

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
St. Joseph Parish, Quincy
Third Sunday of Easter – Year A**

April 23, 2023

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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 Saint Joseph Parish in Quincy. Yesterday I administered the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion to several young people at Saint Brigid Church in Liberty. Later this morning, I will administer these sacraments at Saint Edward Church in Mendon. By receiving these sacraments, these young people are completing 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 these Masses, I will meet with your parish councils this afternoon to hear about all the good things that are happening at your parishes 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.¹

My brothers and sisters in Christ: Today is the Third Sunday of Easter. Our first reading today from the *Acts of the Apostles* (2:14, 22-33) continues Saint Luke’s account of events that took place on the feast of Pentecost. The apostles have received the gift of the Holy Spirit just as the risen Lord promised. Now Peter stands with the rest and raises his voice to proclaim God’s word to the many Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem

for this feast. His bold proclamation is clear evidence of the transformation that has taken place within him through the power of the Holy Spirit. We who have received the Holy Spirit in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation are called to cooperate with God's grace and use the gifts that have been given to us to carry out the mission entrusted by Our Lord to all of His disciples.

Today's Gospel passage (*Luke 24:13-35*) is Saint Luke's famous story about the risen Lord appearing to two of His disciples as they walked to Emmaus. Three very important points are made in this story. First, Jesus appears to His disciples in the form of a stranger; they could not recognize Him. Second Jesus reveals who He is by unfolding for His disciples the Scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets. Third, Jesus reveals Himself to His disciples in the breaking of the bread. While sharing a meal, Jesus takes bread, says the blessing, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. Immediately, the eyes of the disciples are opened and they recognize Jesus, who instantly vanishes from their sight. Only now does their journey make sense. The stranger, the Scriptures, and the breaking of the bread all disclose who this person really is. Immediately, they returned to Jerusalem and proclaimed this good news, which we are called to do 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 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>.