

**Homily for a Parish Visit to  
Saint Patrick Parish, Grafton, Illinois  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B**

**January 25, 2015**

**† 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 Saint Patrick Church here in Grafton, 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 have been visiting 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.

Reflecting on today's readings from the Sacred Scriptures, I am reminded of an old story that recounts the training program of three demons who are apprentices to Satan himself. They each meet with the devil to complete their training, proposing ideas to wreak havoc in the lives of men and so turn them away from Christ.

The first demon proposes that he will convince people that there is no sin. The devil responds that, while it is a good idea, it will not work because people know the reality of sin from their experience of humanity. The second demon proposes that people be convinced that there is no hell. Once again, the devil rejects the idea, saying that the notion of judgment is deeply ingrained and that people would not buy the idea that there are no negative eternal consequences for what we do on this earth.

Finally, the third demon proposed that people be convinced that there is no hurry, that there is no need to inconvenience themselves at this moment with this or that aspect of living their faith, but that they can wait until another day. The devil responded by telling the apprentice that his plan was perfect. Convincing man of the fact that no real urgency is needed would give the devil and his minions plenty of time to have their way.

We can be assured that thinking that there is no big hurry in living our faith is a lie from the "father of lies" (John 8:44). We know this because our readings for today's Mass give us the exact opposite message. In our second reading, we hear St. Paul warn us that "the time is running out...for the world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor 7:29, 31). We must

not be tempted to think that we can put off to tomorrow what we should be taking care of today, especially as it concerns the obligations of living our Catholic faith in our daily lives.

In our first reading, we have the example of the people of Nineveh, who responded with great urgency after hearing the warning proclaimed by the Lord through His prophet Jonah. The thought of being destroyed frightened the people of the city and they immediately sought God's mercy, hoping that He would spare them from their punishment. Some would like to suggest that such tactics of being frightened into acting is somehow outdated and not in keeping with an image of Jesus that is non-threatening.

Jesus speaks in several places about the reality of what will happen to those who reject Him and who choose to follow their own path. He speaks about eternal separation from Him in hell as a real possibility, a possibility that we can freely choose by how we live our lives. We should not dismiss those warnings of Jesus, for He provides them to us in the Gospels to urge us to repentance, conversion, and fidelity in living our lives as Catholics.

In a prayer vigil last year for victims of Mafia violence in Italy, Pope Francis made this urgent plea to members of the Mafia. He said: “[t]here is

still time not to end up in hell, which awaits you if you continue on this road.”<sup>1</sup> This is the case not just for the Mafia, but for all people who intentionally choose to reject Christ and His teachings. There is still time for us to improve in our journey with Him, but we cannot put it off, for we “do not know the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:13) when the Lord will ask us to account for our actions, an accounting that will determine whether we spend the remainder of eternity with Him in Heaven or apart from Him in hell.

While fear of punishment is certainly one source of motivation for us not to delay our response to following Christ, it is not the only one, nor is it the most important. The stronger motivator for following Christ is love. This is at the heart of our understanding of the gift of the Holy Spirit known as the fear of the Lord. This fear is not so much one of punishment, but a fear of losing God who loves us and who wants us to experience that love. Our awareness and appreciation of that love grows the more we encounter Him in our lives.

We see this dynamic in the Gospel for today’s Mass, where we hear St. Mark’s account of the calling of the first disciples. Jesus invites them to follow Him. Notice how there was no delay in their response to Him as it

says that they “abandoned their nets and followed Him” (Mark 1:18). Their encounter with the love of God in Christ Jesus had a profound impact on them, causing them to reorient their lives radically to follow Him. On the day of Pentecost, after receiving that love in an even deeper way through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the disciples did not delay in spreading the Good News and working for the building up of the Kingdom of God.

This is an important lesson for each of us. The Lord wants us to follow Him, just as with His first disciples. And while we do not encounter Him in the same way that they did, we do have the opportunity to encounter Him in an equally powerful way through the means that He has left us, namely the sacraments and the Sacred Scriptures. A life rooted in the regular reception of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, is a way of staying united to the love of Christ as He comes to dwell in us through the gift of grace. We are also drawn deeper into that love by encountering Him in the written Word of God, the Scriptures. By making ourselves familiar with Him in the Word, we come to know the wonderful story of His love for us and we are motivated to respond to that love with lives centered on Him and His Church.

If we truly allow ourselves to encounter Christ through these means, we will not delay one moment when it comes to fulfilling what is expected of us in living our Catholic faith. As Catholics, we are called to set an example of a life rooted in Catholic values because it is what God expects of us. Our salvation and the salvation of others will be affected by how we choose to live our faith. That can be a slightly frightening prospect, but that fear melts away when we realize the great opportunity that we have to introduce and lead others to a profound experience of God's love. We will be eager to promote that experience if we have ourselves experienced that love by intentionally following Christ as our first priority in this life, so that we can enjoy an eternal experience of His love in the Kingdom of Heaven.

As we continue this Mass, we prepare to encounter His love once again in the gift of His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. May that experience of His love fill us with a renewed sense of purpose and mission. May we strive with greater haste to follow His will and faithfully do our part in building up His Kingdom, where we hope to be with Him and all of the saints for all eternity. May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Prayer Vigil for the 19<sup>th</sup> "Memorial and Commitment Day,"* 21 March 2014.