

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

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2019**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good for us to be here gathered in prayer for this Christmas Midnight Mass. Midnight is not a time when we usually celebrate Mass, so the very fact that we are here at this late hour tells us that we are beginning a very special day, a day that is different from all other days, for on this day we rejoice that unto us a Savior has been born, Christ the Lord.

Anticipating this special celebration, last Sunday a TV reporter from Channel 20 News interviewed me here at the Cathedral before Mass. The reporter started out by citing recent polls that showed a decline in weekly Mass attendance and wanted to know if we were doing anything special to get people to come to Mass for Christmas. I replied, "Getting people to church for Christmas is not a challenge. The challenge is getting them to come back on regular basis every week." Indeed, we had overflow crowds in the Cathedral Atrium for the 4:00 PM and 7:00 PM Christmas Eve Masses, and the Cathedral is nearly full now past midnight.

I added that I was hopeful because there are signs that people have not abandoned their faith entirely. People who do not go to church regularly often say that they are spiritual, but not religious, meaning that they are not atheists, but even though they believe in God, they just do not go to church on a regular basis. If that describes you, then this homily is meant especially to you. In talking to you directly about this, my intention is not to berate you, or to chastise you, or to make you feel guilty. My hope is to encourage you with a warm invitation to become a regular part of our worshipping community on a weekly basis. As Pope St. John Paul II used to say, the Church does not impose, but proposes.

So why should you come to Mass every week?

First and foremost, being a Christian is about a relationship, namely, our relationship with Jesus as Our Lord and Savior. That means that Jesus loves us and cares deeply about us. In return, He asks us to love Him and care deeply about Him as well. Most of us have no problem with that.

But think about this some more. If you have a loving relationship with someone, that relationship needs to be nurtured on a regular basis. For example, think of a person you love very much, such as your spouse, your Mom or Dad, your children, or a close friend. Now, what if you said to that

person, “I love you very much. It was nice visiting with you today. I’ll see you again same time and same place – a year from now!” Perhaps some married couples would welcome that! Most people, however, would recognize that it would be hard to sustain a deep, loving relationship if you only see your loved one once or twice a year. So why would anyone think that our loving relationship with God would be any different? God’s love for us will never diminish, but our love for God will grow cool if we do not express it frequently and fill our hearts with His love on a regular basis.

That leads to the next reason why we should go to Mass every Sunday: to receive Our Lord into our hearts in Holy Communion. Of course, that will mean something only to those who believe that Holy Communion is not just a symbolic reminder of the Last Supper, but is actually the Real Presence of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the reason why weekly Mass attendance hovers nationally at about 30% of Catholics¹ is because polls indicate that almost 70% of self-identified Catholics do not believe that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ during the consecration at Mass.² At the Last Supper, Jesus was quite clear, as described in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, who wrote, “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, ‘Take and eat; this is my

body.’ Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matthew 26:26-28). If we truly believe that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist, how could we not want to receive Christ into our hearts as often as possible?

The next reason why we should go to church every week is because we need each other to remain spiritually strong. Christ did not come to us as some sort of personal philosopher with wise sayings for us to follow like Confucius, but Jesus established His Church as a community of believers built on the solid rock of Saint Peter and his successors, despite their human weaknesses, and sent His Holy Spirit to guide them. People are social beings, and we crave the support of others to strengthen us in our work as well as in play. Without this support, our energies wane. People accomplish so much more when they work together rather than as isolated individuals. Sports teams constantly talk about teamwork in order to succeed. Imagine how impoverished society would be without Catholic schools, Catholic hospitals, and Catholic Charities. Yet all of these efforts to improve the human race and lessen human suffering are made possible because people of faith banded together to work cohesively to accomplish a common goal.

Most important, we should come to church and receive Holy Communion every week because we need to do so for our eternal salvation. Again, Jesus was clear, as recorded in the Gospel of Saint John: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” (John 6:53-56).

Saint Augustine summed it up well when he reflected on the message of the angels rejoicing in the birth of Our Savior with their song: *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth*. Saint Augustine wrote:

Let us then rejoice in this grace, so that our glorying may bear witness to our good conscience by which we glory, not in ourselves, but in the Lord. That is why Scripture says: He is my glory, the one who lifts up my head. For what greater grace could God have made to dawn on us than to make his only Son become the son of man, so that a son of man might in his turn become the son of God? Ask if this were merited; ask for its reason, for its justification, and see whether you will find any other answer but sheer grace.³

So I warmly invite you, in fact I plead with you: please make your New Year's resolution a week from today a firm promise to come to Mass every week. That will benefit you infinitely more than anything else I could possibly imagine!

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/232226/church-attendance-among-catholics-resumes-downward-slide.aspx>

² <https://ct.dio.org/item/4894-nearly-70-percent-of-catholics-don-t-believe-eucharist-is-body-and-blood-of-christ.html>.

³ From a sermon by Saint Augustine, bishop (*Sermo* 185: PL 38, 997-999), Second Reading in the Office of Readings for December 24, *Liturgy of the Hours*.