

**Homily for Palm Sunday
April 13, 2014**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The liturgy today is rather different from that of other Sundays. Already you will have noticed this when at the beginning of Mass a Gospel passage was read, telling of how the crowds welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem as they sang, "Hosanna to the Son of David"; and then we all processed with palms, singing like them. We now have our blessed palms and we'll take them home and put them somewhere so that we can remember that Jesus Christ is definitely someone to sing and shout about. Another major difference that we have just heard is the reading of the full account of Jesus' passion in the Gospel. Depending on the year, the passion of Matthew, Mark or Luke is read. This year it's Matthew's turn, as it is every three years.

Apart from the length of the Gospel, there is something quite different happening in this Gospel from what was happening in the first

Gospel reading, before the procession. The tone has changed starkly and dramatically. We have moved, as it were, from being witnesses of people in the crowd happily singing and rejoicing to now being witnesses of every detail of injustice and cruelty and torture inflicted on Jesus just a few days later. As we begin our celebrations of Holy Week, we are invited not just to watch like a spectator at a biblical movie epic, like “Noah” or “Son of God,” but to participate actively and identify with each of the characters, seeing our part that we play in these events.

Saint Gregory Nazianzen, fourth-century Archbishop of Constantinople and one of the great Fathers of the Church, said that we should

take our part in the Passover prescribed by the law, not in a literal way, but according to the teaching of the Gospel; not in an imperfect way, but perfectly; not only for a time, but eternally. Let us regard as our home the heavenly Jerusalem, not the earthly one. . . . [mention Judas, Peter, Pontius Pilate].

If you are a Simon of Cyrene, take up your cross and follow Christ. If you are crucified beside him like one of the thieves, now, like the good thief, acknowledge your God. For

your sake, and because of your sin, Christ himself was regarded as a sinner; for his sake, therefore, you must cease to sin. Worship him who was hung on the cross because of you, even if you are hanging there yourself. Derive some benefit from the very shame; purchase salvation with your death. Enter paradise with Jesus, and discover how far you have fallen. Contemplate the glories there, and leave the other scoffing thief to die outside in his blasphemy.

If you are a Joseph of Arimathea, go to the one who ordered his crucifixion, and ask for Christ's body. Make your own the expiation for the sins of the whole world. If you are a Nicodemus, like the man who worshiped God by night, bring spices and prepare Christ's body for burial. If you are one of the Marys, or Salome, or Joanna, weep in the early morning. Be the first to see the stone rolled back, and even the angels perhaps, and Jesus himself. . . .

I will say more: we must sacrifice ourselves to God, each day and in everything we do, accepting all that happens to us for the sake of the Word, imitating his passion by our sufferings,

and honoring his blood by shedding our own. We must be ready to be crucified.¹

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ (Oratio 45, 23-24: PG 36, 654-655)