

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

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2019**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good for us to be here gathered in prayer for this Christmas Midnight Mass. Midnight is not a time when we usually celebrate Mass, so the very fact that we are here at this late hour tells us that we are beginning a very special day, a day that is different from all other days, for on this day we rejoice that unto us a Savior has been born, Christ the Lord.

With the celebration of Christmas coming within a week of the end of the calendar year, there is a natural tendency to look back at the key events of the past year. Among the most significant events, the election of Pope Leo XIV last May was truly an historic occasion. For the first time in history, we have a Pope born not only in the United States of America, but right here in our home state of Illinois!

Pope Leo XIV formally began his ministry as the successor of St. Peter by calling for “a united Church, a sign of unity and communion, which

becomes a leaven for a reconciled world.” In his homily during his inauguration Mass on May 18th, Pope Leo said, “In this our time, we still see too much discord, too many wounds caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, the fear of difference and an economic paradigm that exploits the Earth's resources and marginalizes the poorest. For our part, we want to be a small leaven of unity, communion and fraternity within the world. We want to say to the world, with humility and joy: Look to Christ! Come closer to Him! Welcome His word that enlightens and consoles! Listen to His offer of love and become His one family: In the one Christ, we are one.”¹

Working for a unified Church is definitely not an easy task. According to the [Christian Website.com](http://ChristianWebsite.com), “Christianity has fractured into a wide array of denominations. While an exact count is elusive, most experts estimate there are around 45,000 different Christian denominations globally as of 2024.”² The Pontifical Yearbook 2025 reports that there were 1.4 billion Catholics in the world in 2023.³ The Eastern Orthodox Church split from the Roman Catholic Church in 1054 A.D. and has over 250 million followers worldwide as of 2022. Protestantism originated in the 16th century, breaking off from the Catholic Church. As of 2022, there are estimated to be between 800 million and 1 billion Protestants worldwide, making up the second

largest branch of Christianity after Catholicism, according to the [Center for the Study of Global Christianity](#).⁴ One commentator sums up the situation with these words: “It is hard to defend 100 denominations, much less 45,000. If we go back to the early beginnings of Christianity, there was one foundation, one denomination...”⁵ Of course, that is the one Church founded by Jesus Christ, known today as the Catholic Church. Christian unity is more than Christians of various denominations tolerantly trying to get along with one another, but working to become once again the one Church that Christ meant for her to be as He prayed “that all may be one” (John 17:21).

In his Christmas Eve homily on December 24, 1963, Saint Josemaría Escrivá said, “There is only one race in the world: the race of the children of God. We should all speak the same language, taught by Our Father in heaven—the language Jesus spoke to His Father. It is the language of heart and mind, which you are using now in your prayer—the language of contemplation, used by men who are spiritual, because they realize they are children of God. This language is expressed in a thousand motions of our will, in the clear insights of our minds, in the affections of our hearts, in our commitment to lead a virtuous life, in goodness, happiness, and peace.”⁶

Since most of us have been celebrating Christmas all our lives for as long as we can remember, there might be a tendency to take it for granted. In one of his sermons, Saint Augustine answers the question: what if Christ had never been born? He answers that question this way:

You would have suffered eternal death, had he not been born in time. Never would you have been freed from sinful flesh, had he not taken on himself the likeness of sinful flesh. You would have suffered everlasting unhappiness, had it not been for this mercy. You would never have returned to life, had he not shared your death. You would have been lost if he had not hastened to your aid. You would have perished, had he not come. Let us then joyfully celebrate the coming of our salvation and redemption. Let us celebrate the festive day on which he who is the great and eternal day came from the great and endless day of eternity into our own short day of time. ... For this reason, when our Lord was born of the Virgin, the message of the angelic voices was: *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth. ...* Let us then rejoice in this grace, so that our glorying may bear witness to our good conscience by which we glory, not in ourselves, but in the Lord. ... For what greater grace could God have made to dawn on us than to make His only Son become the son of man, so that a son of man might in his turn become the son of God? Ask if this were merited; ask for its reason, for its

justification, and see whether you will find any other answer but sheer grace.⁷

Let us thank God for this grace. Amen.

¹ <https://www.usccb.org/news/2025/pope-leo-begins-papacy-calling-united-church-wounded-world>.

² <https://www.christianwebsite.com/how-many-denominations-of-christianity-2024/>. See also the website of the Center for Global Christianity, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/quick-facts/>.

³ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/pontifical-yearbook-2025-priests-religious-statistics.html>.

⁴ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/state-of-church-membership-world-growth-protestant-orthodox.html>.

⁵ Jeff Hilles, "How Many Christian Denominations Are There and Why?" *Biblical Christian Worldview*, <https://bcworldview.org/how-many-christian-denominations-are-there-and-why/>.

⁶ Saint Josemaría Escrivá, "Christ Triumphs through Humility," *Christ is Passing By* (New York: Scepter Publishers), translation of *Es Cristo Que Pasa* (Madrid, 1973), pp. 29-30.

⁷ From a sermon by Saint Augustine, Bishop (*Sermo* 185: PL 38, 997-999), Office of Readings for December 24.