

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

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2017**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be here with you gathered in prayer for this Christmas Midnight Mass. We come to celebrate this Christmas Mass during the night because the darkness of the night is a metaphor for the spiritual darkness of the world. Whenever we enter a darkened room, the first thing we do is turn on a light. We do not like to remain in darkness. When there is no light, we are disoriented and cannot find our way. This is true not only in terms of physical darkness, but spiritual darkness as well.

For most of us today it is hard to imagine a state of real darkness. When we go out at night, unless we are far away from city lights, only the brightest stars are visible. There are still places, however, in the countryside where the full glory of the stars at night is evident. It is when we have experienced the darkest night that the coming of light is most appreciated.

This is also true in the spiritual sense. Many people surround themselves with the glitter of the artificial light of earthly pleasures that will fade and disappear, so much so that they may not even recognize that they are actually walking in spiritual darkness. It makes sense for us to mark the birth of Christ at this time as it marks the beginnings of salvation, the triumph of the light of God's grace over the darkness of human sin.

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.

In our Gospel passage from Saint Luke, shepherds are the first people to hear about this birth. They are told by an angel that this newborn child is the long-awaited savior who is the Messiah and Lord. It is fascinating that this good news is revealed first to shepherds and not to kings, princes and royal officials. Perhaps this is because the shepherds knew better than the powerful, rich and famous people that they needed a savior. For them, the Messiah was truly "long-awaited," while the high and mighty may never have realized their need for any kind of salvation.

This is true for us today as well. We will not even notice the “great light” born to us unless we realize that we are wandering aimlessly in spiritual darkness. We will not find anything particularly joyful in the birth of Jesus unless we realize that we are in desperate need of His salvation.

In many parts of our world today, people are still walking in darkness. For them, it may be the experience of exile, refugees from their homes and countries on account of war, violence and hatred. For some, their darkness may be the loneliness of broken relationships, bereavement, sickness or old age. Others may be lost in the darkness of pornography, sexual promiscuity, alcohol and drugs. The artificial light of our world promises happiness through pleasure, wealth and possessions, but in reality this is only light pollution preventing us from recognizing the true light shining in the dark. The light of God’s love, revealed to the poor shepherds in the sign of “a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger,” is still to be found. As people accept Jesus into their hearts, the darkness of our lives dissipates and we begin to see the light again. We see the way we have to go, the way of compassion, the way of reconciliation, the way of communion with Jesus and with all those who share faith with us.

Tonight I invite you to enter in a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ as your Savior. No one should be complacent and think that his or her relationship with Jesus is adequate. Could we ever possibly say that our love for Jesus is perfect and does not need to be deepened? Of course not! So whatever your relationship with Jesus, our celebration of Christmas is an opportunity to grow more deeply in the love that Jesus shares with you. If you go to Mass only at Christmas and Easter time, our Lord is longing for you to receive Him into your heart more frequently in Holy Communion. In fact, Jesus wants you to come to Mass to be with Him every weekend. If you already go to Mass every Sunday, this is no time to rest on your laurels. Ask yourself: what more can I do to turn my life over to Christ completely as my Sovereign Master who rules over my heart, my thoughts and my desires?

For some Catholics, talking about having a personal relationship with Jesus may not be in their vocabulary and may be a difficult concept to grasp. When we think of a relationship, we think of another person we can see and touch, and so we wonder how we can have a relationship with our Lord who comes to us hidden in the Eucharistic species of bread and wine. Perhaps the idea of a personal relationship with Jesus is easier to

understand if we realize that we can indeed have a relationship with Someone who loves us and whom we can love in return, Someone who talks to us in the Scriptures and we in turn can talk to in prayer, Someone who dwells in our hearts and with Whom we can spend time in adoration.

The darker the night, the brighter the stars shine. Tonight let us look around and see the light of God's love reflected in the eyes of all those who share our faith. As we are encouraged by the example of so many "stars," let us remember that our life is also a shining star for people around us. May they see the example of our faith, hope and love so that the light of God's love may increase to become "a joy to be shared by the whole people."

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, our long-awaited Savior, has come and will come to us again in this Eucharist.

May God give us this grace. Amen.