

**Homily for a Parish Visit to
Saint Rita Parish, Kincaid**

**23rd Sunday of the Year - Cycle C
September 7, 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! 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.

Although our liturgy tonight is for the 23rd Week in Ordinary Time, I note that tomorrow is the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In honor of Mary, the Queen of Peace, Pope Francis has proclaimed today to be a day of fasting and prayer for peace in Syria, in the entire Mideast region, and throughout the whole world. Speaking ahead of the traditional Angelus

prayer with pilgrims gathered in St Peter's Square this past Sunday, Pope Francis said, "On [Saturday] the 7th of September, here [in St Peter's Square], from 7 PM until midnight, we will gather together in prayer, in a spirit of penitence, to ask from God this great gift [of peace] for the beloved Syrian nation and for all the situations of conflict and violence in the world."

This period of prayer designated by Pope Francis translates to our time zone as 12:00 noon to 5:00 PM Central Standard Time today, so it is good for us to gather to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and receive into our hearts Jesus, the Prince of Peace, during this last hour of prayer for peace.

The Holy Father also invited non-Catholic Christians and non-Christian believers to participate in ways they feel are appropriate. "Never again war!" said Pope Francis. "We want a peaceful world," he said, "we want to be men and women of peace."

Pope Francis also issued a forceful condemnation of the use of chemical weapons. "There is the judgment of God, and also the judgment of history, upon our actions - [judgments] from which there is no escaping." He called on all parties to conflicts to pursue negotiations, and

urged the international community to take concrete steps to end conflicts, especially the war in Syria. "Humanity needs to see gestures of peace," said Pope Francis, "and to hear words of hope and of peace." He added, "Never has the use of violence brought peace in its wake. War begets war, violence begets violence."¹

Cardinal Timothy Dolan, President, USCCB, and Bishop Richard E. Pates, Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, also issued a statement about the planned military strike against Syria, saying, "the path of dialogue and negotiation between all components of Syrian society, with the support of the international community, is the only option to put an end to the conflict."²

The Church is cautioning against the mindset that war is the only way to resolve this conflict, and reminds us that one evil action against human life should not be countered with another action that will result in the loss of more life in Syria and possibly beyond.

I note also that we are now entering the last few months of the "Year of Faith" proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI. At the heart of this Year of Faith is the personal encounter with the triune God. 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).

Unfortunately, not everyone shares in our joy and enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ. 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, Benedict XVI 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 Pope Emeritus reminded us, “Confessing with the lips indicates in turn that faith implies public testimony and commitment” (*Porta Fidei*, 10). Through this testimony and commitment, we invite others into a relationship with the God who is both three and one.

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

As we approach Christ in holy 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 in the Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 1 September 2013

² Statement of Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan and Bishop Richard E. Pates, 3 September 2013.