

**Homily for Kick-Off of Stewardship and Discipleship as a Way of Life  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
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Reverend Monsignors and Fathers, Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: of all of the saints in the history of the Church, few are more well-known and well-loved than St. Francis of Assisi. The story of his life is particularly inspiring, as it shows the many remarkable ways that God worked in him and through him for the good of the Church.

One of the most memorable stories of his life was the way in which God called him to pursue the way of life for which he is recognized so well. This call came while Francis was in prayer in the run-down church of San Damiano not far from Assisi. The figure of Christ on the crucifix hanging in the Church came alive and spoke to him, saying: “Francis, go and build up My house, which, as thou seest, is falling into ruin.”<sup>1</sup> Francis interpreted this as a command from the Lord to restore the physical structure of the church in which he was praying. He diligently set about this work, and later did likewise in two other churches, in obedience to what he felt the Lord had asked him to do.

Having completed this work, Francis began to realize that the Lord was calling him to an even greater work of renewal. The material work was to serve as a prefiguring<sup>2</sup> to the spiritual renewal of the Church, to which Francis would dedicate the rest of his life through the founding and activity of a new religious order which is commonly referred to as the Franciscans. This order, along with other religious orders and efforts of many on behalf of the Church, has renewed the Church in profound ways which continue to impact us today.

I bring this story up because I believe it offers several parallels to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, particularly as we celebrate this Mass of Kick-Off for Discipleship and Stewardship as a way of life in our diocese. This way of life is not the result of a new idea or due to random chance. Rather, as in the case of the unfolding of the Lord's plan for the life of St. Francis, so too is way of life the result of a development that has been building for some time.

Just as we can look to that physical church of San Damiano as an important part of the story of St. Francis, so too we look to the physical church of this Cathedral as an important element of the road that brings us to where we are today.

In 1923, Pope Pius XI transferred the Episcopal See of our diocese from Alton to our present home of Springfield. Bishop James Griffin, the bishop of our diocese at the time, saw the need for a new cathedral, one that he said “would be worthy of our Catholic faith.”<sup>3</sup> The planning was begun, and on February 14, 1927, the official campaign to raise funds for the new cathedral was begun with the slogan: “It is God’s work. God wills it.” In just under two weeks, the campaign raised almost \$1 million from throughout the diocese. An editorial in the *Illinois State Journal* had the following summary of the campaign:

The enthusiasm with which Catholics of this diocese have rallied to the support of their faith and given their pledges to their Bishop’s plan for development has afforded a spectacle of religious fervor and devotion not often witnessed in our times.<sup>4</sup>

After nearly 80 years as the spiritual heart of this diocese, the effects of age and usage were evident, and the need for a restoration became clear. My predecessor, Bishop George Lucas, initiated a restoration project and encouraged the faithful of the diocese to be a part of this renewal. In a letter sent to the Catholic households of the diocese, he said the following: “More than 80 years ago, our ancestors in faith prepared for the future of

our diocese by building our cathedral in Springfield...The time has come to address the needs of today and prepare our cathedral church for future generations.”<sup>5</sup> Once again, there was a very generous response from the faithful of the diocese, the fruits of which we enjoy today in this beautiful Cathedral.

Once again, in comparison to the story of St. Francis, we can see in the history of the building and renovation of this Cathedral as the Mother Church of our diocese an unfolding and a prefiguring of something to follow, namely, the spiritual renewal of our diocese through a way of life centered on discipleship and stewardship. I am not suggesting that the material work done on this Cathedral by my predecessors is of lesser importance to the work that lies ahead of us now. Rather, it is an essential part of the foundation upon which we are building, for the work done in the past was not just material, but was very much rooted in faith and bears the marks of stewardship and discipleship.

Such is the case in the example of the life of St. Francis. While he was laboring at the physical renewal of the churches, he was also undergoing a spiritual conversion toward humility and poverty, gathering to him others who desired the same way of life. In other words, he was not unconcerned

with the necessity to grow as a more dedicated disciple of Jesus Christ; so too with the history of our diocese. We have much for which to be grateful as we are the recipients of a solid spiritual heritage that goes far beyond the physical churches in which we gather each Sunday.

At the same time, however, I echo what Bishop Lucas said nearly ten years ago, that the time has come to address the needs of today and prepare our diocese for future generations. One of the greatest areas for concern is a trend noticed throughout the country: that of the decreasing Sunday Mass attendance, as seen in our yearly October Count report. When I received my first report after becoming Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois in 2010, I was shocked to see a cumulative decrease of almost 30 percent during the preceding fifteen years prior to my arrival beginning in 2010.<sup>6</sup> That decrease would exceed 30 percent in 2011.<sup>7</sup>

Even in those parishes that were not losing numbers, my sense is that too many of our parishes are in a maintenance mode. Over the past five years, I have visited every parish in our diocese. The occasion of a bishop's visit to a parish is often a cause for parishioners' anxiety, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Positive anxiety arises on joyful occasions for the bishop's visit, such as a parish jubilee, when people are anxious that all

will go well. But far too often, as I visit parishes, people are nervous that my visit may portend something ominous for their parish and greet me by saying, "Bishop, please don't close our parish!"

Well, I have been Bishop of this diocese for five and a half years, and I hope that people have noticed by now that it has not been my practice to close or consolidate parishes. There are different models for parish life. One model is the mega-church that provides a full range of ministries. But not every parish needs to be a mega-church. In my pastoral letter on building a culture of growth in the Church that I published last year, I gave the example of Subway sandwich shops.<sup>8</sup> Many people would be surprised to learn that Subway sandwich shops have the most locations worldwide of all fast-food restaurants. But they don't try to do everything. If you want steak and lobster, you don't go to Subway! But if you are hungry, you can get fed there. I don't mean to make this sound like a commercial for Subway sandwiches, but as I make my way around the diocese visiting parishes, I have noticed many small towns that have a Subway sandwich shop. On seeing them, I have often thought that if there is a Subway sandwich shop feeding the people of this town, there should be a Catholic church to feed their spiritual needs, too!

My hope is that we can seek to move from “maintenance mode” to “growth mode.” It is easy to fall into a sense of complacency whereby the status quo is considered sufficient as we move forward. Over the past couple of years, I have given much thought to how it is that we can begin a process of strategic planning for growth in the Church here in our diocese. The growth envisioned is far more than just a quantitative increase in the number of people or the amount of money available to our parishes and the diocese. It is also essential to ensure that we give significant attention to the qualitative growth that will guarantee sustainability for generations that follow.

Through prayer, discernment, and consultation from others, it has become evident that the Lord is inviting us to more fully embrace our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.<sup>9</sup> Once again, we can look to the building of this Cathedral as a prefiguring of this path which we have begun to follow. When preparing for the designs of this Cathedral, Bishop Griffin travelled to Europe to examine various architectural styles for this church. In a similar manner, in September 2014, several leaders from the diocese and I traveled by bus to southeast Kansas to meet with some of the leadership of the Diocese of

Wichita, where the Bishop of the diocese was formerly a priest and Vicar General of our diocese, Bishop Carl Kemme. The goal of our visit was to learn some lessons from them about their model of stewardship, a model that has been extremely successful.

The resulting product in both cases, however, is no mere replica of the model studied. While we notice several elements of this Cathedral found in other churches, this structure is wholly unique to us; so too with our plan for stewardship and discipleship. While you may hear several references and see many similarities to the model in the Diocese of Wichita, what we have here is unique to us, and it reflects who *we* are as a diocese and the needs for growth that *we* have moving forward. Ultimately, though, we are not talking about a Wichita model or a Springfield model for stewardship and discipleship, but God's call to be stewards and disciples as reflected in the Sacred Scriptures. The Bible gives examples of people like Abraham giving the first fruits of their crops, their cattle and their produce to the priests as an offering to God. This is where the notion of tithing comes from, which literally means ten percent. There are different formulas for apportioning that ten percent to the parish, to the diocese and to other charities, and I will be discussing with our diocesan



consultative bodies the best way to practice tithing in our diocese. Whatever percentage is adopted, however, the important point of the scriptural notion of tithing and stewardship is that we give the first fruits to God, not just what is leftover.

Stewardship recognizes that everything we have comes from God. We are stewards whether we recognize it or not and whether we like it or not. Stewardship from God's perspective is that He has given us gifts to be used not just selfishly for ourselves, but to be shared with others. Even private property must be seen as simply holding legal title in trust for the benefit of others, not just for myself. Becoming a disciple means making an intentional decision to accept the Lord's call to follow Him and live the discipleship and stewardship way of life.

I am aware that such a plan for growth is ambitious, but it is one about which I am very optimistic, especially given my familiarity with what this diocese has to offer and the many ways in which various groups are already poised to contribute to that growth. One group that I would like to acknowledge in a particular way is the priests of our diocese.

Our priests are at the very heart of our journey forward. As Catholics, we rely first and foremost on God's grace. This grace comes to

us through the sacraments of the Church of which the priests are the ministers. In a special way, it is the priest who celebrates the Eucharist for us, feeding us with the Bread of Life, nourishing and strengthening us for this journey. Without the Eucharist, this way of life will never succeed. Without priests, we will not have the Eucharist. Therefore, we need our priests for this journey.

I am very grateful for the fidelity with which our priests serve the diocese. They are men committed to the building up of the Kingdom and to the salvation of the souls of those in our diocese and beyond. Their example of tireless dedication is an inspiration to me and to all of us of how we are called to likewise serve the Lord as committed disciples of Jesus Christ. It is their joyful, humble example that is, I believe, one of the major factors contributing to the growth in the number of seminarians studying for the priesthood in our diocese. They too, are signs of hope and encouragement to us as we continue this journey.

Our priests are also models of stewardship, often in ways unknown and unseen to the faithful. In many ways, they demonstrate a steward's heart by gratefully offering their gifts for the good of others. All priests and religious give of their time, talent and treasure in lives of service. Those

who enter religious life make a financial sacrifice by taking a vow of poverty. Although diocesan priests do not take a vow of poverty, we are paid a salary out of which we are expected to respond generously to the needs of others. In my case, in recent years I have been giving about 25% of my personal income to charity. I don't say this to boast, but to lead by example and to let you know that I am not asking anyone to do something that I don't do myself.

As we continue our celebration of the Mass, let us be grateful for the many ways in which those who have gone before us have offered their gifts to build the foundation on which we now stand. May the enthusiasm of our diocese mirror that of the faithful of previous generations who gave of themselves so generously. May we seek to be intentional disciples of the Lord and good stewards of the gifts entrusted to us for the growth of the Church as we journey together toward our inheritance in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Dedication of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception* (2009), 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> See *Catholic Times* article of April 19, 2008 at <http://ct.dio.org/item/526-campaign-for-cathedral-restoration-set-to-begin-in-parishes.html#sthash.RmZZaXwA.dpuf>

<sup>6</sup> Diocesan October Count: 1996-2010, Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, [http://www.dio.org/uploads/files/Chancellor/October\\_Count/October\\_Count\\_2010.pdf](http://www.dio.org/uploads/files/Chancellor/October_Count/October_Count_2010.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Diocesan October Count: 1996-2011, Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, [http://www.dio.org/uploads/files/Chancellor/October\\_Count/October\\_Count\\_2011.pdf](http://www.dio.org/uploads/files/Chancellor/October_Count/October_Count_2011.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, *Ars cresendi in Dei gratia*, September 14, 2015, <http://www.dio.org/bishop/pastoral-letters/ars-cresendi-in-dei-gratia.html>, p. 16, n. 38.

<sup>9</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992, p. 8; <http://www.usccb.org/upload/stewardship-disciples-response-10th-anniversary.pdf>.