

**Homily on the Occasion of the
150th Anniversary of Saint Joseph Parish**

**Saint Joseph Church
Ramsey, Illinois**

March 14, 2020

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Father Snider, parishioners of Saint Joseph Parish, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here to offer thanks to our Lord in celebration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Saint Joseph Church here in Ramsey. Since 1870, Catholics in this community have gathered here in prayer and fellowship as to journey together as disciples of Jesus Christ. The spiritual foundation laid so long ago continues to remain firm due to God's grace, which has made possible the many good works of those who have preceded us. We come, therefore, to this celebration of the Eucharist with a profound sense of gratitude for the gifts we have received as we ask God's continued guidance, so that we might continue to be committed disciples of our Lord and good stewards of His abundant gifts.

On an anniversary such as this, it is natural to wonder what life was like one hundred and fifty years ago. Looking at our circumstances today in the year 2020, the differences in our country and world, as well as our way of life, seem vast. In 1870, John D. Rockefeller incorporated the Standard Oil Company; the Chicago Base Ball Club, later to be known as the Chicago White Stockings and ultimately the Chicago Cubs, played their first game against the St. Louis Unions of the National Association of Base Ball Players, an amateur league; Christmas was declared a federal holiday in the United States; Rome became the capital of a unified Italy; and the First Vatican Council issued a dogmatic constitution with the approval of Pope Pius IX, declaring the infallibility of the Pope in matters of faith and morals. It is in this historic context that St. Joseph Church was founded.

As we look back on the humble beginnings of this church and the lives of the people who have been part of its history over the past one hundred and fifty years, we have a unique opportunity to reflect on what it means to be missionary disciples of our Lord.

Quite appropriately, our readings today focus on what it means to be nourished and sustained on our journey of faith. In the first reading from today's Mass, as the tribes of Israel journey from Egypt to Sinai, God

challenges them to grow in faith. God had already provided manna in the desert as a way of instructing them. Now they encamp at Rephidim, where they discover there is no water to drink. Ideally, they should see in this situation an opportunity to display faith by turning to God for assistance. But the tribes fall short of ideal faith; they lodge a complaint against Moses, accusing him of putting their lives in jeopardy. They even wonder if there was any advantage to their leaving Egypt where they at least had enough to survive. The reaction on the part of Israel is so extreme that Moses believes his own life is now in jeopardy. Fearing the people are about to hurl stones at him, Moses cries out to God. It seems Moses likewise has yet to trust in God's protective love.

God addresses the concerns of both Moses and the people. First, God gives Moses the assurance of divine protection. God will be standing between him and the people. Secondly, God gives signs of assurance to the people. They will see their elders standing with Moses; they will see in the hand of Moses the shepherd's staff that he used so dramatically in Egypt. Once Moses strikes the rock with that staff, water will flow out for the people to drink. Thus God has removed the fear of death and replaced it with assurance of life.

This season of Lent in which we find ourselves is a time of retreat, of being in the desert to encounter God again and find the new land that God has promised us. The Israelites hated their old land of slavery, and yet they had no idea of what the promised land would look like. It took forty years for them to find it. We have these forty days of Lent to reflect on and prepare for the promised land of heaven that awaits us.

Lent means coming face-to-face with God because there is no place else to go. Only God suffices. Only God will be there for us. Or, in Peter's words, "Lord, to whom else shall we go?" Lent challenges us to see what we substitute for God – power, money, status, etc. – and calls us to see God face-to-face.

In our Gospel today, we are told about the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. On one level the story is about the process the Samaritan woman goes through to recognize who Jesus really is. She begins with "sir," then moves to "prophet," and finally concludes with "Christ," which means "Messiah" or "The Anointed One." On another level the story is about Jesus' identity as "living water." The term "living water" means more than simply fresh, running water. As applied to Jesus, living water is "lifegiving water."

The Samaritan woman truly believed that Jesus *had* living water, indeed *was* living water for her parched life. When she proclaimed that message, the Samaritans came to believe in Jesus. As Christians, we are called to proclaim this in our lives so that others may come to believe in Christ as well.

The woman's request of Jesus, "give me some of that water," can be our prayer too. Many are still thirsting for an experience of God that makes them feel truly loved and known, like the Samaritan woman in her encounter with Jesus. It is easy to be seduced by worldly attractions. Just as the woman kept having to go back to the well, some people find the happiness the world promises illusory and short-lived. You don't have to keep coming back for more, Jesus assures us. He offers us himself as the true source of life and joy. Drink of God's Spirit, he says, and you will never be thirsty again.

There is no greater gift that we can receive than the gift that our Lord gives us, the gift of Himself in Holy Communion. For this sacrament nourishes and strengthens us to live as Christ's disciples in the midst of the world today.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Holy Eucharist is for the spiritual life what food is for our physical lives. Just as food strengthens us

and prevents weakness and death, so too does the Holy Eucharist strengthen us for our lives of faith. Through frequent or daily communion, the spiritual life becomes fuller and the soul is enriched with the many virtues that are needed to bear witness to Christ in our daily lives. In our reception of Holy Communion, may our thirst for union with God be quenched.

As we now continue our celebration of this Mass, may we bring to the Lord our gratitude for all of the gifts that we have been given, especially the gift of this parish. We are grateful also for the vocations of the priests and religious sisters that have come from this parish and we pray for more young people to say yes to God's call to follow Him and serve His Church. May the Lord expand all of our hearts through the reception of the Eucharist so that we might willingly and joyfully commit ourselves to living as Christ's disciples each day of our lives, thus continuing to build on the firm foundation which has been established for us.

May God give us this grace. Amen.