

**Homily for the 1st Sunday of Lent, Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

February 22, 2015

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

A couple of weeks ago, I finally had the opportunity to watch the film “Noah,” a biblical blockbuster movie that came out a few months ago about the Old Testament story of Noah and the flood that we heard about in today’s first reading. In some respects, the Hollywood version does successfully articulate the Biblical logic of the story of Noah. All the major characters in the movie refer to “the Creator,” understood not as a distant force, but as deeply involved in the affairs of the world that he has made. Human beings are portrayed as fallen with their sin producing much of the suffering in the world. Most important, Noah is consistently depicted as seeking to know and follow the will of God.¹

It is here that the film departs from the Bible. In the movie, Noah is convinced that it is God’s will that the human race be obliterated, including Noah and his household who accompanied him in the ark. In contrast, the Bible makes clear that God intended to destroy wicked human beings as

punishment for their evil deeds, but spares Noah and his household, telling Noah to take them into the ark “for you alone in this generation have I found to be righteous before me” (Genesis 7:1). After the flood, God assures Noah that he need not fear another flood. Now life begins anew, There is now the potential for the world to be filled with people totally devoted to following the ways of the Lord. To give Noah all the assurance he needs, God establishes a covenant with him. Noah has God’s word that he, his family, and the creatures of the earth will be protected and that life will be sustained. God assures Noah of this four times in the brief reading we heard today. God then gives a beautiful rainbow as a sign to Noah and countless generations after him that God is always mindful of his covenant.

This theme is continued in today’s second reading, where we heard the First Letter of St. Peter inviting us to reflect on the biblical drama of the flood and Noah’s act of rescue in the hope that we will see the connection to baptism. In this way, we can understand the much more significant rescue act of Christ, who entered our damaged world and was tempted in the wilderness, but did not give in to the temptations of the devil.

The season of Lent is a time for us to accept that we are weak and sinful people born into a beautiful but broken world and then to renew our

faith joyfully in the meaning of our baptism. For it was through our baptism that we entered into the mystery of Christ as redeemer. This is the Christ who went into the desert to wrestle with the powers of evil and who then fulfilled his Father's mission and began to heal the hurt of sin and its consequences.

It will help us to be authentic followers of Jesus of Nazareth if first we acknowledge the power of evil in our world and in our lives. Then we can renew our faith in the power of the one who overcame evil and pray that he will free us from temptation and deliver us from evil.

We do not need to look very hard or very far to see evil in the world around us. Jesus warned His disciples that the world will hate them because He had chosen them out of the world (John 15:19). Just as Jesus was persecuted, we should expect to be persecuted, too (John 15:20). We should not expect that such persecutions took place only long ago or in places far away.

Just last week, commenting on the beheading of twenty-one Coptic Christians in Egypt by terrorists of the Islamic State, Pope Francis said, "Their only words were: 'Jesus, help me!' They were killed simply because they were Christians. The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a

witness that cries out to be heard. It makes no difference whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ.”²

Heaven forbid that such violence should ever confront any of us personally, but these executions of Christians simply because they were Christians should cause us to ask whether we have the depth of faith and resolve to be willing to die for our faith in Jesus Christ.

In order to overcome evil, it is necessary to recognize it, name it, and resolve to defeat it. Unfortunately, that is not the approach being taken by our Commander-in-Chief and his administration. Last week at the State Department in Washington, D.C., President Obama convened a “Summit on Countering Violent Extremism.” In his remarks, the President said that when “people -- especially young people -- feel entirely trapped in impoverished communities, where there is no order and no path for advancement, where there are no educational opportunities, where there are no ways to support families, and no escape from injustice and the humiliations of corruption -- that feeds instability and disorder, and makes those communities ripe for extremist recruitment. And we have seen that across the Middle East and we’ve seen it across North Africa. So if we’re

serious about countering violent extremism, we have to get serious about confronting these economic grievances.”³

Reflecting the administration’s approach to this issue, State Department spokesman Marie Harf talked on MSNBC of the “root causes” that drive jihadists, such as “lack of opportunity for jobs.” She later went on CNN to explain: “Where there’s a lack of governance, you’ve had young men attracted to this terrorist cause where there aren’t other opportunities.”⁴⁵

What the administration fails to recognize and acknowledge is the motivation of the Islamic State is not economic, but religious. Terrorists of the Islamic States are beheading, burning, torturing and killing people who do not subscribe to their narrow view of Islam, including Christians, Jews and fellow Muslims. In fact, most of the victims killed by the Islamic State are Muslims.⁶

In an article in next month’s *Atlantic* magazine entitled, “What ISIS Really Wants,” contributing editor Graeme Wood writes, “Muslims can reject the Islamic State; nearly all do. But pretending it isn’t actually a religious, millenarian group, with theology that must be understood to be

combated, has already led the United States to underestimate it and back foolish schemes to counter it.”⁷

This misunderstanding is further compounded by the President’s attempts to explain the terrorism of the Islamic extremists by comparing them to the Crusaders, as he did at the National Prayer Breakfast earlier this month when he said, “Lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ.”⁸

This popular view of the Crusades as a war of Christian aggression against Muslims is totally inaccurate. The most distinguished historian of the Crusades, the Cambridge University scholar Jonathan Riley-Smith, explains in his book, *The Crusades, Christianity, and Islam*, that it is generally thought that Christians attacked Muslims without provocation to seize their lands and forcibly convert them. The Crusaders were Europe’s scoundrels, who marched against the infidels out of blind zealotry and a desire for land and riches. The problem is that every word of this is wrong. Historians of the Crusades have long known that it is wrong, but they find it extraordinarily difficult to be heard across a chasm of entrenched preconceptions. For on the other side is, as Riley-Smith puts

it, “nearly everyone else, from leading churchmen and scholars in other fields to the general public.”⁹

Professor Thomas Madden, chairman of the department of history at Saint Louis University, points out:

All the Crusades met the criteria of just wars. They came about in reaction attacks against Christians or their Church. . . . In each case, the faithful went to war to defend Christians, to punish the attackers, and to right terrible wrongs. By pushing back Muslim aggression and restoring Eastern Christianity, the Crusaders were—at great peril to themselves—imitating the Good Samaritan. . . . But the Crusades were not just wars. They were holy wars, and that is what made them different from what came before. They were made holy not by their target but by the Crusaders’ sacrifice. The Crusade was a pilgrimage and thereby an act of penance. . . . Crusaders who undertook that burden with right intention and after confessing their sins would receive a plenary indulgence. The indulgence was a recognition that they undertook these sacrifices for Christ, who was crucified again in the tribulations of his people. . . . One can never understand the

Crusades without understanding their penitential character. It was the indulgence that led thousands of men to take on a burden that would certainly cost them dearly.¹⁰

The theological concept of indulgences is a longstanding Catholic doctrine which itself is largely unknown and widely misunderstood even by many Catholics. In short, an “indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment for sins, whose guilt is forgiven, which a properly disposed member of the Christian faithful obtains under certain and clearly defined conditions through the intervention of the Church, which, as minister of the Redemption, dispenses and applies authoritatively the treasury of the expiatory works of Christ and the saints.”¹¹ I will be exploring this important doctrine in greater detail in my homilies here on Sunday evenings in the weeks ahead.

During these forty days of Lent, let us pray that we as individuals and as a nation may acknowledge, name and resolve to defeat the evils that confront us. May we all enter deeply into the Passion of our Lord so as to celebrate with abundant joy the great glory of His Resurrection when Easter arrives.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cf. Fr. Robert Barron, <http://www.wordonfire.org/resources/article/noah-a-post-modern-midrash/480/>, April 1, 2014.

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2015/02/16/pope-francis-denounces-isis-beheadings-their-blood-confesses-christ/>.

³ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/19/remarks-president-summit-counteracting-violent-extremism-february-19-2015>.

⁴ <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/we-cannot-kill-our-way-out-war>.

⁵ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/150217/sitroom.02.html>.

⁶ Peggy Noonan, "An Administration Adrift on Denial: Why won't the president think clearly about the nature of the Islamic State?" *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, February 21, 2015, p. A13.

⁷ <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

⁸ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/02/05/president-obama-joins-dalai-lama-years-national-prayer-breakfast>.

⁹ <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/06/inventing-the-crusades>.

¹⁰ Thomas F. Madden, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/06/inventing-the-crusades>, June 2009.

¹¹ Apostolic Penitentiary, *Manual of Indulgences: Norms and Grants*, English translation of the *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum*, fourth edition, 1999, (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), p. 13.