

Homily by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez of St. Augustine
Feast day of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Patroness of the Americas
Minor Basilica of the Immaculate Conception Jacksonville, Fla.
December 9, 2013

Poet Jose Marti wrote an aphorism, “Honrar honra” (Honor honor”), which I learned when I was in first grade. It means: when you honor someone or something, you are also honored. Tonight we share two great blessings: the privilege as Catholics to recognize the Mother of the Lord as the sinless woman, and the privilege to participate in Pope Francis’ conferral of the title and dignity of Minor Basilica to this historic parish in downtown Jacksonville.

1. It has been said in the Gospel that nothing is impossible for God. Conception without original sin and a virgin becoming a mother are marvels that make Mary the one who “all generations will call blessed!” Since 1854, this church has honored Mary as the Immaculate. As Cardinal Antonio Canizares Llovera wrote in the decree declaring this parish a minor basilica, “in this Church, dedicated to God in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary Immaculate, the Christian faithful, while worshipping the ineffable Deity, also call upon the glorious and superabundant excellence of the God Bearer, the Mother of his only Son. For it was from her that he took on our human flesh and in the fullness of time he was born. She had been chosen, set apart, and so perfectly filled with an abundance of every possible heavenly grace from the divine treasury, so that she was always preserved from every stain of sin, and perfectly maintained that fullness of her innocence and holiness.”

The psalmist expresses accurately our deepest desire, which is to be delivered from evil: “oh wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin...my sin is always before me for a sinner was I conceived...O purify me, then I shall be clean; O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow.” Mary is truly the first of the redeemed, for the hope of the psalmist became true in her being from the first instant of her life; she was conceived without sin! That is why the poet calls her, Mary the dawn and Christ the perfect day. In virtue of her immaculate conception she embodies the hope for each one of us here in combat as soldiers of Christ, that sin can be overcome, that purity is possible, that with her intercession we will be saved for she is the refuge of sinners. She is our Lady of perpetual help, she is the help of Christians, and she is the comforter of the afflicted.

Franciscan Father Benedict Groeschel writes the following in his book, *Jesus and Mary*, (89-90):

“Let us dwell for a few moments on the power of Mary’s sinlessness – that is purity – Sinlessness is a foreign concept to our modern culture ...we have a hard time getting our minds around the notion of a person who never experienced sin, never committed sin, and never even wanted to sin. Yet Mary has a sort of mystical power over sin that bears great authority and can strengthen those who are weak or faltering in any area of faith or morality. We need her power and example as our guide in a very impure world.”

Pope Francis, in a beautiful meditation on Mary's gaze, states: "when we are weary, downcast, beset with cares, let us look to Mary, let us feel her gaze, which speaks to our heart and says: 'Courage my child, I am here to help you' Our Lady knows us well, she is a Mother, she is familiar with our joys and difficulties, our hopes and disappointments. When we feel the burden of our failings and our sins, let us look to Mary, who speaks to our hearts, saying: 'Arise, go to my Son Jesus, in him you will find acceptance, mercy and new strength for the journey.'"

2. With respect to the honor of becoming a minor basilica, we are all full of joy about this parish that preceded by 16 years the creation of Diocese of St. Augustine. Words such as the umbrellino and the tinnanabulum (bells) need to be learned by our volunteers. Now the parish has its coat of arms and it has the privilege to display the coat of arms of Vatican City and the keys of St. Peter on its campus. Some may wonder why it is called minor. The reason is that only the four basilicas in Rome are called major. This Petrine connection is shown as a bond of communion of this community with the See of Peter who presides over the unity of the whole church.

This church is unique for its outstanding gothic architecture; the stained glass windows constructed by artists of the Maier Company in Munich, Germany, its fine pipe organ, etc. yet what impresses me the most of this parish community is its heroic history of faith throughout these 159 years of existence.

- An exemplary courage to experience three times the destruction of the building, and rebuilt time and time again.
- What an exemplary courage to start a Catholic school led by the Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Augustine but without having the means or the number of students and yet succeeding in providing Catholic education to many.

It is opportune tonight to notice that after the great fire of May 3, of 1901 in the city of Jacksonville, a tiny portion of the front wall remained standing. At the peak, the statue of the Immaculate Conception survived the flames. After seeing all the devastation, many people found consolation that our Lady's image was gazing over the entire city.

Many pastors have served the parish of the Immaculate Conception with distinction. Tonight I would like to focus on two. Father William J. Kenny served here for 18 years. He was born in New York, he had worked as a pressman in Pennsylvania, came to St. Augustine where Bishop Moore ordained him a priest in 1879 serving his first assignment in Palatka and its surrounding missions. He supported the Sisters of St. Joseph in opening an orphanage. The yellow fever devastated the city of Jacksonville and this exemplary pastor, who smelled like sheep, got the yellow fever, was dying and funeral arrangements were made.

Bishop Moore came from St. Augustine to take care of the parish. But Father Kenny survived. He witnessed the total destruction of the church, convent, school and orphanage twice: the great fire of August 18, 1891 and once again after the whole rebuilding had taken place by the fire on May 3, 1901. A year later the pastor of the Immaculate

Conception was consecrated as the third bishop of the diocese. The fact that one of the most prominent Catholic High Schools in Florida is named after him makes so much sense!

The other one is someone known and loved by most of you, Father Antonio Leon, a native of Palma de Rio, Cordova, Spain, who served as pastor for 36 years! Father dreamed of seeing this parish raised to a minor basilica. A lot of credit is due to Father Antonio for setting the groundwork, which led to this celebration tonight. I commend Father Eddy Murphy for choosing the statue of Padre Pio in memory of this great priest who protected, enriched and renovated the building and the campus in significant ways. Father Antonio Leon succeeded also in having this parish designated as a Florida Historic Site in 1992 and registered it in the Worldwide Catholic Historic Sites index of the Order of Alhambra in 1991.

As we continue the season of Advent, the feasts of the Immaculate Conception tonight and the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe next Thursday remind us how deeply Marian this preparation is for the coming of the Lord in the flesh in Mary's womb and at the fulfillment of time in his glorious second coming. The role of Mary is always to lead us to her Son. An early Christian from the Orient put it perfectly this way:

**Mary the dawn, Christ the perfect Day
Mary the gate, Christ the Heavenly Way
Mary the root, Christ the Mystic Vine;
Mary the grape, Christ the sacred Wine!
Mary the wheat, Christ the Living Bread;
Mary the stem, Christ the Rose blood-red!
Mary the font, Christ the Cleansing Flood;
Mary the cup, Christ the Saving Blood!
Mary the temple, Christ the temple's Lord;
Mary the shrine, Christ the God adored!
Mary the beacon, Christ the Haven's Rest;
Mary the mirror, Christ the Vision Blest!
Mary the Mother, Christ the mother's Son
By all things blest while endless ages run. Amen.**