

January 1, 2021

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of God/World Day of Peace

Happy New Year! That's the sentiment that's on the minds of most people on this very first day of a brand new year. While the way we all "celebrated" that moment at the stroke of midnight when 2020 became 2021 was probably different from any other year due to all the restrictions, the sentiments remain the same. A new year gives us the opportunity to bid farewell to all that has been in 2020. I know most of us are glad to see this past year be over, especially because of this awful pandemic with all the deaths and suffering it has wrought, along with all the social unrest, and deep political divisions. Yet, as strange and challenging as this year has been, it's also been a year filled with many blessings. And so, I hope you will join me in thanking God for all that has been. And as 2021 has begun, we are filled with hope, anticipation and a sense of optimism, especially because of the availability of life-saving vaccines. May 2021 be better in all the ways that 2020 was not; but may this new year also be a blessing in all the ways that 2020 was, and even more. And so, in that same spirit, I join in my good wishes for a blessed, grace-filled and happy New Year to all.

But on this day in addition to the secular celebration of New Year's Day, in our Liturgical Calendar we are celebrating this Holy Day of Obligation, honoring the Motherhood of our Blessed Mother and the conclusion of the Octave of Christmas. And so, in that spirit, I continue to wish you all a very Merry Christmas.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Numbers has perhaps the most beautiful "Christmas/New Year's" greeting possible in what is known as the Blessing of Aaron: *"May the Lord bless you and keep you; may He let His Face shine upon you and be gracious to you; may He look upon you kindly and give you His peace."* What better greeting could we give one another than to ask for God's bountiful blessings for one another?

Of course, that is exactly what we began celebrating one week ago today---an "octave" ago----on Christmas Day. Christmas celebrates the greatest "blessing" God has ever given to us human beings when He sent His only-begotten Son into the world.

As St. Paul wrote in today's Second Reading in his Letter to the Galatians: *"When the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born*

under the law, to ransom those under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons (and daughters)." The Birth of Jesus is the world's greatest blessing, and what Jesus came into the world to accomplish---what St. Paul referred to as a "ransom"---was the greatest blessing that we could receive. What a great Christmas/New Year's prayer: that the Lord will bless and keep us all today, and throughout each of the next 364 days.

However our particular focus today on the Virgin Mary's Motherhood, celebrating the "one" who made Jesus' Birth possible---His Mother. When we look at the Manger Scene, the Baby Jesus has his infant arms extended----reaching out to be embraced. That embrace is for the entire world, but it's also for each and every one of us offering us the "gift" of Himself, and what He came to bring us---the gift of salvation. But we also realize that the Baby Jesus---just like all babies---was reaching out to be embraced by His Mother. Christmas celebrates the Birth of Jesus who, though completely divine, was also completely human. And in Jesus' complete humanness, He was totally dependent on His mother to love, embrace, and take care of Him; to change Him; to feed Him, burp Him, and cuddle Him; to soothe Him when He cried and to hold Him so He could sleep. As Mary cared for the Baby Jesus and loved Him in every way that all mothers care for and love their babies, we celebrate today Mary's Motherhood.

But today's Feast also celebrates the fact that in becoming the Mother of Jesus, Mary also became the Mother of the entire Body of Christ, the Church---and therefore we celebrate Mary's spiritual Motherhood of each of us who are faithful members of the Church.

In today's Gospel Reading, we heard about the Shepherds, the first to be told about the Birth of Jesus by an entire Choir of Angels. The Shepherds came to the Manger. St. Luke tells us that after *"they found Mary and Joseph and the Infant lying in the manger".... "they made known the message they had been told about the Child."*

In other words, Mary had just given birth to Jesus in the cave in the middle of the night. No one else was around except for Joseph and the animals. It was not until the Shepherds showed up and told Mary what they had heard and seen out in the fields---how the Angel had appeared in the sky and said: *"Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people....A savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.....You will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."* And after the

shepherds told Mary what the message of the Angel was, they would have also told her that an entire *“multitude of the heavenly host (was) with the angel, praising God and singing: ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests’.*” Mary and Joseph would have been completely unaware of any of that until the Shepherds told them. That visit from the Shepherds is what gave Mary so much to think about and wonder about; as St. Luke tells us: *“Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”*

Today, as we conclude the Christmas Octave and also celebrate New Year’s Day, we celebrate new beginnings. We begin 2021 with an opportunity for each of us to recommit ourselves to the vocation we all share through our Baptism as believers and disciples of Jesus. Mary, the Mother of Jesus---the Mother of God---is the Model for each of us as believers. She’s the first believer; she’s the first disciple; she’s the first Christian. It would be so good to ask our Blessed Mother to help us---to inspire and encourage us---to have the same openness of heart to what will come to us in this new year as she was totally open to everything in her life as Jesus’ Mother. Just as Mary picked Jesus up and embraced Him as a Baby, she would keep doing so throughout His entire life. She was always there to help Him, soothe Him, encourage and comfort Him. And she was there until the very end, when Jesus’ lifeless Body was taken down from the cross and placed in the tender, loving arms of His Mother.

Mary wants to keep each of us in her tender embrace as well. While many are happy to see 2020 come to an end, we can’t lose sight that there was much for which to be thankful in that year, and for the many blessings that did come our way. Today would be a good day to be mindful of both the painful and the positive moments of 2020 and “keep all those things and reflect on them in our hearts”, as Mary did.

January 1st is also World Day of Peace with the theme: “The culture of care as a path to peace”. In his statement, Pope Francis wrote: *“The painful events that have marked the path of humanity in the past year, especially the pandemic, teach us how necessary it is to take an interest in the problems of others and to share their concerns. This attitude represents the road that leads to peace.”* He went on to add: *Each one of us, the men and women of our time, is called to make peace a reality every day and in every area of life, extending a hand to a brother or sister in need of a word of comfort, a gesture of tenderness, a helping hand of solidarity.”*

As we move into this new year, perhaps one of our New Year's resolutions could be to be "peace-makers" in all that we do. May we ask our Blessed Mother to help us allow "peace" to reign in our hearts, within our families, in our work places, and in what we do in our relaxation. And may she help us be open to all that God will bring to us in this new year---all the experiences, good and painful, that will come our way, as well as all the graces God will give us to help us deal with each of them.

Joining with Pope Francis, I wish all the Faithful of our Diocese a Happy New Year, and a 2021 filled with the Peace of Christ, that will lead us to live this year with Hope and with the Joy of Christmas throughout the year.

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley