

**Homily for Holy Mass and Parish Visit
St. Joseph Parish, Ramsey, Illinois**

**The Solemnity of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist
June 24, 2012**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is a privilege for me to celebrate and preach at this Mass with you today. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation, celebrating a parish jubilee, or installing a new pastor. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for a regular Sunday Mass because I want at some time to visit every parish in our diocese, in order to get to know the people and the places that make up our Catholic community in central Illinois.

What does a bishop look for when he comes to a parish? Well, I didn't come to see if the floors were cleaned and the pews were polished! I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish, he looks for the presence of the

Catholic **faith**, to see whether it is strong and vibrant, whether it is growing, and if the conditions are present for its continued growth in the future. I am happy to find the Catholic faith being practiced here in Ramsey.

At the same time, a pastoral visit is not just a time for a bishop to see the parish, but also for the parish to see the bishop. The Church is all about relationships. As the three persons of the Trinity are an intimate communion of Father, Son and Spirit in relationship to each other, the Church exists as a communion in relationship to God and in relation to each other, the People of God, the Body of Christ. As a bishop, I have a special relationship with you, and you have a special relationship with me, and one of my roles is to bridge the relationship between you and the Pope and the rest of the universal Church, so that we may all be one in Christ's Body. In the Church, we call this relationship a *communio*, that is, the communion of those belonging to the Body of Christ, the Church. Being connected to each other in this *communio* with the universal Church throughout the world and with the local Church is the essence of what it means to be truly Catholic.

Today, as we gather on this Solemnity of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, it is fitting for us to consider the gift of life. Certainly it is good for us to consider the life of the Forerunner of the Lord, the one who was sent “before the Lord to prepare his way,” but it is also good for us to consider our own lives (Luke 1:76).

Growing up as the third of nine children, I remember those dramatic moments when Dad would announce that Mom had given birth to a baby – in fact, on one of those occasions, to a set of twins. The birth of a child is an occasion for rejoicing, not only for siblings, but also for parents, aunts and uncles, and even for friends and neighbors. But it also was a time that invited questions, particularly for my older sister and brother and me, who wanted to know if we had a new brother or another sister. Four times after my birth the answer was: it’s another boy – or, in the case of the twins, two more boys! Finally, the ninth child born was a girl. The eldest in the family was a girl and the youngest was a girl, with seven boys in between!

“Is the baby a boy or a girl?” was just the first of many questions, not only “How much does he weigh?” or “Who does she look like?” But also

the more thoughtful ones, such as: “What kind of future awaits her?” or “What will he make of life when he grows up?”

If joy and questioning are the order of the day when a baby arrives, it’s no surprise to hear of joy and questioning in abundance when Elizabeth and Zechariah have their baby son. Since his parents were long past childbearing age, the fact that they have a child at all is nothing short of a miracle. Then there’s the way he gets his name. When the time comes for him to be circumcised, everyone presumes he’ll be called after his father, or his grandfather. But his mother insisted firmly: “No, he is to be called John” – and that’s a fascinating name, for it means “God’s gracious gift”.

When relatives and neighbors remind her that this is breaking with tradition, that no one in the family has that name, his father Zechariah intervenes. Taking up a writing tablet – for he’s been unable to speak ever since he doubted the angel’s message that Elizabeth would conceive – he carefully traces out the words: “His name is John.” As he does so, his power of speech returns. That is another marvel and it isn’t long before the question on everyone’s lips is: “What will this child turn out to be?”

He will turn out to be one of God's greatest servants, the herald who prepares the way for Jesus' coming. It's a glorious task, but John always remains humbly self-effacing; as he puts it: "I am not fit to undo his sandals"; "he [Jesus] must increase but I must decrease"; and once Jesus appears on the scene, John is content to step back out of the limelight. Until then he has a message that is simple and direct: "Come and be baptized as a sign of repentance, turn back to God; prepare the way of the Lord." And he repeats it, tirelessly.

If the beginning of John's life was a time of rejoicing, its end was marked by an act of sickening violence: he was beheaded in the underground dungeon of King Herod - the price he paid for condemning Herod's evil behavior. But during his lonely time in prison, uncertain as to what his fate might be, John also faced another trial - doubts about his life's work: in fact, he sent friends to ask Jesus if he really was the one they'd been waiting for. He wondered if he'd been mistaken in his mission, if, to use the words of Isaiah we heard in today's first reading, he had "toiled in vain." The reassurance he received from Jesus must have warmed his heart in his final grim days.

“What will this child turn out to be?” they asked when John was born. A similar question might have been asked about us, for marvels have marked our lives, too. Like John, we were known by God before we were born; known and loved in our mother’s womb. Shortly after our birth, another marvel awaited most of us: through the sacrament of baptism, we began to share in God’s own life, became God’s sons and daughters with a destiny of eternal life and happiness. And now, like John, we are called to decrease so that Christ may increase in us, and to bear witness to him in the way we live our lives.

Like John, we may have moments when we wonder if it’s all worth it, if perhaps we’re toiling in vain. Our celebration of John’s birthday can help us to draw strength from his heroic courage and faithfulness unto death, and to be inspired, in our own small way, to continue his work, enabling the bright light of Christ to shine out more brilliantly in our world.

The words of the prophet Isaiah that we heard in today’s first reading expressed a great truth: “The LORD called me from birth, from my mother’s womb He gave me my name” (Isaiah 49:1). There is great hope and confidence in this realization.

We proclaimed another great truth in today's Responsorial Psalm: "O LORD, you have probed me, you know me: you know when I sit and when I stand, you understand my thoughts from afar" (Psalm 139:1-3). Knowing us as he does, the Lord says to us, "It is too little for you to be my servant;" to be known by God, loved by God, and desired by God is an indescribable grace given to each of us (Isaiah 49:6).

Truly, no one knows us as well as the Lord. At times, this is a great consolation and we "give thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). At other times, the Lord's closeness reminds us of our sins and of our need for a Savior, that we, too, must listen to those who authentically "testify to the light" so as to be made "a people fit for the Lord" (John 1:7; Luke 1:17).

As John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way of the Lord, so, too, we are sent to do the same in the lives of those we meet each day. As those joined to Christ in Holy Baptism, this is our constant duty and calling.

We have received his light; we have been clothed in his garment; we have been washed. Let us, then, beg the Lord to make us, like Saint John the Baptist, "a light to the nations, that [his] salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). May God give us this grace. Amen.