

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD -  
CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois  
December 25, 2015**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The late Cardinal Francis George, Archbishop of Chicago, once said, “Our society permits everything, but forgives nothing.” There is great irony in this statement in that society often criticizes the Church for saying that certain actions are sinful and not morally permitted, yet, unlike society, the Church is willing to forgive everything through God’s grace.

The refusal on the part of some in our society to forgive certain things that they consider to be wrong has been called “the new intolerance.” In an essay entitled, “The New Intolerance,” published in the March 2015 issue of the journal *First Things*, Mary Eberstadt, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, expressed her hope that people will hear and heed the message of God’s mercy repeated so frequently by Pope Francis. “For there is no mercy,” she writes, “in putting butchers and bakers and candlestick makers in the legal dock for refusing to renounce their religious beliefs—but that’s what the new intolerance does. There is no mercy in

stalking and threatening Christian pastors for *being* Christian pastors, or in casting out social scientists who turn up unwanted facts, or in telling a flight attendant she can't wear a crucifix, or in persecuting organizations that do charitable work—but the new intolerance does these things, too.”<sup>1</sup> True mercy in our society would not only tolerate but even respect and protect these exercises of religious liberty.

Another current example of the new intolerance can be seen in the “Guidelines for Inclusive Seasonal Holidays” issued by Cornell University, which state that winters scenes with snowflakes, trees and holly are acceptable, but the following are NOT consistent with the University’s Commitment to Diversity and Inclusiveness:

- Nativity scene
- Menorah
- Angels
- Stars on top of trees
- Crosses
- Star of David<sup>2</sup>

Apparently these religious symbols are not to be tolerated or included in the modern secular, tolerant and inclusive university!

Thus, Bishop Mario Toso, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, was right when he said, "Intolerance in the name of 'tolerance' must be named for what it is and publically condemned."<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, phrased it slightly differently in referring to "selective tolerance," saying that

tolerance if it is to be authentic and true cannot be selective. Unfortunately what we see too often in our country today under the guise of political correctness is selective intolerance. We have recognized in our country in recent years a strong lack of tolerance for Christians, Catholics in particular and the Catholic Church. This is evident when it comes to our faith, our religious freedom and Bible based teaching. We hear of college campuses where authorities seek to ban Christmas on the grounds that recognizing Jesus' birth would be divisive. This claim seems particularly out of place in a land where we Americans have never found the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day divisive. The Catholic Church's appeal to the Scriptures to explain the definition of marriage as a commitment between a man and a woman is regularly decried by some in our country even at the highest political levels as discrimination, not to say bigotry.<sup>4</sup>

Cardinal Wuerl has also asked why “all of the voices that so regularly decry intolerance and violence” have been silent “in the face of the ISIS persecution of whole communities and villages of Christians and other minorities and the televised execution of Christians. He noted that this “holy season should be a time for all of us to review in our hearts how selective is our tolerance? We should also, as citizens of this great nation, question why our nation is so selective when it comes to religious persecution and religious freedom.”<sup>5</sup>

Five years ago, in my first Midnight Mass at our Cathedral here in Springfield, I called attention to the attacks on Christians in the Middle East. I said that “we should count our blessings that we enjoy the freedom to [celebrate Christmas] in relative safety. But we should not forget our Christian brothers and sisters in other parts of the world that are not so fortunate and for whom Christmas is not so joyful.” But I also added, “Nor should we be so complacent or naïve as to think that only people in the Middle East or other parts of the world need to be concerned about attacks by Islamist extremists against Christians.” Sadly, the deadly attack by Islamist terrorists in San Bernardino, California, just three weeks ago now shows how close to home that concern has now become.

Thus, it is helpful that the White House yesterday released a “Statement by the President on Persecuted Christians at Christmas.” In it, President Obama said:

In some areas of the Middle East where church bells have rung for centuries on Christmas Day, this year they will be silent; this silence bears tragic witness to the brutal atrocities committed against these communities by ISIL [the acronym for the “Islamic State”]. We join with people around the world in praying for God’s protection for persecuted Christians and those of other faiths, as well as for those brave men and women engaged in our military, diplomatic, and humanitarian efforts to alleviate their suffering and restore stability, security, and hope to their nations.<sup>6</sup>

At this Midnight Mass, we begin our celebration of the birth of Jesus, who came into this world as the Prince of Peace to save us from our sins and from all the sins of this world through His grace. Two ways that help us to grow in God’s grace are tolerance for authentic religious expression in words and deeds and opening our hearts to the mercy of God.

This Year of Mercy that just began this past December 8<sup>th</sup> is an opportunity for us to have a renewed encounter with God’s love for us, an

encounter which awakens us to our constant need for conversion, casting off those burdens which slow us down on that journey leading to eternal life. This prospect of undergoing a life-altering change due to our encounter with God's mercy should stir in our hearts a feeling of excitement and hope. We might ask how we should live this Year of Mercy in order to draw from the rich blessings that flow so abundantly from "God's merciful heart made accessible through the open side of Christ on the cross" (cf. Jn 19:34).

The first step is to ensure that our hearts are prepared to receive this gift of mercy. While His mercy is indeed powerful, He will not force it upon us. We have to be willing to accept that mercy by first of all recognizing that we are in need of mercy, that we are all sinners. Admitting that we are sinners makes us aware of our need for mercy in order to remedy the illness caused by our sin. The Church, in her motherly tenderness for her children, offers us that assistance in a most extraordinary way in the sacraments. In a particular way during this Year of Mercy, we are encouraged to rediscover the powerful gift of healing that is made available to us through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

A key symbol of the Jubilee Year of Mercy is the Holy Door designated in each cathedral of every diocese around the world. The faithful may receive a plenary indulgence when they pass through the Holy Door under the usual conditions for obtaining an indulgence, that is, reception of sacramental confession and Holy Communion, prayers for the Holy Father, and renunciation of all attachment to sin. Walking through the Holy Door should not be understood as some sort of magic or superstition. Going through the Holy Door should be understood as a symbol of passing from sin to grace, that is, we leave being a sinful way of life in order to enter into the richness of God's mercy and love. We should have that in mind each time we walk through the Holy Door.

Those for whom, for various reasons, it will be impossible to enter the Holy Door, particularly the sick and people who are elderly and alone, often confined to the home, can obtain the Jubilee Indulgence by living with faith and joyful hope this moment of trial, receiving communion or attending Holy Mass and community prayer, even through the various means of communication. Prisoners may obtain the Indulgence in the chapels of the prisons.

It is not a mere coincidence that the Holy Door here in our cathedral is located right next to the primary place where confessions are heard each day in this church. The Holy Door reminds us that the privileged place to encounter mercy is in this great sacrament of renewal, reconciling us to God and one another through a power that only Christ can exercise. Yet, so many people stay away from this sacrament. One of the reasons for doing so is that so many people are convinced that they do not have any sin. Even when that lie has been exposed, people still avoid this sacrament due to a variety of fears that they harbor in their hearts.

During this Year of Mercy, I invite you to implore God's grace to overcome your fears and make frequent use of this sacrament of love and mercy. Maybe it has been several years since you last came to confession. As Jesus said so often in the Gospels: "Do not be afraid!" (Matthew 14:27). The Lord rejoices to grant you forgiveness. Maybe you are in the habit of going to confession only during Advent and Lent. This could be a wonderful opportunity to approach the sacrament with greater regularity and see how doing so can make a profound impact on your spiritual life. Countless numbers of the faithful throughout the history of the Church have experienced a remarkable change in their lives thanks to a personal

rediscovery of the power of this great sacrament. The Church is inviting each of us to that rediscovery in our own way. We have absolutely nothing to lose, but everything to gain!

It is not enough, however, just to receive this great gift of mercy. With the gift comes an expectation. The expectation is that we will share this gift of mercy with others through a committed life of discipleship. We should strive to spread the good news of God's mercy to others by the way that we live our lives. There is never a situation in which we cannot live our faith visibly and so be a sign of hope for others to do likewise.

As we continue our celebration, we turn our attention to Bethlehem, which in Hebrew literally means "house of bread." We are reminded that the Word becomes flesh in a very real and powerful way each time we celebrate the Eucharist, for He comes to us in His Body and His blood. By our partaking of this great gift of His love, we welcome His light into the dark places of our hearts, pointing out the way for us to follow Him. In this bread of life, we are also nourished and strengthened for the journey that lies ahead, and with that strength from on high, we have great confidence that no matter how challenging the circumstances may be or how dark the future may seem, "the light shines in the darkness, and the

darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5), and the darkness *will* not overcome it.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Eberstadt , "The New Intolerance," *First Things*, March 2015, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> "Notable and Quotable: Inclusive Holidays at Cornell," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, December 24, 2015, p. A9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> <http://cardinalsblog.adw.org/2015/12/selective-tolerance/#sthash.dajSOLy2.dpuf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* See also <http://cardinalsblog.adw.org/2014/08/why-a-silence/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/23/statement-president-persecuted-christians-christmas>.