

**Homily for a Parish Visit to
St. Nicholas Parish, Pocahontas
and St. Elizabeth Parish, Marine**

**12th Sunday of the Year - Cycle C
June 23, 2013**

**† Most Rev. Thomas John Paprocki
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 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! 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.

In today's first reading from the Prophet Zechariah, we heard the words of the Lord saying, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and petition" (Zechariah 12:10). Often we approach prayer as a last resort. When we have exhausted all human efforts, we turn to the divine for solace, relief, and remedy. But

that is to misunderstand prayer; for recourse to prayer ought not to be a final, desperate plea to the Almighty, but instead, ought to be infused into every moment of our lives – continual opportunities to offer thanksgiving, praise, and petition.

Like us, our ancestors petitioned the Lord – frequently and for almost everything imaginable. The Scriptures record prayers for wisdom, mercy, physical healing, children, strength, and good weather. Certainly the Lord never grows tired of our petitions. The Prophet Zechariah tells us that prayer itself is a gift from God; that the Lord will grant to his people “a spirit of grace and petition.” For even our desire to pray, our ability to raise our hearts and minds to God, is itself a gift from Him.

Today we exercise that divine gift by continuing our prayers for religious freedom. The U.S. Bishops have declared a Fortnight for Freedom, asking Catholics to engage in a “great hymn of prayer for our country” and a “national campaign of teaching and witness for religious liberty.”¹

Fittingly, this period of special petition will last until the Fourth of July, the day we celebrate as a nation all our liberties. The significance of this fortnight as an appropriate time to pray for religious liberty can be seen simply by looking at the liturgical calendar for this two-week period:

- Yesterday, June 22nd, marked the memorial of two British martyrs who refused to take the Oath of Supremacy, which purported to make the King head of the Church in England instead of the Pope. The reason for the King's action was the Pope's refusal to grant an annulment of the King's marriage. When King Henry VIII decided to annul his marriage to Queen Catherine of Aragon, Bishop John Fisher appeared in court on her behalf, where he declared that, like John the Baptist, he was ready to die on behalf of the indissolubility of marriage. Sir Thomas More, who had resigned as the King's Chancellor, and Bishop John Fisher had remained faithful to the Church. For this they were both beheaded.
- June 24th is the Solemnity of the birth of St. John the Baptist, who was beheaded by King Herod for telling the King that it was wrong for him to have divorced his wife so he could marry his brother's wife (cf. Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21; Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9).
- June 28th is the Memorial of St. Irenaeus, bishop and martyr, who gave his life defending the fullness of the Christian faith.

- June 29th is the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, both of whom died as martyrs in Rome, during the persecution of the Emperor Nero, for their public witness of faith in Jesus Christ.
- June 30th is the memorial of the First Martyrs of the Church of Rome, honoring those many Christian who were tortured, crucified, and burned alive in 64 A.D. in Nero's gardens on the Vatican Hill.
- July 3rd is the Feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle, who evangelized Syria, Persia and India. He also died as a martyr for the faith.

All of these commemorations of courageous witnesses of faith will culminate on the Fourth of July, which of course is not an ecclesiastical holyday, but a civic holiday. Nevertheless, the *Roman Missal* for the United States does provide liturgical texts for Independence Day. The Collect for Independence Day will provide a very fitting culmination to our Fortnight for Freedom: "God of justice, Father of truth, who guide creation in wisdom and goodness to fulfillment in Christ your Son, open our hearts to the truth of his Gospel, that your peace may rule in our hearts and your justice guide our lives."

This prayer helps to put this fortnight in its proper perspective, praying for justice, truth, wisdom, goodness and peace. The bishops have called us to participate in this two-week period of prayer and action to address the many current challenges to religious freedom, including the August 1st deadline to comply with the mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services for certain categories of employers, including many Church institutions, to provide or facilitate health insurance for contraception, sterilization, and abortion-inducing drugs.

For more than a year, the bishops, Catholic citizens, and religious leaders of various faiths have attempted to work with the government to secure an exemption from the mandate. Unfortunately, the government has been unwilling to provide an exemption for the vast majority of faith-based organizations, including Catholic hospitals, universities, and charitable organizations. Many private employers who have objections to providing these morally problematic services have gone to court to assert their rights to the free exercise of their religious beliefs under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. So far, in 20 out of 27 of these cases, judges have granted preliminary injunctions barring the government from enforcing the HHS mandate against them. These are not final decisions, but

the preliminary injunctions are encouraging signs of hope for the protection of religious liberty.

In addition to the mandate, there are other threats to religious freedom: proposed laws which prohibit the Church from offering spiritual and charitable assistance to undocumented immigrants; new laws that have effectively closed Church-run adoption agencies and foster care services in Boston, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and right here in Illinois, and an expected Supreme Court decision that may be announced this coming week that may attempt to redefine marriage in U.S. law.

In the face of these serious threats to religious liberty, the Church cannot be silent, nor can it cease to beg the Lord for a restoration of our rights. The Scriptures continually exhort us to prayer and petition for all our needs. Jesus tells us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8).

May these days of the Fortnight for Freedom be a time of intense and focused prayer, asking the Lord for protection of conscience and religious liberty. As we bring our prayers to Him, we desire the same gift of which

the Prophet Zechariah spoke: that the Lord might pour upon our country “a spirit of grace and petition” to help assure the preservation of our freedoms for generations to come.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ USCCB, Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement on Religious Liberty*, April 2012.