

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

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
December 25, 2021**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Christ became like us, that we might become more like Him.

This is the great truth of the Incarnation, that we celebrate at Christmas. God came into this world and became incarnate in His Son, Jesus, who gives of Himself and shows us the way to His heavenly Kingdom.

This week's issue of the *National Catholic Register* contains an in-depth story about the Christmas poem, *Christmas Bells*, by the distinguished poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. You may be familiar with the poem, but the article by Donald DeMarco provides some helpful context for the poem:

The year 1863 was particularly difficult for distinguished poet and translator Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882). His country was embroiled in a civil war that he hated in which his son, Charley, was severely wounded. In addition, he was grieving over the loss of his wife, Frances, who died two years earlier in a freak accident in their home. His grief led him into a depression. On the first Christmas following her death, he stated in his diary, "How inexpressibly sad are all the holidays."¹

Longfellow wrote his poem, *Christmas Bells*, on Christmas Day in 1863.

It starts out cheerfully enough:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
 And wild and sweet
 The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along
 The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
 A voice, a chime,
 A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then the mood turns dark in the next three stanzas:

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
 And with the sound
 The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
 The hearth-stones of a continent,
 And made forlorn
 The households born
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
 "There is no peace on earth," I said;
 "For hate is strong,
 And mocks the song
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

If the poem had ended there, it would have been sad and depressing. But as Providence would have it, just then Longfellow heard the church bells ringing again, which must have lifted his spirits as he wrote the final stanza:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
 "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
 The Wrong shall fail,
 The Right prevail,
 With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Perhaps we find ourselves in a similar frame of mind that Longfellow was feeling as he started his poem. The recent death of a loved one, personal sickness or suffering, the ongoing challenges of the COVID pandemic: all

these can lead to discouragement with similar sentiments as Longfellow wrote in his diary, "How inexpressibly sad are all the holidays."

If that is the case, I pray that you will hear the Christmas bells peal their message of peace and joy, and conclude as Longfellow did:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Our first reading tonight at this Midnight Mass started out appropriately enough, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing, as they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as people make merry when dividing spoils" (Isaiah 9:1-2).

The darkness referred to here is not just the darkness of the night, but the darkness of sadness, gloom, discouragement and despair. In the same way, the light referred to here is not just the light of a star in the sky, but the light of Christ, who said to His disciples, "I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Christ became like us, that we might become more like Him.

St. Thomas Aquinas expressed it this way, “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that He, made man, might make men gods.”² Or, as Saint Athanasius put it in his work *On the Incarnation*, “God became man so that we might become God.”³

How can this be? Were these esteemed saints promoting some sort of polytheism? How can man become God?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains this by quoting the Second Letter of Saint Peter, saying, “The Word became flesh to make us ‘*partakers of the divine nature*.’⁴ The *Catechism* also quotes Saint Irenaeus, who said, “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.”⁵ Indeed, this is why Christ instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion, so that as Christ comes into our hearts, we may become more like Him.

You know the saying, “You are what you eat.” This is true spiritually as well as physically. If we consume physical food and drink that are

unhealthy for us, we will suffer physically. Conversely, if we consume physical food and drink that are nutritious, this will help nurture our bodies. Similarly, reading harmful literature and looking at pornography will have a toxic effect on our souls, while reading the Bible and other spiritual books, meditating on the sacred mysteries of our Catholic faith, and receiving Holy Communion will make us more like Christ. As Jesus said in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

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To help us grow in appreciation of this great gift, the Catholic Church in the United States is preparing to celebrate a Eucharistic Revival nationwide over the next three years. Our Diocese is planning to participate in this Eucharistic Revival by observing a Year of the Eucharist, which will be opened at our former Cathedral, Saints Peter and Paul Church in Alton, on December 8, 2022, then conclude December 8, 2023, here at our current Cathedral in Springfield. Parish activities throughout the Eucharistic Year will be encouraged, such as Corpus Christi processions, the Eucharistic miracle display, Eucharistic adoration, and study of Eucharistic documents. Our Diocesan Eucharistic Year will also include the Centennial Celebration of the transfer of the See City of our Diocese from Alton to Springfield in

October of 2023. The Eucharistic Revival will culminate with a National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis July 17-21, 2024.

The core belief of Catholics about the mystery of the Eucharist is our faith in the Real Presence of Christ: “The reality that, in the Eucharist, bread and wine become the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ without ceasing to appear as bread and wine.”⁶ That is why it is essential that we receive Holy Communion not just at Christmas, but every Sunday, so that, in doing so, we may become more like Christ.

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As we receive Christ in Holy Communion today and throughout the year, may we remember that the “Lord is generous to us with his grace; and so we, by his grace, should always humbly ask him to give us what we need. . . . Let us adore Jesus who ever remains with us, on all the altars of the world, and lead others to share in our joy!”⁷

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Donald DeMarco, “Christmas Bells Ring Hopeful Notes Amid a Weary World,” *National Catholic Register*, December 19, 2021 – January 1, 2022, p. 9.

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusc.* 57, 1-4

³ St. Athanasius, *De inc.* 54, 3: PG 25, 192B.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 460, quoting 2 Pt 1:4.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 460, quoting St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3, 19, 1: PG 7/1, 939.

⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, n. 14.

⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nn. 58-59.