

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD
CHRISTMAS EVE MASS
Taylorville Correctional Center, Taylorville, Illinois
December 24, 2014**

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My dear brothers in Christ:

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” As described in the Gospel of Saint Luke, these words of praise to God were sung by the angels proclaiming the good news of great joy that a savior has been born for us who is Christ the Lord.

These words and sentiments of peace may seem far from us, separated not only by the temporal passage of over two thousand years, but also by the present realities of a world that seems marked more by violence than by peace. News stories fill the media with a steady stream of reports of the racial tensions and protests, often violent, that have flared up in recent weeks in the aftermath of grand juries that declined to indict white police officers who, in the line of duty, killed two black men in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York, respectively. In apparent retaliation for these killings, a gunman shot dead two New York City police officers in what officials called an “assassination,” hours after warning on social

media that he planned an attack in retribution for recent police killings of black crime suspects. Compounding this tragedy are offensive displays of some people celebrating the senseless murder of these police officers.

So how are we to understand the angelic proclamation of peace in the face of our current circumstances of hatred and violence? Were the angels mistaken? Were they lying? Or was this peace just a temporary state that would not last long beyond the birth of Christ? The answer to these questions is no, the angels were not mistaken, they were not lying, nor was this peace just a temporary state that would not last long beyond the birth of Christ.

The answer is that peace indeed comes to those who allow the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ to enter their hearts and pervade their lives no matter what is happening in the world around them. In the words of Saint Augustine, "For how could there be peace on earth unless *Truth has arisen from the earth*, that is, unless Christ, were born of our flesh? And *he is our peace who made the two into one*: that we might be men of good will, sweetly linked by the bond of unity."¹

Christ points us to the truth that divisions between people can never be healed as long as people are pointing fingers at each other instead of

examining their own consciences. In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Jesus says, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matthew 7:1-3).

Jesus speaks the truth that, as long as people only see the wrongdoings of others, whether real or imagined, and not take notice of their own shortcomings, the pattern of blame and hostility will continue in an endless cycle. This is true whether the disagreement is an international dispute or a domestic argument between husband and wife. Jesus shows us that the way to replace hatred with love is to start by looking into our own hearts, acknowledging our own sins, and resolving to avoid them in the future, with the help of God’s grace. If everyone were to do this, the whole community could then work together to help each other to treat one another better and live in peace.

During this Christmas season and as we begin a new year, we should recognize that there would be lot more peace and good will towards all if everyone were to resolve to live as Christ taught.

Christmas reminds us that God, in Jesus, is present in our midst. I have come here among you on this Christmas Eve 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. It is also a special blessing for us this evening that two of you will profess your faith bringing you into full communion with the Catholic Church, after which you will receive the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist. I pray that the gifts of the Holy Spirit will help you to persevere in the practice of the Catholic faith.

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).

Christmas is a time for exchanging gifts. Christ has given us the great gift of Himself. Our gift to Christ is to give Him our 'yes' each and every day. It is not enough for us to have said 'yes' to Him on the day of our Baptism, or when we renewed those promises at our Confirmation and on every Easter Sunday. We are invited to give that 'yes' at every moment of our lives.

In a very tangible way, we are to give the gift of our 'yes' to Christ by accepting Him as He comes to us in others. As He Himself tells us in Matthew's Gospel: "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). One of the great gifts that we give to Christ whom we cannot see is by loving our neighbor whom we can see. As the Lord reminds us, our neighbor is not just that person with whom

we agree or with whom we like to spend time, but it includes everybody, *especially* those with whom we find it hard to get along.²

My prayer for this Christmas season and upcoming new year is that racial hatreds will be overcome, that ethnic prejudices and discrimination among all races may stop, that violence everywhere may cease, that lawful authority may be respected, that employment and educational opportunities may abound, that families and communities may abide in harmony, and that everyone will be able to live together in peace.

As we celebrate the birth of our Lord at this Mass, Christ prepares to come among us now in a remarkable way in the Eucharist. May we be thankful for this gift which we are about to receive from His love for us. May that love enflame our hearts to be more aware of His constant presence among us at every stage of our journey and how we are encouraged to share His love with each and every person that we encounter along that path.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ St. Augustine, *Sermo 185*: PL 38, 997-999), quoted in the *Liturgy of the Hours, Office of Readings*, for December 24.

² Luke 6:27-36.