

**Homily for a Parish Visit to  
Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, Oblong, Illinois  
28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A**

**October 12, 2014**

**† Most Rev. Thomas John Paprocki  
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 at Our Lady of Lourdes Church here in Oblong, Illinois. 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.

In the Gospel for today's Mass, Jesus offers a parable about the Kingdom of God, one of the central themes of His preaching. The parable speaks about how "many are invited, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14) to come to the wedding feast which is the Kingdom. Far from suggesting that God will only choose certain people to share in the reward of being in

the Kingdom, this parable is more about the fact that all people are freely invited to the wedding feast, but not everybody chooses to come.

God has what is called a “universal salvific will,” where He “wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). At the same time, He has given us the gift of free will, a gift which enables us to choose freely whether or not we want to spend eternity with Him in that Kingdom. This truth is expressed each time we celebrate the Mass during the consecration of the wine into the Precious Blood, when the priest speaks in the person of Christ saying that His blood has been poured out “for many.” This acknowledges the fact that, even though Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary was sufficient for the salvation of all of humanity, there would be some who would freely reject that offer.

God does not leave us to ourselves, however, in our journey toward the Kingdom. In fact, He reminds us that salvation by our own efforts is impossible (cf. Matthew 19:26). He therefore gives us the help that we need in order to accept His invitation to enter the wedding feast of the Kingdom. This help comes in the form of sanctifying grace which is given to us through the sacraments of the Church. The image of the wedding garment in the parable is understood by St. Gregory the Great to be the supernatural

gift of charity which accompanies sanctifying grace.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore necessary that this gift of charity be in our souls in order to enter into Heaven.<sup>2</sup>

In our Responsorial Psalm, we hear the beautiful words of Psalm 23, which speaks of the Lord as the shepherd who will lead His sheep so that they will “dwell in the house of the Lord” (Psalm 23:6) for all eternity. Jesus Christ fulfills this role as He proclaims that He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep, that they might be secure in the sheepfold of the Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> When preparing to leave this earth to return to His Father in Heaven, Jesus entrusted to His Apostles the role of continuing His work of shepherding the people until He returns at the end of time.

This sharing in the saving work of Christ continues today in the shepherds of the Church, the bishops, and in their closest collaborators, the priests. The respect and honor we give to priests is not so much directed to them as individuals, but rather to Christ, the one true shepherd and high priest who loves us so much that He has given us these ministers to enable us to receive the graces needed in order to be saved. It is in thanksgiving to

God for that opportunity for salvation from Him and through His Church that we celebrate today.

In a particular way, we give thanks to God for those priests who have served our parishes in the past and who do so currently. Their collective ministry has touched thousands of souls, assisting them to follow the Gospel way of life. We are also blessed to have twenty-two seminarians currently studying to become priests for our diocese. These young men have responded to a special invitation to consider the possibility that the Lord may be calling them to share in the priestly ministry as well. Your prayers and support are vitally important and much appreciated as we strive to be generous in giving our lives in service for all of you.

As many of you are aware, there is an important gathering of bishops that is currently taking place in Rome to discuss various challenges that the family faces in our world today. Although they are focusing on another sacrament, namely the Sacrament of Matrimony, there is a very close link to the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Seminarians and priests do not just fall out of the sky, they come from families. Families play a very important role in fostering vocations as they are called to take seriously their responsibility to pass on the faith to their children. A critical part of this is

supporting and encouraging their children to be open to God's will in their lives, whatever it may be.

In 2011, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that "the ability to foster vocations is a hallmark of the vitality of a local Church."<sup>4</sup> This is true not only of an entire Diocesan Church, but also of each local parish and indeed each family which is often referred to as the domestic church.<sup>5</sup>

In the Communion Rite of our Mass, the priest says, "Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb." The Eucharistic meal that we share at Holy Communion is a preparation for the glory and the joy of paradise. Jesus was once sacrificed for our sake, like a lamb being offered up in the Old Testament. Every Mass is done in remembrance of our Lord's sacrifice, as He commanded us to do. But at the banquet in the kingdom we shall see Him, our risen Lord, in His glory, and this will make us incredibly happy. In the words of today's Psalm, "Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for years to come."

May our reception of the Eucharist 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.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Gregory the Great, *In Evan. Homil.* 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium* §14.

<sup>3</sup> See John 10: 21; *Lumen Gentium* §6.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 48<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

<sup>5</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church §1656.