



**Most Rev. Robert D. Gruss  
Bishop of Rapid City**

**Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception Homily**  
Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

December 8, 2015

Today on this great Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the Jubilee of Mercy begins. This is an extraordinary time for all of us, for the whole Church. As Pope Francis invites us, “*we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives.*” [Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* - Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy]

It is no accident that the beginning of this Jubilee of Mercy begins on this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. This feast today clearly expresses God’s action of mercy and love from the very beginning of the history of humankind.

The readings present a clear contrast between Eve, the “Mother of all the living,” and Mary of Nazareth, the “Mother of the Church.” Both women, created without sin, and given the freedom to fully flourish and prosper, come to the point of critical choice – critical for themselves and critical for all of humanity forever, into the history of the world.

Because of Eve’s selfishness, we all are now impacted by Original Sin and tendencies toward disbelief, self-centeredness, cynicism, pride, fear, false humility, etc. – all of which can cloud our reasoning and make it hard for us to surrender to the Lord and his plan for our lives.

We see how sin destroyed Adam and Eve’s complete faith, trust and confidence in God. It brought fear and shame into the world, and has destroyed our ability to be the best version of ourselves. Sin teaches us to fear our true and beautiful selves, created in God’s image and likeness.

But after the sin of Adam and Eve, God refused to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil. So he turned his gaze to Mary, holy and immaculate in love (cf. *Eph* 1:4), protected from the stain and effects of original sin, brought into being “full of grace.” In turning his gaze to Mary, God chose her to be the Mother of our Redeemer, bringing the fullness of mercy into the world.

“When faced with the enormity of sin, God responds with the fullness of his 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.” *[Misericordiae Vultus]*

As part of the human race, man could not and cannot save itself from evil. We could not and cannot achieve the happiness and peace for which we were created. Original sin cut us off from our true destiny. And so God came to our rescue by sending us a Savior – Jesus Christ – through Mary, this woman of grace.

Unlike Eve, who succumbed to the pressure of temptation, Mary chose to cooperate with God’s plan for her, though not without question. “*How can this be?*” she says. *[Luke 1:34]*

But Mary’s question demonstrated that she clearly used her human reason **and** her faith to know and follow what God was asking of her, her vocation. Mary was free from the impediments and hindrances that can keep us from saying “yes” to the Lord because her life’s focus was doing the will of God and responding to God’s grace. “*Hail, full of grace [favored one]. The Lord is with you,*” we heard the angel Gabriel saying. *[Luke 1:28]*

There is no question that the world so desperately needs salvation, hope, forgiveness, mercy and redemption – but we could never obtain them by our own efforts. They are God’s gift to us in Christ, just as the Immaculate Conception was God’s gift to Mary because of Christ.

Yes, Mary was conceived without sin and from the very moment of birth her heart’s desire was for God. But even on a human level, a heart that is focused on God will remain free from sin. We should never be afraid of what God might have in store for us or ask of us. Never!

But when we do sin, we all have recourse to God’s forgiveness and mercy. As Pope Francis states, “*The mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy.*” *[Misericordiae Vultus]*

This is what these next 12 months offer each and every one of us. If we embrace the fullness of this Jubilee of Mercy, leave the comforts of our lives and go out on pilgrimage into the realm of mercy, we will experience what our hearts long for – Jesus “*pouring out his mercy like the morning dew, so that everyone may work to build a brighter future.*” Once we have received mercy, then we willingly and excitingly share it with others, especially through the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy.

In fact, each time that we personally perform one or more of these actions, we will receive the Jubilee Indulgence. In addition to fulfilling the requirements – the usual conditions which require a heart well-disposed for the grace to bring its desired fruits – we should stop in prayer to fulfill the final actions asked for: the profession of faith, and prayer for the Holy Father and his intentions.

The Holy Father says, “*How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God.*” [*Misericordiae Vultus*]

In living lives of mercy, we become a more effective sign of the Father who is pouring out his in-exhaustive mercy upon the world.

“Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope.” [*Misericordiae Vultus*]

Such was Mary’s life. She never shied away from this calling. Her whole life was patterned after the presence of mercy, her son, Jesus. And as Pope Francis notes, Jesus is the face of the Father’s mercy.

Like Mary, you and I have been chosen in a special way to bring forth Christ and his mercy into the world, each in our own way. God’s plan for us is just as beautiful as his plan was for Mary. Even though we were not conceived without sin, we have not been barred from the glory of heaven that Mary is experiencing right now, nor from the holiness which she experienced here on earth.

As a consequence of Mary’s grace and surrender, all of us have been chosen by God “*before the foundation of the world, we have been blessed in Christ, receiving EVERY spiritual blessings in the heavens.....to be holy and without blemish before him.*” [Ephesians 1:3-4] In other words, like Mary, great holiness for us is possible. But we must take Mary’s posture toward God.

The holiness of Mary can be ours if we seek God with our whole hearts; if we seek a life of conversion; if we seek and respond to God's grace and mercy wherever it leads us. All the spiritual blessings that we have received in the heavens, of which St. Paul speaks, will then immerge.

On this great solemnity of the Church, I am so grateful for what the Almighty has done for Mary. "He has great things for her, and holy is his name" – we hear in Mary's Magnificat. How blessed we are!

Therefore we entrust this Jubilee Year to the Mother of Mercy, that she turn her gaze upon us and watch over our year-long journey, leading us deeper into the mercy of her Son.

And finally, "May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the kingdom of God is already present in our midst." [*Misericordiae Vultus*]

Mary, Mother of Mercy, pray for us!