

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
CATHEDRAL OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
DECEMBER 8, 2011

Bishop J. Terry Steib, S.V.D.

Sisters and brothers,

What an evening this is! In the midst of Advent, we are celebrating the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception – that day when Mary, the Mother of the Messiah, was born “**full of grace.**” In the midst of Advent, we are celebrating the 90th anniversary of Immaculate Conception Church – that year when this church was established to be the House of the Lord – and the 10th anniversary of the renovation of this Cathedral Church – that day when the Cathedral truly became the Mother Church. In the midst of Advent, when we are preparing ourselves for a surprising and incredible message: that “**the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,**” we hear in the Gospel of St. Luke telling us that Elizabeth, sterile and advanced in age, conceives a child and gives birth to a son; and that Mary, virgin and young, becomes a mother through the power of the Holy Spirit. How incredible is that? These two events, apparently impossible in humanity, become possible in God. These two events prepare us for yet another surprising and incredible event: God will begin his life among us as a little child.

What an incredible evening! The angel Gabriel greets Mary: “**Hail! Full of grace! The Lord is with you!**” It is not “**MAY the Lord be with you!**” It is not “**The Lord WILL be with you!**” It is: “**The Lord IS with you!**” It is: “**Hail, full of grace!**” From these words, the angel Gabriel was expressing that the Blessed Virgin Mary enjoyed a unique state of grace that far surpassed the creation of all. She is the one of whom God spoke in the Garden: “**I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers....**” And through this Immaculate Mary, who cooperated fully with the Divine Plan of God, we are led to Jesus. What an incredible event – impossible for us, but possible for God!

And as if this is not enough, we gather to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the establishment of Immaculate Conception Church as a parish and the 10th anniversary of the renovation of this Cathedral Church! Who would have believed this?

Last week, from the files of the Archdiocese of Louisville, I read an old, old report that was sent to the pope in Rome. It was Bishop Flaget's report of the Diocese of Bardstown to Pope Pius VII. The report was dated April 10, 1815. In it, he wrote:

“I must now write to Your Holiness a statement concerning this diocese and its various divisions. It embraces three States and three territories, which have not as yet been erected into States, namely, the State of Kentucky and the State of Tennessee, which States constitute the Diocese of Bardstown proper, the State of Ohio and the Territories of Indiana, Illinois and Michigan, which have been joined to the aforesaid Diocese until it shall be otherwise ordered by the Apostolic See.”

Then, later in the report, Bishop Flaget continues:

“To come now to the other States and Territories. In the neighboring State of Tennessee there are about twenty-five Catholic families, who are destitute of every help of the Church. Once or twice, many years ago, they were visited by a priest from Kentucky (Note 20 – Father Badin visited them once or twice). At length, it was impossible for me to go to them...”

Isn't that incredible? Who would have thought that a diocese would have been established in Tennessee, much less that Immaculate Conception here on Central Avenue would have been the tenth parish to be founded in Memphis in 1921, and much less that Memphis would have been made a diocese 40 years ago with this church being named the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception! What an incredible history! What a story of salvation!

Like Mary, the Cathedral Parish can say: **“God who is mighty has done great things.... And holy is His name!”** This was Mary's proclamation of praise in response to her being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. And for centuries, the Church, every day at the liturgical hour of Evening Prayer, has joined her in that praise. With her, we too as a cathedral parish proclaim the greatness of the Lord. With her, we find our joy in the Lord for what God has done at the level of the great story of salvation and at the level of our history as the Mother Church. With Mary, we too find our joy in the Lord for what God has done and is doing at the level of our own personal lives.

Our patroness is a woman who has been called from among us to a unique greatness. Yet her greatness lies in the fact that she is, above all, a woman of faith. The young girl from Nazareth could not

be expected to understand the depth of the mystery that was being revealed to her. The young lady from Nazareth could not possibly be expected to see this vast mystery in which she was to play an indispensable role: that is, to be the giver of the flesh and blood in the mystery of the Incarnation. **“How can this be?..... Why should this be happening to me?”** She could not understand. But, as the woman of faith, she was caught up in the wonderful mystery of God’s ways in her life. **“I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.”** She compromised herself in faith. She trusted.

In the lives of each of us, do we not have something similar? Are we not asked to have faith, to trust? Each day, we are asked to embark on the mission that God has for us as followers of Jesus Christ in this cathedral. Each day, by our lives, we are asked to proclaim the Good News! This is the wonderful truth of our faith – that God has a plan for each of us, that the God of heaven and earth, the eternal, the all-powerful, loves us and does things for us **“and holy is His name.”**

So, as we hear and see these incredible, apparently impossible things, happening in our preparation for the incredible, impossible message, let us be lifted up by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may sing every day: **“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior... because God who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.”**