

**Homily for Journey to Excellence Workshop  
Feast of St. Matthias  
May 14, 2015**

**St. Agnes Parish  
Springfield, IL**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here at the end of this day-long workshop during which we have been reflecting on the Journey to Excellence to which the Lord is calling us. We bring this day to a close in the most fitting way possible: by giving God our greatest act of praise and thanksgiving in this Eucharistic celebration.

Today is a rather unique day liturgically in the life of the Church. In many places, the Church is celebrating the Solemnity of the Ascension of our Lord. The Ascension is the day on which the Risen Christ parted company with His Apostles here on earth and ascended to join His Father in Heaven, ushering in a new era in the life of the Church. For pastoral reasons, many places, including our Province and much of the United States, have transferred this important feast day to the following Sunday.

As a result of this, we have the opportunity to celebrate the Feast of St. Matthias today. St. Matthias, as you will recall, was the Apostle chosen

to replace Judas Iscariot who had betrayed the Lord and had fallen from his privileged place of being one of the original Twelve. And although it may seem as though there are two distinct liturgical celebrations going on today in the Church, they are actually closely related to one another.

The account of the choosing of Matthias, which we heard in our first reading, comes just two verses after the conclusion of the account of the Ascension, which opens up the Acts of the Apostles. This was one of the first actions undertaken by the leaders of the early Church following the departure of Jesus from their earthly company. And although it took place before the official birthday of the Church on Pentecost, it is nevertheless an important episode upon which to reflect as it gives us some helpful insights into discipleship and leadership. These insights are every bit as relevant today as they were nearly two thousand years ago.

One point that stands out in this account of the process of filling the vacancy in the Twelve is the requirement that the candidate had to be one who had accompanied the rest of the Apostles in following Jesus and had to have been a witness to His Resurrection.<sup>1</sup> This is important because it shows that in order to be a leader, one must first be a follower. And this is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian disciple, that we understand

that we are all first and foremost followers of Jesus. Not all are called to leadership, but all, without exception, are called to be followers.

For those of us who *are* in positions of leadership, it is helpful to be reminded of this so that we can give our leadership the proper focus.

There is a certain danger of being a leader in that we can be tempted to want to think as though we call the shots and set the direction. While not dismissing the important contributions that a leader makes in directing, the Catholic leader must always be attentive and obedient to the promptings of the Lord, who is the one who is ultimately in charge. This means having the humility to accept the Lord's will over our own, trusting that He knows better than we do.

This is demonstrated in a very clear way as we see Peter, the leader of the Apostles, stepping up as that leader to begin the process of selecting the next Apostle. Two individuals were chosen, but we notice how Peter does not presume to abuse the authority given to him by God, and so he asks for guidance from the true leader by praying in the following words: "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen" (Acts 1:24). In this example, Peter is showing his role as a leader, but at the same time, submitting himself as a follower in order to ensure

that God's will is the one that is being fulfilled, and not his own.

By being consciously aware of our primary role as a follower, we who are in role of leadership are able to be of greater service to the people that we lead. We resist the temptations that come from that 2<sup>nd</sup> Level of Happiness which can cause us to become overly focused on ourselves and our own ideas. We are freed to let the attention and glory be directed to the One who is the ultimate leader. And if we are truly open to His will, we can be assured that He will always guide us to have our decisions and actions directed toward those higher levels of happiness, for they are at the heart of His command to love God and love our neighbor.

This style of leadership should also instill trust and confidence in those who are not in positions of leadership, for it makes clear to them that their obedience to their leaders is in alignment with the will of God and not just a servile submission to authority. Jesus makes this point clear in the Gospel when He tells His disciples: "I no longer call you slaves...I have called you friends" (John 15:15). We are much more likely to follow when we feel as though we are being treated as friends, with our good and the good of all at the heart of that leadership. When we keep our focus on following Christ, even when it means being led by another human being,

we have great confidence that He will indeed provide for that good.

As we prepare to receive our Lord in the Eucharist today, let us renew our commitment, regardless of our position, to being followers of Christ. Our dedicated discipleship will enable us to do whatever it is that the Lord has called us to, be it large or small. By deciding to follow His lead in all things, we can indeed be assured that we are on a journey of excellence in which we seek above all else to be good stewards of the gifts that He has given to us, making use of them for building up of the Kingdom here in this local Church and in the Church throughout the world.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:21-22.