

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
Saint Francis Solanus Church, Quincy, Illinois
Second Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year A**

January 14, 2023

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you for this pastoral visit to Saint Francis Solanus Parish in Quincy, Illinois. Earlier today I administered the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion here to several young people of this parish, by which they completed 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 evening, 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's Gospel focuses on the important role John the Baptist played in giving testimony to Jesus. John

has just undergone intense questioning by the Pharisees, who are trying to discover who John really is and why he is doing what he does. Today's Gospel takes place on the next day as John sees Jesus coming toward him. Immediately, John refers to Jesus as "the Lamb of God." This title seems to bring together a combination of possibilities. First, there is the apocalyptic lamb in Revelation 17:14. There is also the suffering servant, who is like a lamb led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). Finally, there is the paschal lamb of the Jewish Passover. For the Gospel of John, all of these Old Testament images combine to provide a rich background for alluding to Jesus as the Lamb of God.

John the Baptist refers to Jesus as "the one who existed before me," which points to Jesus' preexistence. John the Baptist testifies that he saw the Spirit come like a dove and remain upon Jesus. John had been told that whomever the Spirit comes down upon and remains over is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. This one is the Son of God. When we put John the Baptist's testimonies together, we come up with the following description: Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the preexistent one, the bearer of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God. Once again, the evangelist paints with broad strokes and rich images.

It is no accident that the first document of the Second Vatican Council is entitled *Lumen Gentium*, "Light of the Nations." One of the hallmarks of Vatican II is the "universal call to holiness," the notion that all Christians, regardless of individual vocation or life circumstances, are called to union with God and thereby have a role to play in the salvation of all. Jesus is the light, and as His Body, the Church, we must manifest the light of Christ to all peoples within the circumstances of our lives.

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 concelebrate 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>.