

Homily for the Synodal Consultation with Consecrated Religious

**Saint Francis Church at the Motherhouse of the Hospital Sisters of Saint Francis
Springfield, Illinois
August 19, 2017**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Dear Consecrated Religious, Reverend Fathers, my brothers and sisters in Christ:

Ninety years ago this past Tuesday, my predecessor, Bishop James Aloysius Griffin, penned his dedication to the *Diamond Jubilee History*, that Herculean work written to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of this Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. Each time I thumb through its pages, I cannot help but notice the pivotal role played by men and women religious throughout the history of this local Church, as also happens when I look through Sr. Susan Karina Dickey's book, *Come to the Water*, commemorating our sesquicentennial jubilee. From its humble origins in Quincy to its early transfer to Alton and its later transfer to Springfield, religious sisters, brothers, and priests provided vital and fruitful service wherever they were called to service. Much of their noble efforts and heroic sacrifices are remembered better by you than by the

diocesan clergy and the laity, but the effects of their zealous apostolic work cannot be doubted.

In his dedication to that Jubilee history book, Bishop Griffin rightly said, “we celebrate not only with happy hearts and pleasant anticipations, but also with a profound sense of responsibility in carrying on the great work so well begun by those who have gone before.”¹ His words were a simple allusion to the task of discipleship, for “no disciple is above his teacher” (Matthew 10:24). Those who came before us in this Diocese and labored to build up this recently established Church, knew what it meant to follow the Teacher and Master and actively and intentionally cooperated together -- clergy, religious, and laity -- to build “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone” (cf. John 13:13; Ephesians 2:20). They heard the Great Commission echo down through the centuries and set out with zeal to do what the Lord commanded, namely, to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Continuing his reflections of this noble history of the disciples of Jesus here in central Illinois, Bishop Griffin went on to say:

As we look into the future, we see here in this central part of the State a great field for Catholic achievement, provided the leaders remain true to the ideals of the pioneers and the souls of the laity stand steadfast, confident, aspiring and pure. We have inherited resources, spiritual and material, to create a great Church in this Diocese. We have abundant spiritual inspiration to acquire and to desire high achievement in the things of God. We have the spiritual foundation for the fulfillment of that desire well and truly laid in the form of religious, charitable and educational institutions. We have youth. Seventy-five years in the life of the Church is merely a beginning.²

His words remain true today, and one hundred and sixty-four years in the life of the Church is still merely a beginning, because discipleship is always an ongoing deepening relationship, both individual and communal, with Jesus Christ.

Many of these religious, charitable, and educational institutions to which Bishop Griffin referred were founded, developed, and enhanced by

the men and women of your institutes of consecrated life. They have a long and rich history and have greatly aided the faith of countless men and women. Each in their own ways and faithful to the charisms of their founders, they carried out the four aims to which I have asked the faithful of this Diocese of Springfield in Illinois to rededicate themselves through the process of this synod.³ They invited others to join them in prayer, especially the Sunday Mass. They helped others to study the Word of God by teaching the Catholic faith to others and helping others to learn about Jesus. They provided the Sacraments as signs of hope and paths of grace. And they served those in need by practicing charity and justice.

Even so, despite so much good work done by our ancestors in the faith, our leaders – both religious and diocesan – have not always remained true to the pioneers who came before us, and the laity have not always remained confident in advancing the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. We have grown somewhat lax or timid, and have become, it might be said, too comfortable, a situation which has unfortunately led to a general spirit of complacency. We have come to accept the *status quo* and have allowed our zeal to wane, settling for what I have called “maintenance mode.”

After much prayer and consultation, I decided the time was ripe for the convocation of a diocesan synod to strengthen our resolve to live as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus. Now is the time to beg the Lord to re-enliven our faith and to bring about within us a contagious joy and love of the faith, a joy and love that attracts and enlarges the fold. It is my great hope that the fruit of this Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, as I said in my homily for the Opening of the Preliminary Phase, “will be life-changing because our Diocese will be asked to become something new and we as individuals will be asked to become someone new, not ruptured from the past, but growing organically from what we were to what we are called to be, as a caterpillar becomes a butterfly and the contents of an egg become a full-grown bird flying aloft.”

Because you, dear men and women religious, have played such an important role in the history of this great Diocese and because I value your continued and fruitful collaboration in the Lord’s vineyard here in central Illinois, that today I seek your consultation regarding the proposed synodal declarations at this historic moment in our common history. It is true that we see signs of decline in certain aspects of our diocesan life, but at the same time it is also true that we see many signs of growth which fill us

with hope for the future of this local Church. Authentic growth always comes with a cost and with certain growing pains; this is as true in the natural world as it is in the spiritual. We know this to be true in our own, individual lives; can it be any different for the Body of Christ? Is this not why Saint Paul says “all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-23)?

Your members – both present and past – have labored tirelessly for the proclamation of the Gospel from the Mississippi River to the Indiana border for these past sixteen decades, for which I am deeply grateful. I ask you today to consider how we can strengthen our collaboration in the future so that the faithful of this Diocese can grow ever deeper in the grace of God and live more fully as disciples who intentionally live lives of hospitality, formation, prayer, and service.

When I made my first visits to the seven deaneries of this Diocese, I laid out my vision for the future of this local Church, a part of which is this: “I see a diocese where there is an abundance of vocations of young people willing to answer God’s call to follow Him and dedicate their lives to

carrying out His mission in the world; where there are sufficient priests to staff our parishes and serve their parishioners with virtuous commitment and impeccable integrity; devoted deacons, nuns and religious brothers dedicated to teaching the faith and caring for the sick, the poor, and the dying." This was my vision seven years ago and it remains my vision today. It is my hope that the proposed declarations for this synod, aided by your prayers and cooperation, will help to bring about this vision so that everyone within this Diocese will rededicate themselves to living and serving the Lord Jesus "completely and sincerely" (Joshua 24:14). Just as my predecessors relied greatly upon the collaboration of the members of your various institutes, so today do I rely on your collaboration to help the faithful of this Diocese say in sincerity of heart, "We will still serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:21).

I am confident that the Lord is calling us now to actively invite others to worship God with us; to study the Bible and learn about our faith; to provide the sacraments as signs of hope and paths to grace; and to serve those in need, because these are all signs of a lively faith and a deep love of God and neighbor. Please help me today - and throughout the process of

this synod - to discern how the Lord is calling us to live as his devoted disciples.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ James Aloysius Griffin, in Joseph J. Thompson, ed., *Diocese of Springfield in Illinois: Diamond Jubilee History* (Springfield, Illinois: Hartman Printing Co., 1927), 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cf. Thomas John Paprocki, *Ars crescendi in Dei gratia*, 72.