

**Homily for the 175th Anniversary of the Founding of the Parish
September 9, 2012
St. Aloysius Parish, North Arm**

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

Reverend Fathers and Deacon, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I am happy to be with you today to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the establishment of a Catholic community here in North Arm by Bishop Simon Bruté, when this area was part of the Diocese of Vincennes. I am grateful for your warm welcome and for the enthusiasm of your faith, and I congratulate you in the Lord Jesus on this joyous occasion.

Those first settlers of North Arm - who left England with Lord Baltimore because of religious persecution, settled in the Catholic colony of Maryland as a haven from persecution, and who later fled Maryland amid growing persecutions by those who succeeded Lord Baltimore - certainly knew great difficulty and hardship. How often did they hear the Lord say to them, "Be strong, fear not" (Isaiah 35:4)? Our presence here today these many decades later is a testament not only to the strength of their faith, but also to their descendants who continually handed on this same faith. Today we pray that this faith will remain strong and confident, that it will continue to be

handed on so that those who face coming persecutions will not fear, but remain strong in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The most common fear among men and women of our time is the fear of public speaking. Many among us would sooner jump out of an airplane than they would address a crowd. To speak is not always easy. Sometimes we stumble to find the proper words; sometimes we rush our words together; and sometimes we speak incoherently.

Speaking is something that must be learned, first from our parents who – we pray – whisper gentle words of love to us and, as we grow older, begin to teach us to form our sentences and to express our thoughts. We spend so many years as children learning about sentence structure, proper grammar and the best manner in which to address an audience.

Even those who gain their hearing as adults must often be taught how to speak, because they have not previously heard the mannerisms that make our speech understandable to one another.

But the man in the Gospel today is not like this: Jesus opens his ears and “his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly” (Mark 7:). Having never before heard the tongues of men, the man’s ears are opened and without teaching or training he simply begins to speak. What did he say?

That man surely knew the prophecy of Isaiah, that on the day of the Lord, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing" (Isaiah 35:5-6). Surely, with his ears opened and his tongue freed, that man spoke plainly, saying, "Praise the Lord, my soul!" (Psalm 146:1). In this man, we see clearly that God chose those who are poor in this world to be rich in faith (cf. James 2:5).

Saint Mark tells how Jesus arrived in the mainly pagan area of the Decapolis and this deaf man, who also had an impediment in his speech, was brought to him. Presumably it was his friends who brought him. They hoped Jesus would lay his hands on him, but in fact he performed a more elaborate ritual than that - one that hinted at what would happen to deaf ears and a speechless tongue. When the man is first brought to Jesus, the Lord "took him off by himself away from the crowd" (Mark 7:33). In this we learn that Jesus desires to meet us personally, not simply as one person among many, but to speak to us individually, to heal us and call us each to a life of discipleship. In this simple act, the tenderness of his compassion is shown. He will not allow the man's healing to become a spectacle for the crowd, but will love him personally and ask for his love in return. Taking the man to one side, he

slipped his finger into his ears and touched the man's tongue with spittle (in those days it was commonly believed that spittle had curative properties). Then, with a word of command, Jesus said, "Be opened" - Mark has preserved the word Jesus used in the original Aramaic form, "Ephphatha" - the man is set free from his disabilities: sight and speech are restored.

An intriguing feature of this miracle is that the Greek word translated "impediment in his speech" is very rare; in fact, it appears nowhere else in the New Testament and even in the Greek version of the Old Testament it appears on only one occasion. In fact that one occasion is in the passage that we heard in today's first reading. There, Isaiah the prophet speaks of the wonders that will occur when the Lord makes his great intervention in human history: "Look," he cries, "your God is coming... Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the mute sing for joy." However, the Greek word Isaiah uses in the phrase "the tongues of the mute sing for joy" is that same rare word which was used of the man with a speech impairment in the Gospel. So Mark is dropping a heavy hint, a clue, if you like, as to who Jesus really is; he's telling us that his life is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy - the

age of the Messiah has already arrived in the person of Jesus. Through him God's intervention in human history has become a reality.

We also see here the man's humility in the presence of the One of whom it was written: "Here is your God, with divine recompense he comes to save you" (Isaiah 35:4). Despite the peculiarity of the manner with which Jesus chose to heal him, the man does not protest, nor does he seek to leave the Lord. Rather, he submits himself to Jesus because he trusted that "the LORD sets captives free" (Psalm 146:7). Do you and I trust this same promise?

When the Lord seeks to draw near to us, to take us away from the crowd to be alone in his presence, how often do we resist? When he stretches out his hand to heal us - especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation - how often do we pull back from him? Why do we not hear the Prophet Isaiah say to us, "Thus says the Lord: Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not!" (Isaiah 35:4)?

In a few minutes, you will come up to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion. As you approach to receive the Blessed Sacrament, I, or one of the priests, deacons or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion will hold up the host before your eyes. What will you see? Just a wafer? A piece of bread? Or will your eyes be open to see the Body of Christ? We will then

indeed proclaim, "The Body of Christ." What will you hear? The same words that you hear so frequently that you almost don't catch their profound significance? Or are your ears open to hear the announcement that you are in the presence Christ your King? How will you respond? Will you mumble a perfunctory response out of habit, or will you proclaim a sincere, "Amen," a word that means, "Yes, indeed, it's true: I really do believe that I am receiving Christ my Lord and Savior!"

Today we hear the evocative promise of the Lord: "The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water" (Isaiah 35:7). In these recent months we know very well how thirsty the ground can be and what it means for springs of water to suddenly be found. At the same time, we also know that deep within each of us is a longing - a thirst - which we cannot fully satisfy; it is a thirst for the Lord himself. Just as the parched earth longs for rain, so do our souls thirst for God.

Saint Justin Martyr teaches us that "the fountain of living water that gushed forth upon a land devoid of the knowledge of God," the living water promised by Isaiah, "was our Christ, who made his appearance on earth in the midst of [the] people and healed those who from birth were blind and deaf and lame. He cured them by his word, causing them to walk, to hear

and to see. By restoring the dead to life," he says, "he compelled the people of that day to recognize him."¹ Do we recognize the Lord Jesus, who comes to us and calls us aside, as the one who satisfies the deepest thirst of our souls?

The beautiful icon of Our Lady of the Life-Giving Spring commissioned for our Diocesan Jubilee Year 2003 is an artistic expression of the Son of God and Son of Mary who is the Living Water who said, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink" (John 7:37). Those who drink from this water that flows forth from the pierced heart of the Savior will find that they have been made "rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him" (James 2:5).

With our thirst quenched by these waters which have passed over into the Sacraments, we, too, should find our tongues freed to plainly speak and to sing the praises of God boldly and without fear.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Saint Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 69. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament Vol. X: Isaiah 1-39*. Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2004), 245.