

**Holy Hour and Message for
Immaculate Conception Parish
Mattoon, Illinois
April 16, 2014**

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

Father Sotiroff, Father Hoefler, Chancellor Mulford and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

I thank you for participating in this Holy Hour of adoration before our Lord Jesus, present in the Blessed Sacrament, and for joining in our Rosary of intercession to His Blessed Mother, the patroness of this parish under the title of the Immaculate Conception, seeking her wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Over the past several months, I have received many letters, e-mail messages and communications from parishioners who have expressed their concerns about the transition to the leadership of your new Pastor, Father Stephen Sotiroff, whose tenure here began last July 1st. Even before he arrived in Mattoon, I received correspondence making clear that a change in pastors was not desired here.

In response, I commissioned our diocesan Chancellor, Mrs. Marlene Mulford, my Vicar General, Monsignor Carl Kemme, now Bishop-elect of Wichita, and Father David Hoefler, Dean of the Effingham Deanery and soon to be Vicar General beginning May 1st, to listen to your concerns as well as to hear the perspective of Father Sotiroff. They have communicated this information to me, which I have seriously considered and taken to prayer. I hear your pain and frustration, and I share your desire for a resolution of these painful tensions. I am here today because I love you and care for you as a shepherd cares for his flock. Included in my pastoral care is Father Sotiroff, who has given his life to serve the Lord and His Church.

The fruit of my prayer is that I believe we should look for a Gospel solution to the current tensions here in Mattoon at Immaculate Conception Parish. By that I mean that I am not going to review with you here tonight the specific complaints that people have raised or the responses to them, whether to affirm them, defend them, deny them or refute them. I am not going to declare winners or losers or take any action that would allow anyone to say, "We won," or, "somebody lost." I simply wish to search through Sacred Scripture and prayer for how Jesus would address such a situation and respond accordingly.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44). This instruction from our Lord has been very much on my mind in my prayer and meditation during this Lenten season, especially with regard to the conflict situations and tensions here in Mattoon.

Perhaps “love your enemies” seems not applicable to a parish situation such as this. Are we not all brothers and sisters in Christ? To speak of “enemies” seems to apply to the military at war, not to everyday mundane conflicts. We like to think of ourselves as capable of getting along with everyone. If someone can’t get along with us, that must be the other person’s fault! But Jesus wasn’t just talking to aggressors; notice that our Lord was also talking to those who are persecuted: “I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28).

Saint Paul continued this theme in his instructions on the duties of Christians: “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them” (Romans 12:14).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* includes love of enemies as an obligation of the fifth commandment (see paragraph 2262). Although the fifth commandment says simply, “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13; Deut. 5:17), Jesus amplified this as a positive duty, saying, “I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:22).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also says, “Deliberate hatred is contrary to charity. Hatred of the neighbor is a sin when one deliberately wishes him evil. Hatred of the neighbor is a grave sin when one deliberately desires him grave harm” (par. 2303).

Jesus even went so far as to make reconciliation between those who are estranged from each other a prerequisite for divine worship, saying, “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

Another reason why love of enemies and love of neighbor are such a challenge is that our culture has come to understand “love” as a warm feeling toward another person, and it is hard to feel emotional warmth

toward someone by whom we feel aggrieved. But Christian love must be understood not just in its natural sense as an instinctual human emotion or sentimental feeling, but also in its supernatural sense as a willed, voluntary and conscious act that desires to perpetuate itself forever beyond the limits of time and survives intact even after death.

If you would rather not consider your pastor as an enemy, and I hope you don't, it is good to remember that Jesus also said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). Even if people are not "enemies" strictly speaking, the question still remains: can you love someone whom you do not like, someone you think has offended you, someone you feel has hurt you in some way?

That is the Gospel solution and my straightforward challenge both to Father Sotiroff and to all of you, simply: can you love each other? Since his arrival here, Father Sotiroff has not always shown the pastoral sensitivity, personal warmth and compassionate understanding expected of a parish priest. He will need to tell you clearly, as he has told me, that he wants to be here and continue as your Pastor. He will need to show that he cares for you, even when he offers fraternal correction, as Jesus taught us that we all

need to do from time to time (see, for example, Matthew 18:5, Mark 9:38-40, Matthew 16:23, and Matthew 20:20-23).

On the other hand, the parish community has not shown the welcome, respect and cooperation that a parish community should show toward their pastor, a priest ordained to act in the person of Christ, Head of the Church. Withholding of donations has been used as leverage to try to force my hand, which only hurts the parish and threatens the future existence of the school. Such actions speak more of consumers who will pay for a product only if they are satisfied with its performance, or of a political strategy designed to put pressure on decision-makers and lobby for a desired result, rather than the stewardship, sacrifice and generosity characteristic of faithful followers of the Lord.

This Sunday's celebration of Easter is the ideal time for all of you, pastor and parishioners, to put behind you all the hurts of the past, to press the reset button, so to speak, and start afresh with the new life of Christ's resurrection. Father Hoefler, Chancellor Mulford and I will work with Father Sotiroff to help rebuild his relationship with you.

I know that many of you here simply want Father Sotiroff transferred and will not be satisfied with my approach to the situation here. However,

the Christian response to broken relationships is not to end them, but to mend them. Simply removing Father Sotiroff would be a failure of love, an admission of defeat on the part of this whole community to live up to the ideals of Christian charity, and a surrendering to the snares of the Devil, whose very name means “to divide.”

I am not going to give in to that and I hope that you will not either. I believe that you are better than that. You are good and sincere people who want the best for your parish and your families. Father Sotiroff is a good and holy priest who wants above all the salvation of your souls. I am hopeful that Father Sotiroff and all of you can rise to the challenge and grow in love for each other.

As we prepare for our Easter celebration of Christ’s resurrection, may Our Lord’s victory over sin and death free us from sin and open us to share more generously the endless stream of His merciful love.

Finally, let us give thanks to God for the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, whose Passion we are preparing to celebrate solemnly during the Paschal Triduum this week. Through His death and Resurrection, He has redeemed us and has anointed us to be His beloved sons and daughters. May our hearts be open to receiving His grace and living the new life that

He has won for us, a life rooted in holiness and led by the Holy Spirit to fullness of His blessing in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.