

**Homily for a Parish Visit to
Saint Mary of the Assumption Church, Neoga, Illinois
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A**

September 20, 2014

**† Most Rev. Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is a privilege for me to celebrate and preach at this Mass with you today here at Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation or celebrating a parish jubilee. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for a regular Sunday Mass because I want at some time to visit every parish in our diocese, in order to get to know the people and the places that make up our Catholic community in central Illinois.

What does a bishop look for when he comes to a parish? Well, I didn't come to see if the floors were cleaned and the pews were polished! I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish, he looks for the presence of the Catholic **faith**, to see whether it is strong and vibrant, whether it is growing, and if the conditions are present for its continued growth in the future. So it is good to see people of faith gathered here.

At the same time, a pastoral visit is not just a time for a bishop to see the parish, but also for the parish to see the bishop. The Church is all about relationships. As the three persons of the Trinity are an intimate communion of Father, Son and Spirit in relationship to each other, the Church exists as a communion in relationship to God and in relation to each other, the People of God, the Body of Christ. As a bishop, I have a special relationship with you, and you have a special relationship with me, and one of my roles is to bridge the relationship between you and the Pope and the rest of the universal Church, so that we may all be one in Christ's Body, into which we have been incorporated by the grace of Baptism.

In his homily for this Sunday's Gospel, Saint Augustine wrote, "The gospel story about the vineyard workers is appropriate to this time of year, the season of earthly grape harvest. But there is another harvest, the spiritual one in which God rejoices in the fruit of his vineyard."

Jesus tells the story about the vineyard laborers in order to teach us something about God's kingdom. It also teaches us something about ourselves and the society we live in. Can we recognize ourselves in this parable, where the attitudes of jealousy and generosity are contrasted? Would we be complaining like the laborers employed in the morning, or deeply grateful like the laborers employed towards the end of the day? Would we appreciate a generous employer, even if others seem to be reaping more benefit?

In the society in which we live, those who have a good start in life, those who are influential and well-educated, get more. Those who are strong often exploit the weak. This is the way of the world. In the perspective of the kingdom, those who are powerful and influential will not get more. God's arithmetic is different. We are being told that the kingdom of heaven is about God's abundance, and God's indiscriminate generosity in forgiving our sins.

Experiencing God's benevolence transforms who we are and the way we see our lives. We can recognize the blessings given to us. We can take joy in our homes, our daily bread, our schools, our jobs, the people who care for us, and even the blessings in the challenges we face. Too often we

complain: “I should be earning more than him”; “Why are other people more gifted than I am?”; “Why are others healthy, while I have a chronic illness?” In fact, everything is a gift from God. We are called to be thankful for what we have, and not complain about what we have not been given. Today we have the opportunity to learn even more deeply the lesson for which Jesus gave His life on the cross: that it is by the pure graciousness and love of God that we are saved and brought into life.

There is a beautiful passage in the Office of Readings for the Memorial of Saint Stephen of Hungary, whose feast day was August 16th, from a letter that he wrote to his son. In that letter Saint Stephen told his son what he needed to do to fulfill his duty in order to “reach the highest state of happiness.” He said, “Be merciful to all who are suffering violence, keeping always in your heart the example of the Lord who said: *I desire mercy and not sacrifice*. Be patient with everyone, not only with the powerful, but also with the weak. Finally be strong lest prosperity lift you up too much or adversity cast you down. Be humble in this life, that God may raise you up in the next. Be truly moderate and do not punish or condemn anyone immoderately. Be gentle so that you may never oppose justice. Be honorable so that you may never voluntarily bring disgrace

upon anyone. Be chaste so that you may avoid all the foulness of lust like the pangs of death.”

As he wrote to his son, Saint Stephen of Hungary also gives us a beautiful summary of the virtues that will lead to eternal happiness:

Be merciful.

Be patient.

Be strong.

Be humble.

Be moderate.

Be gentle.

Be honorable.

Be chaste.

May our gathering around this altar and our reception of the Eucharist strengthen us to live these virtues and always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.