

**Homily for the Opening Mass
of the USA Council of Serra International
Region 9 Fall Conference**

**The Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows
Belleville, Illinois**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is my privilege to be with you as you begin your regional fall conference for Serra International at this shrine dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows. I offer my gratitude on behalf of all the bishops in the area where you serve, for the important work of fostering and affirming vocations to the priesthood and religious life in the Church.

In our first reading from book of the prophet Haggai, we hear the words: "Greater will be the future glory of this house than the former, says the LORD of hosts" (Hg 2:9). The Jewish people had just finished rebuilding the Temple after they had returned from the exile. As they looked upon the Temple they were discouraged because it paled in comparison to the former glory of the Temple built by Solomon. The Lord offers these words to encourage them to not be saddened, but to be confident in knowing that the glory of this new Temple will surpass that of

the former. What the Lord is urging the people to have in this situation is faith and hope, that even though they may not see this glory now, the promise of the Lord is trustworthy and true. This hope would be necessary for them to continue so as to not fall into discouragement and despair.

This call to hope is one that is constantly proposed throughout the Scriptures and throughout the life of the Church. It is this sense of hope that we must have in a particular way in the work of promoting vocations to the priesthood. This hope is firmly grounded in the promise of the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah, where the Lord tells us: "I will give you shepherds after my own heart" (Jer 3:15). The Lord does not say that He might give us shepherds, He says that He *will* give us shepherds. Just like the Jewish people, this promise requires a response of faith and hope on our part. In commenting on this passage, Blessed John Paul II said the following in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Formation of Priests, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: "Everyone is called upon to share complete trust in the unbroken fulfillment of God's promise."¹ We do not let ourselves be discouraged by those who would like to lament about the shortage of priests, especially in our country. Out of that mindset, they try to advocate would-be solutions such as the ordination of women or the

removal of the requirement of priestly celibacy for candidates for Holy Orders. Such supposed “solutions” look at the situation from a “realistic” perspective, so they say. In reality, what such a position reflects is a lack of faith and hope that God will be true to His promise of providing shepherds to pasture the flock of His Church. And so we pray that we might be more firmly rooted in that hope which trusts that God is indeed faithful and will grant to the Church those shepherds to care for His flock.

At the same time, we cannot stand idly by and do nothing, assuming that God has no need of us in the work of providing for shepherds for the Church. Our involvement in God’s creative work has been the case throughout salvation history. Although He is certainly capable of doing all things, God has chosen to involve man in His work of salvation. The work of calling and forming candidates for the priesthood is not exempt from this involvement. The Lord makes this clear when He exhorts us: “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.” (Mt 9:37-38). In the same letter of Blessed John Paul II, he reminds us that the Church has a “grave responsibility” to cooperate with the Lord’s work of calling and forming men for the priesthood. He explains that the Church “must propose clearly

and courageously to each new generation the vocational call, help people to discern the authenticity of their call from God and to respond to it generously, and give particular care to the formation of candidates for the priesthood.”²

As our Lord indicates, the first and most important step in our cooperation in this great endeavor is prayer. We cannot hope to be successful in contributing to the conditions of a culture of vocations without the essential element of prayer. In this regard, we can say two things about prayer. The first is that we should pray for individuals to have the courage to answer the call to the path that God is inviting them to follow. We should not just be content to pray in a general way, but to be as specific as possible. If we recognize somebody who might have a vocation, we should be praying for them by name. In our parishes, we should be praying for our young people that God might call one or more of them to consider being a priest. Finally, we should be looking within our own families, at our sons, grandsons, nephews, and praying for them by name that they might be open to a vocation to the priesthood. The other thing to say about prayer is that we have the opportunity to teach our young people to pray, for this is necessary for them to truly hear God speaking to them in

the depths of their heart. In his Letter for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations for this past year, Pope-Emeritus Benedict wrote the following: “Vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life are born out of the experience of a personal encounter with Christ, out of sincere and confident dialogue with him, so as to enter into his will.”³ Providing opportunities for our young people to grow in their understanding of prayer and then encouraging them to practice it is a valuable service that we can do to promote that culture of vocations so as to bring to fulfillment the Lord’s promise of providing shepherds for His people.

The work of Serra International has been extremely beneficial to the life of the Church, especially in this area of vocation promotion. May your gathering during these days be a source of encouragement to not lose hope in the Lord’s promises, but to be renewed in your efforts to cooperate with Him in this task. May prayer be at the center of all of your efforts as you continue to foster an atmosphere that is constantly open to the calling of the Lord to follow Him.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1.

² Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 2.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the 50th World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, 21 April 2013.