

**Homily for the 125th Anniversary of the Founding of Saint Agnes Parish
November 16, 2013**

**Saint Agnes Parish
Springfield, Illinois**

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

Father Jallas, Deacon Harley, Deacon Arisman, consecrated religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: on October 1st, 1888, two very important items were published that would have an impact on a great number of people. The first item was the very first issue of the famous National Geographic magazine. "With comprehensive and timely articles and legendary photographs and maps, the magazine documents and interprets the world's sweeping changes through the lens of personal experience."¹ With more than 8 million subscribers worldwide, it is safe to say that this magazine has had a significant impact on our world, exposing its readers to the richness and diversity of places and cultures both near and far. It is very likely that many lives have been changed due to the awareness that the magazine has raised with regards to the suffering and tragedy experienced by many in our world.

On a much smaller scale, but one of particular importance to all of us gathered here, October 1, 1888 was also the date on which Bishop James Ryan, Bishop of the Diocese of Alton, issued a letter which established the new congregation of Saint Agnes here in Springfield under the leadership of Rev. James J. Howard. Gathered in this parish 125 years later, you may not have a congregation of 8 million people, but I am confident in saying that the impact this parish has had on its members throughout its history is far more significant than any picture or story that the National Geographic has ever published. While it may be true that people have been led closer to God through the magazine, this parish, and any parish for that matter, offers something that no magazine could ever offer, a real and personal encounter with the living God who enters into our lives and sets us on a path toward Heaven.

In our Gospel for today's Mass, we hear Jesus speak to the people about the Temple and how "the days will come when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down" (Lk 21:6). On the one hand, these words are prophetic in that they speak of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. At the same time, His words are instructive to His listeners in that He is inviting them to recognize that

what makes the Temple special is not the external beauty of its structure, but rather, the Temple is special because of what it represents, the presence of God among His people. Up to that point, this presence had remained somewhat out of reach. With the Incarnation, however, God enters into the world by taking on our human nature so that we might be raised up to participate in His divine life, thus eliminating the need for the Temple in order to encounter God.

Like the audience Jesus was speaking to in the Gospel, we are reminded that what makes a parish special is not its external qualities, such as the building, the stained glass windows, and the statues, beautiful as they are. Our faith reminds us that the things of this world will pass away.² We should, therefore, not become too attached to them. What makes a parish special is that through it, we enter into this relationship with God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. This union with God is the one thing that will not pass away, but will endure for eternity. The parish, then, is the privileged place of encounter with God for every stage of our journey.

It is at the parish where we enter into our relationship with God through Baptism. Our bond is strengthened through a new outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Confirmation. We are fed with His Body and Blood in the Eucharist, giving us the strength to continue our pilgrimage through this life on our way to the Promised Land of Heaven. When we have turned away from God, it is here in the confessional where we receive His mercy and are welcomed back into relationship with Him. It is here where couples commit themselves to lifelong fidelity in the bond of Holy Matrimony. When we face the obstacles of sickness and old age, we received the Anointing of the Sick to give us the fortitude needed to persevere so as to not lose hope in the midst of our suffering. At the end of our earthly journey, we lie at the foot of the altar, asking the prayers of the Church for Christ to welcome us into the glory of Heaven.

The life of any parish revolves around these encounters with the Lord in the sacraments. It is fitting, therefore, for us to commemorate this joyful occasion in the context of the greatest of all of the sacraments, the Most Holy Eucharist in the celebration of the Mass. It is through the Eucharist that our union with God is strengthened. Through this bond, our relationship with one another is also strengthened. This bond is not just

limited to all of us gathered here this evening, but unites every member of this parish and indeed the universal Church, past, present, and future, for not even death can break the bond that Christ has established with His people. We pray in a special way during this month of November for the repose of the souls of those of this parish who have passed on and await their entrance into Heaven. We also ask the intercession of all of those already in Heaven to intercede for us as we press on to the victory that they already enjoy.

Before I conclude, I would like to take the opportunity to consider one sacrament that I did not mention, but one which is of great importance to this encounter with God. That is, of course, the Sacrament of Holy Orders. It is through the ordained ministry that the graces of the sacraments are communicated to us, making this union with God possible. This parish has been served faithfully by many fine priests throughout the years, including your current pastor, Father Bob Jallas. There have also been several men who, having been strengthened in their encounter with Christ in this parish, have gone on to serve the Church as priests. God-willing, Deacon Steve Arisman will be added to that list this May when I will have the privilege of ordaining him to the Holy Priesthood for service

to the people of God in the diocese. I ask your prayers for Father Jallas and Deacon Arisman, as well as for all of our priests and seminarians that through their ministry, this encounter with God through the sacraments will continue to be strong here in this parish and in our local Church as we await the fulfillment of the coming of the Kingdom at the end of time.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Evolution of National Geographic Magazine,
<http://press.nationalgeographic.com/files/2012/05/NGM-History-10-12.pdf>

² Cf. 1 Cor 7:31.