

**Homily for the Mass of the Christmas Novena
Sacred Heart Church at Saint Katharine Drexel Parish
Springfield**

**The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2012**

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

Dear Father Habing, Sister Mary Jean, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it gives me great joy to celebrate with you this Holy Mass in conjunction with your annual Christmas novena. I greet you joyfully in the Lord and I thank you for your devotion and warm welcome.

So many people today are searching for meaning in their lives, especially following the great tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut. Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, is no stranger to the tragedies that so often mark our lives; her sufferings are greater than ours and yet still she remains a woman of joy and of hope because of her confidence in her Son who “shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD” (Micah 5:3). We must remember, as Pope Benedict XVI recently said, that

What illuminates and gives full meaning to the history of the world and of man begins to shine in the cave of Bethlehem; it is the mystery that soon we will contemplate at Christmas: the salvation which is realized in Jesus Christ. In Jesus of Nazareth, God shows his face and asks man to choose to recognize and follow him.¹

It is in the Holy Infant that God has heard and answered the prayer of the Psalm: "Rouse your power, and come to save us" (Psalm 80:3). Today we have come to the altar of the Lord because we long to look upon the face of Mary's Son, Jesus Christ, who is our peace (cf. Psalm 80:4, Micah 5:4).

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has given us this current Year of Faith so that we can come to know his peace more profoundly. At the heart of this Year of Faith is the encounter with Jesus Christ, before whom Saint John the Baptist joyously leaped in the womb of his mother Saint Elizabeth (cf Luke 1:41). Indeed, in his apostolic letter announcing the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of "the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed clearly light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ" (*Porta Fidei*, 2). The same joy that filled Elizabeth and John the Baptist is the same joy that should fill us when we encounter the Child of Bethlehem whose birth we soon will celebrate.

Just as “Mary set out and travelled in haste to a town of Judah,” so should we also set out in haste to Bethlehem (Luke 1:39). We may not be able to make the physical pilgrimage to the land of the Savior’s birth, but we can make the journey interiorly, in our hearts, before our Nativity sets; spiritually we can travel in haste to Bethlehem.

As we hasten to Bethlehem, it is necessary for each of us to live with a spirit of “self-abandonment, in a continuous crescendo, into the hands of a love that seems to grow constantly because it has its origin in God” (*Porta Fidei*, 7). This is what we call discipleship.

The word “disciple” has its roots in the word *disco* – not a genre of music from the 70s, but Latin for “I learn.” The disciple is one who learns from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This learning is not from dusty tomes or ancient manuscripts, but from the very person of Jesus Christ, risen and alive today, through an immediate and personal relationship with him and his Church. This relationship does not – indeed, cannot – leave a person as he or she was before. The true disciple is the one who becomes such a student of the Master that his very life conforms to the life of Christ in all things. We see such a life so clearly in the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

What can we say to reignite the fire of faith in those who have left or drifted from the Church? What can we say to our family and friends, our neighbors and co-workers? What is Christ inspiring us to do to proclaim the faith anew to these lost sheep who have withdrawn from the Good Shepherd? These questions lie at the heart of the Year of Faith.

Of this task, the Holy Father wrote: “To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived, and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year” (*Porta Fidei*, 9). To this end, I would like to propose to a three-fold plan to make the most of this Year of Faith and to strengthen Saint Katharine Drexel Parish so that through the example of your faith, the lost sheep “will no more withdraw from” the Lord but will call upon his name and be given new life (Psalm 80:19).

First, we must be grateful for the faith we have received, for our encounter with the Lord. Families should strive to make their homes places where the family prays together, reads the Scriptures together, and is nourished together at Sunday Mass. Families should strive to allow their faith to influence everything they do, rather than reserving their faith only for an hour or so on Sunday.

Second, we must endeavor to understand all the more clearly the faith we profess. If a friend, family member or co-worker asks us a question about the Catholic faith, can we provide an adequate – and correct – answer? We ought to be able to do so. If we do not know the faith we profess we cannot communicate it to others.

Third, we must share our faith, not only with our family and friends, but with our co-workers and everyone we meet. As the Holy Father reminds us, “Confessing with the lips indicates in turn that faith implies public testimony and commitment” (*Porta Fidei*, 10).

This three-fold plan is the way of discipleship and through it we learn to apprentice ourselves to Jesus Christ. With Mary as our guide and model, we must devote ourselves to helping those who do not know – or who have perhaps forgotten – the love that Jesus has for them. Let each of us endeavor to seek out the lost sheep and bring them with us as we hasten to Bethlehem to behold the face of God in Jesus Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, December 12, 2012.