

**Homily for Day of Prayer for Peace in Iraq  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois**

**August 17, 2014**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The back window on the north wall of our cathedral depicts John Sobieski III, King of Poland, kneeling on the battlefield giving thanks to God for his victory over the Turks after the siege of Vienna. By the late 17<sup>th</sup> century the Turkish army was penetrating deep into Europe. In the summer of 1683, 140,000 Turkish troops surrounded Vienna. Sobieski, leading an army of about 75,000, defeated the Turks at Kahlenburg, effectively ending Turkish military expansion into Europe.

In our times, the Christian people of Iraq are not so fortunate. There is no one riding to their rescue. After our troops were summarily withdrawn from Iraq in 2011, a jihadist group known as the Islamic State or ISIS has moved into the void. Violence there has escalated as the Islamic State has taken control of large sections of Iraq, destroying, burning and looting churches, homes and businesses. The Islamist terrorists are

ruthlessly slaughtering Christians and others who chose not to convert to Islam. Tens of thousands have fled their homes since the extremist militant group Islamic State overran large swathes of northern Iraq in June and gave Christian residents an ultimatum to convert to Islam, pay a special tax, or be killed. Faced with such a dire situation, most Christians have fled for their lives. The Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk, said that the latest advance has nearly purged northwestern Iraq of its Christian population. "There is not a Christian town left standing," the Archbishop said.

We should not dismiss the situation in Iraq as a far-away matter of no concern to us. U.S. intelligence officials said last Thursday that the gains made in recent months by the Islamic State have bolstered its long-term ambitions in the West, including the United States. Indeed, in a chilling video message aired last week, an ISIS soldier proclaims that their goal is to "raise the flag of Allah in the White House."

In light of this situation, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has called for all people to pray for peace in Iraq. His Beatitude Louis Rafael Sako, Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Iraq, had joined with the international pontifical foundation, Aid to the Church in Need, to call for a Global Day of Prayer for Peace. In solidarity with our Catholic brothers and sisters of

Iraq, the Catholic Bishops of the United States have designated today as a Day of Prayer for Peace in Iraq. Catholics here in the United States are also encouraged to let their elected representatives know of their concern for Christians and other religious minorities who are in dire straits in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and other countries. As Pope Francis said on August 9<sup>th</sup>, "I ask the international community to protect all those suffering violence in Iraq."

Pope Francis recently wrote to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon. In his letter the Holy Father decried how "Christians and other religious minorities have been forced to flee from their homes and witness the destruction of their places of worship and religious patrimony." Pope Francis placed before the Secretary General "the tears, the suffering and the heartfelt cries of despair of Christians and other religious minorities of the beloved land of Iraq." The Catholic community and people of the United States share these tears, sufferings and heartfelt cries.

Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, sent a letter this past week to President Barack Obama, saying, "More must be done." Noting that Pope Francis had called upon "the international community, particularly through the norms and

mechanisms of international law, to do all that it can to stop and to prevent further systematic violence against ethnic and religious minorities,” Archbishop Kurtz pleaded with President Obama for “the United States to answer this call in concert with the international community.”

The jihadist genocide in Iraq calls to mind the speech given by Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg in 2006, in which he quoted the fourteenth century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus, saying: “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” He was harshly criticized for quoting this statement. Yet in light of the violence of the jihadist terrorists seeking forced conversions to Islam, it is good to recall the point that Pope Benedict was making by repeating this quote, namely, that “spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul.”

In 2007 Pope Benedict published a book entitled *Jesus of Nazareth* that provides the proper approach to spreading the faith, that is, through reason and persuasion, not violence. In the first book of what turned out to be a three-volume picture of the preacher from Galilee, the Holy Father

wanted to write a simple and straightforward story of Jesus. As he says in the foreword of the book, it “is solely an expression of my personal search ‘for the face of the Lord.’”

In the book the Holy Father asks the question, “What did Jesus bring to the world?” He did not bring world peace. He did not bring prosperity. So what has he brought to us? The answer is very simple, Pope Benedict says. Jesus has brought God to the world. He has told us about God, whom he calls “the Father.” He has shown us that in looking upon Jesus we are looking upon God in human form. As he said to the apostle Philip, “To have seen me is to have seen the Father.”

The one, true God, the Lord who revealed himself to Abraham and Moses, who made Israel his special people, now comes among us in Jesus of Nazareth. From the very beginning, God’s plan reached beyond the chosen people to embrace all the nations of the world. The people of Israel were not chosen in an exclusive sense to be a members-only club, but to serve as a beacon of light to show the way for the rest of the world.

All of our readings today point in that direction. The prophet Isaiah announces that foreigners will be included in God’s salvation. God will bring into His presence all who keep the sabbath and hold to the covenant,

sharing His love and His joy with them. Our Responsorial Psalm prayed for all nations to give praise to God. Saint Paul, as the Apostle to the Gentiles, writes to the Romans that God will share His gifts and have mercy upon all.

In the Gospel from Saint Matthew, an anxious mother beseeches Jesus for help and healing for her daughter. Note that the woman in the Gospel is a Canaanite woman, that is, she is a Gentile, not a member of the House of Israel. In telling this story, Matthew shows us how Jesus' life and ministry were centered first on his own people. But it was a ministry intended for the salvation of the whole world. The mission of Jesus to "the lost sheep of the House of Israel" will soon become a mission to "gather into one the scattered children of God" throughout the world. This woman is seeking from the Lord what we all seek from Him: eternal happiness.

There is a beautiful passage in the Office of Readings for the Memorial of Saint Stephen of Hungary, whose feast day was yesterday, from a letter that he wrote to his son. In that letter Saint Stephen told his son what he needed to do to fulfill his duty in order to "reach the highest state of happiness." He said, "Be merciful to all who are suffering violence, keeping always in your heart the example of the Lord who said: *I desire*

*mercy and not sacrifice.* Be patient with everyone, not only with the powerful, but also with the weak. Finally be strong lest prosperity lift you up too much or adversity cast you down. Be humble in this life, that God may raise you up in the next. Be truly moderate and do not punish or condemn anyone immoderately. Be gentle so that you may never oppose justice. Be honorable so that you may never voluntarily bring disgrace upon anyone. Be chaste so that you may avoid all the foulness of lust like the pangs of death.”

As he wrote to his son, Saint Stephen of Hungary also gives us a beautiful summary of the virtues that will lead to eternal happiness:

Be merciful.

Be patient.

Be strong.

Be humble.

Be moderate.

Be gentle.

Be honorable.

Be chaste.

May our gathering around this altar and our reception of the Eucharist strengthen us to live these virtues and always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.