

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
St. Mary Parish, Alton, Illinois
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C**

January 27, 2019

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you for this pastoral visit to St. Mary Parish. After Mass, I look forward to greeting as many of you as possible at the reception following Mass and then meeting later with your parish councils to hear about all the good things that are happening here at St. Mary Parish to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod.

I also look forward to celebrating Mass tomorrow at Marquette Catholic High School as we begin Catholic Schools Week.

Soon we will have a new Catholic community in this Alton Deanery: the Divine Mercy Senior Living Community. I will have more to say about this and answer questions you may have at the reception after Mass, but I would like to take this opportunity now to thank those who are supporting this project through their prayers and generosity.

To me, a senior living community is much more than a building where senior citizens reside. In many ways, the Divine Mercy Senior Living Community is an embodiment of today's second reading, taken

from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he says that "you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it" and "if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy." Our vision for senior living is making a home for seniors where they can stay connected to the Body of Christ by building relationships, growing in their faith, and moving into the next stage of their life joyfully, faithfully and gracefully.

I know how important this is from my personal experience of finding a Catholic senior living community for my 91-year-old mother in the Chicago area. For her, it was essential to move into a Catholic facility with a chapel where she could go to daily Mass as she had done during most of her life, surrounded by other people of faith, including retired priests and nuns. It is also a great comfort for me to know that my mother is being cared for by a highly capable staff, with frequent visits from my siblings and from me when I can.

With this project, our goal is to meet the needs of your mothers, fathers and seniors who are looking for a community in this diocese that brings them closer to God. At the Divine Mercy Senior Living Community, we will provide seniors with the opportunity to live in a faith-centered community, surrounded by others who seek to live the

Gospel. In addition, this project is a way for our generation to build something for another part of the Body of Christ, like generations before, who built and maintained our churches and school.

My visit today is also an opportunity to share with you my hopes and my vision as your bishop for the future of our diocese, building on and implementing our Diocesan Synod held in 2017 on the theme of discipleship and stewardship.

Last summer I published my third pastoral letter, *Ars vivendi et moriendi in Dei gratia*, Latin for, "The Art of Living and Dying in God's Grace." Copies were mailed to all subscribers of *Catholic Times* and the full text is posted on our diocesan website. In this letter, I share some personal reflections in part one on the questions posed in the preparatory phase of the Fourth Diocesan Synod that we conducted in November 2017. In part two, I provide a summary of the Fourth Diocesan Synod and some pastoral commentary on the twelve declarations that were adopted. In part three, I offer some theological reflections on the art of living and dying in God's grace.

I see my newest pastoral letter as the third work in a trilogy of pastoral letters, with each pastoral letter building on the preceding one. In my previous pastoral letter, called, *Ars crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for,

“The Art of Growing in God’s Grace,” I wrote, “The art of growing in God’s grace is the key to growth in the Church. Building a culture of growth in the Church starts with inviting people to experience the love of Jesus Christ.” I also proposed some constructive steps to build a culture of growth in the Church. These steps for growth were designed to build on the foundation that I laid in my first pastoral letter, *Ars celebrandi et adorandi*, “The Art of Celebrating the Liturgy Properly and Adoring the Lord in the Eucharist Devoutly.”

This progression of themes is in keeping with the maxim that addresses the centrality of worship in the life, identity and mission of the Catholic Church: how we worship reflects what we believe and determines how we will live.

In my most recent pastoral letter, I said that the “art of living and dying in God’s grace is the key to everlasting happiness in eternal life. The Christian faithful die to sin through the saving waters of baptism. By dying to their selfish desires through acts of mortification and self-sacrifice, the Christian faithful grow in love of God and neighbor. 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.

As an expression of how to reach this goal of everlasting happiness, we adopted a new mission statement at our Fourth Diocesan Synod for all of us as members of this Diocese. It says, “The mission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois 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. Accordingly, the community of Catholic faithful in this diocese is committed to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition.”

To further this mission, the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is committed to implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely, hospitality, prayer, formation and service. In other words, we will invite people proactively to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass; we will provide well-prepared celebrations of the sacraments and other occasions for prayer as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven; we will study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith; and we will serve each other, especially those in need, by practicing charity and justice.

Through prayer, discernment, and consultation with others, it has become evident that the Lord is inviting us to embrace more fully our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.¹

I concluded my third pastoral letter by telling a personal anecdote, which I would like to share with you now to close this homily.

Once when I was catching a flight to concelebrate an out-of-town wedding for a friend of mine, I had gift-wrapped a figurine of the Blessed Mother as a wedding present for the newlyweds and put the gift in my carry-on bag. When I got to the airport and put my bag on the conveyer belt for security screening, the TSA agent looked at the x-ray of my bag and called out, "Bag check." I immediately realized the problem: the figurine was made of leaded crystal and the security agent must have thought it was some sort of weapon. The TSA supervisor came over, saw me standing there wearing my clerical suit and Roman collar, then looked at the x-ray image of the figurine and exclaimed, "For heaven's sake, it's the Blessed Mother, let him through!" Of course, I was greatly relieved, and while the incident still makes me laugh, I have often thought that this little vignette is exactly the scenario I hope for when I die: I pray that I will arrive at the gates of heaven with the Blessed Mother at my side. Seeing

me standing there with Our Lady beside me, Saint Peter will exclaim, "For heaven's sake, he's with the Blessed Mother, let him through!"

As members of Saint Mary Parish, you know that staying close to our Blessed Mother throughout life provides faithful assurance that she will lead us to her Son Jesus at the hour of our death, so that we may die in God's grace and enjoy everlasting happiness in eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992, p. 8; <http://www.usccb.org/upload/stewardship-disciples-response-10th-anniversary.pdf>.