Fr Matthew Charlesworth, SJ
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Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Date: Sunday, January 1, 2017 | **Season:** Christmas | **Year:** A
First Reading: Numbers 6:22–27
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 67:2–8 | **Response:** Psalm 67:2a
Second Reading: Galatians 4:4–7
Gospel Acclamation: Hebrews 1:1–2
Gospel Reading: Luke 2:16–21
Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

Last week I spoke about Christmas and I used Star Wars as an example. But in case I confused you all – today I want to speak about Peace; because today I think we are being asked to remember three things, a blessing of peace, a call to non-violence and unity, and the mother of God who gave birth to the Prince of Peace and who is our model for our Christian life.

Firstly, let's recall the blessing of peace: In today's first reading we hear the ancient prayer of blessing which God gave to Moses to hand on to Aaron and his sons: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace".

It is good for us to hear these words at the beginning of our New Year, for they are words of hope. Not based on the promises of men and women, but rather on the sure promise from God himself. In a time when we are all receiving many wishes of blessings for the New Year, it is this, God's blessing, which contains the greatest goodwill of all. And this is the message which the Church brings to each of us today. That "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace". How important this message of hope and peace is for us in South Africa in 2017. We must never lose hope or give into despair. We must never stop working for peace, for peace is the sign of the Lord's blessing to us.

My second point was about non-violence and unity and it comes form Pope Francis' Message for Peace. In his message for peace today, Pope Francis says:

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To be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence. The eight Beatitudes provide a portrait of the person we could describe as blessed, good and authentic. Blessed are the meek, Jesus tells us, the merciful and the peacemakers, those who are pure in heart, and those who hunger and thirst for justice. In his message Pope Francis invites us to build Peace through active nonviolence. He challenges us

to build up society, communities and businesses by acting as peacemakers; to show mercy by refusing to discard people, harm the environment, or seek to win at any costl to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process of peace; to choose solidarity as a way of making history and building friendship in society. Active nonviolence, the Pope says, is a way of showing that unity is truly more powerful and more fruitful than conflict. Let us treasure this blessing from the Lord, and let us receive and work towards – in a non-violent way as the Pope encourages us – that enduring peace: peace in our heart; in our homes, in our workplaces and relationships and in Society at large.

But the Church doesn't ask us to work at something without offering us an example. That is why we have the Saints who can inspire and support us, which brings me to my third point. Today we commemorate Mary, the Mother of God.

The Mother of God. This is the first and most important title of Our Lady, and what the Church asks us to remember as well this morning. This title refers to a fact that the Church, through her constant devotion to Mary, has understood from the earliest times of the Church.

Church Historians recount how in history the Council of Ephesus defined the divine motherhood of the Virgin Mary in the year 431. The title 'Theotokos' – God Bearer – was approved and the first Marian Shrine, the Basilica of Saint Mary Major in Rome, was built. It is said that the residents of Ephesus – the lay faithful of the time – used to gather at the gates of the basilica where the bishops were meeting and they shouted, "Mother of God!" "Theotokos!". The faithful, by asking the Bishops to officially define this title of Our Lady, showed that they acknowledged her divine motherhood. Theirs was the spontaneous and sincere reaction of children who know their Mother best, for they love her with immense tenderness. But it is more than this that we remember today: it is the sensus fidei – the sense of the faithful, of the holy People of God which, in its unity, never errs, recommended this title. On this feast of Mary, the Mother of God, we could

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also commemorate the sensus fidelium – the sense of the faithful – for recognizing Mary's divine motherhood. But she is not just the mother of God – but Jesus himself, whilst dying on the Cross, gave her to us as our Mother, when He said: "Behold your Mother!" (Jn 19:27).

From the Cross, he bequeathed to the church, to the world a Mother. From that moment on, the Mother of God also became our Mother! When the faith of the disciples was most tested by difficulties and uncertainties, Jesus entrusted them to Mary, who was the first to believe, and whose faith never failed. Her sorrowing heart was enlarged to make room for all men and women, all men and women, whether good or bad, and she loves them as she loved Jesus. The woman who at the wedding at Cana in Galilee gave her faith-filled cooperation so that the wonders of God could be displayed in the world; at Calvary kept alive the flame of faith in the resurrection of her Son; and she communicates this all with maternal affection to each and every person. Mary becomes in this way a source of hope and true joy! And is perhaps the vehicle through which God's blessing is delivered.

The Mother of the Redeemer goes before us and continually strengthens us in our faith, in our vocation and in our mission. By her example of humility and openness to God's will, she helps us to communicate our faith, joyfully and without reservation. Let us not forget this, this New Year.

Let us entrust today, to Mary, our own journey of faith, the desires of our own heart. Let us share with her our needs and the needs of the whole world. Let us pray for those who were killed in last night's attacks in Istanbul, and for all people who are victims of terror. Let us pray especially for those who hunger and thirst for non-violence, justice and peace, and for God, and ask Mary to present them to the Father through her Son, confident that our prayers will be answered, that the Lord will bless us, keep us, make his face to shine upon us. That he will be gracious to us and give us peace.

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