

**Homily for a Parish Visit to
St. Maurice Parish
Morrisonville, Illinois
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A**

August 24, 2014

**† Most Rev. Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

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 here at St. Maurice Parish. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation or celebrating a parish jubilee. 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. So it is good to see people of faith gathered here.

At the same time, 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, into which we have been incorporated by the grace of Baptism.

On the outskirts of Rome, the Basilica of St Paul-outside-the-Walls traces the two-thousand-year history of the Church in a unique way. The building itself is not that old. It was rebuilt after the original fourth-century church was destroyed by fire in 1823. Some parts still remain from those early centuries, notably St Paul's tomb and the magnificent cloister.

However, there is a series of round mosaics, high up above the columns, which links the Church across the ages back to its first beginnings. The mosaics carry images of all the popes from St. Peter to the present day. Each picture recalls the person responsible for guiding and shepherding the Church at a particular time in Christian history. Through his predecessor, every one of these Bishops of Rome received the same authority first given by Jesus to the apostle Peter. They form a chain of continuity, guaranteeing the Church's faithfulness to Christ. It's an impressive line-up. While they had very different personalities, the popes were entrusted with the ministry of strengthening the Church on the solid foundation of faith.

There are occasions in our Catholic tradition when a special focus is put on a person's name. The Sacrament of Baptism begins with the priest or deacon asking the parents, "What name do you wish to give to your child?" It is customary for a candidate for Confirmation to select the name of a saint who will not only be a holy patron but provide an example of how to live a heroic Christian life. Religious sisters and brothers traditionally have chosen a new name when they take their vows to begin a new life in the Lord. Most famously, of course, is the custom of a newly elected Pope to

choose a papal name, as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio did when he chose to be known as Pope Francis.

In biblical thought a name was so much a part of a person that any change of name meant that, in a sense, the person was changed. When Abram's name was changed by God to Abraham, and Jacob's name to Israel, their relationship with God was developed to a deeper level. Today's Gospel records an unparalleled change of name. When Jesus questions his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" their answers reflect the common expectation that prophecy would be revived with the coming of the Messiah. But Jesus is seeking more than what others say about him and asks for a personal expression of faith: "But you, who do you say I am?" Simon responds on behalf of them all: Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, "the Son of the living God." This is not an answer that he has thought of by himself; he has been blessed with divine revelation. And now Jesus gives him a new name, Peter, meaning "rock," and with this new name he is changed in that his relationship with the Lord moves to a deeper level. Christ gives the assurance that his Church, built on Peter, will prevail against the powers of death; and he then gives Peter specific authority and leadership.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine.” We are known to God by our name and God loves us with an everlasting love. Our baptism is celebrated in the name of the Holy Trinity and it is then that we are given our baptismal, or Christian name, becoming a “new creation.” Our relationship with God is changed to a new and deeper level.

Through the gift of his new name Peter’s pre-eminence among the disciples was confirmed and he was entrusted with a new mission. Still he remained subject to temptation and weakness and in this we are no different. But Peter truly loved Christ and ultimately gave his life in imitation of the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. In our times of temptation and weakness may we always call upon Jesus whose name is above all other names.

This past April, I had the privilege of being in Rome for the historic canonization of two popes – Pope St. John XXIII and Pope St. John Paul II. This event was a time of great joy not just for those of us who were present, but for the entire Church spread throughout the world. These two shepherds have impacted the Church in countless ways through their

dedicated ministry on earth and now assist her in an even more significant way as they intercede on her behalf in Heaven.

Carrying on the great work of his illustrious predecessors, Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 published a book entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*. It is the first part of what turned out to be a three-part picture of the preacher from Galilee. In these later years of his life, and after so many years of theological study and teaching, the Holy Father wanted to write a simple and straightforward story of Jesus. As he says in the foreword of the book, it “is solely an expression of my personal search ‘for the face of the Lord.’”

In the book the Holy Father asks the question, “What did Jesus bring to the world?” He did not bring world peace. He did not bring prosperity. So what has he brought to us? The answer is very simple, Pope Benedict says. Jesus has brought God to the world. He has told us about God, whom he calls “the Father.” He has shown us that in looking upon Jesus we are looking upon God in human form. As he said to the apostle Philip, “To have seen me is to have seen the Father.” Like the apostles and like the Pope, we search for the face of the Lord because we all seek happiness, and it is the Lord who gives the keys to that eternal reward.

There is a beautiful passage in the Office of Readings for the Memorial of Saint Stephen of Hungary, whose feast day was August 16th, from a letter that he wrote to his son. In that letter Saint Stephen told his son what he needed to do to fulfill his duty in order to “reach the highest state of happiness.” He said, “Be merciful to all who are suffering violence, keeping always in your heart the example of the Lord who said: *I desire mercy and not sacrifice*. Be patient with everyone, not only with the powerful, but also with the weak. Finally be strong lest prosperity lift you up too much or adversity cast you down. Be humble in this life, that God may raise you up in the next. Be truly moderate and do not punish or condemn anyone immoderately. Be gentle so that you may never oppose justice. Be honorable so that you may never voluntarily bring disgrace upon anyone. Be chaste so that you may avoid all the foulness of lust like the pangs of death.”

As he wrote to his son, Saint Stephen of Hungary also gives us a beautiful summary of the virtues that will lead to eternal happiness:

Be merciful.

Be patient.

Be strong.

Be humble.

Be moderate.

Be gentle.

Be honorable.

Be chaste.

May our gathering around this altar and our reception of the Eucharist strengthen us to live these virtues and always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.