

**Homily for a Pastoral Visit to  
St. Isidore the Farmer Parish  
St. Joseph Church, Island Grove**

**The Thirty-third Sunday of the Year - Cycle B  
November 18, 2012**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Father Carlos, [consecrated religious,] my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is a privilege for me to celebrate and preach at this Mass with you today. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation, celebrating a parish jubilee, or installing a new pastor. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for a regular Sunday Mass because I want at some time to visit every parish in our diocese, in order to get to know the people and the places that make up our Catholic community in central Illinois.

What does a bishop look for when he comes to a parish? Well, I didn't come to see if the floors were cleaned and the pews were polished! I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish, he looks for the presence of the

Catholic **faith**, to see whether it is strong and vibrant, whether it is growing, and if the conditions are present for its continued growth in the future.

Last month the whole Catholic Church throughout the world began a Year of Faith, proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI. In his apostolic letter announcing this year, the Holy Father spoke of “the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed clearly light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ” (*Porta Fidei*, 2).

You may have heard the statistic that the second-largest religious group in the United States is non-practicing Catholics. I am sure that many of us know personally the people and stories behind these numbers. They are our sisters and brothers, our nieces and nephews, our sons and daughters, our neighbors and co-workers.

What can we say to reignite in them the fire of faith? What is Christ inspiring us to do to proclaim the faith anew to these lost sheep? These questions lie at the heart of the Year of Faith. Of this task, the Holy Father wrote: “To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived, and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year” (*Porta*

*Fidei*, 9). To this end, I would like to propose to a three-fold plan to make the most of this Year of Faith.

First, we must be grateful for the faith we have received, for our encounter with the Lord. Families should strive to make their homes places where the family prays together, reads the Scriptures together, and is nourished together at Sunday Mass. Families should strive to allow their faith to influence everything they do, rather than reserving their faith only for an hour or so on Sunday.

Second, we must endeavor to understand all the more clearly the faith we profess. If a friend, family member or co-worker asks us a question about Catholicism, can we provide an adequate – and correct – answer? We ought to be able to do so.

Third, we must share our faith, not only with our family and friends, but with our co-workers and everyone we meet. As the Holy Father reminds us, “Confessing with the lips indicates in turn that faith implies public testimony and commitment” (*Porta Fidei*, 10).

This three-fold plan is the way of discipleship and through it we learn to become followers of Jesus Christ.

I note also that a pastoral visit is not just a time for a bishop to see the parish, but also for the parish to see the bishop. The Church is all about relationships. As the three persons of the Trinity are an intimate communion of Father, Son and Spirit in relationship to each other, the Church exists as a communion in relationship to God and in relation to each other, the People of God, the Body of Christ. As a bishop, I have a special relationship with you, and you have a special relationship with me, and one of my roles is to bridge the relationship between you and the Pope and the rest of the universal Church, so that we may all be one in Christ's Body.

But this "special relationship" is not just about recognizing each other's faces and knowing one another's names and titles. In the Church, we call this relationship a *communio*, that is, the communion of those belonging to the Body of Christ, the Church, who are united by the bonds of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesial government, and are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who governs her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops (*Lumen Gentium*, 14). Thus, to remain in this authentic *communio*, we can never see ourselves as somehow

“independent” or act apart from the universal Church or even the local Church, or else we cease to be truly Catholic.

Considering the call to renew our faith and strengthen the bonds of communion in light of today’s readings from the Sacred Scriptures, at first glance they may seem to present a bleak picture. The prophet Daniel foretells “a time unsurpassed in distress” and the Lord Jesus speaks of the days when “the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (Daniel 12:1; Mark 13:25).

The days foretold by Daniel and Jesus are really one and the same time; they both speak of the day when the Son of Man will come “with great power and glory,” the day of judgment when those “who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake” (Mark 13:26; Daniel 12:2). For those who strive to live as authentic and faithful disciples, for those who remain in *communion* with Christ and his Church, this day is not a day of dread but of hope. It is a day of hope because the faithful, who were illumined by the Light of Christ at Baptism, “shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament” (Daniel 12:3). This is why we sang the words of the Psalm, “You will show me the path of life, fullness of joys in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever” (Psalm 16:11).

Our confidence, our inheritance, is in Jesus Christ, because he who was crucified and is now risen and has taken “his seat forever at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12). He is seated now as judge of the living and the dead and awaits the day of his return, that day for which we should greatly yearn. We do not know on which day he will come, but we pray for his coming every day when we pray as he has taught us, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” (Matthew 6:10). We should pray, as we will pray throughout the coming season of Advent, that the Lord Jesus come quickly and not delay.

Still, there are some who look up the Day of Judgment with some sense of anxiety or nervousness. They do so either because they do not want to be caught off guard or because in the depths of their heart they know they are far from God (Mark 13:32).

We should never forget that in Jesus there is nothing to fear, if we have listened to him and learned from him. We know that “in the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each man’s relations with God will be laid bare” (CCC, 1039). For this reason he calls each of us daily to conversion and the time we have now – before his return – is given us to return to him and remain in his *communio*.

There is a fear of the Lord that is holy; it is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. This holy fear is not so much a fear of God's wrath, but a fear of disappointing him, a fear of not loving him as we should and of not loving our neighbor as we are called to do. The Day of Judgment should inspire within us not a dread of God but "a holy fear of God" that leads us to recommit ourselves again and again "to the justice of the Kingdom of God" (CCC 1041).

If we live in his communion and daily seek his justice – a justice always tempered with mercy (cf. James 2:13) – we will receive the Lord himself as our inheritance and share eternally in his life. United with him in heaven, we will sing forever the words of the Psalm, "My heart is glad and my soul rejoices, my body, too, abides in confidence" (Psalm 16:9).

As we approach Christ in communion at this and at every Mass, may our gathering around this altar and our celebration of the Eucharist always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.