

**Homily for Christmas Eve Mass with Confirmation
December 24, 2015**

**Taylorville Correctional Center
Taylorville, Illinois**

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My dear brothers in Christ, this past year marked the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, one of the bleakest periods of human history. It was a time marked by great suffering and the loss of so many lives. The world watched in horror at the atrocities that human beings were capable of inflicting upon one another. Truly, it was a time of great darkness for our world.

Yet, in the midst of those dark times, there never ceased to be rays of light piercing through the shadows, offering small signs of hope to those who lived through such challenging circumstances. One example came in the person of a German Lutheran pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer spoke and acted in resistance to the evil being undertaken by the Nazi regime in Germany and throughout Europe. He was arrested and put into prison for his defiance of the actions of the Third Reich, and when it was discovered that he was associated with the failed assassination attempt of Adolf Hitler in July of 1944, Bonhoeffer was quickly tried and executed.

While in prison, Bonhoeffer was not deterred from continuing his work of spreading the faith for which he lived, and for which he was willing to die. He worked to encourage his fellow prisoners, inviting them to have hope, even in those difficult moments. One of his fellow prisoners wrote the following of Bonhoeffer:

To the very end, Bonhoeffer took advantage of (their) condition by arranging prayer services, consoling those who had lost all hope, and giving them fresh courage. A towering rock of faith, he became a shining example to his fellow prisoners.¹

This unwavering witness to his faith in the power of Jesus Christ was a tangible proof of the words found in the Prologue of John's Gospel, where we hear that "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). This is at the heart of our celebration of Christmas. Christ, who is the light of the world, entered into a world of darkness, and in doing so, renewed the hope of those had longed for His coming. His coming was not just a moment in the past, but is one that is continually presented to us in so many ways with that same promise of hope, even in prison.

In one of the letters that he wrote while in prison, Bonhoeffer addressed this very point with the following words:

Viewed from a Christian perspective, Christmas in a prison cell can, of course, hardly be considered particularly problematic. Most likely many of those here in this building will celebrate a more meaningful and authentic Christmas than in places where it is celebrated in name only. That misery, sorrow, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God than according to human judgment; that God turns toward the very places from which humans turn away; that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn – a prisoner grasps this better than others, and for him this is truly good news.²

As Bonhoeffer mentions in this letter, the circumstances surrounding the birth of Christ tell us something very beautiful about how He chooses to work. Instead of coming in the obvious and expected fashion, He comes in the most unlikely of circumstances. This long awaited king does not come to a palace, surrounded by nobility. He comes in the humble setting of a cave, surrounded by animals and poor shepherds. As He would continue His life, He would defy the expectations for the Messiah and He

manifested His glory in the most unlikely ways, culminating with His shameful death on the Cross and burial in a borrowed tomb.

God continues even today to show forth His light and power in those unexpected places. One of those places where He most wants to shed His light is in the depths of our hearts, so often darkened by the sins of our past and the many other ways in which we have not welcomed Him in our lives. We can be tempted to doubt that He would want to dwell in such a place, yet there is no place that He would rather be! What we may deem to be a less than ideal place for Him to dwell is exactly where He wants to come in order to share His love, thus bringing us peace and joy.

As Bonhoeffer suggests, this should be received as good news for you as you find yourself in what may seem less than ideal circumstances. In many ways, you are in a more privileged place to welcome Christ, for those places outside of these walls, which seem much more suitable for the newborn king, are often places that do not really want to welcome Him in any way that is more than just superficial. I invite you to see this time in prison not as a time separated from God, but as a unique opportunity to draw closer to Him and His love for you.

In his desire for people to come to know the love of God more profoundly, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has just begun a Jubilee Year of Mercy. He longs for everyone to encounter this powerful gift which is at the heart of our Christian faith. This gift of mercy is described by him as “the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.”³ There is no sin that cannot be forgiven by this gift of mercy, thus reconciling us back to that loving embrace of the Father.

A key symbol of the Jubilee Year of Mercy is the Holy Door designated in each cathedral of every diocese around the world. The faithful may receive a plenary indulgence when they pass through the Holy Door under the usual conditions for obtaining an indulgence, that is, reception of sacramental confession and Holy Communion, prayers for the Holy Father, and renunciation of all attachment to sin. Walking through the Holy Door should not be understood as some sort of magic or superstition. Going through the Holy Door should be understood as a symbol of passing from sin to grace, that is, we leave behind a sinful way of life in order to enter into the richness of God’s mercy and love. We should have that in mind each time we walk through the Holy Door.

The question will certainly arise in your hearts about how such a gift like this can be available to you who are unable to pass through the Holy Door at our Cathedral? Do not worry, for the Church has not forgotten about you! In fact, the pope thought specifically of you and how this gift of God's mercy is to be made available in a very special way to you during this Jubilee Year of Mercy. He writes the following words to you:

My thoughts also turn to those incarcerated, whose freedom is limited. The Jubilee Year has always constituted an opportunity for great amnesty, which is intended to include the many people who, despite deserving punishment, have become conscious of the injustice they worked and sincerely wish to re-enter society and make their honest contribution to it. May they all be touched in a tangible way by the mercy of the Father who wants to be close to those who have the greatest need of his forgiveness. They may obtain the Indulgence in the chapels of the prisons. May the gesture of directing their thought and prayer to the Father each time they cross the threshold of their cell signify for them their passage through the Holy Door, because the mercy of God is able to transform hearts, and is also able to transform bars into an experience of freedom.⁴

May you see this tender sign of affection of the Church for you as a gift greater than any other that you could receive for Christmas, that even though you may remain behind these walls, you will be freed from the only prison that is truly enslaving, that of sin.

It is not enough, however, just to receive this great gift. With the gift comes an expectation. The expectation is that we will share this gift of mercy with others through a committed life of discipleship. We should strive to spread the good news of God's mercy to others by the way that we live our lives. There is never a situation, no matter how far from the ideal that it may be, in which we cannot live our faith visibly and so be a sign of hope for others to do likewise, even here in prison.

Right after this homily, I will be administering the Sacrament of Confirmation to two men. Those who will present themselves for this sacrament are making a decisive step to commit themselves more fully to living their Catholic faith as fully-initiated members of the Catholic Church. With that comes that greater expectation of which I just spoke. But with that expectation comes the grace of the sacrament to assist in the struggle to remain firmly on the path given to us to follow.

As we continue our celebration, we turn our attention back to Bethlehem, which in Hebrew literally means “house of bread.” We are reminded that the Word becomes flesh is a very real and powerful way each time we celebrate the Eucharist, for He comes to us in His Body and His blood. By our partaking of this great gift of His love, we welcome His light into the dark places of our hearts, pointing out the way for us to follow Him. In this bread of life, we are also nourished and strengthened for the journey that lies ahead, and with that strength from on high, we have great confidence that no matter how challenging the circumstances may be or how dark the future may seem, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5), and the darkness *will* not overcome it.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1966), 324.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 205.

³ Pope Francis, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy *Misericordiae Vultus*, §2.

⁴ Pope Francis, Letter of the Holy Father according to which an Indulgence is granted to the faithful on the occasion of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, 1 September 2015.