

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD -
CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2014**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” As we just heard proclaimed from 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.

In his Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2015, Pope Francis writes, "In her 'proclamation of the truth of Christ's love in society,' the Church constantly engages in charitable activities inspired by the truth of the human person. She is charged with showing to all the path to conversion, which enables us to change the way we see our neighbors, to recognize in every other person a brother or sister in our human family, and to acknowledge his or her intrinsic dignity in truth and freedom."

The Holy Father is telling us that the best way to bring Christ to those around us is by being instruments of His love. Every encounter that we have with other people is an opportunity to share that love and so invite them to come to encounter Christ as one who is present and active, as opposed to being simply a nice memory of a good man who lived a long time ago.

We must constantly be aware that we also have the potential of being obstacles to His love in our interactions with others. We can very easily fall into the trap of being uncharitable with people that do not agree with us or

who bother us in some way. It can be tempting to gossip about others or to make judgments about them. There are so many ways in which we can turn people away from God's love and we must make a concerted effort to avoid those ways of acting. Our gathering with our family and friends during the Christmas season is a perfect opportunity for us to witness to the joy of the Incarnation by giving the gift of His love to everybody we encounter, including those who do not treat us as we think they should.

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.