

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

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2023**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests (Luke 2:10-14).”

As we just heard in the conclusion of the Gospel passage for this Christmas Mass at Midnight, this is message proclaimed by the angel announcing the birth of Our Savior, Christ the Lord. More than two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, we continue to pray for peace on earth as war rages on between Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Hamas and Israel. While these wars are being fought with lethal weapons, there are many other situations where peace is lacking. Perhaps there are people in our own lives with whom we are not at peace, not in the sense of violent attacks, but simply relationships in tension because of some animosity, envy, rivalry, or resentment.

Even within the Church, our peace may feel disturbed by the confusion and division in the aftermath of the declaration issued last week

on Blessings of Couples in Irregular Situations and of Couples of the Same Sex. This is not the time to analyze and critique that document, but I acknowledge that it may be just one more element adding to various stresses in our lives that make the prospect of peace and tranquility seem so elusive.

How do we find peace in such situations? It may sound simplistic to say that true peace is found in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, but true peace is indeed found in Our Savior, Christ the Lord, whose birth we celebrate today. We call Jesus Our Savior precisely because He saves us from our sins, our hatreds, and our broken relationships. The fact that peace still eludes us is not due to any fault on the part of Our Savior, but is the result of the human failure to embrace fully the Gospel way of life to which Jesus calls us. How can we learn to live in such a way as to make peace a reality in our world?

Of course, the first and best step toward achieving something is prayer. If we want to find peace, we should start with prayer. One particular prayer that is helpful in this regard has come to be known as the Serenity Prayer, composed by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in the early 1930s.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

For the people of the prophet Isaiah's day, life was dark and desperate. The leaders of the people were in exile in Babylon, while the poor of the land lived under an army of occupation. It was in this darkness that Isaiah began to see the light of God's saving promise coming to fulfillment. He foresaw the day when a child would be born for the throne of David who would lead his people into a new era of peace, justice, and integrity. Well, the exile did come to an end, some sort of religious life was restored in the Temple of Jerusalem, but the dark days of foreign occupation continued with a succession of rulers from Persia, Greece, and Rome. The people were still walking in darkness, longing for the light of the promised Messiah, the anointed king, the son of David, who would establish God's kingdom and restore the fortunes of Israel.

It is against this background of political and social darkness that we find the story of the birth of Jesus. The census of Caesar Augustus was another act of social oppression, making sure that everyone in this subject nation could be counted for the purpose of taxation. As we experience still today, those who suffer most in every political arrangement are poor people, and among the poorest of the poor in Jesus' day were the shepherds keeping watch over their sheep by night. They were the first to receive the Good

News. In the darkness of their night watch, the glory of the Lord shone around them, and the angel of the Lord announced: "Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy."

In many parts of our world today, people are still walking in darkness. For them, too, it may be the experience of exile, refugees from their homes and countries on account of war, violence, and hatred. For some, their darkness may be the loneliness of broken relationships, bereavement, sickness, or old age. The artificial light of our world promises happiness through wealth and possessions, but in reality, this artificial light prevents us from recognizing the true light shining in the dark. The light of God's love, revealed to the poor shepherds in the sign of "a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger," is still to be found. In tiny mission chapels in the heart of Africa as well as in grand basilicas of the great cities of the world, men and women of faith are gathering tonight to celebrate their faith. Jesus, Son of God and son of Mary, is born in the hearts of all those who believe. As we join together in peace and joy, the darkness of our lives dissipates, we begin to see the light again. We see the way we have to go, the way of compassion, the way of reconciliation, the way of communion with Jesus and with all those who share faith with us.

When I was a child growing up in the city, the stars were obscured by the glare of the streetlights. During the summer, we would visit some friends who lived on a farm. Looking out the window of the car as I was riding home with my parents and siblings at night, I would be amazed by the multitude of stars and their brightness against the dark background of the black sky. The darker the night, the brighter the stars shine. Tonight let us look into the darkness of this world and see the light of God's love reflected in the lives of those who live as true Christians. As we are encouraged by the example of so many "stars," let us remember that our life is also a shining star for people around us. May they see the example of our faith, hope and love, so that the light of God's love may increase to become "a joy to be shared by the whole people."

In his last Message for the World Day of Peace on January 1, 2005, Pope St. John Paul II chose as his theme Saint Paul's words in the Letter to the Romans: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21). Pointing to the saving power of the Holy Eucharist, Pope St. John Paul II concluded by expressing his hope that "the sons and daughters of the Church find in the supreme sacrament of love the wellspring of all communion: communion with Jesus the Redeemer and, in Him, with every

human being. By Christ's death and resurrection, made sacramentally present in each Eucharistic celebration, we are saved from evil and enabled to do good. ... In a word, by sharing in the one bread and the one cup, we come to realize that we are 'God's family' and that together we can make our own effective contribution to building a world based on the values of justice, freedom and peace."

May God give us this grace. Amen.