

**HOMILY FOR THE ENCUESTRO MASS
CATHEDRAL OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION,
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS**

**Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois
October 10, 2010**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good to be with you to celebrate this Encuentro Mass. I welcome you to the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Perhaps this is your first visit to our Cathedral or at least the first time that you're seeing it since it was renovated last year. The Cathedral is the home church not just for the bishop, but, in a sense, for the whole diocese, so I hope that you will always feel at home here.

This is the first Mass that I am celebrating in Spanish here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. I learned Spanish when I was in the seminary and have used the Spanish language in my ministry since my first assignment as a priest. Having lived in other countries myself, I know that it is a challenge to learn the language and culture of a foreign country, but the one place where we always want to feel comfortable is in our communication with God. Certainly God understands all languages, even the unspoken emotions of our hearts, but we certainly desire to express ourselves in our mother tongue, the language that we know best and in

which we can most fully express our needs and desires, our expressions of repentance, our pleas for mercy, as well as our thanks and praise. Thus, the Catholic Church seeks to make you feel at home by providing opportunities such as this Mass today to pray in your native language.

The word “encuentro” comes from our encounter with Christ, and it is our Lord and Savior whom we encounter in this sacred place, in the Eucharist, in our hearts and in our brothers and sisters.

Fifty years ago there was a famous play, later made into a film, called *The Miracle Worker*. It tells the true story of the remarkable Helen Keller, and her inspiring teacher Anne Sullivan. Helen Keller became both deaf and blind through an illness before she was two years old, eventually learning to read and later to type. She even graduated from university and, speaking through Anne, went on many lecture tours, raising money for charity before she died in 1968, aged 88. Imagine not being able either to see anything or hear a sound. No wonder Helen was a wild, angry child, and that it took Miss Sullivan’s immense patience and dedication to break through the communication barrier with her. And yet, towards the end of her life, Helen Keller was to make this remarkable statement: “I thank God for my handicaps,” she said, “for through them I have found myself, my

work and my God." For her, insight was the most important thing: "The only thing worse than being blind," she said, "is having sight but no vision." For her own insight, for her faith, she was immensely grateful.

In the Gospel today, we hear that Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem. Whenever this is mentioned, it is to remind us that he is approaching the place of his passion, death and resurrection. He is in border territory between the Jewish province of Galilee and the land of the Samaritans, a people whose hatred of the Jews was reciprocated. He meets a group of lepers, who have banded together to beg. This would be their only means of livelihood, as they would be forced to keep away from other people. Not only was leprosy considered an infectious disease, but it was thought that sufferers had to have offended God, and so must be shunned. To touch a leper would mean to be defiled, made ritually unclean. Only when the messianic age arrived would lepers be healed and leprosy would be no more.

These lepers ask Jesus for mercy, translated into alms or food. But Jesus gives them more than that. He heals them. They respond at once to his instruction to show themselves to the priests – as someone healed of the disease would do – even before they are sure he has the power to heal

them. Jesus does the healing, but they have cooperated, not scoffed at the incredible implication of what he is asking them to do. They are, of course, ecstatic. Who wouldn't be? Their whole lives have been turned around in an instant. They are free now, whole and healthy. Yet only one of them appreciates the gift they have been given so generously. And this is a Samaritan, one of that despised people. There he is, alone of the ten, humbly falling at Jesus' feet and thanking God. His healing draws him to Jesus, and for this faith Jesus assures him that he is now not only healed but saved, promised a place in the kingdom of God.

Obviously Jesus expects gratitude and is disappointed at the ingratitude of the other nine. For gratitude is good for us. It helps, if only partially, to restore the balance, to bring justice to the situation. It opens us up to another; it deflates our pride; it acknowledges that the other is worthier than we are. It is the mark of true humility that we can be sincerely grateful to a benefactor, to anyone who has done us a favor or service. Are we not taught the words "please" and "thank you" from our infancy? And yet how difficult it is to be grateful. How forgetful we are of all the good things that come to us.

Helen Keller teaches us that even affliction can be used to our good, and be a cause of our gratitude. It takes a heart practiced in the virtue of gratitude and praise of God to be able to appreciate that, and truly to give thanks in those circumstances. This sort of lesson cannot be learned in an instant. A grateful heart is not made overnight, but is the outcome of daily appreciation and thanksgiving to God for every moment of life, for every occasion of happiness, however slight and fleeting. How grateful are we for the kindness of others, the beauty of nature, the blood in our veins and the love of our God? Let us become a grateful people, like Helen Keller and the Samaritan, and not be like the other nine.

May God give us this grace. Amen.