

**HOMILY FOR CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**  
**Springfield, Illinois**  
**December 25, 2010**

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S.S.P.: Christmas light comes in the darkness of the night to set our hearts on fire with Christ's love.

My dear brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Walking through the Vatican Museum on the way up to the Sistine Chapel, one passes through a room with a huge mural of the nineteenth century painting by Polish artist Jan Matejko depicting the Polish King John Sobieski III leading the troops to victory over the Turks, who had invaded Vienna in 1683 with hopes of capturing Austria and conquering all of Europe. The battle marked the turning point in the 300-year struggle between the Christian forces of the Central European kingdoms and the Muslim armies of the Ottoman Empire. After the battle, Sobieski paraphrased Julius Caesar's famous quote by saying, "Veni, vidi, Deus vicit" - "I came, I saw, God conquered." Following his victories over the Ottoman Empire, King Sobieski was hailed by the Pope as the savior of

European Christendom. The commander of the defeated Ottoman army, Kara Mustafa Pasha, was executed in Belgrade on December 25, 1683.

Merry Christmas!

I'm talking about the Battle of Vienna tonight because we are sadly mistaken or at least naïve if we think that this centuries-long onslaught of Muslims against Christians ended on that battlefield three hundred and twenty-seven years ago. From its beginnings in the seventh century, the Muslim community spread through the Middle East through conquest, and the resulting growth of the Muslim state provided the ground in which Islam could take root and flourish.

In their book published in 2003, *Islam at War: A History*, George F. Nafziger and Mark W. Walton wrote that the “real victor in the conquests was not the Arab warlords, but Islam itself... Simply put, Islam may have sped the conquests, but it also showed much greater staying power. It is useful to realize that the power of Islam was separate from much and more permanent than that of the armies with which it rode.”<sup>1</sup>

These onslaughts continue today into the twenty-first century. *The State Journal-Register* reported two days ago that Christian churches in Iraq had cancelled their Christmas celebrations. There would be no Christmas

decorations, no Midnight Mass. “Even an appearance by Santa Claus has been nixed after Iraq’s Christian leaders called off Christmas celebrations amid new al-Quaida threats on their tiny community still terrified from a bloody siege on a Baghdad church” this past October 31<sup>st</sup>.

“Christians across Iraq have been living in fear since the assault on Our Lady of Salvation Church as its Catholic congregation was celebrating Sunday Mass. Sixty-eight people were killed [including two priests, one of whom was shot while presiding at the Mass and the other priest was killed while he was hearing confessions]. Days later Islamic insurgents bombed Christian homes and neighborhoods across the capital. . . .

“Since the church attack, some 1,000 families have fled to Iraq’s safer Kurdish-ruled north, according to the United Nations, which recently warned of a steady exodus of Iraqi Christians.”<sup>2</sup>

Chaldean Archbishop Louis Sako in Kirkuk said, “Nobody can ignore the threats of al-Quaida against Iraq Christians. We cannot find a single source of joy that makes us celebrate. The situation of the Christians is bleak.”<sup>3</sup>

Archbishop Amel Shamoun Nona, who leads the Chaldean Diocese of Mosul, said in a recent interview, “These are the worst and most perilous times” for Christians.<sup>4</sup>

As we gather for this Midnight Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Springfield, Illinois, we should count our blessings that we enjoy the freedom to do this 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.

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. We need only recall the terrorist attacks of 9-11-2001 right here on American soil. Next September will mark the tenth anniversary of those attacks, but the passage of ten years should not lull us into thinking that the threat has passed.

So what should we do? For one, I believe that we need to live our Catholic faith and practice our Christian beliefs much more fervently. Radical Islamist extremists take their faith very seriously, even though they are mistaken in thinking that those beliefs call for them to kill non-Muslims. If we are lukewarm about our Christianity, the Islamists won't

need to invade with armies like they marched into Vienna in 1683, but they could simply continue to move in peacefully and legally as they are already doing in Western Europe and even here in the United States until they reach a majority and impose Islamist values and *sharia* law with little or no resistance.

It doesn't help when our country plays politically correct games such as the security operations at our nation's airports. You can't fight a war if you can't identify the enemy, and if 83-year old great-grandmothers have to be treated the same way as Muslim Arabs from the Middle East with body scans and "enhanced pat-downs," then we're wasting a lot of time and money for nothing. True, not every Muslim is a terrorist, but most terrorists these days are Muslims, and we ignore that fact at our peril.

Perhaps this was not the warm and fuzzy message that you were hoping for at Midnight Mass. But I have a hard time feeling content while our Christian brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are suffering this Christmas night. Moreover, we should not leave here feeling satisfied that we have experienced the joy of another Christmas and that should be sufficient for another year or at least until Easter.

Christmas light comes in the darkness of the night to set our hearts on fire with Christ's love. That should enflame us to greater depths of prayer and devotion, and energize us to greater heights of putting Christian charity into action. Our Christmas liturgies are not nostalgic recollections of the past or mere memorials of historical events, but the birth of the Christ-child and the incarnation of God-made-man marks the dawn of the future for all humanity. That is the true Christmas gift. It is up to us whether we will open that gift and use it, or put it on a shelf never to be touched again.

That is the message delivered by the great Saint Augustine centuries ago as a bishop in northern Africa, when he called mankind to awake to the reality that God became man for our sake. He also told them in no uncertain terms what it would have meant if Christ had not been born:

"You would have suffered eternal death, had He not been born in time. Never would you have been freed from sinful flesh. You would have suffered everlasting unhappiness, had it not been for this mercy. You would never have returned to life, if He had not shared your death. You would have been lost, if He had not hastened to your aid. You would have perished, had He not come.

“Let us then joyfully celebrate the coming of our salvation and redemption. Let us celebrate the festive day on which He who is the great and eternal day came from the great and endless day of eternity into our short day of time. . . .

“Let us then rejoice in this grace, so that our glorying may bear witness to our good conscience by which we glory, not in ourselves, but in the Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

Let us thank God for this grace. Amen.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/earlyrise\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/earlyrise_1.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> Yasha Barzanji and Sameer N. Yacoub, “Iraqi churches cancel Christmas festivities,” *State Journal-Register*, December 23, 2010, p. 6.

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

<sup>4</sup> Sam Dagher, “For Iraq Christians, Silent Night,” *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, December 24, 2010, p. A11.

<sup>5</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermo 185, PL 38, 997-999*, quoted in the Office for Readings for December 24, *Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol. IV (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 379-381.