

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord and  
Celebration of Bishop Paprocki's Fortieth Anniversary of Priesthood Ordination**

**May 12, 2018**

**The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois**

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

Reverend Fathers, deacons, consecrated religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: the renowned British composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose professional career spanned the first half of the 20th century, wrote a majestic musical masterpiece entitled, "The Lark Ascending," inspired by a poem written with that name by the English poet George Meredith. Vaughn Williams wrote the violin solo so masterfully that the listener hearing those notes can virtually see the lark soaring through the sky. The lyrical notes are truly uplifting to the listener.

One can only imagine what the apostles must have felt when they saw Our Lord ascending majestically to heaven. Our scripture reading from the Acts of the Apostles says that they "were looking intently at the sky as he was going," but then "suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them" to break them from their mesmerized gaze.<sup>1</sup>

The Gospel of Saint Mark tells that the disciples indeed “went forth and preached everywhere,” fulfilling our Lord’s farewell command to “go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.”<sup>2</sup>

The Great Commission that Jesus gave to the disciples -- and their prompt response to carry out His wishes -- provides the prototype for our own lives of discipleship. Even here in church, we are not mere spectators watching a religious pageant unfold. We are sharers in the Body of Christ and at the end of Mass we are sent forth to glorify the Lord by our lives.

In today’s Eucharist, I offer prayers of thanks to God for forty years of priesthood. This past Thursday, May 10, was the fortieth anniversary of my ordination as a priest, which I celebrated with my classmates at Mundelein Seminary, where we were ordained. My classmate, Father Robert Coleman, pointed out in his homily at our anniversary Mass that forty is a significant number in Judeo-Christian history.

In the Old Testament, when God destroyed the earth with water, He caused it to rain 40 days and 40 nights ([Genesis 7:12](#)). After Moses killed the Egyptian, he fled to Midian, where he spent 40 years in the desert tending flocks ([Acts 7:30](#)). Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights ([Exodus 24:18](#)). Moses interceded on Israel’s behalf for 40 days and

40 nights ([Deuteronomy 9:18, 25](#)). The Law specified a maximum number of lashes a man could receive for a crime, setting the limit at 40 ([Deuteronomy 25:3](#)). The Israelite spies took 40 days to spy out Canaan ([Numbers 13:25](#)). The people of Israel spent forty days in the desert before entering the Promised Land. ([Deuteronomy 8:2-5](#)). Before Samson's deliverance, Israel served the Philistines for 40 years ([Judges 13:1](#)). Goliath taunted Saul's army for 40 days before David arrived to slay him ([1 Samuel 17:16](#)). When Elijah fled from Jezebel, he traveled 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Horeb ([1 Kings 19:8](#)).

The prophet Jonah powerfully warned ancient Nineveh, for forty days, that its destruction would come because of its many sins (Jonah 3:4). The prophet Ezekiel laid on His right side for 40 days to symbolize Judah's sins (Ezekiel 4:6).

In the New Testament, Jesus spent forty days in the desert fasting and praying before embarking on His public ministry (Matthew 4:2). Forty days also elapsed between Our Lord's resurrection and His Ascension into heaven (Acts 1:3), during which time He appeared to His apostles, ate with them, taught them the meaning of His resurrection, gave the keys of the

Kingdom to Saint Peter and the apostles of the Church, and promised to send His Holy Spirit.

In fact, the number 40 is mentioned 146 times in Scripture. From these examples, we can see that the number 40 generally symbolizes a period of testing, trial or probation. So I hope that I can now safely say that after forty years of priesthood I have finally completed my probationary period! But I think I still have some ways to go before I can say that my journey is ended and I can enter the Promised Land!

I would also say that my journey in the faith and in the priesthood has been a sort of an ascension in itself, starting from the ground up as an altar server, entering high school seminary at the age of fourteen, and resulting in my ordination to the priesthood at the age of twenty-five. In all honesty, looking back now, I must say that there was much about the priesthood that I did not know or really understand. I am grateful for the people who have mentored me over these forty years and helped me to grow in my understanding of the ordained ministerial priesthood, which in many ways still remains a mystery that continues to unfold through the grace of God.

I would call these people the pillars of my priesthood, starting with my parents, my first teachers in the faith. It is through them that I was introduced to a relationship with the Lord and His Church, which impressed me so strongly at a very early age that I wanted to be a priest for as long as I can remember. Of course, many priests were influential in this attraction to the priesthood, starting with the priest who instructed my mother in the faith when she was a teenager, Father Stanley Rokicinski, whom we affectionately called "Father Rocky." The Pastor of my home parish, St. Casimir Parish on the South Side of Chicago, was Monsignor Theodore Kaczoroski, a true gentleman who was a real model of the highly dedicated and dignified priest. Throughout my twelve years in the seminary from high school through college and theology, there were countless priests who were not only outstanding role models but who became close friends in the presbyterate, such as Monsignor John Canary, who taught me both at Niles College Seminary and at Mundelein Seminary, and with whom I continue to go on vacation every Winter.

As a deacon at St. Catherine Labouré Parish in Glenview, Illinois, my Pastor was Father William Buckley, and the Pastor of my first assignment as a priest at St. Michael Church in the blue-collar steel mill community of

South Chicago was Father Joseph Nowak. They were good priests whom I appreciate more now looking back than I did when I they were living.

There were three Archbishops of Chicago who were very significant in shaping my priesthood. Cardinal John Patrick Cody was the Archbishop throughout my years in the seminary, ordained me as a deacon and as a priest, and under whom I served for the first four years of my priesthood until his death in 1982. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin gave his blessing to my work of providing legal services for the poor through the Chicago Legal Clinic, but then sent me to Rome to study canon law and, after I returned from my studies, named me Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago when I was 39 years old. After his death in 1996, I continued as Chancellor under Cardinal Francis George until the end of my term in 2000, then I served as Pastor of St. Constance Parish near O'Hare Airport until I was named as Auxiliary Bishop to Cardinal George in 2003 by Pope John Paul II. Much of what I learned about how to serve as a bishop comes from the example I learned from working closely with these two eminent churchmen, Cardinal Bernardin and Cardinal George.

Three Popes were also very significant in helping to form me into the person and the bishop that I am today. Pope Paul VI was our Holy Father

throughout my years as a seminarian, but died three months after I was ordained a priest. After the brief reign of Pope John Paul I, it was Pope Saint John Paul II who would be my Holy Father for the next twenty-seven years and who named me bishop. It is quite an honor to have been named a bishop by a canonized saint! Of course, it was Pope Benedict XVI who named me to be your bishop here in Springfield in 2010.

I was blessed to have met two people in my lifetime who are now canonized saints. In addition to Pope Saint John Paul the Great, I was privileged to meet Saint Mother Theresa of Calcutta when I celebrated Mass for the Missionaries of Charity at their convent in Rome. After Mass, she came to the sacristy to thank me for celebrating Mass. That was before cell-phone cameras, so unfortunately I do not have a selfie with Saint Mother Theresa!

Other Saints who have been influential in my spirituality are my patron saints, Thomas More and John Fisher. The saint whose name I chose for my Confirmation name was Saint Joseph. Saint Francis de Sales has a special place in my heart not only because my reading of his *Introduction to the Devout Life* deeply influenced my own spirituality, but also because my appointment as Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago was announced on his feast

day, January 24, 2003. Like St. Francis de Sales, St. Josemaría Escrivá more recently has also been a major proponent of the holiness of all the faithful.

Now, I serve in this diocese and at this Cathedral dedicated to Our Blessed Mother under the title of the Immaculate Conception. As the model Christian, it is Our Lady who ultimately leads us to her Son.

Which brings me to my final point: while it is a great privilege to serve as your bishop, I must admit that I am hoping for something more. My upward ascendancy is not finished. But please don't get me wrong! I have no desire to be an Archbishop, a Cardinal or the Pope. My great ambition is to be a saint! I also do not necessarily mean an officially canonized saint, but simply a saint in the sense of spending eternal life with Our Lord in heaven. Please pray for me to reach this heavenly goal, as I pray for you to reach these transcendent heights with our Risen and Ascended Lord!

I wish close as I started: with reference to Ralph Vaugh Williams. At our priesthood ordination at Mundelein Seminary on May 10, 1978, my 28 classmates and I sang this song by Ralph Vaugh Williams as a Communion Meditation in the Sanctuary of the Main Chapel:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:

Such a Way, as gives us breath:

Such a Truth, as ends all strife:

Such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:

Such a Light, as shows a feast:

Such a Feast, as mends in length:

Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:

Such a Joy, as none can move:

Such a Love, as none can part:

Such a Heart, as joys in love.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts of the Apostles 1:10.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 16:15-20.