

**Homily for a Parish Visit to  
Holy Family Parish  
Litchfield**

**The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord - Cycle C  
January 13, 2013**

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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.

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.

But this "special relationship" brought about in the saving waters is not just about recognizing each other's faces and knowing one another's names and titles. In the Church, we call this relationship a *communio*, that is, the communion of those belonging to the Body of Christ, the Church, which the Second Vatican Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the

Church, *Lumen Gentium* (14), describes as follows: “Fully incorporated into the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and . . . are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops.” Thus, to remain in this authentic *communio*, we can never see ourselves as somehow “independent” or act apart from the universal Church or even the local diocese, or else we cease to be truly Catholic.

As we celebrate today the Baptism of the Lord by which he showed his solidarity with us even to the point of death, it is fitting for us to consider, for a moment, our own Baptism. On the day of our Baptism, our parents and godparents - or, if we were adults, we ourselves - were asked, “What do you ask of God’s Church for your child?” Among the appropriate answers is, “Faith,” to which the priest asked “And what does faith offer?” “Eternal life,” came the response. Yes, eternal life comes from faith and faith comes from Jesus Christ.

This encounter with Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Year of Faith that we are observing in the Catholic Church throughout the world. Indeed, in his apostolic letter announcing this year, Pope Benedict XVI

spoke of “the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed clearly light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ” (*Porta Fidei*, 2).

Each of us makes our way on this journey of faith at different speeds or paces. Some of us run swiftly along, keeping our eyes firmly fixed on the prize of eternal life. Some of us simply amble on as if this journey of faith were an escalator that will simply move us up the stairway to heaven without any real effort on our part. Others make their way backwards and forward and back again.

At whatever pace we travel on this journey of faith, there is always room for growth. Baptism calls us to abandon ourselves continuously to the will of the Lord and to follow Jesus as our Savior; this is what we call discipleship.

The word “disciple” has its roots in the word *disco* – not a genre of music from the 70s, but Latin for “I learn.” The disciple is one who learns from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This learning is not from dusty tomes or ancient manuscripts, but from the very person of Jesus Christ, risen and alive today, through an immediate and personal relationship with him and his Church. This relationship does not – indeed, cannot –

leave a person as he or she was before. The true disciple is the one who becomes such a student of the Master that his very life conforms to the life of Christ in all things. In the waters of Baptism, we have died and risen with Christ; we share in his life and so our lives must now reflect his; when people look at us, at followers of Christ, they should be able to see the love of Jesus shining through our words and deeds.

Unfortunately, in our world today there are many people unwilling to place themselves under the lordship of Jesus Christ, to learn from him the will of the Father and the ways in which we may live in his love. You may have heard the statistic that the second-largest religious group in the United States is non-practicing Catholics. I am sure that many of us know personally the people and stories behind these numbers. They are our sisters and brothers, our nieces and nephews, our sons and daughters, our neighbors and co-workers.

What can we say to reignite in them the fire of faith, to call them back to the promises made and received in Baptism? What is Christ inspiring us to do to proclaim the faith anew to these lost sheep? These questions lie at the heart of the Year of Faith. Of this task, the Holy Father wrote: "To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived, and

prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year” (*Porta Fidei*, 9). To this end, I would like to propose to a three-fold plan to make the most of this Year of Faith.

First, we must be grateful for the faith we have received, for our encounter with the Lord. Families should strive to make their homes places where the family prays together, reads the Scriptures together, and is nourished together at Sunday Mass. Families should strive to allow their faith to influence everything they do, rather than reserving their faith only for an hour or so on Sunday.

Second, we must endeavor to understand all the more clearly the faith we profess. If a friend, family member or co-worker asks us a question about Catholicism, can we provide an adequate – and correct – answer? We ought to be able to do so.

Third, we must share our faith, not only with our family and friends, but with our co-workers and everyone we meet. As the Holy Father reminds us, “Confessing with the lips indicates in turn that faith implies public testimony and commitment” (*Porta Fidei*, 10).

This three-fold plan is the way of discipleship and through it we learn to apprentice ourselves to Jesus Christ, to live our more fully the grace of Baptism.

As we approach Christ in communion at this and at every Mass, 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.