

**Homily for Mass at the
Diocesan Adult Enrichment Conference**

**Twenty Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle B
September 30, 2018**

**Decatur Conference Center and Hotel
Decatur, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Bishop Perry, Reverend Fathers, deacons, consecrated men and women religious, catechists, teachers, and my dear brothers and Sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here as we join together in prayer at this Mass for our Diocesan Adult Enrichment Conference.

Over the past year, people throughout our diocese have begun to consider how it is that we can most effectively implement the vision outlined by the members of our Fourth Diocesan Synod with regard to growth in the Church in our diocese. The growth we are striving for is far more than just a quantitative increase in the number of people or the amount of money available to our parishes and the diocese. Rather, it is essential to ensure that we give significant attention to the qualitative growth that will guarantee sustainability for the generations that follow. I am aware that this plan for growth is ambitious, but it is one that I am very

optimistic about, especially given my familiarity with what this diocese has to offer and the many ways in which various groups are already poised to contribute to that growth.

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel, our Holy Father Pope Francis offers a reflection in this regard as he talks about the various ways in which each of us is called to contribute to the work of evangelization through living as missionary disciples. The Holy Father writes:

All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples".¹

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I am asking that each of you see yourself as a missionary disciple in assisting in the important work of growth of the Church in our diocese. This begins with gratefully recognizing that all that we have is a gift from the Lord, and out of that gratitude, responding with generosity by sharing those gifts with others as we assist the faithful in deepening their relationship with Christ so that they, in turn, may become faithful missionary disciples and good stewards of the gifts that they have received.

The theme of this year's Diocesan Adult Enrichment Conference is, "Who Do You Say That I Am?" When we were in the planning stages of our Fourth Diocesan Synod, some members of the Preparatory Commission suggested that we make this question – "Who do you say that I am?" – the key phrase that expressed the focus and goal of the Synod. In many ways, that is the essential question that each and every follower of Jesus must answer, but we must note that 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). If Jesus were to ask me, "Who do you say that I am?," I would answer the same as Saint Peter, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." There really is no other answer that matters for a believing Christian.

To be a disciple means to accept Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Several steps must be taken before one can arrive at this conclusion. Father James Mallon, in his book, *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission*, describes these various steps. The

very first step is called the “pre-evangelization” stage, which begins with simply making an initial contact and building a relationship. This is also the first of the four pillars of discipleship and stewardship, which is hospitality and is extended by a welcoming invitation. Jesus took this first step with His disciples when they asked where He was staying and He responded with a cordial invitation, “Come and see” (John 1:39). It is only after we get to know Jesus in a personal way that we can recognize Him as our Lord and Savior. Recognizing Jesus as our Lord and Savior then calls us into a close relationship with the Church, since the Church is the Body of Christ.

Just a few moments ago both in the first reading from today’s Mass as well as in the Gospel, we heard two examples of the importance of such work. In the first reading we hear how Moses, feeling that he did not have the strength to carry out his mission by himself, asked the Lord to give his spirit to the elders of the Israelite people. In answer to this prayer, the Lord took some of the spirit that was on Moses and bestowed it on the seventy elders who began prophesying. However, there were *two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, were not in the gathering but had been left in the camp. They too had been on the list, but had not gone out to the tent; yet the spirit*

*came to rest on them also, and they prophesied in the camp.*² Immediately, Joshua came to Moses and asked him to forbid them from prophesying, to which Moses replied: *Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets! Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!*³

So too, in the Gospel reading we hear of a very similar scenario occurring between our Lord and the disciples. John, the beloved disciple, approaches our Lord and tells Him that he and the other disciples have seen someone driving out demons in the Jesus' name. Since he is not known to the disciples and is not part of the group that surrounds our Lord, the disciples tried to stop him from performing such works. However, we hear that our Lord instructed the disciples not to prevent him from doing so, for there is no one who performs a mighty deed in the Lord's name who can at the same time speak ill of Him. In doing so, Jesus reproves the idea that being a follower of Christ required one to be part of some exclusive group.

My dear brothers and sisters, there could not be a more appropriate time for us to hear these readings than during our time together at this conference. Our Lord has bestowed His spirit on each and every one of us through our baptism and invites us to share in the work of building up the

kingdom of God. So, like Eldad and Medad and the man that the disciples saw driving out demons, we must not hesitate to proclaim Christ to those around us. If we whole heartedly embrace our call to be messengers of the Gospel, we will most certainly experience the sort of growth in our diocese that the members of the synod and I envisioned.

Therefore, may our reception of our Lord's greatest gift of Himself in the Holy Eucharist at this Mass enflame our hearts with a desire to embrace more fully the path of intentional discipleship and stewardship as we all journey together toward the reward of eternal life promised to those who have been faithful servants of what has been entrusted to them.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.

² Numbers 11:26

³ Numbers 11:29