

Homily for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 15, 2018

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

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Why would a shepherd be tending sycamore trees? It seems odd for Amos the shepherd to be pruning trees. But that is what we heard in our first reading today; the prophet Amos says that he “was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores.” Both jobs, being a shepherd and being a tender of sycamore trees, were often the work of very poor people who looked for odd jobs in order to gain some money on a day-to-day basis in order to provide food and living. The type of sycamore that Amos would have tended was not the sort of sycamore tree we may be familiar with in our own countries, but rather a prickly bush which produced small fruits. These fruits would normally be very bitter. However, if the dresser of the tree pierced each fruit, a little grub would get inside and make the bitter fruit sweet and edible. It was a prickly and painful job, which most people didn’t want to do. Only those who were poor would do it in order to live. However, God had other

plans for Amos. We are told that the LORD took Amos from tending the flock and said to him, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel" (Amos 7:2-17).

The Lord called a very poor man to do his will and confront the king of Israel, Jeroboam, and his priest Amaziah. It would be Amos' task to reveal the kingdom's injustice and lack of faithfulness to God. Of course, like all God's prophets, Amos met opposition, but we remember him today as one of God's great prophets, even though he came from a surprising background. He had the task of making a bitter kingdom sweet again with God's justice. Similarly, Jesus called the Twelve from surprising and disparate workplaces, for example, calling fishermen from their nets and Matthew the tax collector from his office, and gave them a new task: they were to call people to repentance and new life in Christ.

To be called to do God's work is a great honor as well as a responsibility. The dignity of the Christian is described in the letter to the Ephesians. The Father has forgiven our sins and poured the richness of God's grace and blessing upon us. We are stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit at baptism and confirmation so that we can be a new creation and members of the body of Christ, sharing in Christ's life and ministry in the world.

It is quite clear in Mark's Gospel that Jesus did not intend to carry out His mission alone. Rather, from the very beginning His ministry was to be collaborative. To this end, we see our Lord sending the disciples out, two by two, to proclaim the word and confront unclean spirits.

Recently I completed writing my third pastoral letter, *Ars vivendi et moriendi in Dei gratia*, which is Latin for, "The Art of Living and Dying in God's Grace." I wrote it as a sort of post-synodal exhortation following our Fourth Diocesan Synod last year in which we declared that the mission of our diocese "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" and that we were therefore committed "to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition." My pastoral letter will be published soon and will be the basis for my conversations with parish pastoral councils, finance councils and school boards when I begin a new round of parish pastoral visitations in the Fall of 2018.

When we were in the planning stages of our Fourth Diocesan Synod, some members of the Preparatory Commission suggested that we make the theme of the synod the question that Jesus asked His disciples: "Who do you

say that I am?" (Matthew 16:13-20). In many ways, that is the essential question that each and every follower of Jesus must answer, but it is not the starting point. Notice that it is not mentioned that Jesus asked this question until the sixteenth chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel. A lot had to happen before the disciples would be capable of even considering this question. The call of the first disciples is described in chapter one of Saint John's Gospel, where it says that Saint John the Baptist watched Jesus walk by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Two of John's disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see" (John 1:35-39). It was only after coming with Jesus, watching Him and spending considerable time with Him that Jesus finally asked His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 13-16). It is only after the disciples acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah that He sends them out to tell others this Good News.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, just as He sent the Twelve, our Lord sends us out to proclaim the Good News in our daily lives. One of the dismissals from the Roman Missal is, "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." This is what Amos and the apostles were called to do. We are sent out from the Mass renewed and refreshed to make the good news of Jesus' promise of love and mercy known to others. We are sent out to free people from the things that oppress them; and to help establish a kingdom built upon the values of justice, peace and love in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are sent out to bring healing and support to those who are sick and weary.

Like Amos and the apostles, we are sent out to help make places where there is bitterness or sadness into places of joy and love. We may wonder why God has chosen us to do this; but like Amos, and like the apostles, we may be surprised at what we can do in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.