

HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As we begin a new year, it is fitting that our first reading today gives us a blessing for new beginnings. The now-familiar blessing that God gave to Moses for the Israelites came as God's people were preparing to set out for the Promised Land. The approaching journey to the Promised Land will mark a new life for the people. The wording of the blessing includes the image of God's face shining on the people, lighting the way and scattering the darkness. The blessing also speaks of their enjoying God's grace and favor, protecting them from harm. Finally, the blessing includes the gift of peace, not the elusive peace of this world, but the lasting peace that only God can give.

Every new year is in a way a new beginning, so this blessing is also appropriate for us to ask God to light the way and scatter the darkness, that we may enjoy God's grace and favor, protecting us from harm, and bestow on the world the gift of peace.

As is customary, Pope Benedict XVI has issued a message for peace at the beginning of the new year. The Holy Father's January 1, 2012 message for the World Day of Peace starts out as follows:

The beginning of a new year, God's gift to humanity, prompts me to extend to all, with great confidence and affection, my heartfelt good wishes that this time now before us may be marked concretely by justice and peace.

With what attitude should we look to the New Year? We find a very beautiful image in Psalm 130. The Psalmist says that people of faith wait for the Lord "more than those who watch for the morning" (v. 6); they wait for him with firm hope because they know that he will bring light, mercy, salvation. This waiting was born of the experience of the Chosen People, who realized that God taught them to look at the world in its truth and not to be overwhelmed by tribulation. I invite you to look to 2012 with this attitude of confident trust. It is true that the year now ending has been marked by a rising sense of frustration at the crisis looming over society, the world of labor and the economy, a crisis whose roots are primarily cultural and anthropological. It seems as if a shadow has fallen over our time, preventing us from clearly seeing the light of day.

In this shadow, however, human hearts continue to wait for the dawn of which the Psalmist speaks. Because this expectation is particularly powerful and evident in young people, my thoughts turn to them and to the contribution which they can and must make to society. I would like therefore to devote this message for the XLV World Day of Peace to the theme of education: "Educating Young People in Justice and Peace," in the conviction that the young, with their enthusiasm and idealism, can offer new hope to the world.

The Holy Father continued:

My Message is also addressed to parents, families and all those involved in the area of education and formation, as well as to leaders in the various spheres of religious, social, political, economic and cultural life and in the media. Attentiveness to young people and their concerns, the ability to listen to them and appreciate them, is not merely something expedient; it represents a primary duty for society as a whole, for the sake of building a future of justice and peace.

It is a matter of communicating to young people an appreciation for the positive value of life and of awakening in them a desire to spend their lives in the service of the Good. This is a task which engages each of us personally. ...

The Church looks to young people with hope and confidence; she encourages them to seek truth, to defend the common good, to be open to the world around them and willing to see "new things" (Is 42:9; 48:6).

Looking to the future with hope and confidence, it is helpful for us to take note of some trends about Christianity in the world. While the secular media often portray Christianity in an unfavorable light, there is much good news about the spread of Christianity in the world that you may not have heard about.

According to a report published last month by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Christians account for almost a third of the world's population. The data from the 2010 survey of more than 200 countries found that worldwide, there are 2.18 billion Christians, nearly a third of the estimated global population at that time of 6.9 billion.

The report looked at what has changed in the past century. Since 1910 the number of Christians nearly quadrupled, from about 600 million to more than 2 billion. Christians are the world's largest religious group. Muslims, according to previous studies by the Pew group, account for a bit under a quarter of the world's population.

The spread of countries reflects a major shift in where Christians are to be found. In 1910, about two-thirds of the world's Christians lived in Europe. A century later only 26% of Christians live in Europe. More than a third are now found in the Americas, 37%. While just under a quarter, 24%, live in sub-Saharan Africa. The Asia-Pacific region accounts for 13%.

Taking Europe and the Americas together these two still make up a majority of Christians, with 63%. That is, however, a notable decline from the 1910 level of 93%. In both regions the numbers of Christians have dropped. In 1910, 95% of Europe's population was Christian, but by 2010 it was only 76%. In the Americas over the same period it went from 96% to 86%.

This decline contrasts with the dramatic change in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1910 only 9% were Christians, but a century later the Christian faith had exploded, making up 63% of the population.

There are 1.1 billion Catholics worldwide, according to the report. This means they account for half of the global Christian population.

The report gives a more precise idea of what observers have been commenting on in recent years regarding the shift of Christianity to the Global South. The rapid growth of Christians in Africa and China will likely continue, with significant implications for Christianity.

As we contemplate those implications, we look to Mary, the Mother of God, whose feast day we celebrate today. The Gospel of Saint Luke tells us that Mary treasured all the things that happened after the birth of Jesus and reflected on them in her heart.

When we reflect on Christ's birth, the most fitting response for us is that of the shepherds described in today's Gospel, namely, they returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. That is the reason why Christianity is spreading throughout the world two thousand years after Christ's birth, because the only possible response for those who understand the significance of these events is put their faith in the Lord and give Him glory and praise.

May God give us this grace. Amen.