

**Homily for the Prayer Service for the Opening of the
First Session of the Fourth Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: In my homily for the Prayer Service for the Opening of the Preliminary Phase of the Diocesan Synod here in our Cathedral this past January 22nd, I started by quoting the British author and Oxford University scholar, C.S. Lewis, from his book entitled, *Mere Christianity*. Today, I wish to begin my homily for this Prayer Service for the Opening of the First Session of our Fourth Diocesan Synod by again quoting from Lewis, this time from his book called, *The Screwtape Letters*. This entertaining and enlightening book is a compilation of imaginary letters from a worldly-wise old devil named Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, a novice demon in charge of securing the damnation of an ordinary young man.

A key piece of advice from the veteran devil to the rookie demon is that “it is essential to keep the patient ignorant of your own existence. . . . Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves.”¹ The reason, he says, is that “when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and

sceptics. . . . The fact that ‘devils’ are predominantly *comic* figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that (it is an old textbook method of confusing them) he therefore cannot believe in you.”²

So a good place to start as we officially begin the first session of our Diocesan Synod is to acknowledge the existence of Satan and reject him. Notice that in the Rite of Baptism, the Rite of Confirmation and in the Renewal of Baptismal promises during the Easter season, most of the questions come right from the Apostles Creed in term of asking what we believe; but before we get to those questions, there is a preliminary question: do you reject Satan, and all his works, and all his empty promises? We start there before we profess our faith in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, because the Evil One will try to distract us from belief in the Triune God and His Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

As we begin to address the questions of discipleship and stewardship in our synod, the Evil One will try to prevent us from achieving our spiritual goals and growing in God’s grace. He will do this in subtle ways, not with a

frontal assault, but through apathy, discouragement and fear. We need to be on guard against these temptations. As we pray the Prayer to Saint Michael after Mass throughout our diocese in the months ahead, it will be good to keep our Diocesan Synod in mind as we ask him to defend us in battle and to be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil.

With regard to apathy, Lewis quotes Screwtape as writing, "Some ages are lukewarm and complacent, and then it is our business to soothe them faster asleep."³ This describes our current culture and circumstances: largely lukewarm and complacent. Catholics make up only 12 to 14 percent of the population in the 28 counties of our diocese. Of these, the majority do not go to Mass every Sunday in fulfillment of their obligation as God has prescribed in the Third Commandment of the Decalogue and as required in the Precepts of the Church.

There is no future in being lukewarm and complacent or just getting by in maintenance mode. We read in the Bible, "I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15-16). We need to find a way through God's grace to light a fire of faith burning deeply within hearts of the people of central Illinois.

As we discuss our proposed synodal declarations, we will also need to be aware of our fears, especially the fear of failure. But if we are to succeed, we must not be afraid to fail.

In arguing for a completely new constitution for the United States rather than a mere revision of the feeble Articles of Confederation, Founding Father James Madison wrote, “Better to fail in a noble cause than to succeed in a more limited effort that would only postpone the inevitable descent into political dissolution.”⁴ It would be better for us to fail in our noble cause of promoting discipleship and stewardship as a way of life than to sit back passively and watch our parishes and schools wither on the vine and dissolve into oblivion through apathy and neglect.

What gives us hope in this endeavor is that whenever God asks us to do something, He reminds us not to be afraid. In the Gospel read at the Easter Vigil, which we just heard again a few minutes ago, Saint Matthew says that two disciples were walking to the tomb on that Easter morning when all of a sudden, in what must have seemed like an explosion, there was a “great earthquake.” An angel descended from heaven, rolled back the stone of Christ’s tomb and sat upon it. The once mighty Roman guards were shaken with fear and suddenly they “became like dead men.” The angel of

the Lord addressed the two disciples and through the evangelist addresses us here today with the words, "Do not be afraid!" The angel invites them into the tomb and sends them forth to spread the Good News that Jesus was raised from the dead. These members of Christ's team were sent by the angel and charged with the words "Do not be afraid!" Along the road they encounter the Risen Christ who says to them, "Do not be afraid" (Matthew 28:1-10).

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see a great transformation take place in Saint Peter in just a few days. On Holy Thursday, after Jesus was arrested, Peter was so afraid that he denied the Lord three times. After Our Lord's resurrection, confronted by the "leaders, elders, and scribes . . . Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly class," Peter does not hesitate to proclaim that Jesus Christ the Nazorean has been "raised from the dead" and, moreover, that there "is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:1-12). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter is no longer paralyzed by fear, but does not back down in the face of opposition, even from the most powerful in the land. In the Gospel passage from Saint John, Peter's zeal for the Risen Lord is seen in his jumping

out of the boat and into the water as soon as he recognized that the person standing on the shore was Jesus (John 21:1-14). He is no longer afraid.

This message not to be afraid is a recurring theme in the Scriptures. When an angel appeared to Zechariah while he was performing his priestly service of burning incense in the sanctuary of the Lord, “Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John, and you will have joy and gladness’” (Luke 1:12-14).

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit, “she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High’” (Luke 1:30-32).

When Joseph learned that his wife Mary had become pregnant before they lived together, an “angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your

home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'" (Matthew 1:20-21).

When Jesus was born in the manger in Bethlehem, "there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord'" (Luke 2:8-11).

Fast-forward to October 22, 1978 and during the inaugural homily of his pontificate, Saint John Paul II proclaimed to the millions watching his words, "brothers and sisters, do not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power. Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ."

My dear members of the Fourth Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, I urge you to join me in beginning this holy task by calling to mind those four powerful words of the Risen Christ with which Saint John Paul II began his Petrine ministry: "do not be afraid." As we discuss our proposed synodal declarations, we need to check our own

tendency to say, “I am afraid that won’t work because . . .” or “I fear we will fail if we do this because . . .” If such is our tendency, we are reminded, “do not be afraid,” for the Holy Spirit will be with us, and the communion of saints will be helping us and will be praying for us if we seek to do God’s will by simply doing what God asks us to do.

The great earthquake of Christ’s resurrection should shake us to the core, jolting us out of our fears to turn forever to the Risen Lord, who gave the Great Commission to the Apostles just prior to ascending to His Father: *“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19). By making disciples of all nations and baptizing them with Trinitarian grace, we will indeed lead them to the Lord, who came *“so that they might have life and have it more abundantly”* (John 10:10).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperOne, 1996; originally published 1942), p. 31.

² Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, pp. 31-32.

³ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, pp. 32.

⁴ James Madison, quoted in Joseph J. Ellis, *The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789* (New York: Random House, 2015).