



## ARCHBISHOP COSTELLOE'S 2014 CHRISTMAS MESSAGE TO PARISHES

**T**HIS CHRISTMAS marks the one hundredth anniversary of a remarkable event at the start of the First World War. It is reported that German, British and French troops laid down their weapons and began to exchange seasonal greetings and songs with the diggers in the opposing trenches. These soldiers walked across to their opposite numbers bearing gifts, exchanging food and souvenirs, playing soccer games together, joining in carol singing and even having joint burial services.

This very moving account points to the extraordinary power of the Christmas story to touch the human heart at the deepest level even in the midst of great suffering, brutality, and when in direct opposition to one another.

Christmas seems to draw out of us our real humanity. It invites us again to be our best selves. If it was so one hundred years ago on the battlefields of Europe it can still concretely happen for us today here in our own beautiful corner of the world and in every part of the globe.

We are told that the Christmas carol "Silent Night" or "Stille Nacht" was sung that Christmas night between the troops. The miracle of this event was precisely that the guns fell silent and it was indeed a silent and peaceful night, punctuated only by religious songs and the cries of "Happy Christmas".

One common greeting would have been "Peace on earth, goodwill towards men", which seems to capture the hope of Christmas very well. It is worth remembering, though, that the angels are reported to have said "Peace on earth to people with whom God is pleased".

The first greeting – "goodwill towards men" – reminds us that, through Jesus taking on flesh among us, God offers us his gift of peace through a person and in this way extends his goodwill and loving kindness to us. It also hints that we, in our turn, are called to imitate Jesus and to be bringers of peace and goodwill to others.

If we want our lives and our world to be marked by peace and goodwill then it is up to us to do something practical about it. Although an everyday task, Christmas offers us a special opportunity to recommit ourselves to being people of peace. And after all, who really wants to be a bringer of discord and disharmony?

I see this practical peace-building being lived out in our midst following the recent siege that transpired in Sydney's Martin Place. The hashtag, *#illridewithyou*, born out of one Australian's commitment to another to move beyond division, judgment and intolerance, speaks of a deliberate decision by one person to reach out beyond fear and opposition and to build confidence and unity with their neighbour.

The second translation – "peace on earth to people with whom God is pleased" – reminds us that the great blessing of peace is the fruit of a life lived in openness, and with gratitude, to God for his goodness to us. St Augustine once reminded us that our hearts are always restless until we find our rest in God. Living our lives in fidelity to God is the way to this peace which only He can give.

My prayer for all of you and for your loved ones as you once again celebrate the birth of Jesus is that you really do experience this wonderful gift of peace as you gather in your church, in your home, and elsewhere.

And finally, as we celebrate at each Eucharist, my wish is that "the peace of the Lord be with you always".

Have a blessed and wonderful Christmas!

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