

**Homily for the Prayer Service for the Opening of the
Preliminary Phase of the Diocesan Synod
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

One of my favorite movies is “Shadowlands,” the 1993 film about the British author and Oxford University scholar C.S. Lewis, starring one of my favorite actors, Anthony Hopkins, who played the part of Lewis. After I saw that movie for the first time in the theater, I rented the video and did something that I had never done before and have never done since: I watch the video in my living room with a note pad and jotted down quotes from the profound theological insights that were being spoken by the character of Lewis in the movie, which was based on his real life experiences dealing with the terminal illness of his wife Joy, who was dying of cancer.

C.S. Lewis was the author of many significant books. He is best known for his fictional work, especially *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Space Trilogy*, and for his non-fiction Christian

apologetics, such as *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, and *The Problem of Pain*. After the death of his wife, he wrote *A Grief Observed*.

Lewis was not always a Christian. Although he was baptized as an infant, as a young adult he lived as an atheist for several years before embracing the practice of Christianity at the age of 32 largely through the influence of his fellow novelist and Oxford University colleague, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings*.

During the Second World War, Lewis gave a series of radio talks on BBC, which he eventually developed into a theological book called *Mere Christianity*, in which he intended to describe the common ground of faith shared by the various Christian Churches and denominations, aiming to explain the fundamental teachings of Christianity.

There are several passages of that book that are good for us to consider as we gather today for this Prayer Service for the Opening of the Preliminary Phase of the Diocesan Synod. In the first passage that I would like to quote, Lewis asks if it is not true that the popular idea of Christianity is simply this:

that Jesus Christ was a great moral teacher and if only we took His advice we might be able to establish a better social order and avoid another war? Now, mind you, that is quite true. But

it tells you much less about the whole truth of Christianity and it has no practical importance at all. . . . If Christianity means only one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There has been no lack of good advice for the past four thousand years. A bit more makes no difference. But as soon as you look at any real Christian writings, you find that they are talking about something quite different from the popular religion. . . . Christianity seems to be telling us about another world, about something behind the world that we can touch and see. . . . Now the whole point of Christianity which gives us the greatest shock is the statement that by attaching ourselves to Christ, we can become 'sons of God.'"¹

Lewis is emphasizing that the goal of Christianity is not just to make us nice people who are very nice to each other. Rather, we are called to become something or someone entirely new, entirely different. Lewis explains it this way:

"Niceness"—wholesome, integrated personality—is an excellent thing. We must try by every medical, educational, economic, and political means in our power to produce a world where as many people as possible grow up "nice"; just as we must try to produce a world where we all have plenty to eat. But we must not suppose that even if we succeeded in making everyone nice that we should have saved their souls. A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world—and might even be more difficult to save.

For mere improvement is not redemption, though redemption always improves people here and now and will, in the end, improve them to a degree that we cannot yet imagine. God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to

produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man.²

The Diocesan Synod that we will be celebrating this year will not only be historic; it will also be life-changing. It will be historic because this will be our Diocese's first Synod in over half a century, and only the fourth in the 164-year history of our Diocese. It will be life-changing because our Diocese will be asked to become something new and we as individuals will be asked to become someone new, not ruptured from the past, but growing organically from what we were to what we are called to be, as a caterpillar becomes a butterfly and the contents of an egg become a full-grown bird flying aloft.

This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, which is the main theme of what our Diocesan Synod will be looking at and discussing during this year in the months ahead. When Jesus invited a rich young man to be His disciple, Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Matt. 19:21). That might initially sound attractive, but when we start to think about what we currently have and do not yet know what Christ's promise holds in store for us, it is not

surprising that a common and natural reaction is resistance. In fact, the very next verse from Saint Matthew's Gospel says, "When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions" (Matt. 19:22). Lewis explains:

The natural life in us is something self-centered, something that wants to be petted and admired, to take advantage of other lives, to exploit the whole universe. And especially it wants to be left to itself: to be kept well away from anything better or stronger or higher than it, anything that might make it feel small. It is afraid of the light and air of the spiritual world, just as people who have been brought up dirty are afraid of a bath. And in a sense it is quite right. It knows that if the spiritual life ever gets hold of it, all of its self-centeredness and self-will are going to be killed and it is ready to fight tooth and nail to avoid that.³

So the process of becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ is a surrender of oneself to the higher power of God. Why should anyone do so? Because as Saint Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9), and the essence of being saved is a life far better than we could ever imagine, and that new life will last forever. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.

Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life” (John 12:24-25). Lewis sums it up this way:

Give up your yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life, and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep nothing back. Nothing that you have not given away will ever really be yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything thrown in.⁴

When we finally understand this true meaning of discipleship, we can see the connection between discipleship and what we call stewardship, that is, the discovery that we are mere stewards or custodians of God’s creation. As Lewis says:

Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or moving your limbs from moment to moment, is given you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to His service you could not give Him anything that was not in a sense His own already.⁵

The height and breadth of God’s creation is described in the first reading we heard from the prophet Ezekiel, from the trees of the field to the topmost branch of the majestic cedar on the loftiest mountain (cf.

Ezekiel 17:22-24). God has entrusted this creation and all that we have to our care as “good and faithful servants,” like those described in our reading from the Gospel of Saint Matthew who were entrusted with talents to be returned with interest to their Master (cf. Matt. 25:14-30).

So from now until the solemn conclusion of our Diocesan Synod on the Solemnity of Christ the King next November 26, we will consider how we can make a communal commitment as a diocesan community of clergy and laity regarding discipleship and stewardship as a way of life. Closely related to this will be for us to look at how we can foster community-wide support of Catholic education so that more students will be able to attend Catholic schools. This involves understanding Catholic education as being the responsibility for everyone in each parish as a means to hand on the faith to the next generation of Catholics, not just the financial burden of parents to pay for their children’s education.

After the disciples had spent some time with each other and presumably gotten to know each other better, Jesus asked them a key question: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15). This is the question that Jesus asks of every one of His disciples, including us. Saint Peter answered on behalf of all of the disciples, not just those who were with him

at the time, but also for all of us as well: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). But that answer was not immediately obvious to people then, nor is it immediately obvious to people today. In Jesus’ time, some thought that He was “John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matt. 16:14). In our time, we would get similarly erroneous answers from people who think, as I said earlier, that Jesus was simply a great moral teacher who gave sage advice. Being a true disciple of Jesus Christ does not happen until a person believes, as Saint Peter did, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. However, coming to that realization and belief takes time, so we should not expect people who are unfamiliar with Jesus to come to that conclusion very quickly.

In our efforts to call people to discipleship, we should follow the example of Jesus and the apostles. In the first chapter of Saint John’s Gospel, two disciples followed Jesus and asked Him, “Where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come, and you will see” (John 1:39). Still in the first chapter of Saint John’s Gospel, just a few verses later, Jesus says to Philip, “Follow me.” Philip then finds Nathanael and tells him, “We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets,

Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.” But Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see” (John 1:43-46).

To anyone who is wondering what our Diocesan Synod is all about or what to expect, I would give the same answer given by Jesus and His apostles: “Come and see.”

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), p. 123.

² Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 169-170.

³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 141.

⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 177.

⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 112-113.