

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

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2024**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

A few hours ago at the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, Pope Francis opened the Ordinary Jubilee Year of 2025. The official opening of the Jubilee Year of 2025 will take place in local dioceses this Sunday, Holy Family Sunday, December 29. In our diocese, we will open the Jubilee Year of 2025 this coming Sunday morning at the ten o'clock Mass. The Jubilee Year of 2025 will conclude in local dioceses the following Holy Family Sunday, December 28, 2025.

A Jubilee Year is a significant moment in the life of the Church in which she celebrates the year of messianic favor inaugurated by Christ through his Incarnation and Paschal Mystery.¹ Proclaimed every twenty-five years since the thirteenth century, the celebration of jubilee years typically includes pilgrimages, processions, celebrations of Mass, and an invitation to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These liturgical celebrations are opportunities

to receive the Lord's mercy, especially through the practice of the Jubilee indulgence, and lead to the performance of works of mercy.

The theme for this Jubilee Year is "Pilgrims of Hope," and the Holy Father suggests several ways to bring Christ and his message of hope to the world, for example, by working for peace and an end to conflicts, promoting human life, upholding the dignity of migrants, healing the sick, and accompanying the elderly – or even through the forgiveness of debts, a custom of jubilee years in the Old Testament.

I will say more about the Jubilee Year in my homily on Sunday, but I mention it here in the context of our Christmas Midnight Mass because of the connection of the theme of hope with the second reading from the Bible that we heard tonight, in which Saint Paul refers to our "blessed hope," namely, "the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ" (*Titus* 2:11-14). Tonight, at this Christmas Midnight Mass, as pilgrims of hope, we celebrate the birth of the hope of the entire world, Jesus Christ.

Of course, one week from Christmas comes a new year. It is always good to begin something new with a sense of hope about what is to come. What does it mean to have hope?

Hope is not the same thing as optimism. The word “optimism” comes from the Latin *optimus*, which means, “the best.” An optimist may seek to put the best spin on a bad situation. As such, optimism can be an attitude that looks for something good even when everything looks bad. There is nothing wrong with that, but optimism in that sense could also be superficial or even an act, pretending to look on the bright side of things while feeling miserable inside.

Hope goes much deeper. Hope is based on an interior trust in God and a belief that divine grace ultimately leads to good. It is no accident that hope is one of the theological virtues, along with faith and love. If we have a solid faith in God’s Providence, we will have hope for the future, and this will lead to a life of loving God and neighbor.

Virtues are good habits, ways of behaving that come almost automatically without a lot of mental debate. A truthful person does not have to wonder if he or she should tell the truth. A truthful person tells the truth without having to think about it. Similarly, a hopeful person views life through a virtuous lens that is quite different from the viewpoint of a person who looks at the world with despair.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines hope as “the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (par. 1817).

The title given by Pope Francis to his document declaring the Jubilee Year of 2025 is *Spes non confundit*, Latin for “Hope does not disappoint,” taken from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans (*Rom* 5:5), in which Saint Paul offered these words of encouragement to the Christian community of Rome. Similarly, Pope Francis wrote, “Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross ... By his perennial presence in the life of the pilgrim Church, the Holy Spirit illumines all believers with the light of hope. He keeps that light burning, like an ever-burning lamp, to sustain and invigorate our lives. Christian hope does not deceive or disappoint because it is grounded in the certainty that nothing and no one may ever separate us from God’s love.”²

The Holy Father then makes the connection between the virtue of hope and our Blessed Mother, saying, “Hope finds its supreme witness in *the Mother of God*. In the Blessed Virgin, we see that hope is not naive optimism but a gift of grace amid the realities of life. ... It is not by chance that popular

piety continues to invoke the Blessed Virgin as *Stella Maris* [Star of the Sea], a title that bespeaks the sure hope that, amid the tempests of this life, the Mother of God comes to our aid, sustains us and encourages us to persevere in hope and trust.”³

The symbol of hope is an anchor, inspired by the Letter to the Hebrews, which says, “May we who have taken refuge in [Christ] be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered” (*Heb 6:18-20*).

Commenting on this passage, the Holy Father says, “The image of the anchor is eloquent; it helps us to recognize the stability and security that is ours amid the troubled waters of this life, provided we entrust ourselves to the Lord Jesus. The storms that buffet us will never prevail, for we are firmly anchored in the hope born of grace, which enables us to live in Christ and to overcome sin, fear and death. This hope, which transcends life’s fleeting pleasures and the achievement of our immediate goals, makes us rise above our trials and difficulties, and inspires us to keep pressing forward, never losing sight of the grandeur of the heavenly goal to which we have been called.”⁴

As we celebrate Christmas with our loved ones, may our love be anchored in the hope that comes from our faith in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ (Cf. Lk 4:19; John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nos. 11- 16).

² Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, given in Rome on May 9, 2024, par. 3; accessed online December 23, 2024, at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.

³ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, par. 24.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, par. 25.