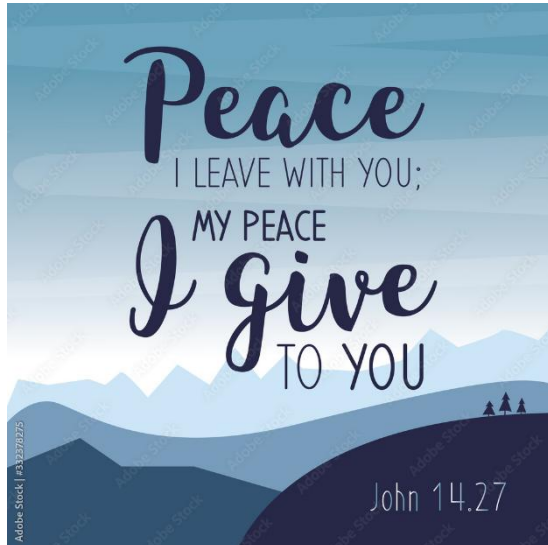


Homily for January 1, 2026 (Mary, Mother of God)

January 1st each year is a weighted day. It's obviously, New Year's Day in the



secular world. Furthermore, for the Church, it is also the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God and World Day of Peace. Putting together Mary, Mother of God and World Day of Peace makes a lot of sense in my mind.

There's an ancient Jewish blessing, that we heard in that first reading from the Book of Numbers. In its paraphrased version it says, ***“May God bless you, may God let His face shine on you, and may God give you peace.”***

It's always God's initiative, including the initiative of giving us peace. Our job is to decide whether we want peace enough. If we want it enough, we will find ways to cultivate it within ourselves and pass it on to others. My hunch is that if you did a random survey and asked people what they would wish for in the year 2026, peace would rank at the top, whether it be peace within their families, within the world, or within themselves.

Just before we share the sign of peace at Mass, the presider quotes Jesus at the Last Supper by saying, ***“Peace I leave you, my peace I give you.”*** Then we shake hands. But if we had the entire quote from the Last Supper we would hear Jesus

say, ***“Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give. This is my gift to you. So do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”***

Jesus is saying a lot with that, isn't he? Firstly, he's less than a day away from being brutally killed and instead of being full of fear and anxiety, he's offering us peace! But he's not just leaving us peace like an Amazon delivery person leaves a package at your door. He's *giving* you peace. He's putting it in your hands. “Peace I leave you, my peace I give you.” All he wants from us is to receive it and pass it into the hands of others. What prevents us from being the peacemakers Jesus thinks we are capable of? Anxiety and fear. “Do not let your hearts be anxious (troubled) and do not be afraid.” Fear blocks peace.

Think of peace in the same way you think of vitamins. The human body needs vitamins to survive and thrive, but it cannot produce vitamins on its own. So, we must ingest vitamins from our diet, from the things we eat. (By the way, thanks for all the chocolates you gave me at Christmas; I convince myself they're full of vitamins!). It's the same for peace. Jesus says, “I want to give you a peace the world cannot give. This is my gift to you.” We can't generate peace within ourselves anymore than we can generate necessary vitamins from within. Peace can only be received as a gift. What's wrong with the peace the world gives? It's not lasting. At best we have a ceasefire for a day, a week, a month and then it's back to egos vying for power and prestige. Peace that avoids going inward to find it's source in God will have little effect on the outer world.

Mary--before, during, and after bringing Jesus into the world--is always portrayed as a person who first ponders things in her heart. Before she brings forth Jesus, the Prince of Peace, she goes inside, to the heart, and ponders the gift of peace God planted within her. That's probably why the Church emphasizes her virginity. It's not speaking so much about her physically virginity as much as it's emphasizing the fact that she made room for God to take the initiative in her life. She wasn't pregnant already, she wasn't full of her own plans; there was still room for God's plan to take root in her. She received, like a gift, the Prince of Peace, and then she gave Jesus, that same Prince of Peace, to the world. Initially, Mary was puzzled when the Angel Gabriel approached her and told her she would be the mother of Jesus. She was confused because she knew she had done nothing to get pregnant. The angel said, "You don't need to do anything, Mary; it will be done to you. The Holy Spirit will come upon you. All you need to do is be open to God's initiative. God will do it in you. Are you in?" Mary said, "Well, if it's of God, I'm in. I don't understand this mystery, but I'm in. Let it be done to me as you have said." In that moment, the Prince of Peace started to grow within her.

"Most people despair that such a peace is possible," wrote Fr. Henri Nouwen, "They cling to old ways and prefer the security offered by preparing for war to the insecurity of taking risks for peace." I think Fr. Henri was right. I also think Mary was a risk-taker.

In Jesus' inaugural speech, the first thing he wanted to tell us was, "***Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.***" In the very moment you try to be a peacemaker, it is like you are be regenerated, born again as a child

of God. God is giving birth to you in that very moment. Can you believe it? You might be questioning yourself as to why you would offer peace in a certain situation, or to a certain person, as it seems to be doomed from the beginning. But can you believe that in the moment, and not 10 years later, you are being born anew? It might take 10 years to heal a rift in the family, or with a close friend, but in the moment you offer peace, you are being born a child of God.

True peace, I believe, is more than the absence of violence, for that would simply depend on outer circumstances, circumstances we're rarely in control of. True peace is what God offers us in the form of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. It's not dependent on outer circumstances but come from within. Jesus never promises us a perfect set of circumstances or still water on the surface but peace in our hearts—calm beneath the surface. Peace isn't the escape from life's troubles or immunity from harm. It's more the serenity underneath the turbulent waves and winds, that deep connectedness we have with Jesus, who promised never to leave us to our own devices.

Being a peacemaker, as you know, isn't easy nor for the faint of heart. It certainly doesn't come second nature in my life. If our actions are not rooted in love, they will have little hope of changing anyone or any situation. When I think of peacemakers like Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandella, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, and others I have known right here in the parish, they shared a common characteristic—they did not try to overcome their adversaries by defeating them but by convincing them. True peacemaking tries to turn an adversary into a friend, not by trying to *win* over the other, but by winning the

other over. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and great ambassador for peace, said that “the root of war is fear.” If that is true, then we must become more understanding of the fears people have. The most effective peacemakers are those who can understand the fear of others. We all push back because of fear.

Perhaps that’s why Mary is portrayed as a ponderer. She pondered what was inside of others and inside of herself. There’s no substitute for the inner work we all have to do within ourselves before peace can have a chance out there. Mary did that work. I may not be able to do much about the war in Ukraine or in the Middle East, but I can do something about responding to the Prince of Peace who already dwells within me and begs to be born anew.

May God bless you, may God let His face shine on you, and may God give you peace.

~Fr. Phil