

**The Ascension of the Lord  
June 2, 2011**

**Taylor Correctional Center  
Taylorville, Illinois**

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

Reverend Father, dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

I have come among you mindful of the words of the Divine Savior: “I was in prison and you came to me” (Matthew 25:36). He said these words to those to whom he also said, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). But to those who did not visit him in prison, he said, “Depart from me, you accursed” (Matthew 25:43). In these few words, we see how important those in prison are to the Lord; he goes so far as to count a visit to a prisoner as a visit to himself: “as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

I have come to you today not simply to complete an item on a Bishop’s checklist of things to do so that he might hear Jesus say to him, “Come, O blessed of my Father.” No, I have come, rather, with the very beautiful prayer of Saint Paul on my lips that we have just heard: “May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may

know what is the hope that belongs to [Jesus'] call" (Ephesians 1:18). I have come so that you might hear him say to you, "Come, O blessed of my Father."

Today the Apostles ask Jesus, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel" (Acts 1:6)? In a veiled response, Jesus says "yes" to their question, even if they do not at this time perceive his answer. He restores the kingdom of Israel – though in a way no one expected or foresaw – when he promises the Apostles: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). And then he left them "and a cloud took him from their sight" (Acts 1:9).

We are sometimes tempted to think or to imagine that Jesus has left us completely alone, that he no longer cares for us, but Holy Mother Church gently corrects this thought and reminds us, as we soon will pray, that

The Lord Jesus, the king of glory, the conqueror of sin and death, ascended to heaven while the angels sang his praises. Christ, the mediator between God and man, judge of the world and Lord of all, has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope. Christ is the beginning, the head of the Church; where he has gone, we hope to follow" (Preface: Ascension II).

This, then, is the hope that belongs to Jesus' call: to be with him forever in his kingdom where "God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord. Alleluia" (Psalm 47:6)!

This is why Jesus gave to the Apostles his Great Commission: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

It is this final command of the Lord that has brought me here to you today. As a Bishop, a Successor of the Apostles, this same Commission has been given to me, and in it my priests also share. I have come to remind you of Christ's love and concern for you. He wants you to be with him in his kingdom. I urge you, then, to encounter him frequently in the Sacraments, especially in Confession and in Holy Communion and to seek always to follow his commands of love.

I would like very much to attend to you more frequently in person, but my duties as a Bishop prevent me doing so. For this reason Father Dan Willenborg works as my close collaborator to

look to your pastoral and spiritual needs, as I know he has done with a father's love. For his generous and willing service to you, I am deeply grateful, and hope that you will see in his care for you the love that Jesus Christ has for you.

I also hope that my presence here today is a clear sign and witness to the important place that ministry within the prisons in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois has in my heart. When so many people in society are ready to write you off, as we say, the Church, united with Christ her Head, remains with you. Jesus never abandons you, and neither will the Church, so long as you remain close to her.

I do not want you to lose hope simply because you are imprisoned. The Lord's grace is powerful and effective even here. If we look at the lives of the saints, we see that a time spent in prison was a profound moment of conversion in many of their lives. We think, especially, of Saint Dismas, the Good Thief, who, while hanging on a cross next to Jesus, expressed his faith and his sorrow for his sins, when he said to the Lord: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42).

The grace of conversion is needed in the heart of every member of the faithful. We must all look to the Crucified and Risen Lord, who has ascended to the right hand of the Father, where he intercedes for us, and beg him to remove the darkness from the eyes of our hearts. If we cooperate with his grace and allow him to do so, then we might live no longer in sin but bask, rather, in the light of his Word, of his commands, that shines as a lamp marking out the path that leads to heaven (cf. Psalm 119:105).

When we look upon the image of the Crucified Lord it is as if we look into a mirror. There, hanging upon the Cross, we see what we are; we see our humanity, wounded and weak. But we also see what we are to become; we see the image of selfless love, a love that knows no limits. Look, then, upon the Cross each day, even if only in your mind's eye, and learn from Jesus. From his Cross, he will teach you his commands and will show you how to love him and your neighbor.

If you live in this way, seeking always to be motivated in all things by the love of God and of neighbor, then on the day of judgment you will be counted among the sheep, among the flock of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep, and you

will hear him say to you, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

May God give us this grace. Amen.