

**Diocesan Patronal Feast Day Mass in honour of Mary Immaculate
to launch the Year of the Word**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

May I begin by saluting you all, dear parishioners, religious, deacons and priests, for coming so freely to the Cathedral to honour Mary Immaculate, Mother of the Word, with her to praise God our Father through her Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and to launch the “Year of the Word”, the “Year of the God Who Speaks.”

If you have a mobile phone or a computer or a car with too many gadgets or the infamous Alexa, do you use them interactively and naturally? I find it unnerving to speak to my computer and watch the text of what I am saying appear on the screen. My pronunciation must be very poor because when I give a command to my navigation system, I end up going the wrong way. So, I revert to manual controls, and interactivity goes out of the window.

Yet, you and I are built to be interactive, first of all, with one another. Our relationships are key, with all their ups and downs, to our lives. Part of being human is relating to one another. And, as we are made in the image and likeness of God, then surely God, too, must be interactive. God reaches out to connect with us. The story of that interaction between God and ourselves is contained in the Bible, in the Word of God from the Book of Genesis to the Book of the Apocalypse.

Today's first reading from the Book of Genesis recalls the catastrophic effect of that interactivity failing, the fall from grace into sin and the loss of innocence and likeness to God experienced by Adam and Eve. The consequences of that original sin are inherited by every human being, by each of us. All of us are wounded, subject to ignorance, suffering and the dominion of death, and inclined to sin and evil. Do you recognise yourself in that description? Of course, by the grace of Baptism, original sin is erased, and the life of Christ's grace turns us back to the Father but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in us and summon us to a spiritual battle.

The struggle to respond to the call to holiness in our lives is a struggle to put our trust in God and in his grace rather than in our own efforts. It is a struggle to overcome our pride and to accept God's love for us as we are and not as we think that we should be. In response to the reality of sin, God sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes away our sins. It is only that grace and love of God that can lift us up. The Lord alone is our light and our help.

In this Mass of Mary Immaculate, we celebrate the working of God's grace in our Blessed Lady, the one whom we hail as "full of grace". She alone, of all humanity, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. The teaching about the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854 as follows: "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, Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin." The splendour of an entirely unique holiness by which Mary is enriched from the first instant of her conception comes wholly from Christ: she is redeemed in a more exalted fashion by reason of the merits of

her Son. Applying words from our second reading, God the Father blessed Mary more than any other created person 'in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' and chose her 'in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love.'

At the announcement that she would give birth to 'the Son of the Most High' as a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary responded with the obedience of faith. She embraced the divine will for salvation wholeheartedly, without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and to the work of her Son. As St. Irenaeus wrote, "Being obedient she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race. Hence not a few of the early Fathers gladly assert 'The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve bound with her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith.' Comparing her with Eve, they call Mary 'Mother of the living' and frequently claim: 'Death through Eve, life through Mary'".

Today we celebrate the beautiful interaction between God and Mary and, as we launch the "Year of the Word", we are invited to open our hearts to God and to his interaction with us through his precious Word in the Scriptures.

The year has three key themes – Celebrating God's Word – Living God's Word – Sharing God's Word. I hope that the year is an opportunity in our parishes and schools to make sure that the reading of God's Word at Mass and in Services of the Word – the celebration of God's Word - is a proclamation from the heart that touches the way we live – living God's Word - and draws others to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour – sharing God's Word.

In your own prayer time, listen to God's Word' in groups together, let God's Word be at the centre; in the celebration of Mass in our parishes, let particular care be given to the Liturgy of the Word.

Like Mary in the Gospel, may we learn to listen to God's Word, to reflect on it, to ask questions about it in our lives and let it draw us to do God's will.

Through the prayers of Mary Immaculate may we, like her, bring forth the Word of God and make it flesh in our daily lives in every part of our Diocese.

O Mary, conceived without sin,
Pray for us who have recourse to thee.

+Peter Doyle
Bishop of Northampton