

**Homily for Thanks for the Harvest Mass
November 17, 2013
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C**

**Immaculate Conception Parish
Mattoon, Illinois**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

When a group of very eager and enthusiastic participants at a Church conference on strategies for spreading the Gospel asked an expert on evangelization what was the most effective evangelical strategy today, he gave a disconcerting answer. He said that empirical research showed the answer is martyrdom. After a long pause, one of the participants at the conference finally asked, "Can you tell us what the second most effective strategy might be?"

It is not surprising that we look for an easier answer when the first answer may involve dying for our faith. We play down a central teaching of Christianity, which is the need to back up our words with actions - this is what Jesus means when He tells us to take up His cross and follow Him. He also tells His disciples that He and they will have to suffer for their faith. Such persecution will be an opportunity for them to bear witness to

their faith. God will give them an eloquent defense. They may be betrayed by their family and friends, and some will be put to death. But Jesus tells us not to be frightened but rather to have confidence, because in the end, "Your endurance will win you your lives."

In the history of the Church, Christians have drawn strength from these words of Jesus. From Saint Stephen onwards, men and women have given the witness of their lives as martyrs. Such persecution continues today. A little publicized fact at the moment is that Christians are persecuted more than the followers of any other religious faith throughout the world. Innumerable Christian communities are on the defensive against rampant forms of intolerance. In many countries around the world, especially in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Christians are not free to worship without harassment. Since the turn of the millennium, about 200 million Christians are now under threat.

It takes great courage to witness to the faith in such countries. But even in countries where Christianity is not persecuted, there are opportunities to give witness when Gospel values are questioned. It may be on questions of marriage, respect for life, or justice and peace, but it takes courage to take a stand against the prevailing consensus.

In today's first reading from the prophet Malachi, we hear these words: "Lo, the day is coming" (Mal 3:19). The day that the prophet speaks of is no ordinary day, but rather, the Last Day, the day at the end of time when Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. It is this final day that the Church asks us to direct our gaze toward each year as we reach the conclusion of the liturgical year.

In addition to the readings that the Church offers to us for our reflection during this time, the world around us, especially during these autumn days, offers us a visual aid to assist us in pondering this reality. By now, most of the leaves have changed and are falling from the trees, signifying the passing away of this world as it is presently known. The days are growing shorter with less sunlight, pointing to that last day when "the sun will be darkened" (Mt 24:49). Here in central Illinois, we see the fields being harvested, evoking the image of the harvest at the end of time where the faithful will be separated from the wicked and welcomed into eternal light.¹

The end of time is a reminder that what is present here on earth is only temporary, “[b]ut according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13). To many, this is a frightening prospect as it means a transition to something largely unknown. To others, especially those who find this life a burden, it is a change to look forward with great joy to the promise of this new life in Heaven. For those who fear this final day, there is the desire that it be delayed as long as possible. For those who eagerly anticipate it, it cannot come soon enough. In either case, the Lord directs that we should “stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt 25:13) of this end.

In today’s second reading from his second letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul is confronting a situation in which the people expect the Lord to return very soon. As a result, many have abandoned their responsibilities that pertain to this present life. These duties seemed unnecessary given the fact that they would soon cease with the return of the Lord. St. Paul reprimands them for this behavior because they are denying a fundamental part of God’s plan which calls man to work and “subdue the earth” (Gen. 1:28).

St. Paul uses himself as a model of one who worked “in toil and drudgery, night and day” (2 Thess 3:8) and urged others to “work quietly” (2 Thess 3:12) according to their state in life. Work, therefore, is a duty that is expected of all of us as we await the coming of the Lord. This work takes on various forms, but as we gather today for this Mass of Thanksgiving for the Harvest, we focus in a particular way on the work of agriculture.

The work of planting and harvesting has always been honored in the Scriptures and the Church as a most noble profession. In his Encyclical Letter on Human Work, Blessed John Paul II singled out the dignity of this type of work. He wrote that “[t]he world of agriculture, which provides society with the goods it needs for its daily sustenance, is of fundamental importance.”² Farming addresses a need that is essential to human existence and therefore contributes in a most significant way to the common good. St. Paul writes that “if anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat” (2 Thess 3:10). If the farmers are unwilling to work, then nobody *can* eat!

At the same time, as essential as the work of agriculture is, few types of work are as challenging and subject to so many variables out of one’s control. As such, being a farmer requires a great amount of faith and trust

that the Lord will provide. This type of faith is especially conducive to being a Christian as we are called to trust that even though events may not always unfold in the way that we would like, the Lord does not abandon His children but always remain close to those who persevere in following Him. When we find ourselves in a situation that requires this type of faith, every gift and blessing that we receive is an opportunity for giving thanks to God because we know that in the end, even though we cooperate with Him, He alone has made these fruits possible.

It is with that attitude of thanksgiving that we have come here today, grateful for the blessings that God has showered upon our farmers here in central Illinois during this year's harvest. Whether the yield is large or small, it is all a gift and can be used to benefit others. As this harvest season draws to a close, you will no doubt already begin your planning for the next season, looking for ways to yield a more productive harvest, yet still placing your trust in God's providence. This provides a fitting parallel for the spiritual life as the Church prepares for the beginning of a new liturgical year. We look for new ways of being more open to God's will in our lives so as to experience a more fruitful life in the Spirit, submitting ourselves in trust to the God who loves us.

It is certainly fitting that we commemorate this occasion in the context of our celebration of the Eucharist. The word Eucharist itself means thanksgiving. Each time we come to the altar for this feast, we bring with us hearts that are grateful for the countless blessings that the Lord bestows upon us, particularly the gift of eternal salvation which has been won for us through His Son's Passion, death, and Resurrection. As we give thanks for another harvest, let us renew our hope in the promise of eternal life in Heaven. Until that time comes, though, may we continue to heed the Lord's command to "subdue the earth" (Gen. 1:28), working contentiously and diligently as His stewards who await the master's return, for "[b]lessed is that servant whom his master on his arrival finds doing so" (Mt 24:46).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cf. Mt. 13:37-42.

² Blessed John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 21.