

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
Assumption of the BVM Parish, Assumption; and
St. Francis de Sales Parish, Moweaqua
Third Sunday of Advent – Year A**

December 11, 2022

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you for this pastoral visit to Assumption of the BVM Parish in Assumption and St. Francis de Sales Parish in Moweaqua. Later this morning I will administer the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion at Immaculate Conception Church in Shelbyville to several young people of these parishes, by which they will complete their full initiation into the Catholic Church as adopted sons and daughters of God. In the future, the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion will take place at our Cathedral in Springfield as a way of expressing symbolically the fact that full Initiation into the Catholic Church means being a member of the universal Church in communion with the Pope, and Bishops, and all Catholics throughout the world, not just members of a local congregation.

This afternoon, I will meet with your parish councils to hear about all the good things that are happening here at your parishes to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod.

My visit today is also an opportunity to share with you my hopes and my vision as your bishop for the future of our diocese, building on and implementing our Diocesan Synod held in 2017 on the theme of discipleship and stewardship.

Following our Diocesan Synod, I published my third pastoral letter, *Ars vivendi et moriendi in Dei gratia*, Latin for, “The Art of Living and Dying in God’s Grace.” Copies were mailed to all subscribers of *Catholic Times* and the full text is posted on our diocesan website. In this letter, I share some personal reflections in part one on the questions posed in the preparatory phase of the Fourth Diocesan Synod that we conducted in November 2017. In part two, I provide a summary of the Fourth Diocesan Synod and some pastoral commentary on the twelve declarations that were adopted. In part three, I offer some theological reflections on the art of living and dying in God’s grace.

I see this post-synodal pastoral letter as the third work in a trilogy of pastoral letters, with each pastoral letter building on the preceding one. In my previous pastoral letter, called, *Ars crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for,

“The Art of Growing in God’s Grace,” 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.” I also proposed some constructive steps to build a culture of growth in the Church. These steps for growth were designed to build on the foundation that I laid in my first pastoral letter, *Ars celebrandi et adorandi*, “The Art of Celebrating the Liturgy Properly and Adoring the Lord in the Eucharist Devoutly.”

This progression of themes is in keeping with the maxim that addresses the centrality of worship in the life, identity and mission of the Catholic Church: how we worship reflects what we believe and determines how we will live.

In my most recent pastoral letter, I said that the “art of living and dying in God’s grace is the key to everlasting happiness in eternal life. The Christian faithful die to sin through the saving waters of baptism. By dying to their selfish desires through acts of mortification and self-sacrifice, the Christian faithful grow in love of God and neighbor. The whole Christian life aims at reaching this goal of everlasting happiness in eternal life by turning from sin and growing in virtue through God’s grace.

As an expression of how to reach this goal of everlasting happiness, we adopted a new mission statement at our Fourth Diocesan Synod for all of us as members of this Diocese. It says, “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.”

To further this mission, the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is committed to implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely, hospitality, prayer, formation and service. In other words, we 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.

Through prayer, discernment, and consultation with others, it has become evident that the Lord is inviting us to embrace more fully our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.¹

My brothers and sisters in Christ: Today is the Third Sunday of Advent, which is called "Gaudete" Sunday, from the Latin word, "Rejoice." That is why we light the pink candle. Our first reading today from Isaiah is full of joy. The prophet inspires thoughts of a world of hope, a world of God's sure and strong promise to lift those who are burdened with sorrows. All creation will be fruitful, reflecting God's love. In the Gospel we sense a feeling of anticipation growing among the people. This is picked up in the Psalm and the second reading, which emphasize God's faithfulness to us.

In the Gospel reading we hear that John the Baptist is so important because he urges people to turn from sin and towards God to experience God's mercy. Such challenges are crucial for any reform or authentic transformation of people or groups. That is why we focus on John the Baptist every Advent. However, Jesus' teaching goes beyond John the Baptist. Christmas always renews our commitment to bring God's revolutionary love into a world that so desperately needs it. It is the Lord who brings love and healing into our lives.

On Gaudete Sunday, we are reminded to rejoice in the living of our ordinary lives – to remember God’s gifts to us in family and friends, in work and in play and in the natural world – to remember God loves us more than we could ever understand. We can have hope in our hearts and trust in God that we are able to do this in good and bad times. As Advent progresses and Christmas draws near, let us pray for a heightened awareness of God’s presence among us and openness to being changed and blessed by it.

I concluded my third pastoral letter by telling a personal anecdote, which I would like to share with you now to close this homily.

Once when I was catching a flight to celebrate an out-of-town wedding for a friend of mine, I had gift-wrapped a figurine of the Blessed Mother as a wedding present for the newlyweds and put the gift in my carry-on bag. When I got to the airport and put my bag on the conveyer belt for security screening, the TSA agent looked at the x-ray of my bag and called out, “Bag check.” I immediately realized the problem: the figurine was made of leaded crystal and the security agent must have thought it was some sort of weapon. The TSA supervisor came over, saw me standing there wearing my clerical suit and Roman collar, then looked at the x-ray image of the figurine and exclaimed, “For heaven’s sake, it’s

the Blessed Mother, let him through!” Of course, I was greatly relieved, and while the incident still makes me laugh, I have often thought that this little vignette is exactly the scenario I hope for when I die: I pray that I will arrive at the gates of heaven with the Blessed Mother at my side. Seeing me standing there with Our Lady beside me, Saint Peter will exclaim, “For heaven’s sake, he’s with the Blessed Mother, let him through!”

Staying close to our Blessed Mother throughout life provides faithful assurance that she will lead us to her Son Jesus at the hour of our death, so that we may die in God’s grace and enjoy everlasting happiness in eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992, p. 8; <http://www.usccb.org/upload/stewardship-disciples-response-10th-anniversary.pdf>.