

**Homily for the Evening of Repentance and Prayer for those Harmed in the Church  
December 12, 2011**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Tonight we have come together for an Evening of Repentance and Prayer for Those Harmed in the Church. I am grateful for your presence and participation as we ask God's healing for those who have been harmed in the Church, express our repentance for those sins, and seek God's mercy and forgiveness. I am glad to be able to speak also to those attending these prayer services in the deaneries through the Deans who are reading the same homily I am giving tonight at our Cathedral in Springfield, so that all may hear the same message of your diocesan bishop throughout our diocese.

The title chosen for our evening of repentance and prayer was given much thought and reflection. In calling this an "Evening of Repentance and Prayer for Those Harmed in the Church," the preposition "in" is important. People may be harmed IN the Church by her sinful and imperfect agents, but people are never harmed BY the Church, which is the holy means of our salvation.

Our great Holy Father, Blessed John Paul II, made this distinction succinctly in his 1994 Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* ("As the Third Millennium Approaches"), in which he wrote:

[I]t is appropriate that, as the second millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become ever more conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and the Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged ways of thinking and acting that were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*. Although she is holy because of her incorporation into Christ, the Church does not tire of doing penance. Before God and man, she always *acknowledges as her own her sinful sons and daughters*.<sup>1</sup>

In making this distinction, Blessed John Paul II helped us to understand that we are asking forgiveness for the sons and daughters of the Church, not for the Church *per se*, for she is the holy bride of Christ. As then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explained as President of the International Theological Commission in their 1999 report, "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past," the "request for pardon must not be understood as an expression of false humility or a denial of her 2,000 year history, which is certainly rich in merit in the areas of charity, culture and holiness. Instead, she responds to a necessary requirement of the truth, which, in addition to the positive aspects, recognizes the human limitations and weaknesses of the various generations of Christ's disciples."<sup>2</sup>

This was the heart of Blessed John Paul II's plans for the Great Jubilee of 2000: that the Church cleanse its historical conscience at the end of the second millennium, in

preparation for a new springtime of evangelization in the third. Similarly, it is my prayerful hope that we can have a new springtime of evangelization in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, but in preparation for this we must first cleanse our historical conscience.

Our prayer service tonight for this purification of conscience is modeled along the lines of Pope John Paul II's "Day of Pardon" held on the First Sunday of Lent, March 12, 2000, as part of the observation of the Great Jubilee of the new millennium.<sup>3</sup> We began as he did, vested in penitential purple, asking for forgiveness and seeking the grace to forgive. We have listened to the words of Sacred Scripture, in which we heard the message of the prophet Malachi speaking of God's justice and purification, as well as God's promise that He will return to those who return to Him. We have pleaded in the Responsorial Psalm, "Lord, come and save us." We have heard the words of Jesus in St. Luke's Gospel tell us that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance." The general intercessions will take the form of seven confessions of sin and requests for God's pardon. After each of these seven petitions, one of the seven candles on the altar will be lit. As we pray for God's forgiveness for these sins, we will chant the *Kyrie Eleison* [Lord have mercy]. Before the final blessing, we will pray the Lord's Prayer, asking our Father to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

I see this evening of repentance and prayer as my desire, while I am still near the beginning of my pastoral ministry as Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, to express our repentance and seek God's pardon for the sins of the past, that His grace may bring us healing for the faith to flourish in the future. Blessed John Paul II said that "the Church does not tire of doing penance" because penance is something that we do as a community of faith, asking pardon for each other's sins. As Saint Paul wrote, if one part of the body suffers, "all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy" (1 *Corinthians* 12:26). So we do penance for the sins of others as well as ourselves, that all may be healed.

I am not the first Bishop of Springfield to express such repentance and prayer for pardon. In his Pastoral Letter on Reconciliation, issued February 10, 2008, the Most Reverend George J. Lucas, now Archbishop of Omaha, wrote, "I want to ask forgiveness for the offenses caused by any representatives of the Church, and I want to call all members of our diocese to a renewed effort at reconciliation in our families, our parishes and our communities."<sup>4</sup>

It is in that same spirit that I express repentance for the sins of the members of the Church who have harmed others. Sometimes these harms were evil in themselves, such as the sins of racism and the sexual abuse of minors, as well as other forms of unchastity. At other times, the harms may have been done in the context of actions that were in themselves not sinful and may even have been necessary for pastoral or

economic reasons, such as the closing of a church or school, but nevertheless were done in a way that was insensitive to the feelings of those who would be affected.

Therefore we pray for all those who have been harmed, that with God's grace they may be able to forgive, since it is through forgiveness of those who have harmed them that they will begin to experience God's healing and come to a place of peace in their relationships with God and with others. We pray for those who have perpetrated harm and have sinned against others, that they may recognize how they have hurt God, their victims and others who have been offended by their actions, and that God may administer justice tempered by His Divine mercy.

The fact that there are always offenses to be forgiven and amends to be made and accepted should not give rise to despair. Rather, the ongoing work of reconciliation in the Church takes its hope from the truth of our faith that our sins are forgiven and salvation is accomplished through Jesus' death on the cross and His rising to new life.

Our repentance tonight is not a Lenten penance, but an Advent preparation for the rebirth of a Christmas spirit in the Church, a spirit that can celebrate anew the joy of Christian faith with the innocence of a small child. We also offer our evening of repentance and prayer on this Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In the image of our Blessed Mother that miraculously appeared on the cloak of Juan Diego, the Virgin Mary is depicted as being pregnant. As such, we join in Mary's joyful expectation and anticipation of the birth of her Son. It is my fervent hope and prayer that, having repented our sins and being purified by God's pardon, we in the Diocese of Springfield

in Illinois will experience a rebirth of faith in Christ; a deepening of commitment to live as a follower of Jesus in full communion with His one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church; an openness to hearing God's unique call for each one of us; a readiness to answer that call and live out our vocation in accord with God's will; a firm resolve to fulfill the mission that Christ has entrusted to us; a desire to love God and neighbor by keeping the Ten Commandments; an eagerness to share our faith with others; and a willingness to tell them of the happiness that is found in Jesus Christ both here on earth and in the life to come in God's heavenly kingdom. In short, we pray that the presence of Jesus and His love may grow in our world, in our hearts, in our minds, in our words and in our deeds.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Blessed John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Apostolic Letter, "As the New Millennium Approaches," 1994, 33 [emphasis in original].

<sup>2</sup> International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, 1999, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> George Weigel, *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II – The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), pp. 215-216.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop George J. Lucas, "We Implore You on Behalf of Christ, Be Reconciled to God," The Bishop's Pastoral Letter on Reconciliation, *Catholic Times*, February 10, 2008.