

**Mass of the Easter Sunday  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Holy Sunday, April 8, 2012**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and Sisters in Christ:

A Dutch navigator sailing the high seas in 1722 happened to come across an uncharted island in the Pacific. He was thrilled to land on it. This discovery happened on Easter Sunday. Naturally, the island was called “Easter Island.” A preacher some years ago used this bit of history to make a point. He pointed out that we make a mistake if we regard Easter as merely an island—a nice place to visit once a year and then go back to the mainland. Rather, Easter needs to be a place that we visit every Sunday. Indeed, that is why Christians for the past two thousand years have regarded Sunday as a special day of worship, because every Sunday is a “mini-Easter,” a commemoration of our Lord’s resurrection from the dead.

Every year in October all of our parishes count the number of people who come to Mass each Sunday. Overall, our most recent October Mass Count indicates that 58,875 people attended parish Masses in our diocese on Saturday evening and Sunday on the four weekends of October 2011. With a total Catholic population of 146,692, this means that 40% of our

Catholics went to Sunday Mass last October. That's better than many places in the world, but it still means that a majority of Catholics do not go to church on Sunday. We can do better than that and we should do better than that.

Moreover, last year's numbers translate to a decrease of 1,080 people (-1.98%) from October 2010. Even more troubling, the fifteen year comparison shows a decrease of 25,533 people (-30.25%) since 1996. When I first saw that number, I was stunned. In just fifteen years the number of people going to Sunday Mass in our diocese has decreased by almost one-third. Unfortunately, I have only raw numbers, but no hard data to explain why this decrease has occurred. I can conjecture, but I do hope to get some objective analysis of the underlying reasons for this decline.

In the meantime, these numbers should be a wake up call for all Catholics, not just for the bishop and priests of the diocese, and Easter Sunday is a perfect time to resolve to do something about this. Today we celebrate our Lord's resurrection. There would be no Church if Jesus did not rise from the dead. The Church came into being and spread throughout the world by word of mouth, with believers in the Risen Lord telling others about their Savior and inspiring them to be His follower, too. That is how

the Church has continued to grow for two thousand years. That is the way for the Church to flourish in the future as well.

There have been plenty of programs and efforts to bring people to the Church, the most recent being the television campaign called “Catholics Come Home” that many people saw during last year’s Christmas season. These television spots were very high quality, but the fact remains that the most effective testimony that wins people for Christ comes from personal, one-on-one conversations. Bringing people to the Lord is not just the work of bishops, priests, deacons and nuns. All of the baptized share in the responsibility to spread the Good News about the promise of God’s Kingdom.

Inviting people to the Church does not require a degree in theology or sophisticated argumentation. Just as a movie becomes a blockbuster when people who have seen it tell others that they’ve got to see it too, all it takes is tell people about your parish and why you go to Mass there.

I am confident that we can turn things around if we all step up to this task with the help of God’s grace. In the past two years, we have already seen an increase in the number of seminarians studying to become priests for our diocese. When I was appointed Bishop of Springfield in Illinois in April 2010, there were eleven seminarians studying for our diocese. This

year we have twenty. Eight more have applied to go to the seminary next year. This has come about because people across the diocese have been talking about this and praying for an increase in vocations to the priesthood and religious life. That's the good news and provides an excellent example of how personal invitations can have a positive effect. Of course, the increased number of seminarians presents a welcome financial challenge to find the means to pay for the increased costs of their tuition, room and board. This weekend we will have an opportunity for all the faithful of our diocese to support this need by contributing to our seminary collection.

The generosity of our people and their prayerful support will help to provide the priests that will be needed for the future. We also need to work hard to make sure that there will be people in the pews for them to serve.

Our renewal of baptismal promises on Easter Sunday is not just a matter of saying the words, but truly renewing our hearts to be more committed Catholics who firmly believe in the Risen Lord, because belief in the Lord rising from the dead is not a footnote in Christian faith. It *is* the Christian faith. It is God who has the last word, reminding us that the best is still to come. Jesus is raised to new life by the sheer compelling energy of the Father's love: the tomb could never be his permanent home.

Despite the determined efforts of many down the ages, and now, to relegate Christianity and this fundamental belief to the dust of history, the empty tomb still poses a vibrant and challenging question that refuses to go away and cries out to be answered. Ultimately it is not about proof but about faith which, faltering and hesitant though it may be, enables us to say: "I know my Redeemer lives." The good news for us who believe is that hope in the resurrection of the body is given to all who are able to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. St. Paul again, in the reading today to the Colossians, says: "When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory."

When we are confronted with the stark reality of the death of loved ones, the world offers us nothing other than, "This is our only life; there is nothing else after it." That loved one, that wonderfully gifted person, is gone for ever, there is nothing left but memories. But the Easter Gospel, the message of Christ's resurrection, keeps hope alive: death is not the end; death has been vanquished.

I wish all of you a very happy Easter.

May God give us this grace. Amen.