

**Homily for the Annual Bishop's Gift Society Mass
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle A
The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

August 26, 2017

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good for us to be here to celebrate this Mass as we ask for the Lord's blessings on our Diocese. It is most fitting as we begin the Annual Catholic Services Appeal for another year here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, that we come to the altar to offer our greatest form of thanksgiving to our Lord, that of the celebration of the Eucharist in gratitude for the many blessings that God has bestowed on us as a Diocese and as individuals this past year.

On a personal level, I celebrated two birthdays this month. August 5th marked 65 years since I was born into this world. This past Thursday, August 24th, marked 65 years since I was born again into the family of God in the saving waters of baptism. Both birth days were important. Without the first, I would not be here at all, but without the second, I would not be standing here as a fellow Christian nor as your bishop. Indeed, my second birthday forever changed my life. But along the way over the past 65 years

I have had to make intentional decisions to continue on the path to the door of eternal life that was opened to me by God's grace. Each one of us must make such intentional decisions to grow in God's grace.

In the Fall of 2015, I published my second pastoral letter, entitled, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for "The Art of Growing in God's Grace." In it, I wrote, "The art of growing in God's grace is the key to growth in the Church. Building a culture of growth in the Church starts with inviting people to experience the love of Jesus Christ."

Over the course of the years leading up to the publication of my pastoral letter, I gave much thought to how we could, as a diocese, begin a process of strategic planning for growth in the Church. The growth envisioned is far more than just a quantitative increase in the number of people or the amount of money available to our parishes and the diocese. It is also essential to ensure that we give significant attention to the quality of the growth as we seek to grow more deeply in holiness.

In my pastoral letter, I said that we must do four things to build a vibrant community of saints:

1. Invite people to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass (hospitality);

2. Study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith (formation);
3. Provide the sacraments as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven (prayer); and
4. Serve those in need by practicing charity and justice (service).

The verbs in these four action items correspond to the four pillars of stewardship and discipleship that we have been talking about in our diocese throughout the course of our Fourth Diocesan Synod: hospitality, formation, prayer and service. The Lord is inviting all of us to embrace more fully our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.¹

Stewardship recognizes that everything we have comes from God. Stewardship from God's perspective is that He has given us gifts to be used not just selfishly for ourselves, but to be shared with others. Becoming a disciple means making an intentional decision to accept the Lord's call to follow Him and live the discipleship and stewardship way of life.

I am very optimistic about our potential for growth in this diocese. Whether it is through the giving of our time on a parish or diocesan level, through using the gifts and talents that our Lord has bestowed on us to

build up the kingdom of God on earth, or through the gift of our treasure to financially support the work of the Church in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, we are all called to give of ourselves and so live as Christ's disciples in the midst of the world.

Our readings today are very fitting as we contemplate what it means to be a disciple of our Lord and a good steward of the gifts that He has given to us. In our second reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans, Saint Paul makes it quite clear that everything that we have has come to us through divine providence, for all things are "from Him and through Him and for Him."²

Our Gospel reading for today, the twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, presents us with the key question that we must all answer if we are to be intentional disciples of the Lord Jesus. After the disciples have spent some time with Jesus, we hear our Lord first ask them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"³ They reply with the rumors that were circulating at the time. But then Jesus goes a step further and asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"⁴ Peter replies, "You are Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Pope Saint John Paul II says that we all know this moment, that we have all experienced a point where “it is no longer sufficient to speak about Jesus by repeating what others have said.”⁵ Rather, we must bear witness to Jesus, and through this feel committed to living out the life that our Lord calls us to live. For to be best friends, followers and disciples of our Lord, we must not only answer this question authentically proclaiming that Jesus is indeed the “Christ, the Son of God,” we must live out our belief in our daily lives through living a generous life in thanksgiving for all that God has given to us. A person’s life, indeed our whole future, “depends on the clear, unequivocal answer . . . to this question.”⁶

In our first reading today from the prophet Isaiah, the servant Eliakim was made the gatekeeper and given the key to the house of David the King because he showed himself to be trustworthy. In the Gospel, Peter is given the keys to the kingdom of heaven because he spoke the spiritual truth that Jesus is “the Christ,” our Redeemer, the “Son of the living God.”

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Eliakim and Peter are not the only believers to have the key that unlocks the door to a strong and generous faith. We are here today to celebrate this most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass because we know that this is the primary way in which we

encounter the “riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.”⁷ Here we listen to the word of God, share in the Eucharist and commit ourselves to living as Christ’s disciples. If we live our lives on a daily basis in ways that bear witness to our being disciples of our Lord and good stewards of the many gifts that He has given to us through our generosity and our willingness to share what our Lord has given to us with others, then we, like Peter, can look forward with hope to our Lord calling us “blessed,” for we too will have not only confessed our Lord to be the Son of God, but we will have lived that belief in our daily lives.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992, p. 8; <http://www.usccb.org/upload/stewardship-disciples-response-10th-anniversary.pdf>.

² Romans 11:36

³ Matthew 16:13

⁴ Matthew 16:15

⁵ St. John Paul II, Homily for the Mass for the Youth at Belo Horizonte, July 1, 1980, n. 2.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Romans 11:33