

**Homily for the 150th Anniversary of Saint Gertrude Parish
and the Parish Pastoral Visit at
Saint Gertrude Church
Grantfork, 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, Father Paul Bonk, parishioners, and friends of Saint Gertrude Parish here in Grantfork, it is good to be here with all of you to celebrate the 150th anniversary, the sesquicentennial jubilee, of the founding of this parish!

The seeds of Saint Gertrude Parish were planted on September 1, 1870, when a group of 30 Catholic men from the area now known as Grantfork met with Father Peters of Saint Paul Church in Highland to establish a church for their community. A simple brick structure was built and opened for worship in 1872. I am grateful to the many dedicated priests and pastoral leaders who have served the people of this parish over the past 150 years. Of course, it is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass that has sustained this parish for 150 years, and will continue to be the source and summit of its existence in the years ahead.

Today our liturgical calendar marks 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.

In addition to celebrating this Mass for the 150th anniversary of your parish, I am here with you this morning also 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. Earlier this morning, I celebrated Mass Saint Nicholas Church in Pocahontas. Then, 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>.