

**Thanks for the Harvest Mass
Holy Family Parish
Litchfield, IL**

**The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe
November 23, 2014**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: four-and-a-half years ago, when I became the bishop of this diocese, there were several adjustments that I had to make in settling into my new position. I had to get used to a much larger diocese geographically, but a much smaller one in terms of the number of Catholics. I had to get used to working with and working for people that I did not yet know. I even had to find new routes for my morning runs and a new place to play ice hockey!

Another significant adjustment was getting used to the scenery around me as I traveled throughout the diocese. Having spent much of my life in the city of Chicago, I had grown accustomed to buildings of every shape and size and a vast network of streets and intersections that made up that vast and crowded city. In central Illinois, it is quite different. Much of the landscape is dominated by field after field. While some may consider such a sight boring or monotonous, I find it to be rather fascinating,

especially as one witnesses the progression of events throughout the season that begins with the tilling of the fields in the spring, continues with the growth of crops throughout the summer months, and finally, reaches completion in the fall with the harvest.

Many of the people that I meet as I travel in these areas are involved in the work of farming. The life of a farmer is certainly a challenging one. It is one that requires a great deal of faith, considering that many of the factors that contribute to a successful season are out of their control. An outlook rooted in faith is necessary to weather the ups and downs that characterize the life of a farmer.

Just last week, I heard about a farmer whose wife commented that he could always find something positive from any situation regarding the farm. In fact, when confronted with a very poor year, there was a sense of excitement about him as he proudly proclaimed that this was his worst year ever! To some that may sound slightly odd, but I think it shows the depth of faith that this farmer had, knowing he had to move on and that he could hope for better success the following year.

In many ways, the experience of farming parallels what we experience in our daily lives. There are some years that we can look back

on and be pleased with how everything turned out for us. There are other years when things did not go so well. As with farming, those hard times are often the result of something over which we had no control. In either case, it is our faith that helps us to see the situation with greater clarity. We attribute those good times of our life to God's goodness toward us, and we give Him thanks. The hard times are an invitation to renew our trust in God, confident that He will not abandon us but will give us the strength that we need to take the next step.

This supernatural outlook, whether it has to do with farming or any other part of our lives, is strengthened as we continue to draw closer to Christ. Today, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of Christ the King, and in doing so, she encourages us to renew within ourselves the desire to have Christ as the king of every aspect of our lives. When we let His power and His will reign in us, we come to recognize more completely that His ruling in our lives is in no way oppressive, but rather a source of great freedom and joy.

Our first reading and our responsorial psalm highlight this with the image of the shepherd who will watch over us, protect us, heal us, and lead us ultimately to safe pastures. Jesus Christ identifies Himself as the Good

Shepherd who fulfills these promises and who, if we allow ourselves to be led by Him, will lead us to the safe pastures of eternal life in Heaven where He reigns as our King.

Letting Christ reign as king of our lives is far more than a mindless obedience to His rules, but one that is done out of love for Him who has blessed us in so many ways. Out of our gratitude for those blessings, we seek to give back to Him. The first way that we do this is by giving Him profound thanks for His goodness to us. As one of the prefaces of the Mass so beautifully expresses: "For, although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation."¹ This thanksgiving profits us for salvation in that our hearts are more open to following Him more closely after having seen how abundantly He has provided for us in the past, and we are confident that He will continue to provide for us in the future.

This heart of gratitude which turns our gaze away from ourselves and toward God, also opens our eyes to the needs of those who are around us and are in need in various ways. In the Gospel for today's Mass, we are reminded of the obligation that we have not to overlook our brothers and sisters who are struggling. We are to reach out to them and share with

them from our blessings. Jesus reminds us that by doing this, we are serving Him. Our care for our neighbors, then, is an important way in which we are able to give back to God in thanksgiving for His coming to our aid in our times of need.

Our gathering together today to give thanks to the Lord of the Harvest for His abundant blessings in this year's harvest is an opportunity for us to thank Him for all of His blessings in our lives and to renew our commitment to serve Him more faithfully by the way that we live our lives, particularly in how we serve the least among us.

The celebration of the Solemnity of Christ the King also gives us a chance to reflect on His Kingship in the world around us. The society in which we live poses many challenges in this regard. One area in particular is that of religious liberty. An increasing amount of pressure is being placed on pushing anything to do with faith to the margins. Expressing the truths of our faith is often labeled as offensive and an attempt to impose our beliefs on society. Not wanting to be confronted with these truths, attempts are made to isolate us by enacting legislation that limits the freedoms that have made this country so great.

To stand idly by, letting our religious freedom be slowly taken away, is not an option. To do nothing would be a betrayal of the command that the Lord has given to us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) by proposing the Gospel to every place and to every generation. We who are convinced that this Good News is the path that leads to true peace, lasting happiness, and authentic freedom, should be happy to share this message with others so that they too can experience the fullness of life that God intends for all of His children.

While there are many ways to combat these attacks against our religious liberty, including voting and taking the necessary political action, our joyful witness of a life rooted in faith under the leadership of Christ is one of the most effective means of showing to those around us that the truths and teachings of our faith are a blessing to society, and not a burden. This begins with ourselves and our families and spreads to our friends, co-workers, and indeed everybody that we encounter. As farmers, you surely understand this dynamic, for just as from tiny seeds come great crops which are harvested and which then benefit a countless number of individuals, so too is the seemingly small witness of our lives capable of spreading in ways that we could never imagine.

As we continue our celebration of this Eucharist, let us give thanks to God for His many blessings. As we receive the greatest blessing in His Body and Blood, may our hearts burn with an ever greater desire to let Him reign more fully in our lives and to extend that reign by sharing His Word and His love with the world around us. By doing this, we make our desire His desire, that all will come to know, love, and serve Him in this life, so that we might all be eternally happy with Him in His Kingdom in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Common Preface IV