



WILTON CARDINAL GREGORY
BY THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE APOSTOLIC SEE
ARCHBISHOP OF WASHINGTON

DECREE

DISPENSATION FROM THE OBLIGATION TO ATTEND MASS ON THE SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION DECEMBER 9, 2024

The Most Blessed Virgin Mary, “at the first instant of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved immune from all stain of original sin.”

In 1854, our Holy Father, Blessed Pius IX, using these words, defined the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, which had been the belief of faithful Catholics for centuries already, and raised it to a dogma of the faith. The liturgical feast had been celebrated in different regions in various ways for hundreds of years. Gradually the liturgical texts, the readings, and the dates for the celebration were made more uniform.

Our country, from its inception, had been consecrated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Our first Bishop, John Carroll, consecrated the Diocese of Baltimore, which then included all the former colonies, to the Virgin Mary. A canon of the First National Synod, in 1791, reads:

At the beginning of our episcopate, we have been impelled by an ardent desire of naming the Blessed Virgin Mary the principal patroness of our diocese, in order that, by Her intercession, faith and love of God, and sanctity of life among the people committed to our care may flourish and increase more and more.

A prayer attributed to the Bishop says, “Most Holy Trinity we place the United States of America into the hands of Mary Immaculate in order that she may present the country to you.”

The bishops of the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore, in 1846, chose Mary in her Immaculate Conception as the principal Patron of the United States. Their pastoral letter said:

We take this occasion, brethren, to communicate to you the determination, unanimously adopted by us, to place ourselves and all entrusted to our charge throughout the United States, under the special patronage of the holy Mother of God, whose Immaculate Conception is venerated by the piety of the faithful throughout the Catholic Church. By the aid of her prayers, we entertain the confident hope that we will be strengthened to perform the arduous duties of our ministry, and that you will be enabled to practice the sublime virtues, of which her life presents the most perfect example.

This wish of the American bishops was confirmed by Pope Pius IX in 1847. The feast day has been celebrated formally here since the First Plenary Council of Baltimore, in 1852. (Note that these things were done before the Holy Father’s dogmatic definition.) The Second Plenary Council of Baltimore, in 1866, affirmed that the Patronal Feast of the Immaculate Conception was to be celebrated in every diocese of the United States as of obligation.

This year, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary falls on the Second Sunday of Advent, so it has been transferred to Monday, December 9.

Many holy days of obligation that fall on a Saturday or a Monday have the obligation lifted, in accordance with what has been particular law for the United States. The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, however, is not one of those days, and the obligation to attend Mass remains for the Solemnity this year.

The existence of the obligation was confirmed by a letter from the Holy See to the American bishops. At the same time, however, the letter included this helpful guidance:

It is, however, important to keep in mind that canon law explicitly addresses the situation in which a grave cause renders it impossible to attend Holy Mass (cf. can. 1248, §2), and since no one is bound to the impossible, a dispensation is not even needed in those situations. It is in this sense that n. 2181 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) states that “the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on the days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor” (for a just cause). In n. 2185 of the CCC it is specified that “Family needs or important social service can legitimately excuse from the obligation of Sunday rest” (or other holidays); in other cases, however, for a just cause, one could obtain a dispensation. (Cf. cann. 1247, 1245, 87 and 90).

It is well known that in recent weeks there has been confusion over whether the obligation exists, and some calendars and other materials have been prepared that contain erroneous information that may misguide the faithful. Because of this, and in order to ease consciences, I hereby

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that all Roman Catholics of the Archdiocese of Washington, no matter where they may be, and all other Roman Catholics actually present in the Archdiocese on the feast day, are, by my authority, dispensed from the obligation to attend Mass on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary on Monday, December 9, 2024 (can. 87 §1).

No one is required to make use of this dispensation. It is certainly preferable that those who can do so attend Mass on December 9. Those who do make use of the dispensation are encouraged to engage in other acts of prayer, charity, and Christian witness, all in keeping with the preeminent example of our country’s Patron, the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is the Immaculate Conception. Perhaps they could attend a daily Mass at some other time in the weeks before or after December 9 that is convenient.

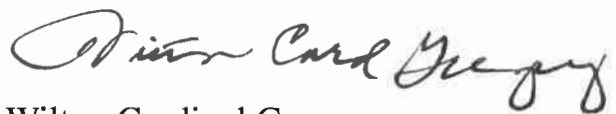
Our Archdiocese has the honor to be the home of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, now celebrating its 100th year of service to Catholics from all over the country and around the world in their devotion to Our Lady. In the Shrine, our people have a blessed and unique resource for the celebration of the sacraments, for pilgrimage, for prayer, and for

contemplation of the many graces showered upon us by our loving God through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. Perhaps in the season of the Feast special visits there may be made by the faithful.

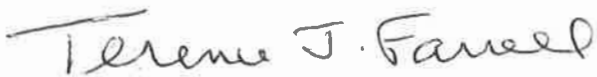
Mary has always been our country's patron saint. Since the mid-1800's, under her title as the Immaculate Conception, she has been our chief intercessor before the Lord and our primary example of discipleship. She has been with us, through terrible wars here and abroad; in times of economic distress; through natural disasters; in times of political strife; cultural disintegration; and times of deep societal injustice. During the pandemic, dioceses across North America joined together in prayer to reconsecrate themselves to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Clearly, her intercession is needed in our present time as well.

The privilege of her Immaculate Conception was not an imposition on Mary. Some speculate whether, since she was preserved from any stain of original sin, and therefore never even tempted to sin, she had true freedom. In reality, however, this privilege, given in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, gave Our Lady the clarity of vision to choose to do the will of God in complete freedom, to be the first and best disciple of her Son and a model for all others, in every place and time.

Given at the Archdiocese of Washington on the 4th day of November in the year 2024.



✠ Wilton Cardinal Gregory
Archbishop of Washington



Notary