

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
MIDNIGHT MASS (MISSA IN NATIVITATE DOMINI IN NOCTE)
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, DC
2021**

As the Apostolic Nuncio, in the name of the Holy Father, I want to wish you and your loved ones a blessed and peace-filled Christmas. *Today in the City of David a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord!* What joy these words bring to the ears of people around the world and to those gathered here in this Basilica or watching on television or internet. To all, I express the closeness and spiritual affection of Pope Francis, assuring you of his prayers.

The angels declared the birth of the Savior to the shepherds, assuring them that they would see a sign: *you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.* To the lowly shepherds, the heavenly host appeared, singing: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.* Today, after its absence during the four weeks of Advent, we heard resound the words of the *Gloria*, which most Sundays reminds us of the joy of the Incarnation.

And on earth, peace to those on whom his favor rests. Historians view the period of time in which Jesus was born as relatively peaceful. The so-called *Pax Romana* allowed for trade and travel and was largely free from the bloody conflict that marked other periods. Caesar had been awarded the title *Augustus*, meaning one worthy of adoration, shortly after he assumed office. Elsewhere, he is called *soter*, or savior, which the Greeks used to refer to Zeus or to God alone. The *Ara Pacis Augusti* in Rome reminds us that he made it possible for the people of that era to hope and to live without horrific violence. During this period, a census was called and Joseph went down to the city of Bethlehem.

Despite the appearance of peace – imposed from the outside – there was unrest – an interior unrest in the hearts of the men and women of that day and of all time. It was the violence of sin, a war that had been waged from the beginning of time. Despite all his efforts, man could not accomplish true peace – forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.

The English hymn *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* begins with the beautiful line: *Hark the herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn King! Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled.* This is the true peace that this evening's liturgy proposes. With the Nativity, the Child Jesus begins His ministry of reconciliation between humanity and God, His mission of forgiveness.

With His Birth, the Prince of Peace, took up arms on our behalf to defend us from the violence of our Enemy, but surprisingly, these were not the arms of divinity but the weapons of our weakness and human condition. St. Leo the Great writes:

“God’s Son took on human nature to reconcile it to its Maker. In that way, the devil who invented death might be overcome through that very thing which he had overcome. In the conflict undertaken on our behalf, battle was joined ... The Omnipotent Lord engages this extremely savage enemy, not in his own majesty but in our lowliness, bringing against

him the same form and the very same nature, partaker indeed in our mortality but wholly without sin.” (LEO THE GREAT, SERMON 21 ON THE NATIVITY)

The Lord brought a different type of peace. His peace was not imposed from the outside but comes from within. We feel comfortable with an external peace, which allows us to carry out our daily activities, but what about the deeper interior disquiet? If we place all our hopes on the external peace – a good economy, the development of vaccines, better politicians and policies – then what will happen when those conditions end? All of these are good things, but none will bring us the peace for which our hearts truly long.

Jesus was born at a time of peace, but nothing was peaceful about His Birth. Externally, things did not go according to plan. He was not born at home; He was born in a stable. He had no proper bed; he was placed on straw in a manger. Everything seemed unstable and disrupted, but His birth teaches us that true peace does not depend on the externals.

He had come to accomplish that which no earthly ruler could establish – interior peace, a right ordering of our relationship with God and one another. His birth announces that the division that separates us from God and one another has ended. He has become one of us. In His very person, He unites humanity and divinity. Gazing on the manger scene in this basilica, we see an image of our reconciliation with God.

The internal division within man – sin – is the source of our external division, but it is Christ, the newborn King, who can reach into the soul and touch the heart, reconciling us with His Father. Indeed, all the creatures – the angels, the humans, the animals, even the stars – are reconciled in perfect peace and harmony. It is what the hymn *Silent Night* calls “heavenly peace,” and this is what the angels have come to announce. The Lord reveals to us in the little town of Bethlehem the peace that the world cannot give.

But the first part of the angelic greeting is *Glory to God in the highest*. This is the surest way to peace – to give God glory. The lack of peace in our world is due to our seeking of our own glory. At times, we are “self-referential” and “self-obsessed.” The path to peace demands that we give God glory and place Christ in the center of our life. Looking upon the manger, we see the central figure: it is the Child. All the figures in the Nativity scene turn to Him.

How shall we give Him glory? In reading the Gospels, we learn from Christ – from His words and gestures – how to glorify the Father. We learn it in the manger, when he demonstrates humility in robing Himself in flesh and human weakness. We see it in His service of the poor and the sick. We see it most of all when He glorifies the Father at Calvary. Our Lord’s birth already is pointing us to His saving sacrifice, by which sinners are reconciled to the Father, and by which the Father is glorified.

The sixth verse of Saint Alphonsus Liguori’s *Tu scendi dale stelle* captures this in the dialogue with the Infant at the manger: “*You sleep, my child, but meanwhile the heart is not sleeping, but is always awake. Ah, my beautiful and pure lamb, what are You thinking of? Tell me. Oh, immense love! "I think one day I'll die for you," You reply.*”

His dying for us – His sacrifice – is what we call the “Mass,” and we have gathered this holy night for “Christ’s Mass”, for Christmas, the sending of Christ into the world. This is where God is glorified. In glorifying God in worship and receiving the King of Kings and Prince of Peace into our souls, we are

transformed into instruments of His peace, conforming our lives, our words, our gestures to His. Thus, we give glory to God in the highest, who gave us His Son.

I conclude with the opening words of the Wexford Carol: *“Good people all, this Christmas time/Consider well and bear in mind/What our good God for us has done/In sending His beloved Son.”*

He has given us lasting Peace. May the peace of this Christmas season be with you and your families now and throughout the New Year. Merry Christmas!