

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

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2020**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As you may know, I grew up in a large family. I am the third of nine children. I recall as a child going to movies with my parents and siblings. If we had attended an afternoon matinee, when we would leave the darkened theater and step out into the bright sunlight, my family members and I would sneeze. Since we shared this apparently genetic trait, we just assumed that everyone had the same reaction as our eyes adjusted from darkness to sudden bright light.

It was not until years later that I discovered not everyone shared this trait. In fact, I found more often than not that if I sneezed upon going outside from a dark building or church into the sunlight, the person with me would say, "God bless you" and ask if I was catching a cold. I would say, "No, the sunlight makes me sneeze." Of course, they would then look at me as if I were crazy!

So when I became bishop of our diocese and Father Alford was serving as my Master of Ceremonies, we were walking out after Mass one day from a church with a very dark interior into the bright sunlight. Of course, I sneezed. Then Father Alford sneezed too! I looked at him and asked, "Did the sun make you sneeze?" He said, "Yes, that always happens when I leave a darkened place into bright sunlight." I felt so relieved. I was not going crazy and someone not only believes me about the sun making me sneeze but also has the same reaction himself!

So I did a little research and found out that there is actually a name for this condition: it is known as the photic sneeze reflex and is estimated to occur in 10 to 35 percent of the population, so indeed it does not affect everyone. It has also been given the scientific name of Autosomal Dominant Compulsive Helio-Ophthalmic Outbursts of sneezing syndrome, the acronym of which spells out as ACHOO. I kid you not! Apparently, this syndrome has been around for a while. The Greek philosopher Aristotle made reference to the phenomenon during the fourth century B.C.¹

One theory is that sneezing involves the optic nerve. A change in light may stimulate this nerve, creating the same sensation as having an irritant in the nose. This sensation could possibly be responsible for the sneeze.²

I am telling you all this about photic sneeze reflex because of the first line of tonight's first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "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).

A person like me who has photic sneeze reflex cannot help but wonder after reading that line whether these "people who walked in darkness" will sneeze after they "have seen a great light"! Of course, I am being facetious and do not mean this literally. But it does suggest to me that, just as it takes at least a few minutes for our eyes to adjust from darkness to a glaring light, perhaps our souls need to adjust gradually from the darkness of a sinful world to the overwhelming brightness with which Christ our Light fills the Kingdom of Heaven. After all, the Book of Revelation describes heaven in these terms: "Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give them light" (Revelation 22:5).

Perhaps that is why the Messiah is referred to in the Canticle of Zechariah, the father of St. John the Baptist, as the "Dawn from on high" (Luke 1:78). If you think about the dawn, the sun rises slowly in the eastern sky. We do not go instantaneously from the darkness of night to the full glow

of a bright sun. The sunlight grows steadily as the sun rises over the horizon. In this way, our eyes can adjust gradually to the increasing daylight.

So, too, God has chosen to reveal Himself to the world very subtly through the Incarnation of Christ, His Son. In this way, we come to see God through the eyes of faith as we perceive the face of God in Jesus, as Our Lord told His disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Christ is the light of the world (John 8:12). But God did not choose to reveal Himself to the world in a spectacular display of divine power. Rather, God reveals Himself to us in the birth of a small child in a manger. The power of God is then revealed gradually in the miracles that Jesus performed, His death on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead. God continues to show Himself to us in the world today in ways that are not always obvious, such as in the love of husband and wife, acts of charity for those in need, and the compassionate care provided for the sick and suffering.

The casual observer may miss the divine presence in these glimpses of God that are discernable to those who have eyes of faith. As St. Francis of Assisi said, "Out of love for us, God so humbles himself that he hides himself under the little form of bread." Indeed, Christ comes to us in this Eucharist.

God longs to come to us. God longs for us to receive him, and God longs to be part of our lives, not only at Christmas but every second of every moment of every day.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ “Why looking at the sun can make you sneeze,” PBS News Hour, March 20, 2017, accessed online at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/does-the-sun-make-you-sneeze>.

² “Why Do I Sneeze in Bright Light (and Other Unusual Stimuli)?” *Healthline*, June 10, 2019, accessed online at <https://www.healthline.com/health/photic-sneeze-reflex#takeaway>.