

**Homily for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, Cycle A  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

**November 27, 2016**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Yesterday I joined the Sacred Heart-Griffin High School Cyclone Football Team on the team bus and on the sidelines of the Illinois State High School Association Class 6A Championship Football Game at Memorial Stadium of University of Illinois in Champaign. Although SHG lost the game to a very tough opponent, Prairie Ridge High School in Crystal Lake, the game capped a very successful season with a 13-1 record and second place in the State in Class 6A. Not only the Catholic community but all of Springfield should be proud of these outstanding young men and congratulate them for their achievements.

While we were in Champaign, I took advantage of being in the area to see friend of mine who is now a young priest serving as one of the Chaplains at the Catholic Newman Center at the University of Illinois in Champaign, Father Chase Hilgenbrinck. Father Hilgenbrinck was born in Quincy, Illinois, in 1982, grew up in the Diocese of Peoria and was

ordained a priest for the Peoria diocese in 2014. Before his ordination, however, Father Hilgenbrinck's path to priesthood included a career as a professional soccer player. He played soccer for four years in South America before returning to the United States to play for the New England Revolution. Hilgenbrinck's last game was on a Sunday, July 13, 2008, at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts. The reason he hung up his soccer spikes was to enter the seminary and study for the priesthood. Although his Catholic faith had been important to him throughout his life, Hilgenbrinck decided to make a deeper commitment: to put God at the center of his life.

Similar to the life story of Father Hilgenbrinck is the vocational path of a young woman named Kirstin Holum. In 1998, at the Winter Olympics in Japan, Kirstin Holum was a seventeen-year-old speed-skating prodigy from the United States who was foreseen to achieve future greatness. When Kirstin placed sixth in the three thousand meter speed skating and seventh in the five thousand meters, experts predicted a golden future. Her mother had been an Olympic gold medalist and similar success was forecast for Kirstin. But the 1998 Olympic Games would be the final time she would skate competitively. From that point on, her life began an entirely different

journey. "Speed skating was such a huge part of my life," she says. "I still loved the sport, but I had this incredibly strong calling that it was time to move on and take a different path in life."

In fact, Kirstin became a nun, joining the Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal, whose mission is to work with people who are poor and homeless. She became known as Sister Catherine. In New York she worked with some of the city's most underprivileged children in areas steeped in gang culture. She then moved to Britain, to work with underprivileged groups in the city of Leeds.

Kirstin does not hide her background as an Olympian when giving talks to children. In her words: "Their eyes get really big and they start paying a lot more attention. It is not exactly something you would normally expect from a sister. But I think it is good for them to see that members of a religious order can come from any background and any walk of life. It is all about your commitment to the message. I saw people making sports into the most important thing in their lives and I didn't desire that." Sister Catherine desired to put Christ at the center of her life.

Father Chase Hilgenbrinck and Sister Catherine Holum are shining examples for taking a deeper plunge into our calling as Christians and making a life-long commitment to put Christ at the center of our lives.

Today the Church begins the four-week Advent season of Advent preparation for the celebration of Christmas. This First Sunday of Advent is a good time to reflect on the proper way to prepare for Christmas.

For many people, preparing for Christmas unfortunately starts on “Black Friday” with feverish shopping for sales amidst the tumultuous crowds of the shopping malls. May I suggest that our Christian faith offers a saner and more wholesome path: our Advent preparation for Christmas should not be so focused on shopping and buying gifts, but on building relationships. If giving someone a gift helps to build a relationship with someone, fine; but giving a gift in and of itself does not build a relationship: something more is needed, something more personal, something more relational, something more emotional and, I might venture to say, something more spiritual and even sacrificial.

The original “Santa Claus,” after all, was St. Nicholas, who was not a harried shopper for presents to deliver on his sleigh, but a bishop whose generous and anonymous gifts to the poor became the paradigm for

Christmas gift-giving. So besides shopping for Christmas presents, following the example of St. Nicholas suggests that we also make gifts to charities that help the poor.

In terms of building relationships, Advent is a journey that should bring us closer to God and to each other. One of the best ways to do that is through the Sacrament of Penance. By confessing our sins and receiving absolution from a priest, we are reconciled to God and to the community of faith. Just before Christmas in 1980, Saint John Paul II was with over two thousand children in a Roman parish. He began his catechesis with this dialogue: *How are you preparing for Christmas?* The children shouted back, *By praying!* The Pope responded, *Very good, by praying, but also by going to Confession. You must go to Confession so that you can go to Communion later. Will you do that?* In an even louder voice, those thousands of children shouted their reply, *We will.* John Paul II responded, *Yes, you ought to go.* Then, lowering his voice, he whispered, *The Pope will also go to Confession so as to receive the Child Jesus worthily.*

In more recent times, we also see our current Holy Father, Pope Francis, going to Confession. I will also go to Confession and many

Catholics will also do the same in the weeks between now and Christmas, with an ever greater love and deeper contrition.

As an Advent people, we are people of hope and expectation. We live in hope and expectation of our Lord's second coming. We also live in the hope of improved relationships with other people and the expectation that our relationships can indeed be improved to become more caring and more loving. We should never give up on anyone, but always have hope that God's grace can touch the hearts of those who hunger for his nourishment, which He gives us now in the gift of this Eucharist.

May God give us this grace. Amen.