

Blessing, meditation, and witness. These are the words that could best summarize today's Solemnity, which is also The International Day of Peace.

The last couple of days of the year are always nostalgic for me because they always make me think of my grandmother, even before she passed away; I would say, since I entered the Seminary. In my family, New Year's Day was traditionally dedicated to family reunion at her modest home - not just to enjoy her delicious meals and play games with my cousins, but especially for something more precious: Grandma always took time to bless each of us individually and expressed wishes on us for the new year.

This practice might not exist in your families, but the truth is that we are here to lift our eyes to the Lord, the Author of all good things, to thank Him for 2025 that is gone, and entrust to Him 2026, asking for His blessing upon us and all those dear to us - spouses, parents, children, friends, neighbors, colleagues, as well as our country, those who lack resources and the needy.

Since the Old Testament, our forefathers in faith already knew how to turn to God for the same reason, with words that have come down to us and which serve as our First Reading, "The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!"

"To bless" comes from the Latin *bene dicere*, which means: to speak well, to wish others growth, prosperity and also to do good for them. Remember: these words were given by God Himself to Aaron, the high priest. Therefore, it's God Himself who thinks well of us, speaks positively about us, does good to us, and encourages us to do the same, if we are willing to.

But to know how to receive this blessing, the Church suggests a model: the Virgin Mary, blessed among all women. She is the one who welcomed with faith the gift of the Son of God, the Prince of peace, of Whom she became the Mother.

Such a favor that has made her the "Theotokos," meaning the "Bearer of God" and our Mother. If you remember Jesus, while hanging on the cross, He entrusted us all to her, "Woman, behold your son! Son, behold your mother!"

If the Church invites us to begin the new one with Mother Mary, it's because she has been the inspiration of generations of Christians and continues to be so for us today. She is the one who reveals

to us the closeness of the Lord, who is willing to do great things for us, just as He has done for her, if we open our hearts to Him, just as she did.

And if the Church encourages us to entrust the new year to the Lord through her, it's because every moment, every year spent in her company is a blessed moment, it's a blessed year. She knew how to grasp and welcome the events of her life in relation to God. Though she was a silent woman, her profound spiritual insight stemmed from her deep union with God, her Savior. In facing the events of her life, even the most confusing ones, such as those related to the coming of the Son of God, she did not panic. The Gospel says that "She kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart."

With complete trust in God, she discreetly sought to discern what God wished to convey to her; and once she grasped God's will, she was open to it and align herself with it. She is inviting us to do the same especially during this moment of self-evaluation.

Indeed, as a new year has just come, it's easier to look back; and in looking back, it's very difficult for our evaluations to be 100% positive because we were so challenged during 2025. Alongside international wars and conflicts, we heard about public shootings in schools, churches and supermarkets, political tensions, and personal struggles; each of us had our own battle! Some of us might have faced family issues; some others lost loved ones, or experienced job losses, or dealt with unexpected illnesses, or gotten into accidents, or gone through divorce, or felt deep loneliness, or undergone separation...

Despite these trials, we are invited to show, through acts of solidarity, that peace is possible. We are invited to pray for this peace to spread throughout the world - to places like here The USA, Palestine, Ukraine, Haiti, Nigeria, Venezuela. Let us place into God's hand our Church, which is constantly under attack, and the Archdiocese of Dubuque, as we journey In Faith. Please, pray for the holy-father, Pope Leo, our Bishops, especially Archbishop Thomas, for all priests, deacons and sisters. Please pray for us, as we pray for you!

2025 is over, and 2026 is opening before us. Keep in mind that it will be unfolding according to God's will, but also according to what we will decide to make of it. Hatred and trouble can spread, but love and peace are stronger and have the power to defeat them. Please, choose love; love for everyone! Choose peace: peace in our hearts, peace within your families, your workplaces and on the roads. Be peacemakers in a world where it's easier for people to be troublemakers.

The Lord has granted us another year to spread peace: 12 months to serve Him in our brothers and sisters, and be for them a source of hope and encouragement in difficult times; 52 weeks to live out His love; 365 days to practice forgiveness and reconciliation in our relationships; 8,760 hours to bear witness to our Christian faith through acts of kindness and compassion, and 525,600 (Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred) minutes to shine His light before others, to be lights for others; 31,536,000 seconds to behave as His sons and daughters.

The questions is: What have you done with the 9 hours that have already passed?

In the school of The Holy Mother of God, let us learn humility, simplicity, discretion, openness, trust and obedience in everything her Son tells us to do. May the Eucharist open us to the wonders of the Holy Spirit throughout 2026. As we strive to be peacemakers and doors of mercy for those in need, let us be people who bless one another, who keep God's word, reflecting on them in our hearts, and who bear witness to it.

We wish you all and your loved ones a blessed, holy, and a happy new year!