

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit  
St. Mary Parish, Alton  
Fifth Sunday of Lent - Year A**

**March 25-26, 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 Mary Parish in Alton. Yesterday I administered the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion to several young people of Saint Mary 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.

After celebrating Masses and delivering the homily at the Masses on Sunday morning, I will meet with your parish councils to hear about all the good things that are happening here at your parish to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod.

My visit this weekend 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,” the full text of which 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.”

In my third 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.<sup>1</sup>

My brothers and sisters in Christ: Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. In today’s Gospel passage (John 11:1-45), when Jesus and his disciples reach Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem, they are met by Martha, one of the sisters of Lazarus. She tells Jesus that her brother would not have died had Jesus arrived earlier. She does concede that even now God will hear Jesus’ prayers. Jesus reassures her that Lazarus will live, and Martha

replies that she knows he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day. Jesus tells her that he himself is “the resurrection and the life,” and whoever believes in Him will never die. Martha responds with the ultimate profession of faith: “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.”

During the first half of our Lenten season, our focus has been primarily on repentance and conversion: asking forgiveness for our sins and seeking to live the Gospel more fully and grow closer to the Lord. Now, with Easter just two weeks away, our focus shifts to preparing to celebrate Our Lord’s resurrection in anticipation of our own hopes for eternal life. Thus, in our first reading from the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord tells the people, “I will open your graves and have you rise from them” (Ez 37:12-14).

In our second reading, Saint Paul wrote to the Romans that “the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also” (Romans 8:8-11).

In the Gospel, before raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” Then He asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” He asks us this question as well.

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.