

**Homily for the Closing of the Fourth Diocesan Synod on the
Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe
at the
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
November 26, 2017**

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Reverend Monsignors and Fathers, Deacons, Consecrated Religious,
Synod Members, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The Sistine Chapel in Vatican City contains some of the most remarkable art in the world. The Sistine Chapel takes its name from Pope Sixtus IV, who had the old Cappella Magna restored between 1477 and 1480. The 15th century decoration of the walls includes: the stories of Moses and of Christ and the portraits of the Popes. It was executed by a team of painters made up initially of Pietro Perugino, Sandro Botticelli, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Cosimo Rosselli, assisted by their respective shops and by some closer assistants. In 1508 Pope Julius II decided to partly alter the decoration, entrusting the work to Michelangelo Buonarroti, who painted the ceiling and, on the upper part of the walls, the lunettes. The work was finished in October 1512 and, on the Feast of All Saints (November 1st), Pope Julius II inaugurated the Sistine Chapel with a solemn Mass. The nine

central panels show the stories of Genesis, from the Creation to the Fall of man, to the Flood and the subsequent rebirth of mankind with the family of Noah.

Following the start of the Protestant Reformation by Martin Luther in 1517 and the Sack of Rome in 1527, the Church was in crisis. The visual arts would play a key role in the Church's response to this crisis. Towards the end of 1533, Pope Clement VII gave Michelangelo the task of further altering the decoration of the Sistine Chapel by painting the Last Judgment on the altar wall. In this fresco, Michelangelo wished to show the glorious return of Christ as described in the texts of the New Testament.¹ The artist began the mighty work in 1536 during the pontificate of Pope Paul III and completed it in the autumn of 1541. Using his extraordinary artistic capacities, Michelangelo tried to translate into visible forms the invisible beauty and majesty of God.²

The Sistine Chapel's more recent restoration was done between 1980 and 1994. The ceiling frescoes were cleaned between 1980 and 1992, while the "*Last Judgment*" took four years of intense work, ending in 1994. After the cleaning removed centuries of candle smoke and the detrimental effects

of previous attempted restorations, the bright colors once again make a vivid impression on one's mind.³

In his homily for the celebration of the unveiling of the restorations of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel on April 8, 1994, Pope Saint John Paul II said,

The frescoes that we contemplate here introduce us to the *world of Revelation*. The truths of our faith speak to us here from all sides. From them the human genius has drawn its inspiration, committing itself to portraying them in forms of unparalleled beauty. This is why the *Last Judgement above all awakens within us the keen desire to profess our faith in God, Creator of all things seen and unseen*. And at the same time, it stimulates us to reassert our adherence to the risen Christ, who will come again on the Last Day as the supreme Judge of the living and the dead. Before this masterpiece we confess Christ, King of the ages, whose kingdom will have no end.⁴

The Last Judgment is the "moment all Christians await with both hope and dread. This is the end of time, the beginning of eternity when the mortal becomes immortal, when the elect join Christ in his heavenly kingdom and the damned are cast into the unending torments of hell."⁵

So it is fitting that we celebrate the closing of our Fourth Diocesan Synod on this Solemnity of Christ the King, for the very purpose of this Synod is summed up in the final words of the Nicene Creed, the Profession

of Faith that we will proclaim after this homily, when we say, “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”

With this end in mind, the Fourth Diocesan Synod has declared that the “mission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is to build a fervent community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and steadfast stewards of God’s creation who seek to become saints. Accordingly, the community of Catholic faithful in this diocese is committed to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition.”⁶

To further this mission, this Synod has declared that the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is committed to implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely:

- i. **Hospitality** – to **invite** people proactively to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass;
- ii. **Prayer** – to **provide** well-prepared celebrations of the sacraments and other occasions for **prayer** as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven;
- iii. **Formation** – to **study** the Bible and **learn** more about Jesus and our Catholic faith; and

- iv. **Service** – to **serve** each other, especially those in need, by practicing charity and justice.⁷

It is my hope that this Fourth Diocesan Synod will set the direction and tone for the pastoral ministry of the parishes and other components of the diocese itself for at least the next ten years. Thus, we have pledged, “In the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, ‘all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness’⁸ and will invite people to a life of discipleship and stewardship.”⁹

This universal call to holiness, which was so beautifully emphasized at the Second Vatican Council,¹⁰ has a two-fold dimension: individual and communal. On the one hand, the individual dimension recognizes that everyone in the Church, not just the hierarchy, the clergy and consecrated religious, but also the laity, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle Saint Paul, who wrote: “For this is the will of God, your holiness.”¹¹ As the bishop Saint Francis de Sales taught over four hundred years ago in his book, *Introduction to the Devout Life*:

It is therefore an error and even a heresy to wish to exclude the exercise of devotion from military divisions, from the artisans’ shops, from the courts of princes, from family households. I acknowledge . . . that the type of devotion which

is purely contemplative, monastic and religious can certainly not be exercised in these sorts of stations and occupations, but besides this threefold type of devotion, there are many others fit for perfecting those who live in a secular state. Therefore, in whatever situations we happen to be, we can and we must aspire to the life of perfection.¹²

The communal dimension is that the Church is called by her very nature to grow in numbers, for Jesus said, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.”¹³ Taking a cue, therefore from my Second Pastoral Letter, *The Art of Growing in God’s Grace*,¹⁴ our Diocesan Synod calls for a culture of growth in the Church that “starts with inviting people to experience the love of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

Flowing from this experience of the love of Jesus Christ, Catholic discipleship for an individual person refers to “a committed approach to living a Christian life within the Catholic Church,” having accepted Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior.¹⁶

Discipleship, as a matter of the mind as well as the heart, requires proper formation for people of all ages, “with sacramental preparation seen as a step in this process, but not the end of the process. Being a practicing Catholic must be taught as a way of life. Thus, religious education is a

personal obligation that does not end with the reception of the sacraments, but continues into adulthood.”¹⁷

Looking then at question of the sequence and age for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation, the Synod voted that the “Sacraments of Christian Initiation shall be offered in the proper sequence (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) for children as well as for adults. To promote discipleship and stewardship as a way of life from an early age, those who are baptized as infants are to receive the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist at about the age of reason, which in this diocese will normally be in their third grade of elementary school, after they have been properly prepared and have made sacramental confession.”¹⁸

Addressing “the responsibility of all the Christian faithful (not just parents) to hand on the Catholic faith to the next generation and in order that cost not be a barrier for children to receive a Catholic education,” the Synod declared that “our parishes and schools through the use of scholarships (public and/or private) shall help pay tuition to make Catholic education available.”¹⁹

Since the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the primary way for most Catholics to participate in the life of the Church, the Synod adopted the aim

of my First Pastoral Letter describing the “art of celebrating the liturgy properly and adoring the Lord in the Eucharist devoutly”²⁰ as a necessary step to inviting people to the ecclesial experience of discipleship and stewardship.²¹

Discipleship is not just a theoretical idea or an emotional feeling, therefore it has real consequences in terms of how we live our lives. In the economic realities of our culture, how we spend our money is an indication of our priorities. In this regard, the Synod recognized “that everything we have comes from God and that He has given us gifts not just to use them for ourselves but also to share them with others. As faithful and generous stewards of God’s abundant gifts, those committed to discipleship and stewardship as a way of life pledge to share their talents, give of their time and contribute proportionately from their financial resources for the good of the Church and those in need.”²²

In concrete and practical terms, this means that, while “[t]rusting in God’s providence and giving according to their means, the Catholic faithful of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois are called to live as disciples of Our Lord Jesus Christ by giving of their time and talent and striving to fulfill the Biblical command to tithe by donating the suggested amount of at least

8% of their income to their parishes and 2% to other charities as an expression of their gratitude to God and of their stewardship of His manifold gifts of creation.”²³

The Synod then considered that stewardship applies not just to individual persons, but also to juridic persons such as parishes and the Diocese. “Each parish is a member of the Diocese and of the universal Catholic Church. As such, each parish has an obligation to contribute to the operational expenses of the Diocese and the Apostolic See. Following the Biblical model of tithing, parishes shall tithe approximately 10% of their designated annual income to the diocese, which shall be used to fund the operations of the Diocesan Curia, payment of assessments to the Catholic Conference of Illinois and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, financial contributions to the Apostolic See . . . and donations to national and international collections.”²⁴

“Parish tithing will replace the Annual Catholic Services Appeal and regularly-scheduled second collections. Parishioners who wish to make additional donations to the scheduled diocesan, national and international collections may still do so by placing the envelope with their designated donation in the regular collection. Special second collections will be taken

in support of the Annual Missionary Plan of Cooperation and may still be taken up from time to time to assist victims of natural disasters and other extraordinary causes.”²⁵

I will appoint a committee to work in consultation with the Diocesan Finance Council and the Presbyteral Council, and subject to my approval, “to define what constitutes the annual parish income for the determination of a formula to calculate the amount that is subject to the approximate 10% tithe. Such process should take into consideration the goals of the diocese to build up the Body of Christ, to support Catholic formation and education, and to recognize the differences in parishes (e.g., those with an abundance of material wealth and those without, those that operate parish schools and those that do not). Such formula should attempt to be fair and just to all, while at the same time provide adequate financial resources to the diocese, so that the diocese can accomplish its intended mission.”²⁶

The purpose of all of these Declarations and Statutes comes back to where we started, with the image of Christ our King at the Last Judgment. Our Scripture readings today remind us that Jesus will not judge us as a harsh dictator, but as a loving Shepherd who desires nothing less than to guide us to the rich pastures of His heavenly Kingdom.²⁷ As Saint Thomas

Aquinas said, "It is fitting that the end of all our desires, namely eternal life, coincides with the words at the end of the Creed, "Life everlasting."²⁸

In this vein, our Diocesan Synod declared, "The art of dying in God's grace is the key to everlasting happiness in eternal life. The Christian faithful die to sin through the saving waters of baptism. By dying to their selfish desires through acts of mortification and self-sacrifice, the Christian faithful grow in love of God and neighbor. The whole Christian life aims at reaching this goal of everlasting happiness in eternal life by turning from sin and growing in virtue through God's grace."²⁹

We should not expect all of this to happen immediately, or perhaps in the next ten years, or even in our lifetime here in earth. But we must plant seeds, even if another will sow, for "neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth. . . . For we are God's co-workers."³⁰

"On the many farms in our diocese here in central Illinois, it is understood that growth does not happen overnight. Seeds are planted and steps are taken to provide the necessary nutrients and conducive conditions for crops to grow, but patience is also needed while nature takes its course. As our local Church continues to cultivate a culture of growth,

my prayer is that through the *ars crescendi in Dei gratia* – the art of growing in God’s grace – we can rebuild and renew a community of dedicated and intentional disciples of Jesus Christ, always grateful for God’s gifts as faithful stewards of his beautiful creation! I pray that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Patroness of our diocese under her title of the Immaculate Conception, will lead us all to grow in a deeper relationship with her Son.”³¹

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cf. Matthew 24:30-31; 25:31-46; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55.

² Description of the art of the Sistine Chapel from the Vatican website, *Musei Vaticani*, at: <http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/cappella-sistina/storia-cappella-sistina.html>.

³ Description of the cleaning and restoration of the Sistine Chapel frescoes, at: [http://www.vaticanstate.va/content/vaticanstate/en/monumenti/musei-vaticani/cappella-sistina.paginate.6.html](http://www.vaticanstate.va/content/vaticanstate/en/monumenti/musei-vaticani/cappella-sistina/paginate.6.html).

⁴ Pope Saint John Paul II, Homily for the Celebration of the Unveiling of the Restorations of Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, April 8, 1994, at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19940408_restauri-sistina.html.

⁵ Dr. Esperanca Camara, *Essay on the Last Judgment*, Khan Academy website, at: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/high-ren-florence-rome/michelangelo/a/michelangelo-last-judgment>.

⁶ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 1a, Statute 1a.

⁷ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 1b, Statute 1b.

⁸ Pope Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, "On entering the New Millennium," January 6, 2001, n. 30.

⁹ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 2, Statute 2.

¹⁰ Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter V, n. 39.

¹¹ 1 *Thessalonians* 4:3.

¹² Saint Francis de Sales, bishop, Excerpt from *The Introduction to the Devout Life* (Part 1, chapter 3), quoted in the Office of Readings of the *Liturgy of the Hours* for January 24; originally published in French as *Philothea, Introduction à la Vie Dévote* in 1608; published in English under the title, *Philothea, or Introduction to the Devout Life* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1994), pp. 8-9.

¹³ Matthew 28:19.

¹⁴ Second Pastoral Letter of Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, September 14, 2015, n. 1.

¹⁵ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 3, Statute 3.

¹⁶ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 4, Statute 4.

¹⁷ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 5, Statute 64.

¹⁸ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 6, Statute 80.

¹⁹ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 7, Statute 67.

²⁰ First Pastoral Letter of Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, *Ars Celebrandi et Adorandi*, June 22, 2014, n. 1.

²¹ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 8, Statute 79.

²² Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 10, Statute 143.

²³ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 11, Statute 144.

²⁴ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 12a, Statute 145a.

²⁵ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 12b, Statute 145b.

²⁶ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 12c, Statute 145c.

²⁷ *Ezekiel* 34:11-12, 15-17; *Psalms* 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6; *Matthew* 25:31-46.

²⁸ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Coll. super Credo in Deum: Opuscula theologica 2*, Taurini 1954, pp. 216-7; quoted in the Office of Readings of the *Liturgy of the Hours* for Saturday of the Thirty-Third Week in Ordinary Time.

²⁹ Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 9, Statute 134.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:7, 9.

³¹ Second Pastoral Letter of Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, September 14, 2015, n. 74.