

**Solemnity of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
Mass for Pastoral Visit, St. Thomas Parish
Camp Point, Illinois
December 29, 2013**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Her name was Nellie, and she came from the west of Ireland, and whenever something alarming happened, or something that took her by surprise, Nellie would exclaim in clear and ringing tones, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” She was not being irreligious, nor was she taking the holy names in vain. Rather, she had been taught from her earliest years, as a child in Ireland, to invoke the names of the Holy Family whenever she was in trouble or needed help. So well did Nellie take this advice to heart that it became her signature, and everybody who knew and loved Nellie knew that, in her world, the invocation of the Holy Family was never far from her lips.

In earlier days it had been a great prayer, taught to people to invoke the persons of the Holy Family as a preparation for a happy death. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Mary and

Joseph, assist me in my last agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you.” This tradition came from the understanding that Joseph had passed from this world with Jesus and Mary at his side.

Here today, on this Sunday after Christmas, the Church puts before us the image of the Holy Family and speaks to us about virtue. Indeed about many virtues, all those positive forces that are needed if people are going to be able to live with one another peaceably and in harmony.

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 or celebrating a parish jubilee. 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! Though I must say, your church looks very nice! 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. So it is good to see people of faith gathered here.

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, into which we have been incorporated by the grace of Baptism.

In writing to the people of Colossae, St. Paul gives a very impressive list of virtues in his letter that we heard today as our second reading, and he talks about them as if they were the clothes that we wear in everyday

life. Every day we have to put these clothes on – compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. These are the clothes we put on when we were baptized. Do you wear these clothes every day? He goes on to tell us to teach and advise one another in daily life. We have a lot of learning to do. And finally he points out that parents must be as good to their children as they expect their children to be themselves.

Virtues are not simply “nice things” to have in your life. They are vital to your well-being and to your happiness. They are vital to the peace of the world. Jesus said, “If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” You will never know what the joy of God is. And the point is that every day your virtue will be tested by members of your own family, as well as by people in the street. But the first battle will be fought not in your home but in your own heart, because it is there that virtue and vice battle for supremacy.

In the days of Jesus’ birth, a cruel tyrant ruled the land. Herod was so lost in vice that he lived in constant fear of being overthrown. Seeing enemies everywhere, he had three of his own sons executed, fearing that they intended to topple him. Once you commit yourself to evil and wrongdoing, nothing short of conversion of heart can ever save you. Any

vice can destroy us, stealing our peace of mind, and throwing us into anger and despair. That is why Paul urges us, “never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus.” What a wonderful way to live your life!

Some people have nothing but happiness to relate when they think of their family. Others have nothing but sorrow and sadness to speak of. The family, in our experience, can be a place of joy, or a nightmare. In this sense, the family is like the world itself, a place in need of love and redemption. Jesus said that he did not come to condemn the world but to save it. If our experience of family life is good, then give thanks to God for it. Where people’s experience of family life is bad, then let us save people from the ruins.

In the story of the Holy Family today we hear of the message given to Joseph by the angel of God, telling him to save the mother and child. And Joseph did that, going first into Egypt and then to the town of Nazareth. In that little corner of Galilee, Jesus grew up in “wisdom, age and grace,” in a loving family home. Every child deserves the chance to do the same.

In this Eucharistic liturgy, we experience Jesus as the light for our hearts and the one who lifts the burdens of our sins from our shoulders. As we approach Christ in communion at every Mass, you and I can truly say

that we who walked in darkness have seen a great light. May our gathering around this altar and our celebration of the Eucharist always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.