

**Homily for the Installation of Father Stephen Pohlman as
Pastor of Saint Francis Xavier, Holy Ghost, Saint Patrick and Saint Mary Parishes
Holy Ghost Church, Jerseyville, Illinois**

July 22, 2017

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good for us to be here today for this Mass and Rite of Installation of Father Stephen Pohlman as Pastor of Saint Francis Xavier, Holy Ghost, Saint Patrick and Saint Mary Parishes.

In our readings from the Gospel of Saint Matthew for the past couple of weeks, we have heard our Lord speaking in parables defining discipleship for us. Today Jesus draws our attention to the focus of our work as disciples, namely, the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used parables to describe what the kingdom of heaven is like, but, just as those around him did not quite understand, so it is not always easy for us to grasp the meaning of these parables. One of the key characteristics of these parables is the surprise ending or “plot twist” that many of them contain. This change from the way that we thought the parable would end to how our Lord actually concludes the parable should serve as a mechanism to invite

us to look more closely at how we can apply the message of Jesus to our lives as we strive to be His disciples.

The Gospel reading for today certainly contains a plot twist from what many of us would have thought the outcome would be. Growing up in an apartment building without a yard, I have never really been much of a gardener. But for those of you who have spent any time gardening, you know how tedious the job of keeping weeds out of the garden can be, so your initial instinct may be to get rid of the weeds as soon as possible. However, in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, our Lord recommends letting the wheat and weeds grow together until the harvest, at which point the weeds will be separated from the wheat and burned, while the wheat will be saved.

For us to understand this parable correctly, it is important for us to know that the weed to which Jesus was referring - and with which His listeners would have been familiar - was called cockle-seed, which "is a plant that is often found growing in cereal crops in the Middle East. It resembles wheat so closely that even to the farmer's practiced eye it is impossible to tell the two plants apart until the stalks begin to mature, at which stage the cockle can be recognized by its slender ear and emaciated

grain; it is quite toxic to humans, and if mixed with flour will ruin bread. Sowing cockle among the wheat was a form of revenge not unheard of in those countries. Periodic plagues of cockles were very much feared by the peasants, because they could cause them to lose their entire harvest.

“The Fathers of the Church have understood the cockle to be a metaphor for false doctrine, which is not easy to distinguish from the truth, above all at the beginning, *because it is proper to the devil to mix falsehood with truth*, and if error is allowed to flourish it always has catastrophic effects on the people of God.”¹

In our world today, there are plenty of false teachings contrary to the word of God that pop up in various places: on television, on the internet, in newspapers, magazines, movies, and even in songs on the radio. Obviously we can't get rid of all the false messages, but we do have to learn how eventually to distinguish the true doctrines of Christ from the false doctrines of the world. In the end, not only will false teachings be discarded, but Jesus says that “all who cause others to sin and all evildoers” will be thrown into the fires of hell.²

In light of this parable, the question that we must ask ourselves is whether we nourish the good seed of sound doctrine that the Lord has

planted in our lives by striving to follow His teachings and live as His disciples each and every day, or whether we let the weeds, the false teachings and temptations of the world around us to grow up and choke out the grace that each of us has been given. It is my hope that we all can say that we unequivocally nourish ourselves with the grace of our Lord each and every day. If, however, we do not always succeed, let us draw close to our Lord and to ask him for the grace to distinguish between things that nourish us spiritually and things that cause us to starve. For if we are to live as His disciples we must be able to distinguish the things that lead us closer to our Lord and those that lead us away from Him.

Today at this Mass we mark the beginning of a new chapter in the life of Saint Francis Xavier, Holy Ghost, Saint Patrick and Saint Mary Parishes with the Installation of your new Pastor. I am very pleased that Father Steve Pohlman has accepted the call to serve as the local shepherd of the Catholic community of faith in Jerseyville, Grafton and Fieldon. I am deeply grateful to you, Father Pohlman, for the way you have faithfully served the people of our diocese, in particular as Pastor of Saint Ambrose Parish in Godfrey for the past thirteen years. At the same time, I also wish to express my deep appreciation to Father Patrick Gibbons for his

dedicated ministry as Pastor of Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Patrick Parishes for the past six years and as Parochial Administrator of Holy Ghost and Saint Mary for the past year since the death of Father Hembrow.

Father Pohlman will now serve you as pastor in this Third Millennium of Christianity, so I think it is fitting to call to mind a theme suggested by our late Holy Father, the Great Pope Saint John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE*, "On entering the New Millennium," which I quote as follows (nos. 30-31): "First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness."

We grow in holiness by following Jesus as His disciples. Closely related to the notion of discipleship is the concept of stewardship. In the First Letter of St. Peter, he writes of stewardship in these words: "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace."³

In the Fall of 2015, I published my second pastoral letter, entitled, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for "The Art of Growing in God's Grace." In it, I wrote, "The art of growing in God's grace is the key to growth in the

Church. Building a culture of growth in the Church starts with inviting people to experience the love of Jesus Christ.”

Over the course of the years years leading up to the publication of my pastoral letter, I gave much thought to how we could, as a diocese, begin a process of strategic planning for growth in the Church. 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.

In my pastoral letter, I said that we must do four things to build a vibrant community of saints:

1. Invite people to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass (hospitality);
2. Study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith (formation);
3. Provide the sacraments as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven (prayer); and
4. Serve those in need by practicing charity and justice (service).

The verbs in these four action items correspond to the four pillars of stewardship and discipleship that we have begun talking about in our diocese: hospitality, formation, prayer and service. We can all communicate more broadly the message of invitation.

Through prayer, discernment, and consultation with others, it has become evident that the Lord is inviting us to embrace more fully our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.⁴

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. 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 what this diocese has to offer and the many ways in which various groups are already poised to contribute to that growth. A key group that is essential to this plan for growth is the priests of our diocese, especially our pastors. But they cannot do this alone. They need the help and cooperation of all parishioners. To be

able to put into practice the mission of Jesus, we need to be part of a team supporting each other.

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 likewise called to 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.

I pray that all of you will work with Father Pohlman and with his Parochial Vicar, Father Marty Smith, in seeking 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.

Therefore, dear parishioners of Saint Francis Xavier, Holy Ghost, Saint Patrick and Saint Mary Parishes, I urge you to strive for holiness, to work and pray with your new pastor. Support him, help him, pray for him, and most of all, love him as he loves you and as Christ calls us to love each other.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God*, vol. 4 (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 1989), pp. 190-191.

² Matthew 13:41-42.

³ 1 Peter 4:10.

⁴ 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>.