

**Chrism Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
April 15, 2014**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Bishop-elect Kemme, Reverend Monsignors and Fathers, Deacons,
Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In just under two weeks, the universal Church will celebrate the canonization of two of her beloved former shepherds of the flock, Blessed Pope John XXIII and Blessed Pope John Paul II. In doing so, the Church will propose these two figures “as models and intercessors”¹ for all of the faithful throughout the world who also seek to share in the reward of eternal life in Heaven. It will be a personal joy for me in a particular way to concelebrate the Mass of canonization with Pope Francis in Saint Peter’s Square, since I had the privilege to meet Pope John Paul II on several occasions. Moreover, it was this great Holy Father from Poland, the country of my ancestors, who appointed me Bishop in 2003, and will soon be a canonized Saint!

Among the many accomplishments and contributions of these two popes to the Church in the modern world, one of the greatest gifts that each of them has provided is the example of their priesthood, lived with love and fidelity for the people to whom they were called to serve. Their witness shines before us in a particular way this evening as we celebrate this Chrism Mass during which, in addition to blessing the holy oils to be used in the coming year throughout the diocese, the priests gathered here will renew the promises that they made on the day of their ordination to the priesthood.

Mindful of the importance of the priesthood to the life of the Church, Blessed John Paul II had the practice of writing a letter to his brother priests throughout the world each Holy Thursday during his pontificate. In his letter for the year 1986, the Holy Father provided a summary that expressed his intention behind these letters. He wrote the following to the priests:

As you know, I feel particularly close to each one of you on this occasion. And, the same as every year, as a sign of our sacramental union in the same priesthood, and impelled by my affectionate esteem for you and by my duty to confirm all my brothers in their

service of the Lord, I wish to send you this letter to help you to stir up the wonderful gift that was conferred on you through the laying on of hands.²

My brother priests, we are gathered together this evening to do just that, to stir up the gift of our priesthood and to renew our desire to remain faithful to the sacred calling that we have received from our Lord. This renewal is not to be found so much in reflecting on what we do, but rather on who we are. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that “by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, [we] are signed with a special character and are conformed to Christ the Priest in such a way that [we] can act in the person of Christ the Head.”³

Our identity as being anointed in a special way to share in the ministry of Christ is important for us to keep always before our eyes. To live this identity in an authentic and fruitful way, we must always remain close to Christ in all of our activities so that we might be “a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of humanity.”⁴

In his final Holy Thursday letter in 2005, Blessed John Paul II reflected on the need to have our lives centered in Christ when he wrote the following: “Particularly in the context of the new evangelization, the people have a right to turn to priests in the hope of ‘seeing’ Christ in them (cf. Jn 12:21).”⁵

Following in the great tradition of his predecessors, Pope Francis in his homily for the Chrism Mass last year reminded the priests that in their ministry of caring for souls, “the only thing that counts is ‘unction’ – not function.”⁶ What the Church needs most is not priests who are good business managers, effective fundraisers, learned intellectuals, social activists, or polished speakers. Important as they are in their own right, all of these point to the functions undertaken by a priest, which are secondary to being priests who live the ‘unction’ of holiness in imitation of Him in whose name we minister. If our lives are grounded in this holiness, all of those functions we undertake will bear fruit. Without holiness, we become mere functionaries and our work will ultimately be sterile.

As Blessed John Paul II noted, the faithful deserve to see Christ in us as priests. We should strive to imitate St. Paul who said: “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). After affirming your desire to

renew your priestly promises, the first question that I will ask points to this very topic of being conformed to Christ. I will ask if you are “resolved to be more united with the Lord Jesus and more closely conformed to him.” Your positive response to this question will be an expression of your willingness to strive, with the help of God’s grace, to be more configured to Christ in order to work more zealously for the salvation of souls.

In addition to the pastoral benefits for the people we serve, a priestly life rooted in holiness will serve as a compelling example for more young men to consider the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood. Once again, Blessed John Paul II’s words from his final Holy Thursday letter stress this point in a particularly beautiful way:

Vocations will certainly not be lacking if our manner of life is truly priestly, if we become more holy, more joyful, more impassioned in the exercise of our ministry. A priest “won”¹ by Christ (cf. Phil 3:12) more easily “wins” others, so that they too decide to set out on the same adventure.⁷

I have no doubt that the increased number of men that we have studying for the priesthood in our diocese is due in large part to their experience of good, holy priests. It is indeed to our benefit as a

presbyterate to continue to set this good example so that more young men may likewise be inspired to follow Christ in this beautiful life of the priesthood.

After questioning the priests, I will turn to you, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, inviting you to pray for your priests “so that they may lead you to Him, who is the source of salvation.” I cannot overstate the importance of this request that you constantly pray for all of us in the ministry of working for your salvation. We, as priests, are human beings who are far from perfect and who are in need of support and encouragement. Your love and prayers will assist us to grow in holiness, which will in turn benefit you and your parishes as you are led by shepherds after the heart of Christ Himself.

As we prepare to continue our celebration this evening, let us give thanks to God for the gift of the priesthood given by Christ to His Church as the means by which we are drawn deeper into the life of Christ. We pray in thanksgiving for the faithful priestly examples of Blessed Pope John XXIII and Blessed Pope John Paul II, who are set to be raised to the order of saints. In a particular way, we give thanks and pray for the priests here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, whether diocesan or religious. We

also pray for our seminarians who are preparing for the priesthood, that they too might seek to be firmly rooted in lives of holiness. We cannot forget also to pray for our many permanent deacons who render valuable service in their assistance to the ministry provided by our priests throughout the diocese.

Finally, let us give thanks to God for the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, whose Passion we are preparing to celebrate solemnly during the Paschal Triduum this week. Through His death and Resurrection, He has redeemed us and has anointed us to be His beloved sons and daughters. May our hearts be open to receiving His grace and living the new life that He has won for us, a life rooted in holiness and led by the Holy Spirit to fullness of His blessing in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §828.

² Blessed John Paul II, *Letter to Priests*, 16 March 1986 – in *Letter to My Brother Priests – Complete Collection of Holy Thursday Letters (1979-2005)*, Midwest Theological Forum (2006), 112.

³ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

⁴ Blessed John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, §43.

⁵ Blessed John Paul II, *Letter to Priests*, 13 March 2005.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Homily for Chrism Mass*, 28 March 2013.

⁷ Blessed John Paul II, *Letter to Priests*, 13 March 2005.