

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

**Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2012**

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Saint Paul reminds us today, “We are ambassadors for Christ” (II Corinthians 5:20). To be an ambassador is to stand in the place of another, to represent another person. From the beginning of civilization, kings have had their ambassadors to speak on their behalf and to conduct the affairs of state in the name of the king. Even the President of the United States has ambassadors to carry out the mission of our Republic.

There is something peculiar to the life of an ambassador: They are seldom remembered. How many ambassadors can you name? This is revealing: the ambassador himself is not important, but the one he represents is. So it is with us.

In Baptism we were incorporated into Christ, we were claimed by the sign of his Cross and we were anointed with the sacred chrism. Through the saving waters of death we became Christians, other Christs. By virtue of our baptism we are ambassadors of

Jesus Christ who have as our chief duty the task of imploring everyone we meet to “be reconciled to God” (II Corinthians 5:20).

Today’s signing of ashes serves three key purposes. First, they remind us of our own mortality. As such, they remind us that we are not as important as we often like to think we are. The One who is important is the One who dies no more, the one calls us his friends and his ambassadors.

Second, the ashes on our foreheads in the form of the Cross make our allegiance clear to those we meet. They point not to ourselves but to him who died for us and they serve as a silent call to reconciliation with God and with man. As we are signed with the ashes we pray for the grace to conform our lives ever more closely to the will of God, even if it means setting our own will aside.

Third, the ashes remind us that if we are to be faithful and effective ambassadors of Christ, our lives must reflect his life. Today we remember that our life – marked our sins and our sinful desires – do not always look like the life of the Lord, that we are not clear reflections of his love. For this reason today we seek to rend our hearts before the Lord so that he might wash us clean and

become the righteousness of God in him (cf. Joel 2:13; Psalm 51:4; II Corinthians 5:21).

In these coming forty days of Lent, let us strive with great fervor and devotion, through our penance and our increase prayer, fasting, alms-giving, seek to model our lives on Christ Crucified. If we imitate him and strive for the perfection of the love of God and the love of neighbor, we will be found worthy ambassadors of him who is both just and merciful.

Yes, “now is the day of salvation” (II Corinthians 5:). Let us return to the Lord, for he is merciful to all and despises nothing he has made (cf. Joel 2:12; Wisdom 11:24).

May God give us this grace. Amen.