

**Homily for a Parish Visit to  
Ascension Church of St. John Paul II Parish  
Mt. Olive, Illinois  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A**

**August 16, 2014**

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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 here at Ascension Church of St. John Paul II Parish. 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! 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.

This past April, I had the privilege of being in Rome for the historic canonization of two popes – Pope St. John XXIII and Pope St. John Paul II. This event was a time of great joy not just for those of us who were present, but for the entire Church spread throughout the world. These two shepherds have impacted the Church in countless ways through their

dedicated ministry on earth and now assist her in an even more significant way as they intercede on her behalf in Heaven. Your parish has a privileged relationship with your newly-canonized patron, Saint John Paul II, and I pray that he will intercede for you to receive Christ's blessings in abundance.

Carrying on the great work of his illustrious predecessors, Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 published a book entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*. It is the first part of what turned out to be a three-part picture of the preacher from Galilee. In these later years of his life, and after so many years of theological study and teaching, the Holy Father wanted to write a simple and straightforward story of Jesus. As he says in the foreword of the book, it "is solely an expression of my personal search 'for the face of the Lord.'"

In the book the Holy Father asks the question, "What did Jesus bring to the world?" He did not bring world peace. He did not bring prosperity. So what has he brought to us? The answer is very simple, Pope Benedict says. Jesus has brought God to the world. He has told us about God, whom he calls "the Father." He has shown us that in looking upon Jesus we are looking upon God in human form. As he said to the apostle Philip, "To have seen me is to have seen the Father."

The one, true God, the Lord who revealed himself to Abraham and Moses, who made Israel his special people, now comes among us in Jesus of Nazareth. In particular, he comes first to his own Jewish people. His mission is to the Jews. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel," he tells the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel. Yet in this encounter there is the beginning of Jesus' universal mission to the world.

From the very beginning, God's plan reached beyond the chosen people to embrace all the nations of the world. The people of Israel were not chosen in an exclusive sense to be a members-only club, but to serve as a beacon of light to show the way for the rest of the world.

All of our readings today point in that direction. The prophet Isaiah announces that foreigners will be included in God's salvation. God will bring into His presence all who keep the sabbath and hold to the covenant, sharing His love and His joy with them. Our Responsorial Psalm prayed for all nations to give praise to God. Saint Paul, as the Apostle to the Gentiles, writes to the Romans that God will share His gifts and have mercy upon all.

In the Gospel from Saint Matthew, an anxious mother beseeches Jesus for help and healing for her daughter who is tormented by a demon.

First let us note and not gloss over this reference to “a demon.” Pope Francis, who speaks often about the Devil, said in a homily last April that Satan exists in our present century and we must learn from the Gospel how to fight against his temptations. The Holy Father said, “We are all tempted because the law of our spiritual life, our Christian life is a struggle: a struggle. That’s because the Prince of this world, Satan, doesn’t want our holiness, he doesn’t want us to follow Christ. Maybe some of you might say: ‘But Father, how old fashioned you are to speak about the devil in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!’ But look out because the devil is present! The devil is here... even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century! And we mustn’t be naïve, right? We must learn from the Gospel how to fight against Satan.”

Next we note that the woman in the Gospel is a Canaanite woman, that is, she is a Gentile, not a member of the House of Israel. In telling this story, Matthew shows us how Jesus’ life and ministry were centered first on his own people. But it was a ministry intended for the salvation of the whole world. The mission of Jesus to “the lost sheep of the House of Israel” will soon become a mission to “gather into one the scattered children of God” throughout the world. This woman is seeking from the Lord what we all seek from Him: eternal happiness.

There is a beautiful passage in the Office of Readings for the Memorial of Saint Stephen of Hungary, whose feast day is today, from a letter that he wrote to his son. In that letter Saint Stephen told his son what he needed to do to fulfill his duty in order to “reach the highest state of happiness.” He said, “Be merciful to all who are suffering violence, keeping always in your heart the example of the Lord who said: *I desire mercy and not sacrifice*. Be patient with everyone, not only with the powerful, but also with the weak. Finally be strong lest prosperity lift you up too much or adversity cast you down. Be humble in this life, that God may raise you up in the next. Be truly moderate and do not punish or condemn anyone immoderately. Be gentle so that you may never oppose justice. Be honorable so that you may never voluntarily bring disgrace upon anyone. Be chaste so that you may avoid all the foulness of lust like the pangs of death.”

As he wrote to his son, Saint Stephen of Hungary also gives us a beautiful summary of the virtues that will lead to eternal happiness:

Be merciful.

Be patient.

Be strong.

Be humble.

Be moderate.

Be gentle.

Be honorable.

Be chaste.

May our gathering around this altar and our reception of the Eucharist strengthen us to live these virtues and 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.