

**Simbang Gabi Mass
Saint Joseph Catholic Church, Springfield**

**Tuesday, December 14th, 2021
3rd Tuesday of Advent, Cycle II**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brother priests, beloved consecrated [men and] women, and my lay brothers and sisters in Christ, it is *good* to be here to continue our preparations for Christmas with this evening Simbang Gabi Mass. Especially during this season of Advent each year people will come up and ask how busy I am. I think all of us know that these weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas are often hectic ones, and that is true of my work as a bishop too! There are additional Masses and other liturgies on the calendar; various gatherings and celebrations with family, friends, coworkers, and groups and parishes around the diocese; and, of course, there are always cards to send, decorations to put up, and gifts to prepare.

Yes, Advent is a busy time, but in all these things that consume our time and attention, we may not have much of a choice about *what* we are doing, but we do have a choice of *how* we go about it, and for *whom* and with *whom* we do those things. In the parable that Jesus tells us today, He

describes a father with two sons. The dad tells both to go and work in his vineyard. Of course, the vineyard is a symbol that Jesus often used for the Kingdom of God. Our Lord gives us this story to remind us that each of us is asked by our Heavenly Father to go and do His work in the world. The first son says, "*I will not,*" but eventually changes his heart and decides to obey the Father. The second son says, "*Yes, sir,*" but then does not actually do as His Father asked him.

"Which of the two did his father's will?" Jesus asked the chief priests, and asks us: Which one was obedient? Which one was faithful? Which one really loved His Father? They give the correct answer: the first one, the one who changed his heart, who *converted*, and did as his father asked. His true response was given in his actions, not with empty words, like his brother. Jesus turns their answer back upon them: you did *not* convert when John preached repentance, even though the tax collectors and prostitutes did! Those people who you think are sinners are entering the Kingdom before you because they chose to turn around and obey the Lord!

What does this have to do with these busy days before Christmas? In all the things we do - baking, cleaning, traveling, shopping, praying, decorating - we can do these things like the first son: working with His

Father in the vineyard, or, like the second, forget about the Father and go about our self-interests with no thought of God.

Scripture scholars point out that the second, disobedient, son responds to his Dad, “Yes, *sir*.” It is a quick “yes,” but not a *loving* one, and not a *sincere* one, and so when he has to choose whether to labor in the vineyard, or do his own thing, he chooses himself instead of the Father. The first son, even though he at first refuses to go, does not seem to have the same cold, unloving, untrusting relationship with his Dad, and so his heart was open to changing as he continues to reflect on the father’s request.

We have to choose to have this disposition too! Jesus doesn’t say “you have to be perfect” to be a son or daughter of God; rather, even though the first son originally refused, it was that deeper disposition of trust and true listening that allowed his heart to thaw in time. Advent, precisely because it is busy and cold and we may be facing extra struggles, is an opportunity to commit all the more to our relationship with God.

I like to think that this Father asked both his sons to help him in the vineyard and then walked outside and began to work. He would not force either of his sons to follow him out there, but as both of them looked out on the vineyard, it was the first one – even though he refused at first – that was

moved to actually go out and begin to work alongside of his father. The second son got distracted by his own projects and forgot all about his dad's request and missed the chance to spend the day with him.

During this season of Advent, we find ourselves in a similar situation: we are working on many things; the question is whether our hearts are open to doing all those different things with a disposition of trust and love in Our Father in Heaven, or if we forget about Him in our busy-ness and go about our lives forgetting that He wanted us to do all those things with Him.

In addition to the Advent themes of this liturgical season, the Church today celebrates the Memorial of Saint John of the Cross, a priest who was born in Spain in 1542, and died 430 years ago today on December 14, 1591. Saint John of the Cross was one of the greatest Christian mystics and Spanish poets, a doctor of the church, reformer of Spanish monasticism, and co-founder of the contemplative order of Discalced Carmelites. He is a patron saint of mystics and contemplatives and of Spanish poets.

I close with this passage from a spiritual Canticle by Saint John of the Cross:

We must [...] dig deeply in Christ. He is like a rich mine with many pockets containing treasures: however deep we dig we will never find their end or their limit. Indeed, in every pocket new seams of fresh riches are discovered on all sides. For this reason the apostle Paul said of Christ: In Him are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God. The soul cannot enter into these treasures, nor attain them, unless it first crosses into and enters the thicket of suffering, enduring interior and exterior labors, and unless it first receives from God very many blessings in the intellect and in the senses, and has undergone long spiritual training. . . .

Would that men might come at last to see that it is quite impossible to reach the thicket of the riches and wisdom of God except by first entering the thicket of much suffering, in such a way that the soul finds there its consolation and desire. The soul that longs for divine wisdom chooses first, and in truth, to enter the thicket of the cross.

Saint Paul therefore urges the Ephesians not to grow weary in the midst of tribulations, but to be steadfast and rooted and grounded in love, so that they may know with all the saints the breadth, the length, the height and the depth – to know what is beyond knowledge, the love of Christ, so as to be filled with all the fullness of God.

The gate that gives entry into these riches of his wisdom is the cross; because it is a narrow gate, while many seek the joys that can be gained through it, it is given to few to desire to pass through it.

As we continue on this pilgrimage towards the manger scene and our celebration of Christmas, let us keep each other in prayer, especially that we can embrace the cross and remain close to God in everything we do.

May God give us this grace. Amen.