



Good evening, and welcome to the penultimate night of our annual novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Tonight's topic is Mary the Immaculate Conception, Patroness of our country.

My late grandfather was a proud Marine veteran who loved to repeat two Latin words: *Semper Fi*. As a child, I struggled to pronounce the full name: *Semper Fidelis*, but I at least learned how to repeat its translation: Always Faithful. These words, *Semper Fidelis* (Always Faithful) serve as the motto for American Marines. Perhaps it has come to mind as I pondered Mary's Immaculate Conception because the ideal for which our Marines strive in their military duties finds its wholistic and exalted completion in the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is truly "always faithful" because she is all, only, and always God's, the only creature who can claim the title "immaculate": to be conceived without original sin and to have never committed a personal sin in her life. She is a gentle and yet radiant beacon of hope who inspires us to be all that we are meant to be. Who better than Mary, the Immaculate Conception, to receive with joy as our spiritual Mother, and to prize as the specific patroness of our country.

The image of the Immaculate Conception varies, but its principal characteristics are the Blessed Virgin Mary standing on the serpent as you see in the statue behind me. The serpent crushed beneath her feet is to remind us that she is the Woman prophesied in Genesis 3:15. Sometimes, she is depicted with 12 stars around her head to show that she is also the Woman prophesied in Revelation 12. This Woman evades the awful dragon who seeks to devour her son and who continues to wage war on "the rest of her offspring...those who "bear witness to Jesus." For those of you who have attended this year's novena several nights and have heard those 2 scripture references made repeatedly...Good. They're worth memorizing.

The solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is annually celebrated by the universal Church on December 8<sup>th</sup>, exactly 9 months before the celebration of Mary's birth on September 8<sup>th</sup>. In 1854, Pope Pius IX declared that the Immaculate Conception is a dogma, an official Church teaching; this was eight and a half years *after* our country had made the Immaculate Conception our patroness, as I'll explain in a moment. The Solemnity of Immaculate Conception is a Holy Day of Obligation in the United States as well as in many other countries who recognize



the importance of this feast, sometimes even with a national holiday. We are not the only country to choose the Immaculate Conception as our special protectress. Spain, South Korea, Portugal, Tanzania, Equatorial Guinea, Brazil, the Philippines, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo also place themselves under her patronage.

As we've heard with each night of this year's novena, Mary has had a strong presence in our country, but her particular influence under the title "the Immaculate Conception" is also notable. Before we discuss the official declaration of the Immaculate Conception as our patroness which took place in 1846, let's look at her long-standing influence in the land we call "home away from Home."

When Christopher Columbus explored the New World in 1492, he sailed on a ship called the *Santa Maria* (or Holy Mary); but the full name of the ship was actually *Santa Maria de la Immaculada Concepcion*, Holy Mary of the Immaculate Conception (Filz web). "One of the first Catholic churches in what is now the United States was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception in 1584: the [now] Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Jacksonville, Florida" (*Catholic News* web). In 1673, a French missionary named Father Jacques Marquette explored a particularly large river and recognized it as a vital power in the new land (*Catholic Times* web). Being a devout son of Mary, he consecrated this waterway and gave it the title: The River of the Immaculate Conception. Today, the river "bears its original, Native-given name which roughly translates to "great waters;" in English, we call it: the Mississippi River. "Though [this Marian name for the river] is forgotten [if not totally unknown] by most, the 'River of the Immaculate Conception' endures in the memories" of the townsfolk of Kaskaskia, a quiet village that once served as Mississippi's most active trading hub. Before Father Marquette died in 1675, he founded a mission there. Today, the two dozen residents that have remained from the original 1,900 still make December 8<sup>th</sup> a day of celebration as they visit the town's chapel (not surprisingly, named after the Immaculate Conception) and sing Marian hymns translated to the language of the original Algonquin settlers. Ancestral stories still recall how missionaries "like Marquette had a vision of the meeting of two civilizations—European and Native American—under the Catholic faith, rather than a conquest of the land...[It sounds like Our Lady of Guadalupe.] While we know that not every explorer had this same intention, those sincerely devoted to Our Lady certainly did. Skipping forward to 1792, John Carroll, the first bishop of the United States "placed the Diocese of Baltimore—which [at the time] encompassed the 13 colonies of the young republic— under [the] protection" of the Immaculate Conception by consecrating his diocese to her (*Catholic News* web).

It's evident that devotion to Mary's Immaculate Conception was thriving in the New World from the earliest arrivals of its Catholic immigrants. Declaring the Immaculate Conception as patroness of the United States, then, came not as a novel idea but as a testament to the devotion already taking Americans by heart.

On May 13, 1846, “during the first provincial council...[which took place in Baltimore,] U.S. Bishops unanimously named Mary, under her title of the Immaculate Conception, patroness of the nation. Blessed Pope Pius IX approved the declaration in 1847...This declaration of our patroness occurred...as mentioned,...eight and a half years before Pope Pius IX would promulgate the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 (*Catholic News* web). In fact, some people believe that the U.S. Bishops’ request of the Immaculate Conception as patroness might have influenced the Pope’s decision to declare the dogma. This does *not* mean that the U.S. Bishops enlightened the Holy Father by persuading him to believe something he hadn’t before considered; it simply means that the Pope, seeing the widespread devotion to the mystery of the Immaculate Conception which was already cherished by the faithful, decided to declare it a dogma, making it infallibly known that the Immaculate Conception “has been revealed by God and must be firmly and inviolably believed by all the faithful.”

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was defined in the papal document *Ineffabilis Deus*, part of which reads: The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin. It goes on to say that while Mary was “free from any stain of sin...’ by the grace of God, [she] remained free of every personal sin her whole life long.” The Holy Father continues, “Our soul overflows with joy and our tongue with exaltation (Filz web). We give, and we shall continue to give, the humblest and deepest thanks to Jesus Christ, our Lord, because through this singular grace has granted to us, unworthy though we be, to decree and offer this honor and glory and praise to his most holy Mother. All our hope do we repose in the Most Blessed Virgin—in the all fair and immaculate one who has crushed the poisonous head of the most cruel serpent and brought salvation to the world...Let all the children of the Catholic Church, who are so very dear to us, hear these words of ours....Let them fly with utter confidence to this most sweet Mother of mercy and grace in all dangers, difficulties, needs, doubts, and fears. Under her guidance, under her patronage, under her kindness and protection, nothing is to be feared; nothing is hopeless.”

With these words, Pope Pius IX speaks to the universal Church, but we can hear in them an even deeper call to cherish the Immaculate Conception who, of all Saints and even among all Marian titles and mysteries, has become our country’s patroness. Furthermore, “it is noteworthy that Our Lady under this ancient title was not merely chosen as the patroness of the Church in the United States but as the patroness *of* the United States (Sonnen web). Neither in the decree of the fathers of the Council of Baltimore nor in the document from the Holy See confirming their request is the phrase “of the Church” found. Mary is called ‘Patroness of the United States.’”

Given our country's great love for the Immaculate Conception, even before her official patronage was declared, it is not surprising that by 1862, 145 churches dedicated to the Immaculate Conception had been erected. "As of 1943, that number [has grown] to 637" (*History*web). There are also currently 20 U.S. cathedrals named after the Immaculate Conception (one of which is our very own Wichita Cathedral established in 1912), and 5 minor basilicas (most notably: the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception built in 1920 in Washinton D.C.). The National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception "is proud to honor [our country's great melting-pot] heritage with over 80 chapels and oratories dedicated to the Mother of God and representing peoples from every corner of the globe" (*Celebrating*web). By doing so, it hopes to "embody the ethnic and cultural diversity of the United States and the unity and universality of the Catholic Church. Among nationalities and ethnicities represented throughout the Basilica are African, Austrian, Chinese, Cuban, Czeck, Filipino, French, German, Guamanian, Hungarian, Indian, Irish, Italian, Korean, Latin American, Lebanese, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak, Slovenian, and Vietnamese. As St. Pope John Paul II remarked during his visit to the Basilica in 1979: *This Shrine speaks to us with the voice of all America, with the voice of all the sons and daughters of America, who have come here from various countries...When they came, they brought with them in their hearts the same love for the Mother of God that was characteristic of their ancestors and of themselves in their native lands. These people, speaking different languages, coming from different backgrounds of history and traditions in their own countries, came together around the heart of a Mother they all had in common.*"

"Today, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is the largest Roman Catholic church in North America, and it is among the ten largest churches in the world....Pope Francis, Pope Benedict XVI, Saint Pope John Paul II, and [Saint]...Teresa of Calcutta...have visited the Basilica (*Celebrating*web)." Now that our current Holy Father is originally from the United States, I would not be surprised if Pope Leo made a visit to the Shrine some day as well.

As Catholics in the United States, we are very aware of the spiritual battle that is always raging: pro-life causes and religious freedom are constantly under attack; how blessed are we to fight under the banner of Immaculate Conception. To illustrate this truth, I want to shift our focus to the mottos of our country's six military branches. By briefly relating these mottos to Our Lady's active presence throughout scripture and history, we can take courage in our daily combat as "sons and daughters of the New Eve." Since I have already mentioned the Marines' motto, *Always Faithful*, I will continue with the remaining 5 military branches.

## **U.S. Space Force: Semper Supra, Always Above**

When Mary appeared to Bernadette at Lourdes, she was positioned in a niche several feet above the spot where Bernadette reverently knelt. (She was literally “always above” Bernadette.) And though Bernadette was poor, uneducated, and often ill, the beautiful lady always cast a gentle gaze upon her and treated her with kindness and holy dignity. Given the loving impression Bernadette received from the woman who would identify herself as the Immaculate Conception (words unknown to Bernadette at the time), I was surprised to discover that the statue that was created to mark the spot where our Lady appeared is looking up to heaven. However Trochu’s biography of St. Bernadette revealed the reason why: When a sculptor was commissioned to create a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes under Bernadette’s direction, he decided to have Bernadette reproduce [Our Lady’s] posture and gesture at the moment when She said: ‘I am the Immaculate Conception’” (233). Regarding Bernadette’s simple and devout replication of this moment by joining her hands and raising her eyes to heaven, the artist said, “I shall never forget as long as I live that entrancing expression.” Though Bernadette was not surprisingly underwhelmed by the sculptor’s completed statue, it seems that a closer resemblance to our Lady, could be found only in the seer herself, in a humble and receptive child who recognized her place as far below this heavenly visitor and yet never ceased striving to imitate the very virtues our Lady possessed. Yes, Mary is “always above” us; and she incessantly draws us to where she is...

## **U.S. Coast Guard–Semper Paratus, Always Ready**

One of the virtues Bernadette would have imitated in Mary is her obedience, which is reflected in the U.S. Coast Guard’s motto: always ready. At the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel asked Mary to be the Mother of the incarnate Son of God, her response was, “How can this be, since I know not man?” In posing this question, Mary does not express doubt or concern. She knows that God is all powerful, and she also trusts that He will honor the vow of virginity which He inspired; Indeed, this question reveals her simplicity: ever-ready to do His will, waiting on His directives, listening, trusting, ready. (As an aside: the Coast Guard Rescue Swimmers have their own motto which is: So That Others May Live. How closely this relates to the whole incarnational mystery and to Our Blessed Mother’s decisively cooperative role therein. Why was she Immaculately Conceived? Because God became man so that others (all of us) may live!)

## **Air Force–Aim High...Fly, Fight, Win**

These words seem to capture the spirituality of St. Maximilian Kolbe. He was thoroughly aware of the wiles of the serpent but even more confidently trusted in the Blessed Mother, or as he affectionately called her “the Immaculata.” He writes, “It is beyond all doubt that Satan—and no other—strives to put obstacles and grab the instruments he needs for his work. And it will always be so. Where there is the Immaculata, there is also the serpent, although under her feet” (Piazza 1485, vol. I).

The next time you are struggling to obey the Lord, not because you are unwilling, but because satan intensifies the struggle, remember these words from St. Maximilian: Obviously, if this were not the work of the Immaculata, the devil would be quiet; but since he sees her in the entire work, then he 'shall lie in wait for her heel'; however, in the end she will always crush his head [cf. Gn 3:15]" (1499). How small satan would seem if we adopted St. Maximilian's confidence in the Immaculata's intercession!

### **U.S. Army-This We'll Defend**

When Our Lady of Fatima revealed her Immaculate Heart, it was surrounded by 5 thorns representing 5 blasphemies she suffers. Among the 5 blasphemies were those who disbelieve in her Immaculate Conception. She asked that we make reparation by completing the First Saturday devotions. (For more information on First Saturdays, talk to any of the Sisters during refreshments.) But you can also make reparation and say of Mary's Heart, "This We'll Defend" by honoring and proclaiming the beautiful truth of her Immaculate Conception.

### **U.S. Navy: (No official Motto)**

Though the U.S. Navy has no official motto, it has two unofficial mottos: Not Self but Country, and Always Courageous. When Our Lady appeared to St. Catherine Laboure in 1830, she entrusted to St. Catherine what was first known as the "Medal of the Immaculate Conception" because it featured the Blessed Virgin Mary, standing on a globe with the serpent under her feet, and surrounding her, the inscription: *O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee*. After the medal was created and distributed, it aided so many conversions and unbelievable healings that it came to be known as the "Miraculous Medal." The Blessed Virgin Mary's image on the medal also featured rays of light streaming from the rings on her fingers. St. Catherine noticed that not all of the rings had light coming from them. Our Lady explained that the rays represent graces that God wishes to shower upon the world through her, but many people do not ask for them. As sons and daughters of Mary, the Immaculate Conception, we are called upon to ask for these graces, not for self, but ultimately, for others. By cooperating with these graces and becoming holier ourselves, we will actually help others to be more receptive to these graces in the future. Perhaps we could make St. Maximilian Kolbe's prayer our own: "O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee...and for all those who do not have recourse to thee" (Piazza 2318, vol II).

To conclude, I would like to pray a prayer that St. Pope John Paul II prayed during his first pastoral visit to the United States in 1979. I hope you are inspired by our country's patroness to persevere in your journey, accompanied by the light of her presence. "The bishops of the Church in the United States have chosen you in the mystery of your Immaculate Conception as the Patroness of the People of God in this country (Rigali web). May the hope enclosed in this mystery prevail over sin

and may it be shared among all the sons and daughters of America and throughout the human family. In a period during which the struggle between good and evil, between the prince of darkness and the Father of light and of evangelical love is becoming greater, may the light of your Immaculate Conception show to all the way of grace and salvation. Amen.”

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