

**Address to the Serra Vocations Club of Madison County
Perpetual Help Center**

**The Memorial of Saint Dominic
August 8, 2012**

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

Dear brothers and sisters, it is good to be here with you today, not only to encourage you in your continued work for vocations, but also to thank you for the great support you have already given in the vineyard of the Church.

When I was appointed the ninth Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois we had eleven seminarians, one of whom I ordained to the priesthood. The remaining ten seminarians continued in their formation and were joined last year by an additional ten, bringing our number of seminarians to twenty. After ordaining three more men to the priesthood this past May, I am happy to say that – thanks be to God! – nine more seminarians are joining us this year, for a total of twenty-six seminarians.

For this dramatic increase in the number of seminarians for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois we naturally give great thanks to Almighty God, the Master of the Harvest, for sending laborers

into his harvest (cf. *Matthew* 9:38). We are grateful because, as Blessed Pope John Paul II has said,

Priestly vocations are proof and, at the same time, the condition of the vitality of the Church, in the first place because this vitality finds its incessant source in the Eucharist, as the center and the summit of all evangelization and of full sacramental life. Hence springs the indispensable need of the presence of the ordained minister, who is able, precisely, to celebrate the Eucharist.¹

Such an increase in the number of seminarians shows both that the Church here in central Illinois is alive and assures us that the Eucharist will continue to be celebrated in the years to come.

At the same time, we are also experiencing a tremendous growth of vocations to the consecrated life. Next week, I will have the extraordinary joy of receiving the final vows of thirteen Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George, as well as the first vows of three of their novices, and initiating two postulants into the novitiate. They have also had more than twenty-five women visit their community within the past several months.

Fourteen permanent Deacons were recently ordained for our Diocese and another sixteen men are in formation for the diaconate.

Taken together, all of this indicates that we are witnessing - may it please God - the beginning of the fulfillment of one aspect of my vision for the future of this Diocese that I described in the Deanery Masses of Welcome:

I see a diocese where there is an abundance of vocations of young people willing to answer God's call to follow Him and dedicate their lives to carrying out His mission in the world; where there are sufficient priests to staff our parishes and serve their parishioners with virtuous commitment and impeccable integrity; devoted deacons, nuns and religious brothers dedicated to teaching the faith and caring for the sick, the poor, and the dying.

Even so, I know that we are seeing now the fruit of seeds sown well before my arrival as Bishop of this Diocese. These seeds are now beginning to flourish thanks to the prayers of many people like you, dear Serrans, throughout the Diocese and thanks to the invitation from people like yourselves for young men to consider the priestly

and diaconal life and for young women to consider the consecrated life.

Pope Benedict XVI has highlighted the importance of praying for more vocations. “Vocations to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life are,” he says, “first and foremost the fruit of constant contact with the living God and insistent prayer lifted up to the ‘Lord of the harvest,’ whether in parish communities, in Christian families or in groups specifically devoted to prayer for vocations.”²

Because the Eucharist is vital to the life of every parish – to such an extent that without the Eucharist a parish cannot exist – every aspect of parish life should rightly include prayer for vocations to the priesthood, for those who will celebrate the Eucharist. At the same time, because the primary purpose of a parish is the encounter with Jesus Christ, every aspect of parish life – from catechesis to formation to liturgical celebrations to parish picnics and everything in between - should also include prayers for discerning the Lord’s for the lives of every parishioner. Each of these activities, varied as they are, can be opportunities for young

people to feel connected to the Body of Christ and to hear a call from the Lord to service.

To this end, every member of the faithful “needs consciously to feel responsibility for promoting vocations.”³ The Knights of Columbus have been right all these years: Vocations are everybody’s business, not just the realm of specific few.

Christian families, too, should not hesitate to ask the Lord to call their sons and daughters to lives of service to the Church and to humanity as priests, deacons, or consecrated men and women. Parents are to be the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith; authentic Christian faith requires a willingness to abandon oneself to God’s will, whatever it may be. Parents – and each member of the family – must strive diligently to help each other live in this way and to help discern the will of the Lord for each other. We must stop asking the question, “What do *you* want to do with your life?” and begin asking instead, “What does *God* want you to do with your life?”

Groups devoted to prayer for vocations, such as your Serra Vocations Club of Madison County, provide an invaluable service to the Church. The root of vocations lies in prayer, and though we do

not always see the fruit of our prayer immediately, in the course of time we can be certain that we will. Even so, we will never be able to realize, this side of heaven, the many ways in which the Lord answered our prayers.

Saint James teaches us that “The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful” (James 5:16). To this end, each of us should strive to grow in holiness each day as we implore the Lord to bestow upon his Church a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When asked what book he read more than others, Saint Dominic said, “I have studied the book of charity more than any other, for it teaches us all things.”⁴ Each of us must seek to read from this book, as well, so that our prayers will be all the more powerful.

Even to this very day, the Lord Jesus Christ has not ceased calling certain ones of his disciples to follow him in a more radical way.

He invites them to become his friends, to listen attentively to his word and to live with him. He teaches them complete commitment to God and to the extension of his kingdom... He invites them to leave behind their narrow agenda and their notions of self-fulfillment in order to immerse themselves in

another will, the will of God, and to be guided by it. He gives them an experience of fraternity, one born of that total openness to God (cf. Matthew 12:49-50) which becomes the hallmark of the community of Jesus.⁵

Our many prayers for those whom the Lord is calling to himself assist them in responding to his call with generous love. Nevertheless, we cannot rest content to simply pray for vocations; we must actively encourage them, as well.

Many priests, deacons, and consecrated men and women will tell you, if asked, that their vocation was found through the encouragement and invitation of members of the faithful. It often happens that a young man or woman may be considering a vocation quietly within their own hearts, but may well feel unworthy or uncertain of such a call. The simple encouragement of a fellow parishioner can be all they need to more seriously consider the call of the Lord.

Such words of encouragement can be quite simple. Genuine phrases like, “I think God may be calling you to be a priest because...” (and then state the reasons why you think this), or, “I see these gifts in you; you would make an excellent nun?” It can be

intimidating for us to say something like this to those whom we think the Lord is calling, but the Lord delights in using each of us as his humble instruments. Sometimes we must point out the gifts that we see in others that they may not see in themselves.

If we actively seek to promote and encourage vocations to the priesthood, diaconate, and consecrated life, even as we pray fervently for more such vocations, we can be certain that the Lord will answer our prayers and send more laborers into his harvest.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

“This great Saint reminds us that in the heart of the Church a missionary fire must always burn. It must be a constant incentive to make the first proclamation of the Gospel and, wherever necessary, a new evangelization. Christ, in fact, is the most precious good that the men and women of every time and every place have the right to know and love!”⁶

¹ Blessed Pope John Paul II, Address to the Participants of the International Congress for Vocations in Rome, May 10, 1981.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 48th World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 48th World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

⁴ In “St. Dominic,” *Butler’s Lives of the Saints: August*. David Hugh Farmer, *et al*, eds. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 55.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 48th World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, February 3, 2010.