

**Homily for the Installation of Father John Nolan as Pastor of
Little Flower Parish, Springfield
December 6, 2014**

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

Reverend Fathers, Deacon, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In our high-tech age, we are often speaking to electronic answering systems. Having dialed the number we want, we are then invited to make choices according to our needs, and then we are asked to wait if we want to speak to a live human being. Sometimes we hear the recorded message, "Please wait while we try to connect you." If we have to wait too long many of us will give up on the call, feeling frustrated that we cannot speak to a person directly.

As we look into today's readings we can hear the voice of God trying to connect with us. In our first reading, from Isaiah, we hear God urging the prophet to console the people and to speak to their hearts so that they may know the joy of the presence of God. Isaiah announces that the place of preparation for this new awareness is primarily in the wilderness. For the Jews, the wilderness was both very real and full of symbolic meaning. Israel's very history and identity had been forged out of its desert journey from slavery in Egypt. This foundation story would be deeply imprinted in

the depths of their psyche. They knew all about the desert and the wilderness.

In the Gospel we hear the beginning of Mark's Good News narrative. It begins in the wilderness with a voice crying out to be heard. We are introduced to a man named John who fulfils Isaiah's ancient prophecy and calls for a change of heart and repentance.

There is a fierce attractiveness in the Baptist: the people come to listen to him and, subsequently, make changes in their lives. Why? Because he has integrity and humility and he speaks the truth. He reminds them of what they already know deep down in their heart of hearts. By speaking to their conscience he announces the closeness of God to a people who were waiting for, but who had perhaps lost, the connection with God, themselves and each other. John powerfully embodies the message he proclaims.

In the story of John the Baptist, we see that the beginning of the Good News is the story of a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare a way for the Lord. That wilderness voice challenges us today. How do we respond to its call? There is nothing within us or outside of us that can stop God loving us. Reconnecting to this deep truth and acknowledging our divine

origins means that we can embrace the message of the Baptist that God is indeed close.

It is fascinating that none of the traditional elements of the Christmas story have their origins in Mark's Gospel. There are no angels, shepherds or kings. There is no mention of a star in the sky, Mary and Joseph, or even the baby Jesus. For Mark, the real issue is the radical breakthrough to the new world of the Good News, which Jesus would later describe as the kingdom of God. Mark makes it clear that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. People are drawn to John the Baptist from far and wide to hear this momentous news.

John lived what he preached. By his lifestyle, his dress and his eating habits, he showed that the meaning of life is not to be found in the abundance of material possessions but in relationship with God. Simplicity of life and detachment from unnecessary cares and worries free the heart for a personal relationship with God. In this season of Advent the Church extends to us the call of John the Baptist to repent and confess our sins in preparation for the one who is to come. It is an opportunity to rediscover our hope and trust in God and to let go of false hopes and securities. It is a time for revisiting our life plans, relationships and priorities.

Everything that follows from the opening sentence of today's Gospel – the whole adventure of Jesus among us – marks a new beginning, the beginning of the Good News.

Today at this Mass we mark a new beginning in the life of Little Flower Parish with the Installation of your new Pastor, and I am very pleased that Father John Nolan has accepted the call to serve as the local shepherd of the Catholic community of faith here at Little Flower Parish in Springfield. At the same time, I am deeply grateful to Monsignor John Ossola for his years of dedicated service as your Pastor and as a faithful priest of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. Please join me in showing your appreciation for the priestly ministry of Monsignor John Ossola!

Just as Jesus sent the disciples into the world with instructions to proclaim the Good News of God's Kingdom to all creation, so every parish priest is called to invite people "to rejoice because your names are written in heaven." Father Nolan will now serve you as pastor in this Third Millennium of Christianity, so I think it is fitting to call to mind a theme suggested by our late Holy Father, the Great Pope Saint John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE*, "On entering the New Millennium," which I quote as follows (nos. 30-31): "First of all, I have no

hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to *holiness*. . . . To ask catechumens: 'Do you wish to receive Baptism?' means at the same time to ask them: 'Do you wish to become holy?' It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48)".

When he was Pope, Saint John Paul II used to send a letter every year to all the priests of the Church on the occasion of Holy Thursday. In 2001, he wrote this to his priests:

"At this time, I am thinking of the work you do every day, work that is often hidden and, without making headlines, causes the kingdom of God to advance in people's minds and hearts. I want you to know of my admiration for this ministry, discreet, tenacious and creative, even if it is sometimes watered by those tears of the soul which only God sees and 'stores in his bottle.' Your ministry is all the more admirable when it is tested by the resistance of a widely secularized environment, which subjects priestly activity to the temptations of fatigue and discouragement. You well know that such daily commitment is precious in the eyes of God. At the same time, I wish to echo the voice of Christ who continually calls us to deepen our relationship with him. 'Behold, I stand at the door and

knock' (Rev. 3:20)."¹ Referring to his Apostolic Letter that I mentioned earlier, the Pope continued, "In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* I indicated the commitment to holiness as the first element of all wise pastoral 'planning.' It is the basic task of all believers, so how much more it must be for us!"²

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, St. Francis de Sales wrote almost 400 years ago 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 living, loving and vibrant relationship with God, each according to his or her status in life.

In his letter proclaiming 2009 as the Year for Priests, Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “‘*The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus,*’ the saintly Curé of Ars would often say. This touching expression makes us reflect, first of all, with heartfelt gratitude on the immense gift which priests represent, not only for the Church, but also for humanity itself. I think of all those priests who quietly present Christ’s words and actions each day to the faithful and to the whole world, striving to be one with the Lord in their thoughts and their will, their sentiments and their style of life.”³

In his homily at the Chrism Mass last year in St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis said, "Dear lay faithful, be close to your priests with affection and with your prayers, that they may always be shepherds according to God's heart. Dear priests, may God the Father renew in us the Spirit of holiness with whom we have been anointed. May he renew his Spirit in our hearts, that this anointing may spread to everyone, even to those 'outskirts' where our faithful people most look for it and most appreciate it. May our people sense that we are the Lord's disciples; may they feel that their names are written upon our priestly vestments and that we seek no other identity; and may they receive through our words and deeds the oil of gladness which Jesus, the Anointed One, came to bring us."⁴

Therefore, dear parishioners of Little Flower Parish, I urge you to strive for holiness, to work and pray with your new pastor. Support him, help him, pray for him, and most of all, love him as he loves you and as Christ calls us to love each other.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Letters to My Brother Priests: Complete Collection of Holy Thursday Letters (1979-2005)* (Woodridge, Illinois: Midwest Theological Forum, 2006), p. 289.

² Pope John Paul II, *Letters to My Brother Priests*, p. 292.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter Proclaiming a Year for Priests on the 150th Anniversary of the "Dies Natalis" of the Curé of Ars*, June 16, 2009.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Chrim Mass Homily*, St. Peter's Basilica, Holy Thursday, March 28, 2013.