

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD -
CHRISTMAS MORNING MASS AT THE WOMEN'S PRISON
Decatur Correctional Center, Decatur
December 25, 2012**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

On Christmas Eve in 1995, high in the Atlas Mountains in Algeria, the Islamist guerrilla leader Ali Fayattia has come to the Cistercian monastery with a band of heavily armed men, looking for medicines for his wounded subordinates. The abbot and soon-to-be martyr, Brother Christian, tells Fayattia that the monastery is no place for weapons. He explains that it is a special night, a night of peace, because the monks are celebrating the birth of Jesus, whom Muslims revere as a great prophet. Fayattia apologizes for interrupting their celebrations and extends his hand. After a short hesitation, Brother Christian shakes the hand of a man whom he knows to be a brutal murderer.

For a few seconds, hearts, minds and faith meet in harmony and understanding. For a brief moment, the name and birth of Jesus cross the religious divide between Christian and Muslim. Brother Christian starts to quote the Koran to the Muslim, inviting reprisals because he, a non-

Muslim, uses the words that Fayattia holds sacred. Those words form a second bridge: the quotation that Brother Christian starts, Fayattia finishes. The two men and the two great religions are united in the word of God.

The film *Of Gods and Men* recalls this true story of the martyrdom of a community of French Cistercian monks, who died because they witnessed for peace. Ali Fayattia also died, but he died because he chose violence. Yet Brother Christian and Fayattia showed that, united by the word of God, there is no need for conflict.

When Brother Christian and Ali Fayattia spoke of Christmas and the birth of Jesus, their thoughts focused on the sacred. The monk spoke of Jesus, the Word of God. When they concentrated on God, they spoke the same language. There was no conflict and that is why they were able to shake hands.

Christmas reminds us that God, in Jesus, is present in our midst. I have come here among you on this Christmas Day as a sign and a reminder that Christ is in your midst, even here, in prison. God has not abandoned you.

We are sometimes tempted to think or to imagine that Jesus has left us completely alone, that he no longer cares for us, but Holy Mother Church gently corrects this thought and reminds us that

The Lord Jesus, the king of glory, the conqueror of sin and death, ascended to heaven while the angels sang his praises. Christ, the mediator between God and man, judge of the world and Lord of all, has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope. Christ is the beginning, the head of the Church; where he has gone, we hope to follow" (Preface: Ascension II).

This, then, is the hope that belongs to Jesus' call: to be with him forever in his kingdom!

This is why Jesus gave to the Apostles his Great Commission: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

It is this final command of the Lord that has brought me here to you today. As a Bishop, a Successor of the Apostles, this same Commission has been given to me, and in it my priests also share. I have come to remind you of Christ's love and concern for you. He wants you to be with him in his kingdom. I urge you, then, to encounter him frequently in the

Sacraments, especially in Confession and in Holy Communion and to seek always to follow his commands of love.

I also hope that my presence here today is a clear sign and witness to the important place that ministry within the prisons in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois has in my heart. When so many people in society are ready to write you off, as we say, the Church, united with Christ her Head, remains with you. Jesus never abandons you, and neither will the Church, so long as you remain close to her.

I do not want you to lose hope simply because you are imprisoned. The Lord's grace is powerful and effective even here. If we look at the lives of the saints, we see that a time spent in prison was a profound moment of conversion in many of their lives. We think, especially, of Saint Dismas, the Good Thief, who, while hanging on a cross next to Jesus, expressed his faith and his sorrow for his sins, when he said to the Lord: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," to which Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

The grace of conversion is needed in the heart of every member of the faithful. We must all look to the Crucified and Risen Lord, who has ascended to the right hand of the Father, where he intercedes for us, and

beg him to remove the darkness from the eyes of our hearts. If we cooperate with his grace and allow him to do so, then we might live no longer in sin but bask, rather, in the light of his Word, of his commands, that shines as a lamp marking out the path that leads to heaven (cf. Psalm 119:105).

If you live in this way, seeking always to be motivated in all things by the love of God and of neighbor, then on the day of judgment you will be counted among the sheep, among the flock of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep, and you will hear him say to you, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

As we continue our celebration of the birth of our Savior in Bethlehem, 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.