

## Mary Mother of God

Our most popular wish on New Year's Day is for people to be happy. Nothing wrong with that, but today's first reading suggests something else is even better: that people will be blessed. This passage from the Book of Numbers contains the blessing that Old Testament priests gave to the people of Israel. It's no ordinary blessing. The priests learned the words from Moses, and Moses learned them directly from God. God tells Moses to give the priests these words so that they would know how to bless the people.

The blessing is in three parts. It starts this way: The Lord bless you and keep you. The first petition is for protection, that God would keep the Israelites from any harm. The next phrase is "The Lord let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you." This part asks God to give the people the good things they need. So the first two petitions are the wishes of any good football coach: not just a good defense, but a good offense. The final part of the blessing is this: "The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace." The blessing concludes with a prayer that the Lord would make these people very special to him, and would give them the greatest gift of all, the gift of peace. God tells Moses when the priests invoke his name upon the Israelites in this way, he will bless them.

Sometimes at the end of mass the priest gives a solemn blessing of three petitions, and everyone answers Amen to each of them. We do that to imitate the structure of this blessing, which Moses received directly from God.

January 1 is a holyday of obligation in the Catholic Church for several reasons. It is the Octave Day of Christmas, so it provides a second opportunity for us to gather and thank God for the gift of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son. According to today's gospel it was on this eighth day when the infant was circumcised and officially received his name, Jesus. We call this day the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary the Mother of God, to honor the woman who said yes to the mystery of the incarnation. It's New Year's Day, and there's no better way to start the year than to celebrate the eucharist. It is also the World Day of Prayer for Justice and Peace, an intention that comes from the pope each year and that is repeated with special focus here in our diocese.

So, it's perfectly fine to wish people a Happy New Year today, and I hope it is happy for everyone. But I hope it's something more – because sometimes people get happy about the wrong things, and sometimes people who are not happy about the circumstances of their life still are grateful for what they have. They are blessed. That's the Church's prayer this New Year's Day: that God will protect us from evil, bring us what is truly good, and bless us with a special gift of peace.