

With Mary on pilgrimage

The following is the text of the homily given by Archbishop O'Brien during the Mass he celebrated for the Archdiocese of Baltimore's pilgrimage to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., on April 25, 2009.

It was in 1846, during the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore held in our own Basilica of the Assumption that the bishops of the United States "decided to memorialize their declaration that the United States would henceforth be under the watchful care of Mary Immaculate, Patroness of America."

The Lowell Courier Journal of Massachusetts then reported the result: "A magnificent Catholic church is to be built at Washington, something after the style of the cathedrals of the Old World. It is intended by the Catholics to appeal for aid in this great undertaking to every congregation of their denomination in the United States."

And so began the project of constructing this largest Catholic church ever built in the Western Hemisphere and the eighth largest religious edifice in the world, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. It would be 113 years later that the great Upper Church would be completed and dedicated by Francis Cardinal Spellman. Since then, millions of Catholics have come from throughout our country and around the world to do what we members of the Archdiocese of Baltimore are doing today - to see this spectacular monument to America's love for the Blessed Mother and, more to the point, to beg her intercession for our great nation and for the hopes known only to faith-filled hearts.

And we come on pilgrimage. And is it not fitting, as pilgrims to recall that first Christian pilgrim, our Blessed Mother, Mary?

We've just heard the story. Mary is surely concerned about her newfound circumstances, a situation so very problematic in the society of the day - a single girl bearing a child. But her concern does not stop with herself: Puzzled by the angel's announcement that Elizabeth, her cousin, was also pregnant and at an advanced

age, she hastens through the dangerous hill country to care for the elderly Elizabeth.

And the story begins with a greeting and a leap of joy. The very voice of Mary, now bearing the Son of God, the Word of God, causes John to leap in the womb of Elizabeth. A leap of joy, Elizabeth calls it.

Only Jesus has been written about, sung about, painted and sculptured more than Mary. And the secret, the key to her pre-eminence is in the song she sings in our Gospel. Echoing the Angel at the Annunciation, Elizabeth calls Mary blest, which prompts Mary's famous hymn of exultation, the Magnificat. Her spirit, her whole being is overwhelmed with joy because God has nestled his eternal Son beneath her heart, and not for the reason most would think.

Of course, now we rightly look upon Mary as the perfect flower of God's creation: holy, saintly, the ideal subject for the honor. But that's not the way she sees it. She sings because she doesn't deserve this honor. And the song she sings is not about herself, but about the inscrutable ways of God as He charts the course of His creation. After all, she is lowly, poor, insignificant and weak - a small-town peasant. And that's why she is chosen.

And if God chooses only weak flesh to reveal his glory, so it will be nine months later in Mary's life as her son and God's is rejected from the day of His birth, born in a stable, lived and grew in Nazareth ("Can anything good come from that place," Nathanael asked!) and surrounded himself with tax collectors, prostitutes and all kinds of sinners. Indeed, the opening words of his public ministry are words that reflect Mary's status when called, words that describe His life and certainly words that set the ageless agenda for His Church and all its members: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor."

In approaching the presence of God in this magnificent Basilica as we do today, listen to the thought of Pope John Paul the Great: "The truth about God who saves, the truth about God who is the source of every gift, cannot be separated from the manifestation of His love of preference for the poor and humble, that love which, celebrated in the Magnificat, is later expressed in the words and works of Jesus."

We of the Church in Baltimore would have to be willfully blind not to see the poor in our midst every day. Baltimore City and many cities and towns throughout our Archdiocese are filled with the physically and materially poor, so many victims of impoverished circumstances, broken families, addictions and an educational system we Catholics are attempting to augment, but with little help and even overt opposition on the part of some of our elected officials.

Where poverty is rampant, life is often seen as cheap and disposable. How sad and scandalous it is that those better off and in responsible positions to respect and defend human life – too many of them Catholic! – reveal their gross and abject moral poverty in promoting the killing of innocents in the womb.

Our Catholic community has been shocked, even dazed in recent days by murder-suicides involving nine of our Catholic people, some so very young. What does that say about the evil remnant of original sin in all of our lives? And what does it say about a culture of greed that is present in our society, as well as our institutions of finance and politics, a culture which has devastated our economy and resulted in so many lives of desperation today?

No need to go further, for so many of you are in the forefront of remedying these scandals and striving to bring glad tidings to the poor: staffing parishes hungry for food and meaning, operating soup kitchens, pregnancy centers, caring institutions of every kind and sacrificing to maintain a Catholic school system that is the only hope, for so many, of advancement. I thank you for the inspiration and encouragement you give to me and to so many others, and I pledge my every effort of support, spiritually and through all our Archdiocesan structures.

And may I quote John Paul II again: “In many Marian shrines, not only individuals or local groups, but sometimes whole nations and societies, even whole continents, seek to meet the Mother of the Lord, the one who is blessed because she believed. ... One could perhaps speak of a specific ‘geography’ of faith and Marian devotion, which includes all these special places of pilgrimage where the people of God seek to meet the Mother of God in order to find ... a strengthening of their own faith.”

And it was just a week more than a year ago, that Pope Benedict XVI came to this revered Basilica, which he rightly called a “shrine of special significance to

American Catholics.” Then, in reference to our first reading which pictured the disciples in the upper room, devoting themselves “with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary, the Mother of Jesus,” Pope Benedict prayed the prayer all of us pray here, on this gifted day: “Gathered in prayer with Mary, Mother of Jesus, we lovingly commend to our heavenly Father the people of God in every part of the United States.”

And I would add with his permission, I’m sure, so too do we commend to our heavenly Father, and to our own patroness, Our Lady of the Assumption and Queen of Heaven, the people of God of Baltimore, especially the poorest among us.