

**Homily for the Pontifical Mass for the General Chapter of Elections and Affairs of
the Hospital Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis**

**Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross
September 14, 2018**

**Saint Francis Church at the Chiara Center
Springfield, Illinois**

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

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, beloved Hospital Sisters of Saint Francis, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good for us to be here to celebrate this Holy Mass, in which we seek God's grace and guidance for the election of your General Superior and leadership team at the General Chapter of Elections and Affairs of the Hospital Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis. This is a very momentous and historic occasion, as it is the first time in your community's 174-year history that the Chapter is not being held in Germany. We are honored that you have chosen to come to the Land of Lincoln here in central Illinois. It is indeed a privilege for me to welcome you to the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois and preside over the election of your General Superior.

As the roots of your community are in Europe, it is fitting to set the context for my homily by recalling a very tragic accident that occurred in another part of Europe, in what was formerly the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, in the Soviet Union, approximately 104 kilometers north of Kiev. On April 26th, 1986, reactor number 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded, causing one of the worst disasters in history. The consequences were swift, brutal, and horrifying.

Vasily, a Chernobyl fireman, was one of the first to respond to the accident, walking among the glowing nuclear debris in jeans and short sleeves in a vain attempt to extinguish the flames. Within hours the ravaging effects of radiation poisoning forced his evacuation to a Moscow hospital. His wife, Lyusya, followed.

Yet, when she arrived at the hospital, she was not allowed into her husband's room; she was also surprised that all of the nurses had refused to enter it as well. They were afraid. Vasily, she was told, had absorbed so much fallout that he had become a small nuclear reactor himself; to be near him was to risk becoming like him – and to share in his fate.

Some of Lyusya's own family forbade her to see her husband, afraid she too would die of radiation poisoning. The doctors told her that her

husband was a lost cause. But Lyusya wouldn't be put off; she would show them otherwise. "You think you can stop her?" her father responded, knowing her determination. "She'll go through the window! She'll get up through the fire escape!"¹

And she did.

She went looking for her husband, and when she discovered where he was, she did everything she could to get to him. She bribed her way in, she snuck up the back stairs, and she hid from those who tried to stop her. When the doctors saw her determination, and realized no one else dared to care for Vasily, they no longer tried to prevent her.

She changed his sheets, brought him his meals, and carried away his sanitary tray. After all of this, she desired to do still more. And then it came to her.

"I remembered" she noted, "how we used to live at home. He only fell asleep at night after he'd taken my hand. That was a habit of his – to hold my hand while he slept. All night. So in the hospital I take his hand and don't let go."²

When one person refuses to leave another, when one hand finds another and does not let go, love becomes devotion.

Today, on the Feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross, we venerate the dreadful means by which divine love became supreme devotion. God climbed up the fire escape of creation and entered our condition through the window of the Incarnation, so to speak.

But it is on the Cross that He takes our hand and does not let go.

He found us like Lyusya found Vasily – dying from the inside out, not from radiation, but from sin. And in response, says St. Paul, “He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness...becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” What both Lyusya and St. Paul realize is that Devotion demands likeness.

If Jesus is going to grasp our hand and raise us up, then He has to be like us, and find us where we are. He must descend all way down into the mess we have made for ourselves, to the depths of human depravity and suffering, to the inescapable conclusion of sin, which is Death.

But He descends in the most beguiling way – coming like Lyusya, in the most unexpected way, “up the fire escape” of the incarnation, risking all to be close to us, to share in our misery and to share in our fate – to descend into the abyss of sin and death with us.

To be lifted up, Jesus foretold Nicodemus, like Moses lifted up the serpent – a symbol of death that brings life. That's the cross. Jesus does this; He shares our fate in order that we may share His with His Father in Heaven. Devotion demands likeness.

Your founder, St. Francis of Assisi, experienced this likeness in the flesh. Devoted to the Christ's crib, cross, and altar, he would, later in life, suffer the wounds of the cross as had his Lord. And as you know well, the crossed arms of Jesus and Francis have become a symbol of your Order and its primary mission – to conform its members and the world to the likeness of the crucified Christ.

This is why we are here. Your prayer, meetings, and decisions are meant to ensure that you tilt the future as much as you can toward this goal, as well as to your apostolic work that flows from and returns to your devotion to Christ, your willingness to live His life as He has lived ours.

Today you will elect one of your sisters to serve as General Superior of the Hospital Sisters of Saint Francis. That high office should be seen as a very exalted position. The Church, however, has an understanding of the concept of being exalted that is very different from the world's understanding of exaltation. The world sees exaltation as glory and fame, power and riches.

In contrast, as today's feast day indicates, the Church understands exaltation as being lifted up on a cross. Whoever is elected General Superior today will indeed be lifted up on a cross, but it is a very privileged cross to be shared with our Savior, Jesus Christ. Those of you who are chosen for the other offices of your Congregation's leadership team will be asked to take on the role of Simon the Cyrenian, sharing the burden of your General Superior's cross in providing direction for more than 700 Franciscan Sisters serving your international Congregation in Germany, Poland, Japan, India, the United States, The Netherlands, South Korea, and Kazakhstan. By sharing the burden of the cross with each other and with the help of God's grace, you will fulfill your mission of being and bringing the healing presence of Christ into our world, wherever you are and in whatever you do. In this way, you will also share in our Lord's glory.

By Christ's coming to us in a way we can understand, as a person, and by a very peculiar means of fidelity – the cross – Jesus has embodied a way to us that becomes our way back to His Father, a way St. Francis found and lived. And then he gathered a community to join him.

With Jesus and His disciple, Francis, we see the same dynamic: those who live the cross, who exalt the cross, will draw disciples to themselves. Self-sacrifice, for love, produces life.

It did for Vasily and Lyusya, too. Vasily died. But Lyusya lived, as did the child in her womb. She named her son after his father.

Love becomes devotion—becomes likeness—and then that likeness lives. Truth be told, that is what will soon happen here, on this altar. The Lord will come in the most beguiling, unexpected way. He has already come as a child and died as a criminal. But here, on the altar—a symbol of the cross—here He appears, if it's possible, even more humbly and undignified than before. Here He comes as food, for he desires again to enter into us to be as close to us as nourishment to bone.

Here is our God who, like Lyusya with Vasily, will find any way to get to us—a virgin mother, a miraculous birth, a humiliating death on a cross—even emptying himself: bread and wine bears his likeness and comes alive.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 15.

² *Ibid.*, 16.