

**Homily for Knights of Columbus Council 1580
Annual Fundraiser for Vocations, Pro-Life and Newman Apostolate
St. Paul Parish - Highland, IL**

**2nd Sunday of Lent- Year C
February 21, 2016**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, during this Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Holy Father has invited the Church to consider the important role that the practice of going on pilgrimage has during this special year. He says that making a pilgrimage “represents the journey each of us makes in this life. Life itself is a pilgrimage, and the human being is a *viator*, a pilgrim travelling along the road, making his way to the desired destination.”¹

Pilgrimages of any length can be significant when we connect them with this view of our life as a journey of faith. Here in our own diocese, the faithful are encouraged to make a pilgrimage as some point during this year to our cathedral in Springfield in order to pass through the Holy Door, which represents “a Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instils hope.”²

The Holy Door at our Cathedral also serves as a visible reminder of our connection to the Universal Church, as each cathedral in the world has designated a Holy Door through which pilgrims are able to enter and so participate in this year of grace. Of all of the holy doors throughout the world, those at the four major basilicas in Rome play a special role of significance as Rome represents the geographical and spiritual center of our Catholic faith. In a particular way, the Holy Door at the Cathedral of Rome, the Basilica of St. John Lateran, is of great importance and thus a destination for many pilgrims who will travel to Rome during this Jubilee Year.

While in Rome, pilgrims also have an opportunity to visit countless other sites that are significant to our Catholic faith. One of those is a relatively small chapel just across the street from the Basilica of St. John Lateran. The chapel is dedicated to the patronage of St. Lawrence, and it is a former private papal chapel that was a part of the old Lateran Palace, which was home to the popes for centuries.

What is so significant about this place is not necessarily the chapel itself, but rather the stairs that lead up to the chapel. This staircase is known as the *Scala Sancta*, which means Holy Stairs. Tradition holds that

these are the stairs that Jesus climbed on His way to Pilate's Praetorium just before His crucifixion. It has become a pious practice for pilgrims to ascend these stairs on one's knees, a practice which is quite penitential in character.

Ascending these stairs slowly and painfully, the pilgrim often looks up to see how much further the journey is, and at the top of the stairs, their eyes fall upon an image of the crucifixion. This image serves as a helpful reminder to the pilgrim to unite their sufferings, both on this ascent, and in their lives, to the sufferings of Christ on the Cross. As Catholics, we do not look upon the Cross as a sign of defeat, but rather, as the sign of victory. We know that the crucifixion is followed by the Resurrection, and so we look upon the Cross, identifying our sufferings with Christ's sufferings, and we push on in faith toward the hope of the Resurrection which lies beyond the Cross.

Our readings for this Second Sunday of Lent present this same dynamic of the role of faith in the face of adversity, suffering, and doubt. In our first reading, we hear the story of the covenant that the Lord made with Abram, promising that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.³ Up to this point, Abram and his wife were childless and

both were advanced in age, so it was only by a strong act of faith in God's promise that he moved forward. The reading concludes by describing a vision that Abram had which confirmed the promise that the Lord had made to him, a vision that would serve to give him the strength and trust needed as he continued his journey.

In the Gospel, we heard the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mt. Tabor in the presence of Peter, James, and John. Peter is overwhelmed by the experience of seeing the glory of the Lord and says: "Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Luke 9:33). He very much would have liked to stay with this joyful experience, but this was not the reason that Jesus had taken them up the mountain in the first place. One of the purposes was, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, "to strengthen the hearts of His disciples with a view to" His coming Passion.⁴ He wanted to give them hope so as not to be scandalized when He would undergo His suffering and death on the Cross. Their experience would serve as a light for the darkness that would soon follow for them as they journeyed toward Jerusalem.

In both cases, the Lord gives a sign in order to point to the future fulfillment of His promises. Those signs serve to strengthen His followers

to have faith when the path on which they tread is not so certain or not so smooth. Such is the image of the Cross for us as Christians. When we struggle in this life, we are invited to look upon the Cross and see that suffering is not the end of the story. If we stay united with Christ in faith, we are assured of the fact that we will share in the glory of the Resurrection. We have even greater confidence in those promises because Christ has already risen and awaits us in Heaven.

In the second reading, St. Paul drives this point home to us, reminding us that “our citizenship is in Heaven” (Philippians 3:20). The things of this world will pass away, so we need not despair when we encounter some sort of obstacle along the way. But these words are also an encouragement to not be too focused on “earthly things” (Phil. 3:19), such as money, power, and earthly success. Fixing our attention solely on these things will lead to “destruction.” Those things that we think will make us happy will ultimately leave us feeling empty and without hope, and we will be overcome by the shadow of the Cross. We will risk falling into despair because our faith has been placed in things other than Christ. And where faith in Christ is lacking, there will be a lack of faith in the hope of the Resurrection, and the Cross will only mean defeat.

Lent is a time when the Church encourages us to fix our gaze more intently on the Cross with eyes of faith. Our practices of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are a means by which we break our attachments to worldly things so that we can more easily direct our hearts to desiring the good things of Heaven that await us at the end of our pilgrimage of faith.

This detachment from earthly things will also benefit how we live our lives while still here on earth. By seeing that we are just pilgrims, we recognize that all we have is not ours to keep, but only on loan to us during this short time that we have. As a result, we will be more willing to practice good stewardship by sharing what we have with others, enabling them to have the strength and encouragement that they need as they journey with us. None of us are meant to make this journey alone. Each of us benefits from the generosity of others, and it is our part to continue that until we all reach our common home as members of the household of God in Heaven.

There are many examples of how this stewardship has been practiced throughout our diocese, and I would like to give a special mention to the good work done by the Knights of Columbus. They have done so much in sharing their resources to benefit a vast array of people on this journey of

faith including, but not limited to, their work to support pro-life causes, vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and Catholic campus ministry. May their example inspire all of us to be good stewards by sharing what we have with those who accompany us on this pilgrimage.

Our vessel for this pilgrimage is the ship of faith. It defines us, gives us shape and our buoyancy. Love is the destination of the ship, but hope is the driving force that propels us through the rough waters, the deep seas of life. We are carried by hope toward the glory of the resurrection, which we, too, will share.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist, the bread for this journey of faith, let us ask the Lord for the grace to keep our eyes fixed on the Cross and to see in that wonderful image a sign of God's love for us and His fidelity to His promise that we who remain united to Him in faith, hope, and love, will share in the victory of the Resurrection when we finish the ascent of our journey here on earth.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Misericordia Vultus*, §14.

² *ibid.*, §3.

³ Genesis 15:5.

⁴ ST III, Q. 45, Art. 3, ad. 3.