Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception: 12/8/22—6:00 PM, 8:00 AM, and 7:00 PM

I have here a drawing of a fish. It was given to me over twenty years ago by a patient who was in the behavioral unit at Mercy Hospital. He had had a very rough life and had suffered much, but his faith was very strong. As part of his treatment, he had made several chalk drawings and was proud to show them to me. After we had spoken for a while, he offered me my choice of his drawings. I chose this brightly-colored fish. In case you don't know it, the fish is a sign that the early Church used during time of the Roman persecutions so that the Christians could safely recognize one other like a code. They also used it to remind themselves that Jesus was God, Son, and our Savior. The man knew of this symbolism and told me that I could, indeed, have his drawing of the fish on one condition, that I have it copied and share it with others so that they too might have this reminder of the joy that faith in Jesus brings. Ever since that time, I have been giving copies of this fish along with its background story to our eighth graders as a Confirmation gift.

#### But why do I have this drawing here as we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Mary? I do so because of beautiful quote by St Catherine of Siena, an activist, mystic, and author who lived between 1347 and 1380. She is the source of many great quotes, but my favorite St. Catherine of Siena quote is this one: *“God is closer to us than water is to a fish.”* Can anything be closer to a fish than water? Water doesn’t only surround the fish, but it is even inside the fish, and it even breathes the water. What we celebrate today is that God was even closer to Mary than water is to a fish. What we celebrate on this feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is that she was full of God’s life and love from the first moment of her being conceived in her own mother. Like a fish, Mary even breathed in the presence of God. That’s what it means when the angel Gabriel describes her as “full of grace,” that she was full of the presence of God!

#### In today’s reading to the Ephesians, St. Paul describes for us how God has lavished that same intimacy, closeness, and friendship on us. He emphasizes that fact when he writes, *Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens. God chose us in him before the world began to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love.* Indeed, he has chosen to be closer to us too than water is to a fish.

#### While we celebrate that full presence of God in Mary, there is also a warning for us in today’s reading about Adam and Eve. They are described in this part of the Book of Genesis as walking with God through the Garden. What a beautiful description of intimacy, closeness, and friendship. God was closer to them too than water is to a fish, yet they took that intimacy for granted and lost it. What a great warning for us who so easily can take God’s loving relationship with us for granted too and lose it.

#### The big question for us is: are we any different than Adam and Eve? Are we trying to grow in our awareness of that loving presence that God has lavished on us, or are we taking it for granted as did Adam and Eve? To grow in that awareness, we need to pray, but what is prayer? At its heart, prayer is awareness of the closeness of God to us at each moment of the day. Please take time to remember that God is closer to us than water is to a fish. Please remember that he wants to walk with us as he did Adam and Eve and as he did with the Blessed Virgin Mary, walking with us all the time in intimacy, closeness, and friendship.