

**Homily for the Installation of Father Chris Comerford as Pastor of  
Ss. James and Patrick Parish, Decatur**

**Vigil Mass of Assumption of Mary - Friday, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good for us to be here today for this Mass and Rite of Installation of Father Chris Comerford as Pastor of Saints James and Patrick here in Decatur.

As we gather this evening for this Mass, we mark the beginning of a new chapter in the life of this parish, but we are also privileged to begin our celebration of the feast of Our Lady's Assumption. Only a few feast days throughout the year are given a specific vigil Mass, but the Assumption is one of them, and so Our Lord entrusts all of us with these specific readings for our meditation as we also celebrate Fr. Chris Comerford's installation as your new pastor.

Our Gospel is only two lines long, yet we would lose much to just skim over the words that St. Luke gives us of the woman from the crowd. We are all in the crowd of disciples that listen to Jesus, that want to follow Him, that want to receive His forgiveness and healing. That is precisely what it means to be a disciple, and so today, this woman becomes an example for all of us.

She calls out “Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.” And she’s right! As soon as we recognize Jesus as the Christ, as the Lord, as our God, we have to be blown away by the reality of the incarnation, that He has taken our flesh, and thus bestowed a marvelous grace on His mother! The Assumption is just the natural consequence of that: Jesus loved His mother so much that He not only entrusted her with His bodily presence on earth, but He also wanted to give her the bodily experience of heaven. And, she, having first received that grace of never falling into sin, not even original sin, was capable of receiving that gift, and so God carried her, body and soul, into heaven. Truly, she was blessed, in soul and body!

Christ *wants to give that gift to each and every one of us!* And so He says, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.” Obviously, Mary, received the Word of God in a preeminent way, as St. John tells us of her conceiving Him: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Of course, St. Luke tells us elsewhere that Mary “pondered all these things in her heart,” holding tight to the mysteries of God’s work as they unfolded in her life. Yet Christ today promises that this indwelling of His word can also happen in us! We receive God’s incarnate Word at every Mass that we prepare ourselves well to receive Holy Communion, and we can ponder the mysteries

of His will whenever we take time to bring the ups and downs of our life into prayer with Him, or meditate on Sacred Scripture. Jesus tells us that all of His disciples can be blessed just like Mary: we too can be entrusted with His bodily presence here on earth, and promised our own bodily presence in heaven, if we only “hear the word of God and observe it.” Let us give Him great thanks for this promise, and renew today our desire to receive it!

I offer this reflection to all of you as well as to your new pastor. Fr. Chris Comerford was ordained in 1996 and was a parochial vicar first at Blessed Sacrament Parish in Springfield, then, in 1999, at Our Saviour Parish in Jacksonville, and in 2002 at Ss. Peter and Paul in Collinsville. For three years he was a sacramental priest at St. Luke’s in Virginia, followed by his being entrusted with the pastorates of St. Barbara in Witt from 2003-2005, St. Maurice in Morrisonville from 2004-2008, St. Elizabeth in Granite City from 2009-2017 (during part of that time also being the priest-moderator at St. Mary and Mark Parish in Madison) and most recently at Blessed Sacrament Parish in Quincy from 2017-2020. I also thank him for his services as an associate director of vocations from 2000-2003. He is not new to the task of being a pastor! But, today, I remind Him of Jesus’ words: “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.”

Chris, my brother, above all, remember that you are an *Alter Christus*, another Christ, shepherding your parish in the name of God, and in collaboration with me, your bishop, both of us as servants of the Lord. With these particular readings in mind, I urge you as you begin this pastorate to humbly listen to God every day, and seek His will and presence in all the decisions you make here at Ss. James and Patrick.

I also wish to express my deep appreciation to Father John Burnette for his dedicated ministry as your Pastor for the past seven years. Our prayers and thanks go with him as Pastor Emeritus. The title "Emeritus" is Latin means "one who has completed a task," so we thank Father Burnette for his dedicated service in successfully bringing his task of pastoring these parishes to completion.

Father Comerford will serve you as pastor as we continue forward into this Third Millennium of Christianity, so I think it is fitting to call to mind a theme suggested by our late Holy Father, the Great Pope Saint John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, "On Entering the New Millennium," which I quote as follows (nos. 30-31): "First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness."

We grow in holiness by following Jesus as His disciples. Closely related to the notion of discipleship is the concept of stewardship. In the First Letter of St. Peter, he writes of stewardship in these words: "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace."<sup>1</sup> The prophet Micah put different words on this same truth: holiness is "to do justice ... love kindness ... and walk humbly with your God".

In the Fall of 2015, I published my second pastoral letter, entitled, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for "The Art of Growing in God's Grace." In it, 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."

In 2017 we concluded our Fourth Diocesan Synod, in which we focused on discipleship and stewardship. In addition to the clergy and consecrated religious who participated, delegates from each of our 129 parishes in this Diocese voted overwhelmingly to adopt a dozen declarations intended to set the direction and tone for the pastoral ministry of this local Church for the next several years.

The first of these declarations proclaims a new mission statement for all of us as members of this Diocese: "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.<sup>2</sup>

Stewardship recognizes that everything we have comes from God. Stewardship from God's perspective is that He has given us gifts to be used

not just selfishly for ourselves, but to be shared with others. Becoming a disciple means making an intentional decision to accept the Lord's call to follow Him and live the discipleship and stewardship way of life.

Thanks to the leadership of Father Burnette, your parishes have already begun to take steps to implement the goals of our Diocesan Synod. A key group that is essential to this plan for growth is the priests of our diocese, especially our pastors. But they cannot do this alone. They need the help and cooperation of all parishioners. To be able to put into practice the mission of Jesus, we need to be part of a team supporting each other.

I pray that all of you will work with Father Chris Comerford in seeking to be intentional disciples of the Lord and good stewards of the gifts entrusted to us for the growth of the Church as we journey together toward our inheritance in the glory of Heaven.

Therefore, dear parishioners of Ss. James and Patrick Parish, I urge you to strive for holiness, to work and pray with your new pastor. Support him, help him, pray for him, and most of all, love him as he loves you and as Christ calls us to love each other.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 4:10.

<sup>2</sup> 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>.