

**Homily for Celebration and Farewell for Bishop-elect Fernand Cheri, O.F.M.
February 15, 2015
6th Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year B**

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

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: our Mass this evening provides us with an opportunity to celebrate the appointment of Bishop-elect Fernand Cheri as Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans. For the past four years, he has served as Director of Campus Ministry at Quincy University and since last year as Coordinator for Black Catholic Ministry in our diocesan Office for Social Concerns and Respect for Life. So this is also our opportunity to say farewell to Bishop-elect Cheri as he leaves our diocese and returns to the Archdiocese of New Orleans. You go with our gratitude for your past ministry and with our prayers for many blessings in your future ministry as a successor of the Apostles.

In just a few days, we will once again enter into the holy season of Lent, a time of preparation for our celebration of the Lord's Passion, death and Resurrection, the mysteries at the heart of our identity as Christians who have been redeemed by our Savior, Jesus Christ. The season of Lent

presents us with a variety of rituals and practices that invite us to enter more deeply into this sacred time of the liturgical year.

On Wednesday of this week, many of us will present ourselves to be marked with ashes and so again be reminded of our call to repentance and conversion in our lives. The Church recommends to us the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as ways of preparing our hearts to experience more fully that conversion to which Christ calls us. We might take the opportunity to participate in the Stations of the Cross as a reminder of the path that Jesus took in securing for us the gift of salvation. Our reflecting on that way of suffering that He endured for us invites us to see His great love for us. Our gratitude for that love should move us to want to be more closely united to Him by removing those obstacles that keep us distant from that love.

One of the practices that is very popular during Lent is the increased availability of options for participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The practice of going to confession during Lent stretches back many centuries in the history of the Church. For many years, it was not the regular practice to receive Holy Communion on a regular basis as we do today. Receiving the Eucharist by a majority of the faithful on a weekly

basis is a fairly recent development. Before that time, it was not uncommon to receive Holy Communion just once a year, generally during the Easter season. In order to receive Holy Communion worthily during that time, also known as fulfilling one's Easter duty, people would go to confession during Lent as a way of preparing for that important moment.

As mentioned, the Church now encourages us to receive Holy Communion as frequently as possible. For a time, the close connection with confession continued, as many people in previous generations would go to confession every Saturday before going to Mass on Sunday. Going to confession every week is not necessary, as long as we are not conscious of having committed any grave, or mortal sins. If we have willfully committed any of these sins, then we are to go to confession before we can worthily receive the Eucharist. That has not changed with regard to our understanding of the connection between confession and the Eucharist.

Going to Confession is more than just a necessary remedy for serious sins, making confession seem as mainly negative. Confession involves strengthening our relationship with Christ and the Church, a relationship of love and mercy, not one of punishment. This is the great gift that the Church is inviting us to experience during this season of Lent.

Our readings for today's Mass highlight this through the lens of the condition of leprosy. In the Old Testament, this skin disease was seen as a very unfortunate fate to have received. On the one hand, it was greatly feared because of its contagiousness. On the other hand, leprosy was seen as a punishment from God. The result of these two things was that those with leprosy were excluded from society. They were kept out of town at a safe distance from everybody else.

In the Gospel for today's Mass, we see Jesus confronting this stigma of leprosy by not running from it, but rather by coming into contact with it in order to heal it. This and other healing miracles of Jesus in the Gospel are signs that He is the long-awaited Messiah. These signs, however, are not meant to be seen as His desire to "abolish all evils here below, but to free men from the gravest slavery, sin" (CCC 549). It is His desire for all people to come to know the experience of His love and not be excluded from Him or from the community, especially when that exclusion is the result of the sins that we have committed.

Sin, regardless of its severity, separates us from God. In the case of venial sin, it weakens our relationship with Him. Mortal sin breaks our relationship with God and the other members of the Church. Like the

person with leprosy, however, Jesus does not desire for us to be isolated from Him. He has come to us to free us from the separation and so restore and even strengthen our relationship with Him and others. This is made possible for each of us through the healing encounter that Jesus has left for us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Each and every one of us can benefit from a strengthened relationship with Jesus, who loves us and who desires to share the gift of His abundant life with us. Regular confession and the frequent, worthy reception of the Eucharist are the most effective ways of achieving this gift. Seen in that light, confession should not be something that we avoid and approach only once a year. Instead, in our desire to enter more deeply into that relationship of love, we should approach Him frequently and joyfully in the sacrament, even if we are confessing only venial sins, for this shows that we do not even want the smallest sins to hold us back from the fullness of love that He wants to give to us.

Our Lenten journey each year is an opportunity for us to look more closely at our lives and to see how we have let ourselves become distant from God through our sins. This requires that we imitate the man in the Gospel who recognized that He was in need of healing. He did not

presume to receive that healing, but rather submitted Himself humbly before the Lord, asking for that grace.

This is the same for us and how we approach God's loving mercy and forgiveness. In this regard, our society has placed many challenges in our way. There are those who would like to say that the notion of sin is exaggerated and that what was once considered sinful is no longer so. This results in a lack of awareness that we suffer from the sickness of sin and therefore are in need of healing. Even if we recognize the reality of sin, there can be a presumption that it is a matter between us and God, and that approaching a priest to receive that forgiveness is not necessary any more. Such a mindset lacks the true humility that Christ expects, for He has ordered that the normal means of receiving His healing mercy is through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, entrusted to the Church whose priests are its ministers. By humbly submitting ourselves to *His* will for forgiveness, and not *our* will for how *we* would prefer to be forgiven, we are assured of His mercy and therefore guaranteed that we have been reconciled to Him and His Church.

Admittedly, God's plan for reconciling us through the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not easy, because it requires us to be vulnerable, admitting

our weaknesses and failures in a very explicit way by confessing to Christ through His priests. But the joy and peace that comes from this practice is extremely liberating. The more we allow ourselves to encounter this freeing love of God, the more we come to see it for what it truly is, not something negative and to be feared, but something very positive to approach regularly so that we may more fully experience the love and freedom of the children of God which He has come to give us. Notice how Jesus sent the leper that He had cleansed to show himself to the priest. So Jesus wants us to show ourselves to the priest when we wish to be cleansed of our sins.

It is my prayer that each of you will take the time this Lent to reflect more deeply on this great sacrament of God's love and mercy. I pray that your desire to enter more deeply into that love which He has shown in His Passion and death will motivate you to look humbly at those sins in your lives that are isolating you from God and one another and to confess them sincerely in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As we continue our celebration of the Mass, let us also ask the Lord to strengthen His priests who have been given the great privilege of being Christ's ministers, being His instruments of grace through the celebration

of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation. In a special way, we ask the Lord to shower an abundance of graces on Bishop-elect Cheri as he will soon receive the fullness of the priesthood and so continue the Lord's plan of salvation in the lives of the people whom he will serve. May we all be found worthy to share in the eternal life that Christ has won for us through His Passion, death and Resurrection.

May God give us this grace. Amen.