

**Homily for 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Joseph Parish  
Benld, IL**

**Third Sunday of Easter  
April 9, 2016**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here for this Mass to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Joseph Parish in Benld. The historic celebration for this parish community today is made all the more joyful as the Universal Church continues her celebration of the Lord's Resurrection on this Third Sunday in the Easter Season.

It can be an interesting exercise to look back in history to see what was going on in our world when we celebrate events such as this. In 1916, much attention was given to World War I, raging in several locations and resulting in massive loss of life. Here in the United States, the Professional Golfer Association, better known as the PGA, was founded. Woodrow Wilson was elected to a second term as the President of the United States. In 1916, the average price of a new car was 400 dollars, and the cost of a stamp was 2 cents.

That year also saw John D. Rockefeller, co-founder of the Standard Oil Company, become the world's first billionaire. Having not been born into wealth, Rockefeller had to work hard to become the businessman and philanthropist that he was. One of his more famous quotes reflected this path that he followed to achieving his fortune. He said the following: "I do not think that there is any other quality so essential to success of any kind as the quality of perseverance."

Indeed, we can look to any undertaking and see how important perseverance is in yielding successful results. The Church is no exception. There are countless examples from our history that prove this point. While it is true that the Church, founded by Jesus Christ, has been given divine assistance so that "the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it" (John 16:18), it is also true that Jesus did not intend for the Church to move forward on auto-pilot. In other words, it was His desire that the members of the Church should exercise their free will in choosing to cooperate with God's grace in the guidance and life of the Church in the world. And when our human nature and free will are involved, perseverance will always be necessary!

We see this played out in the readings for today's Mass. Shortly after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples who had returned to the familiar task of fishing. After seeing that they had been unsuccessful in their efforts, Jesus asked them to give it one more shot. They freely chose to obey Him, and as a result, yielded a huge catch of fish. As with much of John's Gospel, this passage is more than just a story about fishing. It is symbolic of the work that the apostles would be doing as fishers of men. The perseverance demonstrated by the apostles in the face of disappointing results on the sea with fish would also be demonstrated in their work in the field of the world with souls.

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles records one such example. When confronted with the threats of the Sanhedrin "to stop speaking in the name of Jesus" (Acts 5:40), they did not back down. Rather, they persevered in their commitment to remain faithful to the command that the Lord had given to them to go and "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) by preaching the Good News of the Resurrection to the world. They did not *have* to fight back against those who opposed them, but they chose to, not letting setbacks prevent them from moving forward in cooperating with God's plan for His Church.

In the nearly two-thousand year history of the Church, we have seen perseverance practiced in countless situations, from the situations involving the Universal Church to those involving individual parishes. Today, as we celebrate the one hundred years of Catholic life here at St. Joseph's Parish in Benld, we are well-aware that perseverance has been an important ingredient in the recipe for success that has been achieved here.

Reviewing the history of the parish, we note that frightening night in 1933 when a bomb exploded on the front porch of the rectory related to a labor dispute among those who worked in the coal mines, the union and the operators. Thankfully, nobody was hurt, including Father Goff, the pastor, who was asleep in the rectory at the time. In the face of unrest in the town, the parish did not run away in fear, but rebuilt the rectory and persevered in moving forward.

In 1941, the parish experienced severe damage as the result of a fire that started in the sacristy. Once again, the parish would not be deterred by this setback, and work was begun to recover from the damages. When the mining industry began to dwindle in this area, resulting in the moving of several families from the parish, those who remained continued to press forward, trusting in the Lord's assistance.

All of you are the beneficiaries of the great tradition of perseverance exercised by those who have gone before you. This is true in the broad sense as we look to the many saints throughout the history of the Church, and in the more narrow sense by looking to the families and parishioners of this parish who have helped to build the foundation upon which you now stand as a parish community.

It is now your turn to continue to build upon that foundation by committing yourselves to that perseverance required to keep going forward as a parish community. The Lord's blessings have been shared abundantly here, and that assistance is sure to continue. But we must be always mindful that the Lord wants us to choose freely to cooperate with His plan by putting the gifts that we have at the service of this parish community.

As you may know, we are in the early stages of moving our diocese toward adopting a way of life that is centered on stewardship and discipleship. It is a way of life that each parish, and indeed each individual, is encouraged to embrace. This way of life stems from a profound sense of gratitude for the many blessings that the Lord has showered upon us. We are also grateful for those who have gone before us

in our diocese and in our parishes who have modeled this way of life in a variety of inspiring ways. We now have the great privilege of continuing that good work that has begun, knowing that our perseverance in these efforts to be disciples and stewards of God's gifts will strengthen us individually, as a parish, and as a diocese now and for generations to follow.

As we continue our celebration of this Mass, we bring to the Lord our gratitude for every gift received, especially the gift of this parish. We are grateful also for the vocations of the priests and religious sisters that have come from this parish. We pray for more young people to say yes to God's call to follow Him and serve His Church. We ask that the Lord will expand all of our hearts through the reception of the Eucharist so that we might willingly and joyfully commit ourselves to this life of stewardship and discipleship, thus continuing to build on the firm foundation upon which we now stand. Let us pray for the grace to persevere in this journey, trusting that the Lord will multiply what we are able to offer to Him, thus assisting all of us to come to share in the victory of the Resurrection.

May God give you this grace. Amen.