

**Homily for the Second Sunday of Advent – Year A
December 4, 2022**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Dolores Hart began her acting career as a young woman, landing a lead role with Elvis Presley in the 1957 movie “Loving You” at the mere age of eighteen. Over the next five years, she made nine more films in which she costarred with Montgomery Cliff, Anthony Quinn, Myrna Loy, and other famous actors. Then she became engaged to be married to Don Robinson.

She was considered one of Hollywood’s rising stars when her life changed while playing St. Clare in the movie Francis of Assisi, filmed on location in Italy. There she met Pope St. John XXIII. She introduced herself as Dolores Hart, the actress playing Clare, to which the Pope responded, “No! You are Clare!” This statement stuck with Dolores, and in 1963 she shocked Hollywood by breaking off her engagement and entering an order of monastic Benedictine nuns. Those who knew her were shocked and angry over the news and did their best to talk her out of her decision.

One friend even wrote Sister Dolores angry letters for years, berating her for “throwing her life away.” Her response was simple: “If you heard what I hear, you would come, too,” she wrote back. In 2018 she wrote her memoirs with author Richard DeNeut, *The Ear of the Heart: An Actress’ Journey from Hollywood to Holy Vows*, published by Ignatius Press.

Dolores Hart found lasting peace in her fidelity to God. Despite her blossoming active career and engagement to a wonderful man, her heart was not truly fulfilled. Fulfillment and peace came only when she listened to the voice of God and followed his will for her. Dolores Hart turned away from earthly interests and walked in the spirit of God.

We too will find fulfillment and peace when we listen to the voice of God and followed His will. If we place God’s interests first in our lives, we will be granted wisdom and understanding.

Our first reading today from the prophet Isaiah shows us what it will be like when the world finally lives in lasting peace. This will not happen without our cooperation with God’s plan in our lives. The kingdom of Christ our King will be realized, a kingdom of peace and spiritual prosperity. Our hearts will no longer be restless but instead will rest comfortably in the heart of Jesus.

We will see the previously unthinkable – the lion lying down with the lamb, the baby playing alongside the cobra – all guided by fidelity to God. This will happen only if we remain faithful to him.

The Scriptures show us how to live in the kind of harmony and unity called for in the Kingdom of God. We are called to radical change. In the Gospel we see that John the Baptist challenged his followers to a type of repentance that required radical change. Matthew prepares the reader for Jesus' public ministry by focusing on John the Baptist's preaching, which sets the stage for Jesus, who will address the same themes of John but more radically. Both preachers pointed to the end-time that was near. Due to this similarity, the early followers of Jesus saw John as preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus.

John the Baptist preached the imminent coming of the Day of the Lord and thus the need to be prepared for that event. The central theme of John was repentance in view of the coming kingdom of heaven. Repentance here means radical change. Matthew sees John the Baptist as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, who said: "A voice proclaims: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord" (40:3).

Matthew describes the location, clothing, diet, and action of John the Baptist in a way that recalls the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). Elijah was expected to return before the coming of the Day of the Lord. Matthew sees John the Baptist as a second Elijah. John's primary activity was administering a baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees are singled out by John as examples of the need to repent. The Pharisees and the Sadducees did not share common beliefs about many things. Both, however, failed in putting the Torah and the works of the law into practice. John seems skeptical when the Pharisees and Sadducees come to him for baptism, and warns them of the danger of just going through the motions. Perhaps they were coming to be baptized just because John's movement was popular, and they did not want to seem out of touch with the latest religious fashion. They were, after all, the leaders and opinion-formers of the Jewish people, and here was a popular movement they could not afford to ignore. They would let themselves be immersed in the water, but then go back home to carry on fighting among themselves for power and influence, their hearts and minds

unchanged. But this makes a mockery of baptism, which is supposed to be an outward sign of our belonging to God's coming kingdom.

The same challenge is presented to us today: do we truly want to live in the kingdom of God, to be citizens of heaven, or – if we are honest – would we be happy just to carry on as we are? Do we go through the motions of our religious rituals because it seems like the right thing to do, because that is how we were brought up, because our friends and family are doing it? Or do we sincerely desire to be part of God's Kingdom? Although in some ways we are still making our journey through the wilderness of life, and the busyness of the world has its calls upon us, Christians are called to live already as children of the Kingdom.

That Kingdom is what Isaiah promises us in our first reading, a Kingdom of peace that the world cannot give. John proclaims that one is coming after him who is mightier than he and will have his own form of Baptism, "with the Holy Spirit and fire." This, of course, is a reference to Jesus and his coming.

The call of John the Baptist to show the fruit of repentance is echoed by St. Paul, who invites the Christians in Rome to glorify God by their love for one another. We want those outside the Church to believe that our faith

is more than empty words and meaningless rituals, so we might ask ourselves whether people can look at us and see that we behave as citizens of heaven. Do we show one another patience, understanding, compassion and mercy? The changes the Gospel invites us to make can be hard to contemplate, but if we encourage and support one another we can truly embrace God's kingdom.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Next Thursday, December 8th, 2022, at 5:00 PM, I will celebrate Mass for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the Patroness of our Diocese, at Ss. Peter and Paul Church, the "Old Cathedral," in Alton, to begin our Diocesan Year of the Eucharist and open our Centennial Celebration of the 100th anniversary of the transfer of our diocese from Alton to Springfield. All are invited. Our Centennial Celebration and Year of the Eucharist will continue through December 9th, 2023.

In anticipation of this Year of the Eucharist, I requested and received a decree from the Holy See granting a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions of sacramental Confession, Holy Communion, and prayers for the intention of the Pope, for the Christian faithful who are truly penitent and motivated by love to 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. Such a visit to a sacred place is known as a pilgrimage, which involves attending a liturgical service celebrating the jubilee or at least spending a suitable period of time devoted to prayers for the faithfulness of the Diocese to the Christian vocation, concluding with reciting the Lord's Prayer, professing the Symbol of Faith, that is, the Creed, 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, having the disposition of detachment from any kind of sin and the intention of fulfilling, as soon as possible, the three usual conditions, by joining themselves spiritually to the jubilee celebrations and offering prayers to the merciful God for the sufferings or hardships of their own lives. One way for them to do this would be by watching and praying along with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass being livestreamed from our Cathedral.

This plenary indulgence may be offered for one's own spiritual benefit or may be applied through prayer for the souls of the faithful held in Purgatory.

In this Eucharist, let us pray for a radical change of heart as we prepare ourselves to receive the One who brings unity, harmony, and lasting peace.

May God give us this grace. Amen.