life. Mary is someone who can relate to us – and someone to whom we can relate. So if Mary's life wasn't perfect, what does it mean to be the Immaculate Conception? It means, quite simply, that in spite of the hardships and difficulties and temptations and frustrations of her life, Mary's soul was in perfect harmony with God. Rather than allowing herself to be filled with the bitterness, the hatred, the jealousy, the resentments that this life can bring, Mary remained, in the words of the angel, full of grace. To prepare her for the role that she would play in salvation history, God gave Mary an abundant measure of his grace from the first moment of life. And, for her part, Mary never relinquished that grace. She never turned her back on God

– not in the difficulties of her pregnancy, not as she delivered the Lord and laid him in a manger, not as she escaped to Egypt, not even in the horrible moments when she watched her only son die. Mary remained faithful to the God who is always faithful to us.

Far from being inapproachable, Mary is the perfect example of one who persevered not by escaping from the world, but by fully entering into it. Yes, her soul was immaculate, but she was not afraid to get her hands dirty. Here is a woman who lived life just as we do, except that, unlike us, Mary lived her life hand-in-hand with God, heart-to-heart with God. She enjoyed great happiness and endured much sadness and, through it all, she never lost sight of the immense treasure that she had been given.

We too are given the tremendous treasure of Jesus Christ. We too are invited to walk hand-in-hand with God. We too are offered the graces that Mary received. But too often we do not respond as generously as she did. Rather than saying, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word,” we’re more inclined to negotiate terms. I’ll agree to this IF . . . We want to set the agenda, to define how much we will do and what reward we expect for it. For her part, Mary trusted completely in God, fully surrendered to his will. And that, I suggest, is what might intimidate us about Mary – and what, ultimately, should challenge us to follow her example. It is not that the patroness of our parish, that the Immaculate Conception is too perfect, too clean, too immaculate, it is that we are tempted to see her as too humble, too lowly, too willing to surrender her own will completely to God and too trusting that he would see her through. Of course, her faith, her trust, her willingness to embrace God’s plan for her life should be our model of discipleship, but, then, we are not immaculate. We are not yet full of grace – though that should be our goal. In spite of the messiness of our lives, in spite of all that has gone before, this Advent may we follow Mary’s example and place ourselves in God’s hands, may it be done to us according to God’s will.