

**Homily for the Mass for the Diocesan Family Fun Camp
Villa Maria Catholic Life Center
Springfield, Illinois**

July 1, 2016

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we gather for this Mass for the Diocesan Family Fun Camp, it is good to see that families can play together and pray together. Families are also places of loving and learning. We might even say that the family is a sort of school. Yes, the family is a school, but not one of classroom learning, of papers, quizzes, and tests. Rather, the family is a school of life and of love, a school where parents teach children about the beauty and purpose of life and where children teach parents how to love ever more deeply and intently.

Sometime around 1518, Saint Thomas More wrote a letter to his children, Margaret, Elizabeth, Cecilia, and John, in which he expressed his love and affection for them. He wrote,

It is not so strange that I love you with my whole heart, for being a father is not a tie which can be ignored. Nature in her wisdom has

attached the parent to the child and bound their minds together with a Herculean knot. Thence comes that tenderness of a loving heart that accustoms me to take you so often into my arms. That is why I regularly fed you cake and gave you ripe apples and fancy pears. That is why I used to dress you in silken garments and why I never could endure to hear you cry. You know, for example, how often I kissed you.¹

Saint Thomas More was a father who indeed was able to express his tender love for his children in very moving words. He goes on to say:

But now my love has grown so much that it seems to me I did not love you at all before. This is because you combine the wise behavior of old age with the years of childhood, because your hearts have been informed with genuine learning, because you have learned to speak with grace and eloquence, weighing each word carefully. These accomplishments tug at my heart so wonderfully, they bind me to my children so closely, that what, for many fathers, is the only reason for their affection – I mean the fact that they begot their children – has almost nothing to do with my love for you. Therefore, most dear little troop of children, continue to endear yourselves to your father and,

by those same accomplishments which make me think I had not loved you before, make me think hereafter (for you can do it) that I do not love you now.²

Though not every father can express his love for his children with words so clearly, poetically, or profoundly, the hearts of fathers and mothers across the world and through the ages understand the sentiments Saint Thomas expresses.

In a letter he wrote to his children's teacher, William Gonell, Saint Thomas explained what he meant by a "genuine learning," the learning of which filled him with such a deepening love and pride for his children. Through the education received from their teacher, Saint Thomas said his children would "receive from God the reward of an innocent life, and in the assured expectation of it will view death without dread, and meanwhile possessing solid joy will neither be puffed up by the empty praise of men, nor dejected by evil tongues. These," he said, "I consider the real and genuine fruits of learning."³ We might say, then, that the genuine fruit of learning is an ever greater holiness of life.

The words we hear in our first reading from the Prophet Amos can be applied to our present situation. Among the many forms of famine that

exist in our world, one of the greatest hungers among people is not for food or water, but “for hearing the word of the LORD” (Amos 8:11). One is reminded of the timeless words of St. Augustine: “our hearts are restless till they find rest in you.”⁴ Being created by God, we all have a built-in hunger to encounter Him and to find our rest in Him, yet so many people in our world are unaware of the source of this hunger, and they go searching for things to satisfy themselves in various worldly things. When one thing fails to satisfy, they move on to the next, resulting in a vicious cycle which leads one deeper and deeper into dissatisfaction.

As Catholics, we are therefore encouraged to make the Scriptures a part of our daily lives through reading and prayerful reflection. This will help us to resist the many pressures from society to seek happiness apart from God. Among the various forms of encountering the Word of God is through family prayer with the Bible. In his document on the Word of the Lord, Pope Benedict wrote of the importance of the Bible in the life of the family with the following words:

The great mystery of marriage is the source of the essential responsibility of parents towards their children. Part of authentic parenthood is to pass on and bear witness to the meaning of life in

Christ: through their fidelity and the unity of family life, spouses are the first to proclaim God's word to their children. The ecclesial community must support and assist them in fostering family prayer, attentive hearing of the word of God, and knowledge of the Bible. To this end the Synod urged that every household have its Bible, to be kept in a worthy place and used for reading and prayer.⁵

Since our gathering today is in the context of the Family Fun Camp, I would encourage you as families to consider how you might make this activity of reading and learning about the Word of God an enjoyable experience. There are more resources available than ever for learning about the Scriptures, many of which can be quite fun and engaging for families.

The benefits of committing to being more intentional about encountering the Word of God are numerous. It will serve to feed the deepest form of hunger in your family, namely the hunger for God. It will also strengthen your relationships with one another as it will be an activity in which all of the family can participate. It will also prepare you for how to live your lives according to the teachings of Christ, teachings which

promise true happiness and fulfillment, as opposed to the many things of the world which promise the same, but fail to deliver.

There is also a benefit to the larger community beyond your family. In the same document I referenced earlier, Pope Benedict makes this point with the following words:

We cannot keep to ourselves the words of eternal life given to us in our encounter with Jesus Christ: they are meant for everyone, for every man and woman. Everyone today, whether he or she knows it or not, needs this message. May the Lord himself, as in the time of the prophet Amos, raise up in our midst a new hunger and thirst for the word of God (cf. Am 8:11). It is our responsibility to pass on what, by God's grace, we ourselves have received.⁶

You, dear families, are participating in this Diocesan Family Fun Camp because of your desire to "look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth" so as to become holy families yourselves.⁷ This is the hope and joy of the Church, that Christian families become such clear reflections of the love of the Trinity that the witness of familial life and love draws those whose faith is weak or who have not yet experienced God's love into the Sacred Heart of Christ.

To become such reflections of God's love, you, both as families and as individual members of families, must not only receive love but give love as well. We can see something of this exchange of love in the words Jesus spoke from the Cross. Even as He gave his life in love for us, He called out, "I thirst" (John 19:28); He thirsted for our love even as He poured his love out for us. This must become the model of every family; you must not only receive love, but give it as well. I pray that your participation in these days will draw you closer together in love, in hope, and in faith so that you will grow in holiness together.

Dear parents, teach your children the ways holiness by your words and example. Show them the beauty of an innocent life, of a life free from mortal sin. Instill in them such an expectation of the resurrection of the dead that death will bring them no fear. Help them to experience God's love in such a way that the esteem of men will not seem so important. If you do this, you will help your children grow in holiness and their joy will increase.

Dear children, learn well from your parents and seek from them the ways of the faith. Be good students in the school of life and love at which your parents teach you in the family. Learn the beauty of an innocent,

humble, and charitable life. If you do this, you will help your parents grow in holiness and their joy will increase.

If you, then, grow together in holiness, the example of your family life will shine like a beacon before others. They will wonder about the source of your love, about the source of your joy, about the source of your unity. You will be able to show them that the source of your love and joy and communion is nothing less than the open heart of Christ, pierced and overflowing out of love for us.

Today the Church celebrates the feast day of St. Junípero Serra for the first time following his canonization by Pope Francis last September in Washington, D.C. As we do so, we look to him as an example of one who zealously shared the Good News of our Catholic faith with many here in our country. We ask his intercession that our families may be a place where we grow in our love for the Word of God and our Catholic faith. From that, we pray that we too might set out as missionary disciples who, through our words and actions, invite others to encounter the invitation of Christ, the Word of God, to follow Him and so discover the peace and joy that comes from living as members of His family here and forever in Heaven. May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Saint Thomas More, *Letter to His Children*, ca. 1518. In *A Thomas More Source Book*. Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith, eds. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 178-179.

² *Ibid.*, 179.

³ *Ibid.*, *Letter to William Gonell*, May 22, ca. 1518. In *ibid.*, 199.

⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I, Chapter I.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §91.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 30.