

**Homily for the Pontifical Requiem Mass
on the 150th Anniversary of the Death of
✠ The Right Reverend Henry Damian Juncker**

October 2, 2018

**Saints Peter and Paul Church
Alton, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, deacons, consecrated men and women religious, seminarians, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for this Pontifical Requiem Mass on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the death of the Right Reverend Henry Damian Juncker, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Alton, the former see city of our diocese prior to its translation to Springfield.

Bishop Juncker was born on August 22, 1809, in the French Province of Lorraine. Answering God's call to be a missionary, he embarked for the United States and arrived in Cincinnati, where he was ordained on March 16, 1834, the first young man raised to the priesthood by Bishop John Purcell. In 1853, the Diocese of Chicago was divided, and a new see was erected at Quincy. After the priest nominated to the new diocese declined the

appointment, the see remained vacant for three years until it was translated to Alton and Father Juncker was named as the first Bishop of Alton. He was consecrated to the episcopacy on Passion Sunday, April 26, 1857.

His first challenge was to staff his new diocese with priests. Two years after his consecration as Bishop of Alton, he set out for Europe in search of assistance. He returned in 1859, and the results of his efforts are best told in his own words, addressed to his flock soon after his return to Alton:

When Divine Providence, notwithstanding our unworthiness, called us among you two years ago, we found indeed, very few laborers in this new portion of the vineyard of the Lord; and a far greater number of abandoned congregations and scattered Catholics than was ever anticipated. . . .

Without any prospect or means, but with hope in the great Good Shepherd to remedy this sad situation, we undertook the painful journey to Europe, to secure pious, disinterested priests, who might go to the scattered and the abandoned, in his lone hut or solitary home, with words of peace on his lips and blessing in his heart, to celebrate the adorable mysteries, to administer the sacraments, and to instruct the old and the young in the ways of salvation.

You are wonderfully aware how God in His infinite mercy, has blessed our humble efforts; over fifty zealous priests are at present laboring in this diocese; who have left their homes, parents, relatives and friends, and all the comforts of this world for the greater Glory of God, that is, for the love and salvation of your immortal souls.¹

Our Pontifical Requiem Mass on this 150th anniversary of the death of Bishop Juncker provides all of us an opportunity to think about the salvation of our own immortal souls. According to a 2014 CBS News poll, 66% of the respondents said that they believe in the existence of Heaven and Hell. However, according to a 1988 poll conducted by Gallup, there are great differences of what people believe life after death is like is like. While none of us can know with any certainty what awaits us following our physical death, there are certain beliefs that are central to the Catholic understanding of heavenly life. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI once stated the following regarding this topic:

But how should we Christians respond to the question of death? We respond with faith in God, with a gaze of firm hope founded on the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, death opens to life, to eternal life, which is not an infinite duplicate of the present time, but something completely new. Faith

tells us that the true immortality for which we hope is not an idea, a concept, but a relationship of full communion with the living God: it is resting in his hands, in his love, and becoming in him one with all the brothers and sisters that he has created and redeemed, with all Creation. Our hope, then, lies in the love of God that shines resplendent from the Cross of Christ who lets Jesus' words to the good thief: "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43) resound in our heart. This is life in its fullness: life in God; a life of which we now have only a glimpse as one sees blue sky through fog.²

My dear brothers and sisters, in light of this understanding we gather to pray for Bishop Henry Damian Juncker, and ask the Lord, who is righteous, merciful and just,³ to grant him the eternal reward promised to faithful servants of the Gospel.

In addition to praying for the eternal soul of Bishop Juncker, let us also use this as an opportunity to reflect on our own lives and consider whether we live each day as Christ's disciples, so that one day, we too might die in His grace. As I wrote in my recently-published third pastoral letter, *Ars vivendi et moriendi in Deo gratia*, "The art of living and dying in God's grace is the key to everlasting happiness in eternal life."⁴

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, 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. Therefore, let us strive ever more fervently to live as Christ's disciples each and every day, so that at the end of our earthly lives we might be prepared to inherit our heavenly reward.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Michael J. Kelly and James M. Kirwin, *History of Mt. St. Mary's Seminary of the West* (Cincinnati: Keating & Co., 1894), pp. 11-12.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily for the Mass for the Repose of the Souls of the Cardinals and Bishops Who Have Died in the Past Year*, 3 November 2012.

³ cf. Psalm 116:5.

⁴ Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, *Third Pastoral Letter, Ars vivendi et moriendi in Dei gratia*, June 22, 2018, n. 1.