

Feast of Immaculate Conception is Dec. 8

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception falls on a Saturday this year - and, yes, Catholics are required to attend Mass.

Because the Blessed Virgin Mary is the patroness of the United States under the title of the Immaculate Conception, it's a holy day of obligation no matter where it falls on the calendar. But the Dec. 8 feast day is one that Catholics often don't understand, believing wrongly that it refers to the way in which Jesus was conceived.

"I think at times there's confusion; people sometimes think it's referring to Christ our Lord rather than talking about the soul of Mary and her unique place in God's plan of salvation," said Monsignor Lloyd Aiken, pastor of Sacred Heart, Glyndon.

In fact the Feast of the Immaculate Conception celebrates the fact that Mary from the moment of her conception - and she was conceived the normal way - was free from sin.

It makes for some challenging preaching for priests.

"You want to stress the gift that Mary was for God - her complete 'yes.' God gave Mary a special favor by the gift of his grace to be always sinless," said Monsignor Aiken, adding that Jesus was given a place in the world where the heart of the woman who carried him and raised him was free from sin.

Father Aiken said his parish will offer a Dec. 7 evening vigil Mass as well as two on the morning of Dec. 8 - and no, going to a regular Saturday evening Mass doesn't fulfill the obligation for the Immaculate Conception.

"It's difficult for people and their schedules, I know," he said. But he also points out that as Catholics head into Advent, it gives another chance for reflection.

"The Feast of the Immaculate Conception helps us prepare for Christmas as well - Mary giving that home to the Savior not only to grow in her womb but to be

nurtured in our home as well,” he said. “It gives us an opportunity to prepare our own homes.”

Pope Pius IX declared the Immaculate Conception to be an official dogma of the Catholic Church in 1854.