

The Immaculate Conception and Seattle University

- December 8, 2015
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

In true Jesuit fashion I have three points to make in my remarks today.

First a word about this date in the history of Seattle University. The Jesuits bought the piece of property which now has the Administration and Garrard Buildings on it in 1890 from Arthur Denny for \$18,382. It was wooded and had one building on it, the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Before they could build here, they started a school downtown with the Holy Names Sisters in 1891. Then they moved the older students—i.e., high school students—to the Temperance Union House which they bought for \$4,000. In short order—with Irish and German builders vying to show the Jesuits their skills—they rapidly built what is now the Garrard Building. It was called Immaculate Church and School. They moved the boys in and celebrated in that new building the first Mass on this date, December 8, 1894, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Four years later in 1898 the name was changed when it was incorporated as “Seattle College”. We were off and running. So this date of December 8th and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception are historically important for us. It is good to mark it with this Mass.

Second point: The Blessed Virgin Mary, under the title of “The Immaculate Conception” is the patroness of our university as well as the patroness of the United States itself. What does this mean? The Immaculate Conception is the doctrine of the Catholic Church that Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, was herself conceived in the womb of her mother without the human tendency or unavoidable leaning toward sin which the rest of us have, what we call “original sin”. God did this to prepare her to be the mother of Jesus, the one like us in all things but sin, and our Savior from sin. We recognize the traces of this original sin or orientation toward sin in our own violence, our selfishness, our racism, our fear of the other, our protection of ourselves at the cost of others, our lack of care for our needy and suffering brothers and sisters, and our lack of justice and mercy. As a university it may be distant or foreign for us to explore the particulars of the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, but it can be meaningful for us as a university to know that our very origins concern God's overcoming of violence, racism, self-centeredness, and injustice in the human person. There is a thread from our beginning to now as we celebrate this patronal feast in times in which we are made so aware of widespread human sin.

Third, today is the first day, the opening day of the Jubilee Year of Mercy which has been called for by Pope Francis for all Catholics and for all people wishing to foster a world which is more merciful. Pope Francis will likely go down in history as “The Pope of Mercy”. He sees our Christian gospels as being primarily about mercy. He believes we live in “The Era of Mercy”, the time in the history of the world when he believes there is greater need for mercy than ever before because of the forces of threat and destruction let loose in our contemporary world. He calls us, he invites us, to dedicate a more intense time, a full year, to exploring and recognizing the need for mercy, to seeking personal reconciliation with God, with one another, and between

peoples, to fostering dialogue as the pathway to a more merciful world. He chose to launch this special year on this date because it represents God's initiative to overcome sin through Jesus the Merciful One. Seattle University will take up this call to pursue mercy in this Year of Mercy—often with the catalyst and ministry of the Jesuit Community—in multiple ways over the next 12 months. We inaugurate it today with this Mass and we thank you for joining us on this historical date, this patronal feast, and this beginning of a year of fostering our mission of mercy as a university.