

**Homily for the Mass for the Deceased Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI
Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear priests, deacons, and brothers and sisters in Christ:

It was with sadness but with hope in the promise of eternal life that we received the news yesterday of the death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. Our Mass today is offered for the repose of the soul of the deceased former Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church. The priests and deacons and I are wearing red vestments today as it is customary for red vestments to be worn at a Mass for the Dead offered for a Pope since we are mourning the death of the successor of the Apostle Peter, who died as a martyr for the faith.

I had the honor of meeting Pope Benedict XVI several times. I will forever remember his friendliness and compassion. His theological genius and his ability to communicate our rich and oftentimes difficult theology to the people in a clear and understandable way was most impressive.

The first time I met him in person was when I was a priest doing graduate studies in Rome from 1987 to 1991 many years before he was

elected Pope. Then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. It was not uncommon to see him walking across St. Peter's Square on his way from his apartment to the Holy Office, as it was called, wearing a simple black cassock and the red skullcap or *zucchetto* of a Cardinal of the Church, carrying his briefcase full of papers for his day's work. He was very approachable and would casually say hello as people passed by.

After I was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago in 2003, the Bishops of Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin had our periodic *ad limina* visit with Pope John Paul II in 2004. During that week in Rome, in addition to meeting with the Pope, we had several meetings at the Vatican with various dicasteries or departments of the Holy See. The meeting that impressed me most was the one we had at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where Cardinal Ratzinger mostly listened to us, allowed his staff to do most of the talking, and then intervened with his intelligent and insightful remarks.

Years later after he became Pope, on Monday, March 29, 2010, I was on my way to O'Hare International Airport when I received a message that Cardinal Francis George, then Archbishop of Chicago, had called me. He

knew I was on my way to Rome and wanted to talk to me before I got on the plane. I was in the car with another priest and I did not know if the Cardinal wanted to talk to me privately, so I waited until I got to the airport to call him back.

As soon as the priest dropped me off at the airport, I went inside and called the Cardinal. He said, "Good, I'm glad I got hold of you before you took off. Can you talk?"

I looked around and said, "Well, I'm in the terminal at O'Hare, but I can talk. What's up?"

Cardinal George, who was always right to the point without a lot of small talk, said, "The Holy Father is appointing you to be Bishop of Springfield in Illinois."

I had heard some rumors to that effect, but rumors are just that: rumors, so when you hear something officially, it still takes you somewhat by surprise.

After I told the Cardinal that I was honored to accept the appointment, I said, "You know I'm on my way to Rome and I plan to attend the Pope's General Audience on Wednesday. If I get the opportunity, should I say something to the Holy Father about this?"

Cardinal George replied, "Well, it's still under pontifical secret, so you would want to make sure no one overhears you."

Sure enough, at the Pope's General Audience that Wednesday morning, I was seated on the stage next to three other bishops near Pope Benedict XVI. There was only a small group of bishops present that day because all diocesan bishops were required to be in their own dioceses for Holy Week. As an auxiliary bishop at the time, I had the opportunity to go to Rome since Cardinal George would be taking all of the Holy Week and Easter liturgies at Holy Name Cathedral. Of the other three bishops at the General Audience, two worked in the Roman Curia and one was retired. Since I was youngest in seniority, I was last in line to greet Pope Benedict after he finished his talk.

When I walked up to the Holy Father, there was no one else nearby, so I introduced myself and said that I had just received word that he had appointed me to be Bishop of Springfield in Illinois. I thanked him for the appointment and for his confidence in me, assuring him that I would do my best to try to be a good bishop. He just smiled and nodded. But I do have a great photo of that moment with Pope Benedict XVI!

To this day, I am humbled Pope Benedict appointed me as the ninth bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. The Catholic Church has lost an incredible and humble man, but his legacy leaves a lasting impression on the faithful and our Church. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI was an authentic example of faithfulness to God and Catholicism, living and preaching the Gospel message with truth and passion. Always writing and teaching, his warm smile, gentle demeanor, and pastoral approach to explaining and living out the Catholic faith inspired millions and brought people closer to Christ. His reverence toward the Eucharist, the Mass, and the sacraments are examples for us today on how we should all view and respect these treasures of the Catholic faith. His steadfast defense of our faith's teachings and traditions and remaining faithful to them, despite the pressures of the secular world and from inside the Church, is the mark of a true leader.

We offer this Mass for the repose of the soul of Pope Benedict XVI on this first day of the new year, the day when liturgically we normally honor Mary as the Holy Mother of God. Our readings today place us within the family relationship of God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Our first reading sees the Lord remind his people that they are God's children. In addition to letting his face shine upon them, the Lord offers them a blessing of peace

and a promise of God's graciousness. St Paul in our second reading reminds us that we have been adopted as children of God. We are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters of God.

In our Gospel, we are privileged to be given a glimpse into a moment where Mary herself takes in the wonder of Jesus' birth and ponders the unique experience of being mother to the Son of God. While Mary's response to the miracle of Jesus' birth is one of pondering in silence, it differs from that of the shepherds, who are astonished and who return to their flocks, "glorifying and praising God".

We are no less blessed by God our Father, who calls us his adopted children and who loves us with that same love which he has for Jesus, his own Son. Indeed, the Lord loves us so much that he has become human like us. Pope Benedict XVI wrote of God's love in his papal encyclical of 2005, *Deus Caritas Est*, Latin for "God is Love":

In the Church's Liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives. He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. ... Mary, Virgin and Mother, shows us what love is and whence it draws its origin and its constantly renewed power. To her we entrust the Church and her mission in the service of love (nn. 17 and 42).

Pope Benedict concluded his encyclical with this prayer to Mary:

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
you have given the world its true light,
Jesus, your Son – the Son of God.
You abandoned yourself completely
to God's call
and thus became a wellspring
of the goodness which flows forth from him.
Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him,
so that we too can become
capable of true love
and be fountains of living water
in the midst of a thirsting world.

As we begin a new year, may we ponder Christ's love in the silence of
our hearts and find the face of Christ in all those we meet.

May God give us this grace. Amen.