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Recovering Farrakhan Urges Unity, Forgiveness

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CHICAGO, Dec. 22—Making his first public appearance in nearly a year, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan today said a "near-death experience" with prostate cancer had left him a changed man as he preached a message of forgiveness and unity among all races and religions.

Standing with Catholic priests, Jewish rabbis and Muslim clerics at a news conference at the Nation of Islam mosque in Chicago's South Side, Farrakhan looked fit and his voice was strong as he spoke in conciliatory tones about the need for all religions to come together on Christmas Day and "pray, not for a change in someone else, but for a change in ourselves."

Farrakhan, 66, who is recovering from prostate cancer and complications caused by a radiation-related ulcer that has not healed fully, has been criticized in the past for making divisive and inflammatory anti-white and anti-Semitic statements. But today he called on all peoples of the world to "try to end the cycle of violence and the cycle of hatred."

"Only through our act of atonement can we be forgiven for what we have said or done to injure other human beings—a member of another race or a member of another religious group, another nation or another ethnic group," Farrakhan said.

In sincere tones, he repeatedly extended his wishes to Jews for the recently ended Hanukkah holiday, Christians for Christmas Day and Muslims for Ramadan and said that Dec. 25 would be a perfect time for people of all religions and races to come together and pray for unity.

The Rev. Michael Pfleger, a Roman Catholic priest, held hands with Farrakhan and his wife, Khadijah, as the Muslim leader led about 200 supporters and community leaders in prayer. Pfleger and Rabbi Amikham B. Asiel both said they were encouraged by Farrakhan's conciliatory tone.

Despite his illness, Farrakhan displayed some of his trademark passion and fiery rhetoric as, his voice rising, he warned of apocalyptic prophecies in the Bible, the Torah and the Koran and warned that "dark clouds of a great war are now rising" throughout the world.

Famine, pestilence, earthquakes and "a time of trouble as never seen before" could usher in the new millennium if people of all religions fail to come together to embrace God, Farrakhan warned.

"We are asking that this Christmas not be observed with drunkenness, frivolity, filth and foolishness, mocking the name of Jesus the Christ," he said. "Instead of making it [Christmas] a holiday, we are asking to make it a holy day."

The Nation of Islam leader reserved his most stinging rebuke for one of the most commonplace symbols of Christmas: Santa Claus.

"We here and others are asking that Santa Claus be put in his proper place. Santa Claus is a falsehood. Jesus Christ is the truth," Farrakhan said.