

**Homily for the Evening of Repentance and Prayer for those Harmed in the Church
Memorial of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus
October 1, 2018**

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

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Tonight, on this Feast Day of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, known as the “Little Flower,” we have come together for an Evening of Repentance and Prayer for Those Harmed in the Church. As sins of sexual depravity and complicity in their cover-up have deeply infected and wounded the Church, it is crucial that we atone for these sins and pray for these evils to be eradicated from the whole Church.

I am grateful for your presence and participation as we ask God’s healing for those who have been harmed in the Church, express our repentance for those sins, and seek God’s mercy and forgiveness. Some may ask why we must offer prayers of repentance and acts of atonement if we have not personally committed the serious sins that have recently come to light. The answer is that we do this following the example of Jesus Christ, who, though sinless himself, took on our lowliness and died on the

cross for our salvation. All of us who are baptized enter into “a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5), and thus are called to unite ourselves spiritually to the cross of Christ sharing in His suffering for the redemption of souls.¹ This is especially true for those of us in the ministerial priesthood who “are chosen and consecrated by the sacrament of Holy Orders, by which the Holy Spirit enables them to act in the person of Christ the head, for the service of all the members of the Church. The ordained minister is, as it were, an ‘icon’ of Christ the priest.”²

The title chosen for our evening of repentance and prayer was given much thought and reflection. In calling this an “Evening of Repentance and Prayer for Those Harmed in the Church,” the preposition “in” is important. People may be harmed IN the Church by her sinful and imperfect agents, but people are never harmed BY the Church, which is the holy means of our salvation.

Our late Holy Father, the great Pope Saint John Paul II, made this distinction succinctly in his 1994 Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (“As the Third Millennium Approaches”), in which he wrote:

[I]t is appropriate that, as the second millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become ever more conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and the Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged ways of thinking and acting that were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*. Although she is holy because of her incorporation into Christ, the Church does not tire of doing penance. Before God and man, she always *acknowledges as her own her sinful sons and daughters*.³

In making this distinction, Pope Saint John Paul II helped us to understand that we are asking forgiveness for the sons and daughters of the Church, not for the Church *per se*, for she is the holy bride of Christ. As then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explained as President of the International Theological Commission in their 1999 report, “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” the “request for pardon must not be understood as an expression of false humility or a denial of her 2,000 year history, which is certainly rich in merit in the areas of charity, culture and holiness. Instead, she responds to a necessary requirement of the truth,

which, in addition to the positive aspects, recognizes the human limitations and weaknesses of the various generations of Christ's disciples."⁴

This was the heart of Pope Saint John Paul II's plans for the Great Jubilee of 2000: that the Church cleanse its historical conscience at the end of the second millennium, in preparation for a new springtime of evangelization in the third. Similarly, having made the commitment as a diocese to the discipleship and stewardship way of life at our Fourth Diocesan Synod last year, it is my prayerful hope that we can have a new springtime of evangelization in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, but in preparation for this we must cleanse our historical conscience.

Our prayer service tonight for this purification of conscience is modeled along the lines of Pope Saint John Paul II's "Day of Pardon" held on the First Sunday of Lent, March 12, 2000, as part of the observation of the Great Jubilee of the new millennium.⁵ We began as he did, vested in penitential purple, asking for forgiveness and seeking the grace to forgive. We have listened to the words of Sacred Scripture, in which we heard the message of the prophet Malachi speaking of God's justice and purification, as well as God's promise that He will return to those who return to Him.

We have pleaded in the Responsorial Psalm, “Lord, come and save us.” We have heard the words of Jesus in St. Luke’s Gospel tell us that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.” The general intercessions will take the form of seven confessions of sin and requests for God’s pardon. After each of these seven petitions, one of the seven candles on the altar will be lit. As we pray for God’s forgiveness for these sins, we will chant the *Kyrie Eleison* [Lord have mercy]. Before the final blessing, we will pray the Lord’s Prayer, asking our Father to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

I see this evening of repentance and prayer as a way for us as a community of faith to express our repentance and seek God’s pardon for the sins of the past, that His grace may bring us healing for the faith to flourish in the future. Pope Saint John Paul II said that “the Church does not tire of doing penance” because penance is something that we do as a community of faith, asking pardon for each other’s sins. As Saint Paul wrote, if one part of the body suffers, “all the parts suffer with it; if one part

is honored, all the parts share its joy” (1 *Corinthians* 12:26). So we do penance for the sins of others as well as ourselves, that all may be healed.

I am not the first Bishop of Springfield to express such repentance and prayer for pardon. In his Pastoral Letter on Reconciliation, issued February 10, 2008, the Most Reverend George J. Lucas, now Archbishop of Omaha, wrote, “I want to ask forgiveness for the offenses caused by any representatives of the Church, and I want to call all members of our diocese to a renewed effort at reconciliation in our families, our parishes and our communities.”⁶

It is in that same spirit that I express repentance for the sins of the members of the Church, in particular the clergy – bishops, priests and deacons – who have harmed others. Sometimes these harms were evil in themselves, such as stealing church funds or sexually abusing minors, as well as committing other sins of unchastity. At other times, the harms may have been caused by negligence in not properly supervising the clergy or other church personnel, by not removing them promptly enough when they had caused harm to others, or by covering up their wrongdoing.

Therefore, we pray for all those who have been harmed, that with God's grace they may be able to forgive, since it is through forgiveness of those who have harmed them that they will begin to experience God's healing and come to a place of peace in their relationships with God and with others. We pray for those who have perpetrated harm and have sinned against others, that they may recognize how they have hurt God, their victims and others who have been offended by their actions, and that God may administer justice tempered by His Divine mercy. We join our prayers of repentance with those of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, who said during his recent trip to Ireland, "I beg the Lord's forgiveness for these sins and for the scandal and betrayal felt by so many others in God's family."⁷

The fact that there are always offenses to be forgiven and amends to be made and accepted should not give rise to despair. Rather, the ongoing work of reconciliation in the Church takes its hope from the truth of our faith that our sins are forgiven and salvation is accomplished through Jesus' death on the cross and His rising to new life.

We offer our evening of repentance and prayer on this Feast of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, virgin and doctor of the Church. The “Little Flower,” as she was known, was a contemplative nun who urged everyone to follow “the little way,” by which she wished to express her understanding of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, of seeking holiness of life in the ordinary and the everyday things of life. St. Thérèse based her “little way” on two fundamental convictions: 1) God shows love by mercy and forgiveness, and 2) she could not be perfect in following the Lord, so she would go to God as a child approaches a parent with open arms and a profound trust. We have a stained-glass window of the Little Flower on the south wall and a shrine in her honor on the north wall of our Cathedral as a visual reminder for us to follow this “little way” of showing our love for God and neighbor.

It is my fervent hope and prayer that, having repented our sins and being purified by God’s pardon, we in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois will experience a rebirth of faith in Christ; a deepening of commitment to live as a follower of Jesus in full communion with His one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church; an openness to hearing God’s unique call for each

one of us; a readiness to answer that call and live out our vocation in accord with God's will; a firm resolve to fulfill the mission that Christ has entrusted to us; a desire to love God and neighbor by keeping the Ten Commandments; an eagerness to share our faith with others; and a willingness to tell them of the happiness that is found in Jesus Christ both here on earth and in the life to come in God's heavenly kingdom. In short, we pray that the presence of Jesus and His love may grow in our world, in our hearts, in our minds, in our words and in our deeds.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cf. Pope Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, February 11, 1984, nn. 26-27.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. n. 1142.

³ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Apostolic Letter, "As the New Millennium Approaches," 1994, 33 [emphasis in original].

⁴ International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, 1999, p. 27.

⁵ George Weigel, *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II – The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), pp. 215-216.

⁶ Bishop George J. Lucas, "We Implore You on Behalf of Christ, Be Reconciled to God," The Bishop's Pastoral Letter on Reconciliation, *Catholic Times*, February 10, 2008.

⁷ Pope Francis, Homily for the closing Mass at the World Meeting of Families at Phoenix Park in Dublin, Ireland, August 26, 2018, <http://www.irishnews.com/news/popevisit/2018/08/26/news/tens-of-thousands-trek-to-phoenix-park-in-dublin-for-pope-francis-mass-1416582/>.