

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
St. Boniface Parish, Edwardsville, Illinois
Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B**

September 9, 2018

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you for this pastoral visit to St. Boniface Parish. After Mass, I look forward to meeting with your parish councils to hear about all the good things that are happening here at St. Boniface Parish to implement our recently-concluded Fourth Diocesan Synod.

This coming Tuesday, people around the world will remember a day when terrorism struck violently and atrociously in the United States. Tuesday, September 11, 2001, or simply 9/11 as it is widely known, is a day that has sadly gone down in history. That was seventeen years ago, so children high school age and younger were not even alive when it happened, but they have surely heard about it and learned of its significance. It is an anniversary to be remembered and the people involved to be prayed for: those who were killed, their families, those who were injured, those who now live with a greater degree of fear – and also those who committed this horrible act of terrorism. We remember them all in our prayers.

Much of the news that we hear about in the world and, frankly, even in the Church these days, is frightening. In the face of these fears, we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Thus says the LORD: Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, He comes with vindication; with divine recompense, He comes to save you” (Isaiah 35:4).

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).

The Gospel of Saint Matthew tells us about two disciples who were walking to the tomb on the morning of the third day after Our Lord’s crucifixion when, all of a sudden, in what must have seemed like an explosion, there was a “great earthquake.” The angel of the Lord tells the two disciples, “Do not be afraid!”, and sends them forth to spread the Good News that Jesus was raised from the dead.

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, 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.

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 brothers and sisters in Christ, I urge you to keep these four powerful words of the Risen Christ in mind as we look to the future – the future of our lives, the future of the Church, and the future of the world: “Be not afraid.”

Earlier this summer I finished writing my third pastoral letter, *Ars vivendi et moriendi in Dei gratia*, Latin for, “The Art of Living and Dying in God’s Grace.” Copies were mailed recently to all subscribers of *Catholic Times* and the full text is posted on our diocesan website. In this letter, I share some personal reflections in part one on the questions posed in the preparatory phase of the Fourth Diocesan Synod that we conducted last year. In part two, I provide a summary of the Fourth Diocesan Synod and some pastoral commentary on the twelve declarations that were adopted. In part three, I offer some theological reflections on the art of living and dying in God’s grace.

I see my newest pastoral letter as the third work in a trilogy of pastoral letters, with each pastoral letter building on the preceding one. In my previous pastoral letter, called, *Ars crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for, “The Art of Growing in God’s Grace,” 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.” I also proposed some constructive steps to build a culture of growth in the Church. These steps for growth were designed to build on the foundation that I laid in my first pastoral letter, *Ars celebrandi et*

adorandi, “The Art of Celebrating the Liturgy Properly and Adoring the Lord in the Eucharist Devoutly.”

This progression of themes is in keeping with the maxim that addresses the centrality of worship in the life, identity and mission of the Catholic Church: how we worship reflects what we believe and determines how we will live.

In my most recent pastoral letter, I said that the “art of living and 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.

As an expression of how to reach this goal of everlasting happiness, we adopted a new mission statement at our Fourth Diocesan Synod for all of us as members of this Diocese. It says, “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.”

To further this mission, the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is committed to implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely, hospitality, prayer, formation and service. In other words, we will invite people proactively to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass; we will provide well-prepared celebrations of the sacraments and other occasions for prayer as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven; we will study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith; and we will serve each other, especially those in need, by practicing charity and justice.

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.¹

I concluded my third pastoral letter by telling a personal anecdote, which I would like to share with you now to close this homily.

Once when I was catching a flight to concelebrate an out-of-town wedding for a friend of mine, I had gift-wrapped a figurine of the Blessed Mother as a wedding present for the newlyweds and put the gift in my

carry-on bag. When I got to the airport and put my bag on the conveyer belt for security screening, the TSA agent looked at the x-ray of my bag and called out, "Bag check." I immediately realized the problem: the figurine was made of leaded crystal and the security agent must have thought it was some sort of weapon. The TSA supervisor came over, saw me standing there wearing my clerical suit and Roman collar, then looked at the x-ray image of the figurine and exclaimed, "For heaven's sake, it's the Blessed Mother, let him through!" Of course, I was greatly relieved, and while the incident still makes me laugh, I have often thought that this little vignette is exactly the scenario I hope for when I die: I pray that I will arrive at the gates of heaven with the Blessed Mother at my side. Seeing me standing there with Our Lady beside me, Saint Peter will exclaim, "For heaven's sake, he's with the Blessed Mother, let him through!"

Staying close to our Blessed Mother throughout life provides faithful assurance that she will lead us to her Son Jesus at the hour of our death, so that we may die in God's grace and enjoy everlasting happiness in eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ 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>.