

**Homily for a Parish Visit to
St. Bonaventure Parish
St. Elmo, Illinois
Labor Day
September 2, 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 or celebrating a parish jubilee. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for this Labor Day holiday 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 must say that your church appears to have weathered many generations of Catholic services! 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.

As we celebrate Labor Day today, our scripture readings provide us with a spiritual perspective on work. The worldly perspective of work is basically that a job is needed to make money, and money is needed to support yourself and your family. If you're really lucky, you might actually get a job that you enjoy doing, and get paid for doing it. That is true as far

as it goes in the worldly perspective, but the spiritual perspective goes so much beyond that to provide a much deeper meaning, which we call the sanctification of work.

In our first reading from the Book of Genesis, God created man and then “settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it” (*Genesis 2:19*). Man’s work in cultivating and caring for the garden was not simply to give man something to do, but actually to share in the work of cultivating and caring for God’s creation. In our Gospel passage from St. Matthew, Jesus says that we are to “seek his way of holiness” (*Matthew 6:33*). In the spiritual perspective of work, we see a connection between our labors and seeking God’s way of holiness.

The practical steps on the path to holiness applicable to all the Christian faithful involve following a basic plan of life. Some of these steps require daily application, such as praying a Morning Offering at the beginning of the day, the Angelus at 12:00 and 6:00 o’clock, grace before meals, an examination of conscience, an act of contrition and a prayer of thanksgiving at bedtime. Praying the Rosary, doing acts of penance, giving to charity and reading the Bible and other spiritual books should be done on a regular basis, if not daily. Everyone must participate in Mass and

receive the Holy Eucharist at least once a week on Sunday to be nourished in the faith and strengthened in the bonds of communion with the Body of Christ, but many people attend Mass every day, especially during Lent, in order to obtain its bountiful graces and support for daily life. In my opinion, going to the Sacrament of Penance to confess and be absolved of our sins is something that we should do at least monthly to be reconciled with God and with His Church.

The path to holiness does not stop with specifically religious and spiritual activities, but extends into our daily lives at home, at school and at work. While the “universal call to holiness” was highlighted at the Second Vatican Council, almost 400 years ago St. Francis de Sales wrote in his classic spiritual masterpiece, *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, that holiness is possible in all walks of life, under any circumstance and at all times. Whatever the tasks we have to perform in the world we are all called to be saints. Holiness is not the prerogative of the monks, nuns and parish priests, but of all. Everyone is called to live a life of holiness. Every human being is called to enter into a living, loving and vibrant relationship with God, each according to his or her status in life.

A good concrete example for lay people of sanctifying the everyday life of work was described by a laundry worker, who said that before he came to understand the concept of “sanctification of work,” when he was cleaning shirts in his Dad’s laundry, he “would often let little stains pass by, especially if they were under the collar or someplace hard to reach. It was too much hard work, and I would tell myself that if anyone ever complained, I could always say that I hadn’t seen the stain.” Now that he tries to bring holiness into his work, he says that he takes his work much more seriously. He tries to “get out all the stains, however tiny or hard to see.” He summed up this approach very well, saying, “I realize that I’m not just cleaning the shirt for the client, but for God.” Thus, the central idea is that all work, even the most menial or hidden, is ultimately for God.¹

As this example illustrates, the sanctification of our lives applies not just to priests, but to everyone. In the Eucharist that we are about to celebrate, Christ will come into our hearts in Holy Communion. There He will dwell and go forth with us into our daily lives. May Christ sanctify our work and all that we do, that His divine presence within us may be brought into every aspect of our lives wherever we may be.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ John L. Allen, Jr., *Opus Dei: An Objective Look at the Myths and Realities of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), pp. 77-78.