

Homily by Bishop Jaime Soto on Dec. 8, 2017, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, patronal feast day of the United States of America

Daily are the new revelations about the harassment of women in the workplace by men in power from Hollywood, the Silicon Valley, Washington, and the halls of the State Capitol. A pervasive culture belittled women for personal gain and cloaked it under business as usual. The muffled and muted pain has now broken through the wall of sadly acceptable conventions. Women are bringing forth their stories. These accounts resonate with many other women and men throughout the work world who have felt the shame of someone imposing upon them their position, influence, or power. Before, they felt pressured to let go of their dignity believing there was too much else to lose. Now, they bring the pain and the shame to light to free themselves from the complicity of silence and reclaim their own power. Hopefully others will be freed from the fear of workplace harassment. Better that they are free to do their best and to be their best as God created us to be.

This is not a time to lecture but it is an opportunity to learn how to regard one another in the world of work as well as the many other social settings of which we are a part. Today is the Feast of the immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The images and theology around this mystery of our faith may seem like a far cry from

the daily news of accusations and resignations. We should not be too quick to discount what faith can bring to light.

At the heart of this story, the Almighty God exercises His saving power with the cooperation of Mary. As a result, she is exalted and through her God's mercy is poured out on the whole of humanity. The mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception gives understanding to the words of the Archangel Gabriel when he greeted the young woman of Nazareth, "You have found favor with God." This favor began the moment she was conceived. From that moment she was graced with the redeeming mercy of her Son's saving work. Her heart was prepared to share in the mission of her Son. Still, as the gospel reading tells us, the power of the Most High came to ask her cooperation, to invite her participation, and to wait for her consent. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord," was as much an expression of freedom as it was of heartfelt devotion. In this seemingly absolute disparity of power between creature and creator, God took the initiative by revealing His power with mercy. As Mary would later acclaim to her cousin Elizabeth, "For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

In the person of Mary, the words of St. Paul from the second reading find a particular harmony, "*God* chose us in *Christ*, before the

foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him.” This is true about Mary, as the mother of God. These words are true for us as well. “*God* chose us in *Christ*, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him.” Paul later says, “We were also chosen ... so that we might exist for the praise of His glory.” On this feast of the Immaculate Conception we honor these words exemplified in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We also celebrate this feast because it is a reflection of our own calling as well. God chose us in Christ so that we might exist for the praise of His glory.

The whole human race has gained from Mary’s cooperation with the Holy Spirit. An exalted dignity bestowed on all humanity from her share in the work of her Son is reason for us to acclaim along with her, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior.”

We all have something at stake in each human person, woman and man, finding one’s way to live for the glory of God. We all thrive when the dignity of each one is respected and nurtured. This can only be cultivated in a climate of freedom and respect. These two social dimensions complement one another. The best exercise of our freedom should always be at the service of another’s dignity. Indeed, we will find our own personal joy in this way. Respect for a sister or brother honors their freedom of conscience as an inherent part of

human dignity. Both of these – freedom and respect – further God’s saving work begun when the power of the Most High overshadowed the Virgin Mary with tender mercy and joy.

Freedom in contemporary society has become an absolute and untethered value intolerant of any challenge. When such a notion of freedom is enabled by power, position, and influence it demeans the dignity of both the oppressor and the oppressed and corrupts the soul. From the harassment of women in the workplace to harassment of a child in the womb – such a notion of freedom has no place in a good society. Today’s feast celebrates the moral opposite. Freedom and power, both human and divine, are celebrated in the respectful encounter between God and His most favored daughter. From this moment of a reverential mutuality, the joy of the gospel is conceived.

God’s design for each of us finds fulfillment in our own free and reverential desire for him. St. Irenaeus said, God’s glory is the human person fully alive.

Regardless of how long the current public purging continues, we should all examine our hearts, our minds, and our actions. The recent months remind us of sin’s pervasion and perverted power. Today’s Feast joyfully reminds us of the words of St. Paul that together with Mary, “we were also chosen ... so that we might exist

and work for the praise of his glory.” Let us support one another in this enduring hope.