



**His Excellency,
The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Diocese of Belleville
9 AM Mass, October 8, 2023
St. Luke's Parish, Belleville
Sermon
“Make Us Instruments of Your Peace”
(War in the Holy Land)**

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene*: This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

“Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.” When we hear these words, many Catholics think, “Ah, the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi,” the amazing man whose feast day we celebrated on Wednesday, October 4. But the thirteenth-century saint did not actually write this prayer, which can only be traced back to 1912, when it was published anonymously in the French journal *La Clochette*. Later, Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, distributed millions of copies during World War II. When he was elected pope, Cardinal Bergoglio chose Francis for his pontifical name. And on Wednesday, St. Francis feast day, the Pontiff published a new encyclical, *Laudate Deum* (Praise God), challenging all people and all nations to care for the earth endangered by undeniable climate change. On St. Francis Day, the Holy Father opened the Vatican Synod on Synodality, a worldwide month long gathering of over three hundred bishops prayerfully pondering the shape of the Church to come, with laymen and lay women as voting participants for the first time in Church history. The Synod has the potential of leading to changes in Church disciplines and a more nuanced understanding of some Church doctrines.

St. Francis was born in 1182, Son of Pietro and Pica di Bernardone. His actual name is Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone. He was called Francesco "The Frenchman" by his father, who frequently took him on trips to France. After living a selfish and indulgent youth, Francesco felt called by Christ to rebuild and renew the Church. He remained a deacon all his life, feeling unworthy of becoming a priest. Francis became the totally poor and humble workman committed to renewing the Catholic Church. During the final years of his brief life, he was half blind and seriously ill. Two years before his death, Francis became the first person known to receive the *stigmata*, the wounds of Christ in his hands, feet, and side. He died October 3, 1226, when he was only 44 years old.

This morning we heard two of St. Francis's favorite scripture passages. He took great inspiration from the lyrical words of St. Paul's 2nd letter to the Christians living in Philippi c 4, v6-9. "Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, make your requests known to God. Then, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Then the God of peace will be with you."

Francis often meditated on the parable of the landowner in Matthew, 21:33-43. Francis wrote: "In this parable, Jesus speaks of God as a landowner who plants a vineyard, leases it to us, his tenants, and goes on a trip, leaving us in charge of his land, which produces wonderful grapes. Then, the landowner's servants come to collect the landowner's grapes. Jesus says we want to keep the grapes for ourselves, so we kill the servants.

But, instead of punishing us, the landowner sends more servants to collect his grapes. We kill them too. Then, the landowner sends his only son, hoping that we will treat his son with respect and hand over the grapes. Clearly Jesus Himself is the Son, who has come to us not to collect the grapes, but to teach us about the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells us we kill the landowner's son, hoping we can keep the vineyard for ourselves. When the owner of the vineyard comes, He will put us to death and rent His vineyard to others who will produce good grapes and happily give them to the landowner.

Francis says Jesus is describing us. We are quick to claim as ours that which is actually a gift from God. When God asks us to share what we have produced by God's grace, we may respond like the tenant farmers in the parable: we claim as our own God's gifts that have only been lent to us by God, the landowner.

Jesus told this parable just five days before He was arrested and crucified. The chief priests and the Pharisees hear the story, and they know Jesus is talking about them. They call for His death thus fulfilling His parable. St. Francis says Jesus is speaking to all of us as well. He is challenging us to be good stewards of our faith, asking us to think about the different ways that we kill the message of Jesus in our lives. He reminds us of how severely the landowner punished the tenants who killed His son.

St. Francis would be disappointed that 797 years after his death, Pope Francis feels compelled to come to the defense of brother earth and boldly declare on his feast day that it is no longer possible to doubt the human origins of the climate change crisis. The Pope writes, "The world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point. The world must move towards clean energy sources such as wind and solar energy and move quickly away from fossil fuels." With deep pastoral concern, Pope Francis asks those who deny climate change to open their eyes and see.

St. Francis of Assisi would be profoundly saddened that human beings still have not learned that we cannot resolve conflicts by violence and war. Francis would weep to know that yesterday, in the land of Jesus's birth, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that his country was at war with Hamas after Palestinian militants in an early morning assault crossed into Israel by land, sea and air, firing more than five thousand rockets from Gaza toward cities as far away as Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, killing and kidnapping innocent Israeli civilians and soldiers.

Israel retaliated immediately, promising to destroy Hamas. In Gaza, Israeli airstrikes filled cities with plumes of dark smoke, as Palestinian morgues were filled with the dead. So far, hundreds of Israelis and Palestinians have been killed and thousands have been wounded. This is the most horrific attack by Hamas during the ongoing conflict between the Palestinians and Israel in more than 50 years. This new conflict destabilizes

the Middle East with enormous worldwide impact. President Joseph Biden condemned the attack and pledged total support for Israel, promising whatever military assistance needed. Pope Francis called Catholics everywhere to pray for an end to the conflict, lamenting the futility of war. How can this be happening in the birthplace of the Prince of Peace?

Francis of Assisi was a real-world saint who did not spend his life talking to animals and blessing cats and dogs. His focus was on renewing and rebuilding the Church and bringing the Church back to her main purpose of proclaiming the good news of God's love and peace in Jesus Christ to all people everywhere. He would challenge those who do not care for the earth, those who make war, and all of us with the words Jesus spoke to us in the gospel. "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to people who will produce its fruit."

The challenges to the world that Pope Francis underscores in his blunt writings about the human race's responsibility for climate change, the potential impact of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, and the catastrophic new war between Israel and Hamas may all seem far away from this sunny autumn day in southern Illinois, but the example of St. Francis of Assisi challenges each one of you and challenges me to open our eyes and see that all of these realities can have a profound impact on our daily lives. Pray about these things with Jesus as you receive His Body and Blood this morning.

Though we know with certainty that St. Francis did not write it, the popular Prayer for Peace gives voice to his spirit.

**Lord, make us an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.**

O divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to

**console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.**

Praise be Jesus Christ. Both now and forever. Amen!