

**Homily for the Springfield Area Catholic Men's Conference
Saturday after Ash Wednesday
February 16, 2013**

**St. John Vianney Church
Sherman**

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

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, [consecrated men], dear brothers
[and sisters] in Christ:

I am happy to be with you again for this third annual Springfield Area Catholic Men's Conference. In a time when the practice of the faith is declining in some parts of the world and hostilities to the Church are increasing in frequency and in scope, it is a great encouragement to see many of you here this morning to worship the Lord our God and to ask of Him the grace to be "Fathers in Faith and Family." In this effort it is essential that we support one another, and so I encourage you to continue gathering not simply as one large group, but as smaller groups, as well. Together you can, by God's grace, build each other up and walk continuously in the way of truth (cf. Psalm 86:11).

In this season of Lent, Pope Benedict XVI has encouraged each of us to "spend this precious time rekindling your faith in Jesus Christ, so as to

enter with him into the dynamic of love for the Father and for every brother and sister that we encounter in our lives.”¹ If you seek to rekindle your faith, to “stir [it] into flame,” you must seek always to remain in the presence of the Lord who is always present to you (cf. II Timothy 1:6). The Lord, who is the Light of the World, is foretold by the prophet Isaiah when he proclaims, “Then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday; then the LORD will guide you always and give you plenty even on the parched land” (cf. John 8:12; Isaiah 58:10-11).

This light, Christ himself, was entrusted to each of us at the moment of our baptism when the baptismal candle, which was lit from the Paschal Candle, was given to our parents and godparents. “This light is entrusted to you,” they were told, “to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. He (she) is to walk always as a child of the light. May he (she) keep the flame of faith alive in his (her) heart. When the Lord comes, may he (she) go out to meet Him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.”

If you stay close to Jesus Christ and learn from Him His way of love and truth, then He will indeed “renew your strength and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails” (Isaiah 58:11). The world today is in great need of such oases, such places of life and growth that offer both beauty and sustenance in a desert that seems to be ever expanding with increasing assaults on life, marriage, and religious liberty!

Just as the Lord called Matthew out of his daily duties to follow Him, to learn from Him, and to serve Him, so the Lord calls each of us in and through our daily duties to follow Him, to learn from Him, and to serve Him. The Master continually “calls those who, being conscious of their weakness, are not ashamed to confess that we have all offended in many things.”² I urge you, then, especially in these days of penance, to seek the Lord’s abiding mercy in the Sacrament of Penance; confess your sins, receive absolution, accept your penance and be reconciled to God.

This call of the Lord was trumpeted on Ash Wednesday through the words of the prophet Joel, who heard the Lord say, “return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning” (Joel 2:12). If we are to return to the Lord, we must return to Him “from the center of our

thoughts and feelings, from the roots of our decisions, choices and actions, with a gesture of total and radical freedom.

But is this return to God possible? Yes, because there is a force that does not reside in our hearts, but that emanates from the heart of God. It is the power of his mercy.”³ It is the power of his mercy that calls out to each one of us, “Follow me,” because “I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners” (Luke 5:27, 32). Though Matthew was not looking for the Lord, the Lord was looking for Matthew. In the same way, if we are not looking for the Lord, we can be certain that He is looking for us. At the same time, if we are looking for the Lord, it is only because He has sought us and we can be certain that He will show himself to us.

By his cooperation with the Lord’s grace, Saint Matthew went from taking people’s earthly treasures to bestowing upon them the greatest of spiritual treasures. In his encounter with Jesus Christ, Saint Matthew looked upon Him who is “good and forgiving [and] abounding in kindness” and because of this encounter he would never be the same again (Psalm 86:5). If we, too, encounter the Lord when He calls and allow His mercy to touch our hearts and gladden our souls, then we, too, will be

forever changed; we will return to the Lord to be sent by Him as His messengers of reconciliation (cf. Psalm 86:3-4).

Saint Matthew came to be known as an Evangelist who proclaimed the Gospel of the love of God in Christ. Because of his efforts to reconcile God with men and men with God, we might rightly call him a “Repairer of the breach” and a “Restorer of ruined homesteads”(Isaiah 58:12). Each of you, dear brothers, must strive to be known as the same, to be true and authentic fathers in both faith and family.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2013, 4.

² Saint Bede the Venerable, *Homilies on the Gospels*, 1.21. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol.III: Luke*, Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 96.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for Ash Wednesday, February 13, 2013.