

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
Saint Nicholas Church
Pocahontas, Illinois
Fifth Sunday of Easter - Cycle C**

May 15, 2022

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you for this pastoral visit to Saint Nicholas Parish in Pocahontas. A few years ago, I celebrated the baptism of the second child of a friend of mine. I had officiated at his wedding and baptized his first child, a daughter, who was now five years old. After the baptism of the second child, a boy, the mother admitted that she had not been going to church regularly and knew it was time to start coming back to church. I asked her how she knew that she needed to start attending Mass again. She answered, "Well, I was showing my daughter my medal of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus and she exclaimed, 'Oh look, Mommy, it's Pocahontas and her baby!' When I realized my daughter doesn't know the difference between the Blessed Mother and Pocahontas, I knew that I had not been giving her proper instruction in the teachings of the Catholic faith!"

Pocahontas was indeed a real! She was a Native American woman, who lived from about 1596 until March of 1617 and was notable for her association with the colonial settlement at Jamestown, Virginia. Pocahontas was captured and held for ransom by English Colonists during hostilities in 1613. During her captivity, she was encouraged to convert to Christianity and was baptized under the name Rebecca. She married tobacco planter John Rolfe in April 1614 at the age of about 17 or 18, and she bore their son Thomas Rolfe in January 1615. Pocahontas died of unknown causes at around age 20 or 21. Numerous places, landmarks, and products in the United States have been named after Pocahontas.

Alas, my research tells me that Pocahontas, Illinois, is named after the Pocahontas Coal Company of Pocahontas, Virginia. Nevertheless, it certainly is good to know the difference between Pocahontas and the Blessed Mother!

Today the Church celebrates the Fifth Sunday of Easter. In today's Gospel (John 13:31-33a, 34-35), Jesus gives us a "new commandment, that you love one another." Saint Augustine comments on this passage, saying, "This commandment that He is giving them is a new one, the Lord Jesus tells his disciples. Yet was it not contained in the Old Law, where it is written: You shall love your neighbor as yourself? Why does the Lord

call it new when it is clearly so old? Or is the commandment new because it divests us of our former selves and clothes us with the new man? Love does indeed renew the man who hears, or rather obeys its command; but only that love which Jesus distinguished from a natural love by the qualification: As I have loved you.”¹

Indeed, the new part is that they are to love one another as Jesus has loved them. Jesus’ love is to be the model for the disciples’ love for one another. How did Jesus love His disciples? As He demonstrated in the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, Jesus loved his disciples as one who serves others, who was about to give everything up for those He loved. That is what He did when He was given up on the cross. This is what the disciples are commanded to imitate: to love one another as Jesus has loved them. This kind of love uniquely marks the disciples of Jesus. That commandment is still in force.

I am here with you this morning for a parish pastoral visit, as I make my way around the diocese visiting each of our 129 parishes. Yesterday, I celebrated Confirmation and First Holy Communion at Immaculate Conception Church in Pierron for Immaculate Conception Parish, St. Nicholas Parish, Pocahontas, and St. Gertrude Parish, Grantfork. After Mass today, I look forward to greeting as many of you as possible. Then,

at ten o'clock this morning, I will celebrate the Jubilee Mass for the 150th Anniversary of Saint Gertrude Parish in Grantfork.

I am told that the first church in Pocahontas was established in 1871 under the leadership of Reverend Francis Moening, so I wish you a happy 151st anniversary as well!

This afternoon, I will meet with the Parish Finance and Pastoral Councils and other Parish Leaders to hear about all the good things that are happening here at these three parishes to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod.

My visit today is also an opportunity to share with you my hopes and my vision as your bishop for the future of our diocese, building on and implementing our Diocesan Synod held in 2017 on the theme of discipleship and stewardship.

Following our Diocesan Synod, I published my third pastoral letter, *Ars vivendi et moriendi in Dei gratia*, Latin for, "The Art of Living and Dying in God's Grace." In this letter, the full text of which is posted on our diocesan website, I share some personal reflections in part one on the questions posed in the preparatory phase of the Fourth Diocesan Synod that we conducted in November 2017. In part two, I provide a summary of the Fourth Diocesan Synod and some pastoral commentary on the

twelve declarations that were adopted. In part three, I offer some theological reflections on the art of living and dying in God's grace.

I see this post-synodal pastoral letter as the third work in a trilogy of pastoral letters, with each pastoral letter building on the preceding one. In my previous pastoral letter, called, *Ars crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for, "The Art of Growing in God's Grace," 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." I also proposed some constructive steps to build a culture of growth in the Church. These steps for growth were designed to build on the foundation that I laid in my first pastoral letter, *Ars celebrandi et adorandi*, "The Art of Celebrating the Liturgy Properly and Adoring the Lord in the Eucharist Devoutly."

This progression of themes is in keeping with the maxim that addresses the centrality of worship in the life, identity, and mission of the Catholic Church: how we worship reflects what we believe and determines how we will live.

In my post-synodal pastoral letter, I said that the "art of living and dying in God's grace is the key to everlasting happiness in eternal life. The Christian faithful die to sin through the saving waters of baptism. By

dying to their selfish desires through acts of mortification and self-sacrifice, the Christian faithful grow in love of God and neighbor. The whole Christian life aims at reaching this goal of everlasting happiness in eternal life by turning from sin and growing in virtue through God's grace.

As an expression of how to reach this goal of everlasting happiness, we adopted a new mission statement at our Fourth Diocesan Synod for all of us as members of this Diocese. It says, "The mission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is to build a fervent community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and steadfast stewards of God's creation who seek to become saints. Accordingly, the community of Catholic faithful in this diocese is committed to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition."

To further this mission, the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is committed to implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely, hospitality, prayer, formation, and service. In other words, we will invite people proactively to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass; we will provide well-prepared celebrations of the sacraments and other occasions for prayer as signs of hope and paths of

grace to heaven; we will study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith; and we will serve each other, especially those in need, by practicing charity and justice.

Through prayer, discernment, and consultation with others, it has become evident that the Lord is inviting us to embrace more fully our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.²

I concluded my third pastoral letter by telling a personal anecdote, which I would like to share with you now to close this homily.

Once when I was catching a flight to celebrate an out-of-town wedding for a friend of mine, I had gift-wrapped a figurine of the Blessed Mother as a wedding present for the newlyweds and put the gift in my carry-on bag. When I got to the airport and put my bag on the conveyer belt for security screening, the TSA agent looked at the x-ray of my bag and called out, "Bag check." I immediately realized the problem: the figurine was made of leaded crystal and the security agent must have thought it was some sort of weapon. The TSA supervisor came over, saw me standing there wearing my clerical suit and Roman collar, then looked at the x-ray image of the figurine and exclaimed, "For heaven's sake, it's the Blessed Mother, let him through!" Of course, I was greatly relieved, and while the incident still makes me laugh, I have often thought that this

little vignette is exactly the scenario I hope for when I die: I pray that I will arrive at the gates of heaven with the Blessed Mother at my side. Seeing me standing there with Our Lady beside me, Saint Peter will exclaim, “For heaven’s sake, he’s with the Blessed Mother, let him through!”

Staying close to our Blessed Mother throughout life provides faithful assurance that she will lead us to her Son Jesus at the hour of our death, so that we may die in God’s grace and enjoy everlasting happiness in eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ From a treatise on John by Saint Augustine, bishop (Tract. 65, 1-3: CCL 36, 490-492); in *Liturgy of the Hours*, Office of Readings for Thursday of the Fourth Week of Easter.

² 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>.