

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD -
CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2012**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The year was 1223. Christmas was coming. Francis of Assisi longed to do something to help the people of the small Italian town of Greccio to feel close to the infant Jesus, born for them in a stable in Bethlehem. They would never have a chance to visit the Holy Land, so how could he make the Nativity a real and personal experience for them? He persuaded a friend called John to bring straw, hay, an ox and an ass to a cave overlooking the town. There, Francis did the best that he could to recreate the scene within the stable at Bethlehem.

The news spread throughout the neighboring countryside and so, on Christmas Eve, people came from miles around for Midnight Mass, willingly climbing the steep and rocky hillside in the bitter cold. As Francis was a deacon, he sang the Gospel telling the story of the first Christmas. He hoped and prayed that the congregation would see his makeshift manger

and imagine the baby Jesus lying in the hay, with Mary and Joseph on either side.

One man later reported that, during the Mass, he had a vision in which he saw a baby asleep in the manger. As he watched, he saw Francis pick him up, holding him lovingly in his arms. He understood this to mean that the child Jesus had been forgotten by many people, but through St Francis, that Christmas night in Greccio, he came to life in the hearts and memories of all those who saw the crib.

In the spirit of the type of religious pilgrimage inspired by Saint Francis, I invite you to come with me on a journey tonight. On this Christmas night, please come with me on a journey to Bethlehem. We may not be able to make the physical pilgrimage to the land of the Savior's birth, but we can make the journey interiorly, that is, in our hearts, before our Nativity sets; spiritually we can travel to Bethlehem.

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has proclaimed this year a Holy Year of Faith. At the heart of this Year of Faith is the encounter with Jesus Christ. Indeed, in his apostolic letter announcing the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of "the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed clearly light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with

Christ" (*Porta Fidei*, 2). Our encounter with the Child of Bethlehem whose birth we celebrate tonight should fill us with great joy and renewed enthusiasm to live our Catholic faith.

Unfortunately, in our world today there are many people who have not experienced this loving encounter with the Lord and who do not share our joyful enthusiasm to live our Catholic faith. I am sure that many of us know personally such people. They are our sisters and brothers, our nieces and nephews, our sons and daughters, our neighbors and co-workers.

As I talk with church-going Catholic parents with adult children who have drifted from or abandoned the practice of the faith, they relate to me how personally painful it is for them to see their children now as fallen-away Catholics. They feel like failures as Catholic parents and helpless to do anything about it. Some even wonder if they have sinned by not being good Catholic parents.

To this I respond that we must remember the essential role of freedom in the worship of God. From the time of the first human beings as told in the Bible in the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis, God gave people a free will to chose between good and evil. Though God must have been profoundly disappointed by the sins of Adam and Eve, we

would not say that God had failed in his creation of human beings. God created people with a free will, and free will means that people will at times choose good and at other times will choose evil, sometimes even evil so despicable as the shooting rampage that resulted in the deaths of twenty-seven people recently in Newtown, Connecticut. Some people ask why God doesn't prevent such evil, or at least why He permits it. The answer is that a world in which God prevented all acts of evil would be a world in which no one was free. God wants us to love Him and each other, but that love must be free, it cannot be coerced or it is no longer love.

In his recently published book, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, Pope Benedict XVI describes the angel Gabriel's visit to the virgin of Nazareth in these dramatic terms: "After the error of our first parents, the whole world was shrouded in darkness, under the dominion of death. Now God seeks to enter the world anew. He knocks at Mary's door. He needs human freedom. The only way he can redeem man, who was created free, is by means of a free 'yes' to his will. In creating freedom, he made himself in a certain sense dependent upon man. His power is tied to the unenforceable 'yes' of a human being." That "yes," that "be it done

unto me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), is, with the Resurrection, one of the two cornerstones of Christian faith.

To say that people are free to choose between good and evil, between loving God and rejecting Him, does not mean that we just sit by passively and watch what happens in the world. An important part of our “yes” is to do what we can to live as holy and loving disciples of the Lord, engaging our freedom to influence this world and others in it to do the same, while recognizing their freedom to choose otherwise. But when they do, we must continue to pray for their conversion and do what we can to help bring them back to the Lord and prevent their choices from harming others.

Of this task, the Holy Father wrote: “To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived, and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year” (*Porta Fidei*, 9).

As we make our spiritual journey to Bethlehem to behold the face of God in Jesus Christ, I note that the word *Bethlehem* means “House of Bread.” The child Jesus came not only to redeem us through his death and resurrection, but to nourish and sustain us with His very Body and Blood, as He does tonight and each time we receive Him in Holy Communion.

A wonderful poem by Adam Seems called *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, captures the truth announced by the angel to the shepherds that first Christmas night in Bethlehem:

*It is not over
this birthing.
There are always newer skies
into which God can throw stars.
When we begin to think
that we can predict the Advent of God,
that we can box the Christ
in a stable in Bethlehem,
that's just the time
that God will be born
in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.
Those who wait for God
watch with their hearts and not their eyes,
listening
always listening
for angel words.*

May God give us this grace. Amen.