

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

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2022**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The opening verse of the Gospel for Christmas night names one of the most powerful leaders the world has ever known: Emperor Caesar Augustus. He ruled the Roman Empire for forty-one years, from 27 B.C. until 14 A.D., an empire that stretched from India in the east to Spain in the west, and from Britain down to North Africa. The empire he built survived for five hundred years, until it fell, as empires inevitably do. The most important, world-changing, event in his reign was the birth of Jesus Christ.

He boasted before he died that he found Rome a city built of brick, but left it a city of marble. The remains of its fine buildings are admired by tourists today. But it took money, and sitting in his palace overlooking the Forum, the religious and civic center of Rome, Augustus conceived the idea of a poll tax, with safeguards to protect those who were poor. Corruption was to be avoided by registering men in their place of birth. No problem there, for most people spent their life where they were born. But some did

not, like Joseph, who lived in Nazareth, and he had to go back to Bethlehem, taking with him Mary, his wife.

Unwittingly Emperor Caesar Augustus enabled the 700-year-old Jewish Old Testament prophecy of Micah to be fulfilled, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of the great King David. The Old Testament is full of prophecies that many Jews recognized as predictions of the Messiah. One prophet, Isaiah, whose words we heard in our first reading tonight, spoke of “a child born for us, a son given to us,” who would be called, among other titles, “Mighty-God” and “Prince-of-Peace.” It was partly through recognizing the fulfilment of prophecies that many of the Jews believed in Jesus and became his followers.

But the faith that Jesus inspired, and the Church He founded, was for the whole world, not just for the Jews. So, as God used prophets to prepare the Jewish people to recognize the Messiah, God prepared the wider world as well. Caesar Augustus was, unwittingly, part of that preparation. Like most Romans, Augustus consulted sibyls and fortune tellers, and one told him of a strange vision she had of a virgin and child. Michelangelo depicts this in the Sistine Chapel. The Roman poet Virgil, a contemporary of Augustus, also relates how a sibyl foretold the coming of a savior.

Augustus, moreover, dreamed of a new era of peace, and was credited with inaugurating the *Pax Romana*, a period of peace and prosperity that lasted two hundred years. Contemporaries remarked how appropriate it was that the “Prince of Peace” had been born when all the world was at peace.

As we prepared for Christmas during the Advent season earlier this month, on December 8th, I celebrated Mass at Saints Peter and Paul Church, the “Old Cathedral,” in Alton, to begin our Diocesan Year of the Eucharist and to open our Centennial Celebration of the 100th anniversary of the transfer of our diocese from Alton to Springfield. We did so on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the patronal feast of our Diocese, of our Cathedral, and of our country, the United States of America.

In anticipation of this Centennial Year and Year of the Eucharist, I requested and received a decree from the Holy See granting a plenary indulgence for those who visit our Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception here in Springfield or the Church of Ss. Peter and Paul in Alton between the 8th day of December 2022 and the 9th day of December 2023. So, one of the benefits of coming to Mass here in our Cathedral is receiving this plenary indulgence, which may be obtained under the usual conditions of

sacramental confession and detachment from any kind of sin, receiving Holy Communion, and praying for the Holy Father, as well as offering invocations to the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary and Saints Peter and Paul.

The elderly, the sick, and all those who cannot leave their home for a grave reason are equally able to attain a plenary indulgence by joining themselves spiritually to these celebrations and offering prayers to the merciful God for the sufferings or hardships of their own lives. One way for them to do this is by watching and praying along with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass being livestreamed from our Cathedral.

An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment for sins, whose guilt is forgiven. An indulgence is partial or plenary according to whether it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin. Before being allowed to enter the Kingdom of God when we die, even though our sins have been forgiven when we confessed them in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and received absolution from the priest, we must still be purged through temporal punishment of what we owe to God in justice in reparation for our sins either here on earth or in Purgatory after we die.

It might help to understand this better if we consider the analogy of what happens when a person commits the sin of stealing. When a person goes to sacramental Confession and is absolved of the sin of stealing, there is still an obligation in justice to make restitution, that is, to pay back or restore what was stolen. If the rightful owner also discharges the debt, in a sense that is an indulgence, since the rightful owner is being indulgent in pardoning the debt as well as the guilt.

Thus, we have the pious practice of “offering up” our pains and sufferings in this life as penance for our sins. If that purgation is not accomplished before we die, it must be completed in Purgatory or be remitted through various partial indulgences or a plenary indulgence. A plenary indulgence can be acquired only once a day, except for those who are on the point of death. If we are able to receive a plenary indulgence on a frequent or even daily basis during our Year of the Eucharist, as is the case for those who attend Mass here regularly at our Cathedral, it would be laudable and charitable to apply some of those indulgences beyond what we need for ourselves for the poor souls still suffering in Purgatory.

During this Year of the Eucharist, let us take time to reflect on the mystery of the Eucharist. “The reality that, in the Eucharist, bread and wine

become the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ without ceasing to appear as bread and wine to our five senses, is one of the central mysteries of the Catholic faith. This faith is a doorway through which we, like the saints and mystics before us, may enter into a deeper perception of the mercy and love manifested in and through Christ's sacramental presence in our midst. While one thing is seen with our bodily eyes, another reality is perceived through the eyes of faith. The real, true, and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the most profound reality of the sacrament."¹ This profound gift of Christ's Real Presence comes to us not just at Christmas, but every time we participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

As we receive Christ in Holy Communion at this Christmas Mass, may we remember that the "Lord is generous to us with his grace; and so we, by his grace, should always humbly ask him to give us what we need. ... Let us adore Jesus who ever remains with us, on all the altars of the world, and lead others to share in our joy!"²

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, n. 21.

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nn. 58-59.