

**Homily for Mass with the Serra Vocations Club of Madison County
St. Anthony Hospital Chapel, Alton**

August 17, 2016

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as you are well aware, over the past six years, our diocese has experienced a substantial increase in the number of men studying for the priesthood. People are constantly asking about the reason for this increase. It is hard to point to any one thing as *the* reason for this growth, other than the fact that it is ultimately the Lord who is doing all of the hard work. Our part is to do our best to provide opportunities through which His call can be heard more clearly among the young men of our diocese. All of the initiatives undertaken on various levels to promote vocations are serving to build up a culture of vocations in our diocese. It is this strengthened culture of vocations that I believe is responsible for the growth that we have experienced.

Today we gather to give thanks to God for the ways in which your work as the Serra Vocations Club of Madison County has contributed to the strengthening of this culture. One of the key objectives of Serra International is to foster and promote vocations to the ministerial

priesthood and consecrated religious life in the Catholic Church. I am aware that you have done this by organizing visits to some of the area schools, asking priests and religious to speak about vocations to the young people. We cannot underestimate the value of constantly keeping the message of vocations in front of our young people.

In our Gospel for today's Mass, we heard the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. When the landowner went out toward the end of the day and saw that there will still some standing by, he asked them the reason for their idleness. "Because no one has hired us" (Matthew 20:7) was their response. In his commentary on this Gospel passage, St. Gregory the Great sees this group as the Gentiles who were called last. Their failure to respond was because none of the prophets had preached about this new way of life to them. It was not until the Lord came that this message was finally brought to their attention.¹

We do not want to be found guilty of not presenting the priesthood or religious life as a possible way of life to our young people. By your willingness to offer these vocation events, you are making sure that this message is indeed being presented earlier in the day, meaning earlier in their lives. We trust that the Lord can multiply our seemingly meager

efforts to bring about a fruitful response. I therefore commend you and encourage you to continue this work, trusting that the Lord will indeed bless those efforts.

Another central objective of your organization is to support those who have chosen to follow the Lord in the vocations of the ministerial priesthood and consecrated religious life. Once again, never underestimate how something so seemingly simple can leave a significant impact.

Turning again to the Gospel, we see how, when it was time to collect their pay at end of the day, those who had worked all day earned the same amount as those who worked only briefly. Those who toiled all day felt as though they were not being treated justly. It is quite possible that they felt that they were being underappreciated for their work. As a result, they grew bitter and complained.

Those who have been working hard in the vineyard of the Lord as priests and religious are subject to a similar temptation. After laboring tirelessly, it can be the case that they receive little if any recognition for what they do. While they do not serve the Church in order to be recognized or commended, it is still nice to be encouraged from time to

time, reaffirming in them that their work is indeed appreciated and valuable.

In our first reading from the Prophet Ezekiel, we hear the unfortunate account of those shepherds who were more concerned about their own needs than those of the flock entrusted to them. While there can be various reasons that a shepherd might choose to follow such a path, it is quite possible that one thing that could contribute to it is the lack of encouragement and love from those they serve.

Once again, we do not want to be found guilty of contributing to a discouraged attitude among our priests or religious by our lack of love and support for what they do and the commitment that they have made to give their lives in service to the Church. Again, I thank you for the work that you do in this regard.

Although it may not initially seem evident, your support of these men and women already consecrated to the Lord actually serves to support that first objective of promoting vocations among our young people. When they experience happy priests and religious, they are much more likely to consider that way of life as something that can be joyful and fulfilling. In fact, I have no doubt that the joyful witness of the priests in our diocese is a

major factor contributing to the increase of seminarians in our diocese. I also think the joyful witness offered by the sisters in this community of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George is an important element of the consistent trends in vocations that they have been experiencing as well.

As we continue our celebration of this Eucharist, we turn to your newly canonized patron, St. Junipero Serra, asking for his intercession to assist you in your working of building a culture of vocations. He labored strenuously in presenting the message of the Gospel to those who were waiting to hear it. May you have that same missionary zeal to present the good news of vocations to those who are waiting to hear it, and to continue to support those who have already heard it, so that this culture of vocations will continue to grow here and throughout our diocese.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels*, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Matthew, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 1 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 681–682.