

**Homily for the Installation of Fr. Michael Meinhart as Pastor
St. Louis Catholic Church, Nokomis, Illinois**

Mass for the (Transferred) Patronal Solemnity of St. Louis | August 28th, 2022 AD

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good for us to be here today for this Mass and Rite of Installation of Fr. Michael Meinhart as pastor of St. Louis here in Nokomis. I also know that this is the kickoff Mass for your new school year, *and* the celebration of your patronal feast, so we rejoice today for all these reasons, and above all for God's love that has brought us to this day!

The Rite of Installation that we celebrate today is not a pre-requisite for a priest to begin functioning as the pastor of a parish, but every year when new pastors are appointed around our diocese, I try to go and do this rite with them because it reminds all of us of an essential part of being a disciple: Disciples do not choose their own path, they follow Christ where He leads them. I did not just show up here in the Diocese of Springfield one day and claim the title of bishop for myself. No, I was sent, I was commissioned, by then Pope Benedict XVI, himself having been given his authority as Pope after Christ gave it to St. Peter when He founded the Church: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."¹

In a similar way, a priest is *sent* and *entrusted* with the pastoral responsibilities of a parish by his bishop, and it is during the rite of installation that we celebrate here this morning that this handing over of the “keys of the kingdom” (albeit only a small part of Christ’s Kingdom) takes place.

At the same time, Jesus’ gift of responsibility and authority over His Church as entrusted to Peter, and my giving a part of that to your new pastor today, is not something that happens only to the Pope, or to priests. *Every one of us* has been entrusted with a small part of Jesus’ Kingdom. For some of you, that is upholding Christ’s reign in your family, as you work, or among the people you are friends with. For all of us, Christ has given us the responsibility, and dignity, of caring for and protecting His Kingdom *in our own hearts*.

One of the ways that we do this happens every Sunday when we profess our faith by praying the Creed. For St. Peter himself, it was only after his profession of faith in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” that he was made leader of the Church. Today, in a special way, all of us, with your new pastor, will recite the Creed, professing individually and together our common faith in Christ. By that profession, I officially ask your pastor to take on the responsibilities of this parish with the heart of Christ. But every time we profess the creed, every time we *pray* those words that billions of Christians

have prayed down through the centuries, we each renew our own commitment to Jesus! Does He reign over our hearts? Is He the Lord of our *time*? Of our *bank accounts*? Of those He has entrusted to our care? I have heard this question asked rather provocatively: if I were taken before a court and charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me? If Jesus is truly “Christ” and “Son of the Living God,” as we confess, then He *must be the only king of our lives*. Your patron, St. Louis, though King of his country, is for all of us an exemplar of one who allowed God to reign over his life and choices.

Of course, our prayer together this morning is not just a recommitment to the Lord, it is also to give thanksgiving and worship to God, Who daily provides for us. Today we offer thanks and gratitude to God for Fr. Al Allen and Fr. Mike Haag for their priestly care of this parish these past few years. I also want to thank Fr. Michael Meinhart for his own fidelity to the Lord, and obedience to me, in taking on this new assignment as your pastor. Fr. Michael was ordained on June 19th, 2020, and spent his first years of priesthood at St. Boniface Parish in Edwardsville and as Associate Chaplain at Father McGivney Catholic High School in Glen Carbon.

He will serve you as pastor as we continue forward into this Third Millennium of Christianity, so I think it is fitting to call to mind a theme

suggested by our late Holy Father, the Great Pope Saint John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, “On Entering the New Millennium,” which I quote as follows (nos. 30-31): “First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that *all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness.*” Holiness is nothing more than following Jesus as His disciples, as people who listen and learn from Him, who put Him first in our lives. In a real relationship with Christ, we discover that everything we have was first a gift from our Heavenly Father. St. Peter wrote of this realization and consequent conversion in these words: “As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”² This is why *stewardship* naturally flows from the authentic *disciple*. We cannot help but make return to the Lord of all the good things He has done for us.

In the Fall of 2015, I published my second pastoral letter, entitled, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for “The Art of Growing in God’s Grace.” In it, I wrote, “The art of growing in God’s grace is the key to growth in the Church. Building a culture of growth in the Church starts with inviting people to experience the love of Jesus Christ.” All of us are not just called to receive God’s love for ourselves, but to become instruments of that love in those around us! This is how the Church will grow. That is how *this* Church will grow.

In 2017 we concluded our Fourth Diocesan Synod in which the clergy, consecrated religious, and delegates from all 129 parishes in this Diocese voted overwhelmingly to adopt a dozen declarations on how we should live out our identity as disciples and stewards in this diocese for the coming years. The first of these declarations was a bold response to God's call: "The mission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is to build a fervent community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and steadfast stewards of God's creation who seek to become saints. Accordingly, the community of Catholic faithful in this diocese is committed to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition."

Four pillars, essential areas for our faithful discipleship and stewardship, came from those synodal discussions: **hospitality, prayer, formation, and service**. In other words, we are the kind of Catholic Christians who will **invite** people proactively to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass; we will **provide** well-prepared celebrations of the sacraments and other occasions for **prayer** as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven; we will **study** the Bible and **learn** more about Jesus and our Catholic faith; and we will **serve** each other, especially those in need, by practicing charity and justice.

Notice that all of these pillars come back to simply prioritizing our own relationship with God, and inviting others to join us in it. How might our readings for this feast of St. Louis be inviting us to this? Isaiah, exhorting the Israelites, calls us as well out of a formulaic relationship with God: just showing up on Sunday, putting our donation in the basket, and living the rest of our lives just like everyone else. Rather, He calls us as well “to loose the bonds of wickedness, ... to let the oppressed go free, ... to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; ... ⁸Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, ... and the Lord will answer” (Isaiah 58:6-9). Jesus only amplifies this call to Christian love, a love *like Christ*: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... [and] You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” What would our world ... our parish ... our families, look like if we loved like this?! [PAUSE]

St. Louis offers us some fatherly advice on how to do this. I repeat his words written to his son in particular to you Fr. Michael, my spiritual son, and to each and every one of you here today: “Dearest son, I instruct you first that you ought to love God with all your heart and all your strength, for without this no one can be saved. Keep yourself from all things that are displeasing to God ... Should God send you any adversity, accept it graciously, giving thanks

to Our Lord, and think that it has happened to you for your good ... should God send you prosperity, thank him often, because it is on account of his goodness and not for your merit. Confess often, and choose a wise confessor who, to the best of your knowledge, knows how to teach you what you ought to do, and knows how to warn you of what you ought to refrain from doing. ... Listen devoutly and gladly to the service of God and Holy Church, and take care that your manner not be frivolous so long as you are in church. And do not speak evil or vain things there, but pray devoutly to God with mouth and heart, and direct your thought to devotion, especially at ... the sacrament of the Mass. Have a compassionate heart for the wretched and the poor and the tormented, and aid and comfort them as best you can. Enjoy the company of good men, whether they be religious or secular, and shun the company of the wicked. Do not permit anyone to say in your presence any word leading to sin, nor anyone to speak ill of another behind his back. Bear yourself toward your subjects so justly that you hold always to the rule of justice without inclining to right or left, and nonetheless always stand more toward the interest of the poor than the rich, insofar as you know the truth." These words of St. Louis from 800 years ago remain a call to us as well into authentic discipleship.

This parish has already begun following Christ as disciples and stewards, but Our Lord comes to us again today, to invite us into a more complete following after Him. Jesus asks your new pastor for trust, for courage, for prayer in continuing God's mission in these parishes. But Fr. Michael cannot do this alone; he needs the commitment and cooperation of all of you. Today it is my joy to join you all in our worship of God through Christ. I pray that all of you will work with Father Michael Meinhart in seeking to be intentional disciples of the Lord and generous stewards of the gifts entrusted to us for the growth of the Church as we journey together toward our inheritance in the glory of Heaven. Therefore, dear parishioners of St. Louis, I urge you to strive for holiness, to work and pray with your new pastor. Support him, help him, pray for him, and most of all, love him as he loves you and as Christ calls us to love each other.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Matthew 16:19.

² 1 Peter 4:10.