

HOMILY FOR MASS THE DAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Western Illinois Correctional Center
Mount Sterling, Illinois
December 24, 2022

† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

My dear brothers in Christ:

It is good to be with you in prayer on this day before Christmas, when people from across the world will celebrate the birth of our Savior. Here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois we have one federal prison in Greenville and seven state prisons located in Decatur, Hillsboro, Jacksonville, Robinson, Taylorville, Vandalia, and here in Mount Sterling. It has been my practice to visit one of these prisons at Christmas time each year.

My purpose in doing so is to serve as a reminder that, even in the midst of dark times, there never cease to be rays of light piercing through the shadows, offering small signs of hope to those who live through challenging circumstances.

One example of this came in the person of a German Lutheran pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer spoke and acted in resistance to the evil being undertaken by the Nazi regime in Germany and throughout

Europe during World War II. He was arrested and put into prison for his defiance of the actions of the Third Reich, and when it was discovered that he was associated with the failed assassination attempt of Adolf Hitler in July of 1944, Bonhoeffer was quickly tried and executed.

While in prison, Bonhoeffer was not deterred from continuing his work of spreading the faith for which he lived, and for which he was willing to die. He worked to encourage his fellow prisoners, inviting them to have hope, even in those difficult moments. One of his fellow prisoners wrote the following of Bonhoeffer:

To the very end, Bonhoeffer took advantage of (their) condition by arranging prayer services, consoling those who had lost all hope, and giving them fresh courage. A towering rock of faith, he became a shining example to his fellow prisoners.¹

This unwavering witness to his faith in the power of Jesus Christ was a tangible proof of the words found in the Prologue of Saint John's Gospel, which proclaims that "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). This is at the heart of our celebration of Christmas. Christ, who is the light of the world, entered into a world of darkness, and in doing so, renewed the hope of those had longed for His

coming. His coming was not just a moment in the past, but is one that is continually presented to us in so many ways with that same promise of hope, even in prison.

In one of the letters that he wrote while in prison, Bonhoeffer addressed this very point with the following words:

Viewed from a Christian perspective, Christmas in a prison cell can, of course, hardly be considered particularly problematic. Most likely many of those here in this building will celebrate a more meaningful and authentic Christmas than in places where it is celebrated in name only. That misery, sorrow, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God than according to human judgment; that God turns toward the very places from which humans turn away; that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn — a prisoner grasps this better than others, and for him this is truly good news.²

As Bonhoeffer mentions in this letter, the circumstances surrounding the birth of Christ tell us something very beautiful about how He chooses to work. Instead of coming in an obvious and expected way, He comes in the most unlikely of circumstances. This long-awaited king does not come to a palace, surrounded by nobility. He comes in the humble setting of a cave,

surrounded by animals and poor shepherds. As He would continue His life, He would defy the expectations for the Messiah and He manifested His glory in the most unlikely ways, culminating with His shameful death on the Cross and burial in a borrowed tomb.

God continues even today to show forth His light and power in those unexpected places. One of those places where He most wants to shed His light is in the depths of our hearts, so often darkened by the sins of our past and the many other ways in which we have not welcomed Him in our lives. We can be tempted to doubt that He would want to dwell in such a place, yet there is no place that He would rather be! What we may deem to be a less than ideal place for Him to dwell is exactly where He wants to come in order to share His love, thus bringing us peace and joy.

As Bonhoeffer suggests, this should be received as good news for you as you find yourself in what may seem less than ideal circumstances. In many ways, you are in a more privileged place to welcome Christ, for those places outside of these walls, which seem much more suitable for the newborn king, are often places that do not really want to welcome Him in any way that is more than just superficial. I invite you to see this time in

prison not as a time separated from God, but as a unique opportunity to draw closer to Him and His love for you.

Christmas reminds us that God, in Jesus, is present in our midst. I have come here among you on this day before Christmas as a sign and a reminder that Christ is in your midst, even here, in prison. God has not abandoned you.

We are sometimes tempted to think or to imagine that Jesus has left us completely alone, that He no longer cares for us, but Holy Mother Church gently corrects this thought and reminds us that

The Lord Jesus, the king of glory, the conqueror of sin and death, ascended to heaven while the angels sang his praises. Christ, the mediator between God and man, judge of the world and Lord of all, has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope. Christ is the beginning, the head of the Church; where he has gone, we hope to follow" (Preface: Ascension II).

This, then, is the hope that belongs to Jesus' call: to be with him forever in his kingdom!

This is why Jesus gave to the Apostles his Great Commission: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe

all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

It is this final command of the Lord that has brought me here to you today. As a Bishop, a Successor of the Apostles, this same Commission has been given to me, and my priests as my collaborators in ministry also share in it. I have come to remind you of Christ's love and concern for you. He wants you to be with him in His kingdom. I urge you, then, to turn to Christ and seek always to follow His commands of love.

I also hope that my presence here today is a clear sign and witness to the important place that ministry within the prisons in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois has in my heart. When so many people in society are ready to write you off, the Church, united with Christ her Head, remains with you. Jesus never abandons you, and neither will the Church, so long as you remain close to her.

I do not want you to lose hope simply because you are imprisoned. The Lord's grace is powerful and effective even here. If we look at the lives of the saints, we see that a time spent in prison was a profound moment of conversion in many of their lives. We think, especially, of Saint Dismas, the Good Thief, who, while hanging on a cross next to Jesus, expressed his faith

and his sorrow for his sins, when he said to the Lord: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” to which Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42-43).

Christmas is a time for exchanging gifts. Christ has given us the great gift of Himself, not only when he was born on Christmas Day, but here at Mass in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Our gift to Christ is to give Him our ‘yes’ each and every day and at every moment of our lives.

In a very tangible way, we are to give the gift of our ‘yes’ to Christ by accepting Him as He comes to us in others. As He Himself tells us in Matthew’s Gospel: “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). One of the great gifts that we give to Christ whom we cannot see is by loving our neighbor whom we can see. As the Lord reminds us, our neighbor is not just that person with whom we agree or with whom we like to spend time, but it includes everybody, *especially* those with whom we find it hard to get along (see Luke 6:27-36).

As we continue our celebration, we turn our attention to Bethlehem, which in Hebrew literally means “house of bread.” We are reminded that the Word becomes flesh in a very real and powerful way each time we celebrate the Eucharist, for He comes to us in His Body and His blood. By

our partaking of this great gift of His love, we welcome His light into the dark places of our hearts, pointing out the way for us to follow Him. In this bread of life, we are also nourished and strengthened for the journey that lies ahead, and with that strength from on high, we have great confidence that no matter how challenging the circumstances may be or how dark the future may seem, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it,”³ and the darkness *will* not overcome it.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1966), 324.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 205.

³ John 1:5.