

**The Eighteenth Sunday of the Year - Cycle A
Healing and Hope Novena to Our Lady of the Snows
July 31, 2011**

**National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows
Belleville, Illinois**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

S.S.P.: Healing and Hope Within Financial Stresses

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you tonight at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows to celebrate the fourth day of the Novena for Healing and Hope to Our Lady of the Snows. The novena is timed, of course, in anticipation of the Feast of Our Lady of the Snows on August 5th. I am very familiar with this particular feast day, because it also happens to be my birthday!

You may be familiar with the story as well, but it is helpful to recall it. Actually, this feast celebrated on the fifth of August commemorates the dedication of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (in English, Saint Mary Major) on the Esquiline Hill in Rome. So where does the part about the snow come into the picture? The legend runs thus: During the

pontificate of Pope Liberius, who reigned from 352-366, a Roman patrician named John and his wife, who were without heirs, made a vow to donate their possessions to Our Lady. They prayed to her that she might make known to them in what manner they were to dispose of their property in her honor. On the fifth of August, during the night, in the height of the Roman summer, snow fell on the summit of the Esquiline Hill and, in obedience to a vision which they had the same night, they built a basilica in honor of Our Lady on the spot that was covered with snow.

Now August in Rome is known for being unbearably hot. In fact, to this day, most Romans try to get out of town and go up to the hills where it is cooler. Even the Pope goes to his summer home known as Castel Gandolfo at Lake Albano in the hills of Lazio. So a snowfall on August 5th would certainly catch your attention as an indication of a sign from heaven.

The specific theme of our novena tonight is “Healing and Hope Within Financial Stresses.” I’m sure this theme was set months ago, but it is fitting that it comes while the Congress and the President of the United States are wrestling with a national financial crisis, seeking a solution to the situation of a runaway federal debt. Similar scenarios are being played out

in many state and local governments, in corporations, businesses and even in the domestic economies of many families and individuals. At times, it all seems overwhelming and a cause for despair.

We must remember, however, that the angel Gabriel proclaimed to Mary that she was to conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit because “nothing will be impossible for God” (*Luke 1:37*). The God who can make it snow in the hot summer of Rome can also help us resolve our economic woes.

In the days of Jesus, the people of Galilee came to realize that there was someone special in their midst. A young man had appeared who, it seemed, had special powers of healing, and who spoke in ways that captivated his listeners. This was someone who just had to be seen, and someone that people wanted to listen to. And so the crowds began to gather. The people knew that Jesus was extraordinary. This man can cure our sicknesses. This man seems to understand life, and has an air of authority about him that persuades you that he is the genuine article: not a showman, but a savior.

Jesus himself knew all about the problems of being in the public eye. Your words and your actions will be scrutinized. You will be misreported and misrepresented. Your enemies will seek to destroy you in whatever way they can. King Herod Antipas, a vicious ruler, had just executed John the Baptist, and so Jesus could very well be next in line. He leaves Herod's territory and moves along the coast, hoping for some quiet time to compose himself. But his boat is not far from shore, so the crowds can see where he heading. When he steps ashore, the crowds are waiting for him.

Now Jesus will show us what true power is, and how it should be exercised. These people need their sicknesses to be healed – Jesus tends to them. They need guidance – Jesus preaches the word of life to them. They are hungry and need food – so Jesus feeds them, and teaches his disciples to feed them from the little that they have. The issues of health, education and welfare are all addressed here. These are common needs in all of humankind, and we are called to attend to them all, in every person.

When St Paul gave up his life of violence, in which he sought to bring the world to order according to his own narrow view, he embraced the love of Jesus Christ. Paul, blinded on the Damascus road, now sees the

world in a new way. Caught up in the love of the risen Lord, Paul opens his heart to the whole world. The narrow sectarian attitudes of his past are not for Paul any more. Now, Paul will be “all things to all people,” if he may win them to Christ Jesus. The power and might that carry such weight in this world, the reliance on force to solve problems, all this is gone. Paul has met with the risen Lord, who overcame death, and tells us that now there is no reason for us to be afraid. Paul encourages us that, whatever trials we endure, we shall triumph in the end.

That is the message of our scriptures today: out of His abundant love for us, the Lord feeds the hungry and satisfies all our needs. Nothing can separate us from this love of God, which is in Christ Jesus.

Our novena helps us to focus on healing and hope, which we find in Christ Jesus. Our healing and hope are nourished by Christ’s gifts to the Church, the sacraments. In the past year, much attention has been given in the media to the topic of exorcism. The reality is that true diabolical possession is rare. Why is that? A seminary professor once said that the reason for the rarity of diabolical possession and obsession in the Christian world was owing to the reservation of the Most Blessed Sacrament on so

many Catholic altars. As the real presence of Christ in his earthly life in the Holy Land repulsed Satan and the other evil spirits who wander about the world seeking the ruin of souls, so that same Christ, body, blood, soul and divinity received by so many people worthily in the Church today, reserved upon our altars, and venerated at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in perpetual adoration and by visits that people make to the Blessed Sacrament, keeps at bay all the dark forces that war against the soul.

It has also been said that one good sacramental confession is more powerful than a hundred exorcisms. That is because an exorcism is actually a sacramental in the form of a liturgical blessing, while confession is a sacrament instituted by Christ. In the Sacrament of Penance, when we are repentant for our sins and resolved not to commit them again, our sins are forgiven through the words of absolution pronounced by the priest *in persona Christi*. If we are reconciled to God and to His Church in the Sacrament of Penance, if we receive the real presence of Christ in our hearts in the Eucharist, if we remain in the state of grace and in communion with

all the holy angels and saints, especially our Most Blessed Mother, then Satan and his devils and demons will not come near us.

The early Christians understood the multiplication of the loaves and fishes and the miraculous feeding of the five thousand as described in the Gospel as a preview of what Jesus would do at the Last Supper. He took the loaves and the fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, broke the bread, and gave the miraculous meal to His disciples to distribute to the people. We will do the same at this Mass and at every Mass, which looks forward to the heavenly banquet, where there will be no more hunger or thirst, no more suffering or pain, no debt crises or financial stresses, but only joy in the infinite love of God.

May God give us this grace. Amen.