

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD
CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2016**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you in prayer for this Christmas Midnight Mass. Tonight we join people from across the world in celebrating the birth of our Savior.

Our midnight celebration could be summed up in a verse from the Christmas carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, that says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Him tonight." We wait all year for this day. Whatever our hopes and fears may have been during this past year, today our hope is strengthened and our fears are lessened, because that is the very purpose of Christ's coming into the world: so that our hope in God would be fulfilled and our fear be transformed into hope.

Saint Augustine once described in a sermon what our world would have been like if Christ had not been born among us as Our Savior. He said: "You would have suffered eternal death, had He not been born in

time. Never would you have been freed from sinful flesh, had He not taken on Himself the likeness of sinful flesh. You would have suffered everlasting unhappiness, had it not been for this mercy. You would never have returned to life, had He not shared your death. You would have been lost if He had not hastened to your aid. You would have perished, had He not come.”¹

Since, to our everlasting benefit, Christ did choose to be born among us, we “joyfully celebrate the coming of our salvation and redemption” and we “celebrate the festive day on which He who is the great and eternal day came from the great and endless day of eternity into our own short day of time.”²

During the four full weeks of the Advent season that we had this year of preparing for Christmas, a prominent figure was Saint John the Baptist. On the First Sunday of Advent, for example, the Scriptures told us that “John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: *A voice of one crying out in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord*” (Matthew 3:1-3).

The voice of the prophet comes to be heard in the desert in our time as well, not the physical desert of sand and scorching heat, but the spiritual desert of our secular world, a place that is often barren and bereft of any awareness of anything divine. Another metaphor for spiritual emptiness is the darkness of the night, which is why we celebrate this Christmas Mass during the night. The celebration of Christ's birth also comes shortly after the winter solstice, marking the day with the shortest period of daylight and the longest night of the year. From now until the summer solstice next June, the period of daylight day will gradually get longer. So it is that now in the darkness of this night we gather again to celebrate the coming of the light, Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Like the shepherds of Bethlehem we hear again the song of the angels telling us of a child born for us, a Savior. We hear those reassuring words that are featured regularly throughout the Gospel story: "Do not be afraid." There is good news to tell, news that will always survive the evil that human beings can do. There is a joy meant for us, a reason to believe, a cause of happiness that we can know and share in. Allow the Lord to transform your fears into hope, for those who hope in the Lord will not be disappointed.

In our first reading from the prophet Isaiah, we heard that 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). This “great light” is none other than the Christ child born to us. This child will be an ideal King who will carry titles that could never have been attached to his predecessors. He will be Counselor because His wisdom will steer people along the path to eternal life. He will be Hero because He will lead the people to victory against the forces of evil that once ruled their lives. He will be Father because He will care for all of God’s children. He will be Prince of Peace because His reign will offer the people a lasting security that comes from having a right relationship with God.

Another image offered in today’s scripture is the scene of Jesus being born in a manger in a stable because there was no room for him in the usual places of lodging. Again we see a metaphor for our own lives. The usual place where Jesus seeks to dwell is in our hearts, but we must in all honesty ask ourselves if our hearts are not too full of other distractions that leave no room for Our Lord to enter. Are we so preoccupied with work, with sports, with entertainment and other diversions that we have no time or energy left to give to God?

Notice that Our Savior chose to be born in a manger. The word “manger” means: a place to be fed. The animals came to the manger in the stable to be fed. Jesus chose to be born in a manger because He wants us to come to Him to be fed. Eating is something that we do every day for our physical well-being. We also need spiritual food every day in order to have a healthy relationship with God. Christ gives Himself to us in this Eucharist so that we may be nourished frequently with His loving presence.

We came here in darkness. This Cathedral, this place of prayer and sacrifice, is bathed in light, the light of Christ. We have entered and have prayerfully pondered the mystery of this feast. Now Jesus will prepare to come to us. We join with the angels to rejoice that Jesus has come and will come to us again in this Eucharist.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ From a sermon by Saint Augustine, bishop, (Sermo 185: PL 38, 997-999), quoted in the Office of Readings, Liturgy of the Hours for December 24.

² Ibid.