

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD -
CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2013**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Five months ago, Prince William and Catherine (Kate) Middleton, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, welcomed into the world their firstborn son: George Alexander Louis, Prince of Cambridge. Today we celebrate the reality that two thousand years ago Mary and Joseph welcomed their firstborn son: Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

The birth of the Prince of Cambridge was preceded by months of anticipation. Reporters were camped for weeks across the street from the hospital where the birth would take place.

The birth took place in a private suite in the hospital.

It was announced with a royal scroll placed on an easel in front of Buckingham Palace.

The prince's first visitors were his grandparents.

When the child's name was announced, we learned that he would be called George Alexander Louis.

After the prince's birth, the bells of Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral tolled a specially composed peal for four hours.

The Church of England even composed a special prayer to mark Prince George's birth.

In contrast, the birth of the Prince of Peace was preceded by years of anticipation, of waiting in hope for the coming of the Messiah.

The birth took place in a barn and the baby's crib was an animal's manger.

It was announced by an angel to shepherds in a nearby field.

The first visitors to the Prince of Peace were these lowly shepherds.

When the child's name was announced, we learned that he was called Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Emmanuel, Jesus.

After this prince's birth, a host of heavenly angels praised God, singing "Glory to God in high heaven, peace on earth to all God's people."

Our Church celebrates the birth, life, and death of the Prince of Peace with a special prayer called the Eucharist, for which we gather tonight.

Some day Prince George will be king and will rule all of England until his death. Our Prince of Peace has been God-with-us since His birth and will reign as King of the Universe for all eternity. The reign of our heavenly King, however, does not force Himself on us, does not coerce us to obey Him, but respects our freedom to accept or reject His sovereign rule in our hearts.

The implication of this freedom is that a person must make an intentional choice to be a truly committed Catholic Christian, even if one was baptized as an infant. Our Protestant friends call this being a “born-again Christian.” Ethnic Catholics traditionally have scoffed at this notion, feeling that they have been Catholic Christians since their infant baptism and their being reared in an Irish, Italian, German, Polish, Filipino, or Mexican-American household, where one’s Catholic identity came with the culture and was taken for granted. For better or for worse, those days are gone, and the predominant culture that now has the most influence in our society today is a secular culture that leaves little or no room for God. Thus, there is a growing recognition that Catholics, too, must, in a way, be born again. Blessed Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have called this the “New Evangelization.”

Catholic scholar George Weigel has even gone so far as to call for an “Evangelical Catholicism” and published a book earlier this year by that title. As Weigel explains, “Evangelical Catholicism insists that no one is born Catholic and that ‘becoming Catholic’ is a lifelong process: a matter of living out the promises and grace of one’s Baptism in radical discipleship, according to the teaching of Christ as transmitted by Holy Scripture and the apostolic tradition of the Church. You are not a Catholic in the full sense of the term because your grandmother was born in County Cork or Palermo or Guadalajara and your parents submitted you to a religious ritual when you were an infant. You are a Catholic because you have met the Lord and entered into a mature friendship with him—which is to say, in evangelically Catholic language, that the sacramental grace of your Baptism, should you have been baptized as an infant, has been made manifest in the pattern of your life as you have grown into human maturity.”¹

In our world today, people who are looking for a deeper meaning in life are often called “seekers,” and what they seek is often referred to as “spirituality.” Weigel distinguishes that being an evangelical Catholic is something entirely different. He says, “‘Spirituality,’ as the postmodern

world understands it, is the human search for the divine. Christianity, by contrast, is about God's search for us, and our learning to take the same path through history that God is taking. . . . Postmodern 'spirituality' is for seekers. Evangelical Catholicism is for finders. And the point of being a finder—better, the point of being found by grace and accepting that 'being found'—is to convert the world—and to do so in the challenging cultural circumstances of this historical moment."²

Moreover, "spirituality" may be sufficient for individuals, but committed Catholics are not independent operators who function as lone rangers. Committed, evangelical Catholics have the Catholic Church as their point of reference. The Catholic community of faith is the fountain of sacramental grace founded by Christ Himself to nurture us through life toward the eternal salvation of our souls.

To be an evangelical Catholic, then, has many implications. At its most basic level, "to evangelize" means to share the Good News with the joy and the conviction of the first apostles who eagerly proclaimed, "We have found the Messiah" as Andrew did when he brought his brother, Simon Peter, our first Pope, to introduce him to the Lord. As the Gospel of John relates it, "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon

and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus" (John 1:41-42). Then, the "next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, 'Follow me.' Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph'" (John 1:43-45).

In short, we who are committed Catholic Christians are called to build a vibrant community of saints who love God and neighbor. To build a vibrant community of saints who love God and neighbor, we must do four things:

1. Invite people to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass;
2. Study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith;
3. Provide the sacraments as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven;
4. Serve those in need by practicing charity and justice.

Like those first apostles, if our hearts have been touched by the Lord, our immediate impulse is to share this Good News, to invite people to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass, where we encounter our Savior in the Eucharist.

When we truly love someone or something, we want to know more. We who love Christ study the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic Church to learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith.

The Church provides the sacraments because they have been given to us by Christ as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven.

Finally, Pope Francis has said that the Church must not be self-referential, that is, we are not self-centered on ourselves and our own needs, but we must serve others.³ Thus we are called to serve those in need by practicing charity and justice. We do this in the Church in many ways, institutionally through or Catholic hospitals, schools, colleges, universities, Catholic Charities, St. Vincent DePaul Societies and soup kitchens, and individually through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

This is the true meaning of Christmas, this is the fulfillment of the words of the prophet, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone" (Isaiah 9:1).

Let us thank God for this grace. Amen.

¹ George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st Century Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), pp. 34-35.

² Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism*, pp. 27-28.

³ <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2013/03/28/church-must-not-be-self-centred-pope-francis-told-cardinals/>