

Homily, Immaculate Conception B
December 7 - 8, 2011
Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul
Rev. Noah J. Casey

Those of you who travel with any regularity know the experience of cancelled flights, nasty weather, repeated de-icing of airplanes, etc., etc. There really isn't anything one can do, but wait. It is an exercise in Advent patience. It is also an exercise in surrendering.

. Surrendering carries with it the flavor of failure. One side surrenders or loses; the other side wins. To talk about this feast day, therefore, in terms of a spiritual surrender may be a bit hard to swallow.

And if the concept of surrendering isn't challenging enough, how about the idea of obedience. In our culture, the idea of obedience implies a relationship between someone who has power and someone who does not have power. Obedience might, to some, seem like I must do as I'm told to do, or else!

And yet, this feast day of the Immaculate Conception is all about surrender and obedience. We not only recognize these two qualities in Mary, the Mother of God, but today celebrate them and encourage one another to adopt attitudes of surrender and obedience as important characteristics of following in Mary's footsteps as the first and most faithful of all Christ's disciples.

This feast day grew in its significance throughout the history of the Church as Mary's role in the history of salvation became more and more clear. This awareness was officially noted when Pope Pius IX declared infallibly the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. This feast is not about the Virgin birth or Jesus' birth. It is, instead, about Mary being born without stain of original sin so as to predispose her for her unique and graced role as the mother of God, which is her most important title. As the prayer says, she was chosen from among all women to

bear the only Son of God. In this wonderful role, Mary, the mother of God, and our spiritual mother as well, is the first of all disciples and the most faithful.

Mary was called upon to surrender her will, her understanding and her love to the promise, the providential plan and the hope of all people so that Jesus Christ could be among us, both human and divine. Jesus learned well from his mother's surrendering that led Him to surrender to His Father's will on the Cross of our Salvation. It is important to note that Mary surrendered not because she understood God's plan, but because she was willing to trust in the God who had created her and loved her.

She was also obedient which means much more than just doing what she was told to do. Obedience, in its Latin source, means "to be attentive to; or "to listen". Mary's obedience to God began with her listening to the God's message through the Archangel. Her listening to God's loving plan led her to accept, surrender and become obedient to a God whose love is without end.

Our call this feast day is to surrender our wills in joy, or in other words, to learn how to trust in the same God who gives us all good gifts, who gave us the gift of His son, the gift of our very lives, to trust in that God knowing that He seeks the best from us and for us. It is this love to which we surrender.

Our call to be obedient, like Mary's obedience, begins with our listening to the message of God that comes to us in our daily... yes, I said our daily....contact with the Bible, God's love letter to all of us. Our listening continues as we listen to the voice of God's Spirit speaking in the quiet of our own hearts, and to listen to the voice of God speaking through the voices of all our brothers and sisters, a voice that speaks in many languages, under many different and sometimes difficult situations.

To surrender and be obedient is not about being powerless. It is about recognizing that any power we may have to do good, to be good, comes from our

surrendering to a loving relationship with Christ, Mary's Son, and being good listeners to his teaching, being obedient as He himself was obedient even to the point of dying on the Cross. The opportunities for obedient surrender are all around us every day. They are as simple as surrendering our opinions in favor of listening to a spouse, a child, a colleague at work or the poor stranger. They are as great as changing the way we seek love and give it as a nation that is still learning to be a companion to other nations who have fewer resources and no way to repay us. They are the opportunities to recognize the sacredness of life as what Cardinal Bernardin once called "the seamless garment" of life promoting not bits and pieces of life but a comprehensive reverence from the first moment of conception to natural death.

This is a beautiful feast in honor of the Blessed Mother, Mary, the Mother of God and our mother. We will celebrate another Marian feast next Monday, December 12, as we commemorate Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Patroness of the Americas. That feast, too, sees Mary surrendering for the sake of the poor and the dispossessed of the earth.

As for today, this feast is all about tapping into that spiritual power that makes us strong to carry out God's loving plan as good stewards and disciples of His Son.

We enter the dance of Salvation with Mary today, and learn from her the dance steps of joyful surrender and loving obedience. And we will dance into God's Kingdom, partners all, of Christ and his Blessed Mother.