

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
Saint Agnes Parish, Springfield, Illinois
Second Sunday of Easter – Divine Mercy Sunday**

April 24, 2022

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you for this pastoral visit to Saint Agnes Parish in Springfield. Today the Church celebrates the Second Sunday of Easter, which is dedicated as Divine Mercy Sunday. On April 30, 2000, Pope St. John Paul II extended this devotion to Catholics throughout the world on the occasion of the canonization of St. Faustina Kowalska, who had received a series of private revelations from Jesus on the subject of His Divine Mercy, one of which was His desire for the establishment of a Feast of Mercy to be celebrated on the Second Sunday of Easter.

Speaking of this feast day, Our Lord told St. Faustina: “On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the font of My mercy. The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment.”¹

These words of invitation by Our Lord to experience the profound depths of love and mercy are extremely appealing and have been

embraced with enthusiasm by the faithful throughout the Church. Much attention is given to the remarkable benefits received by those who devoutly participate in the devotional practices connected with Divine Mercy Sunday, benefits which draw us into a deeper union with Our Risen Lord at the conclusion of this Octave of Easter.

The Latin word for mercy is *miser cordia*, which comes from *miserere*, to have compassion, and *cordia*, of the heart. Jesus is merciful because He has a compassionate heart and calls us to have compassionate hearts as well in our words and actions.

Today's Gospel (Jn 20:19-31) has three parts: the appearance to the disciples without Thomas, the gifts of peace and the Holy Spirit with the power to forgive sins, and the appearance to Thomas. God's mercy towards His people did not come to an end when Jesus ascended to heaven. After His Resurrection, but before His Ascension, Jesus conferred on His apostles the power to forgive sins, which continues today through the ministerial priesthood in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We should seek to experience Our Lord's Divine Mercy frequently by taking advantage of the opportunities provided to go sacramental confession and be absolved of our sins.

I am here with you this morning for a parish pastoral visit, as I make my way around the diocese visiting each of our 129 parishes. After Mass today, I look forward to greeting as many of you as possible. Then, this afternoon, I will meet with your Parish Finance and Pastoral Councils, School Board, and other Parish Leaders to hear about all the good things that are happening here at Saint Agnes Parish to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod.

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.

Following our Diocesan Synod, 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 this post-synodal 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.²

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!”

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 St. Faustina Kowalska, *Diary*, 699.

² 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>.