

**Homily for the Mass Welcoming the Norbertine Fathers and Celebrating the
Opening of Corpus Christi Priory
July 1, 2023**

**The Church of St. Francis of Assisi
Springfield, Illinois**

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

My dear brother priests, deacons, seminarians, men and women religious, brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you to celebrate this Mass together as we commemorate a historic moment in the life of our local Church and in the lives of two wonderful religious congregations, the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis and the Norbertine Fathers of St. Michael's Abbey.

I welcome Abbot Eugene Hayes from St. Michael's Abbey in the Diocese of Orange, California, along with Father Augustine Puchner, the Prior of this new religious house, along with the six other Norbertine Fathers who have joined him here in the establishment of Corpus Christi Priory. We are excited to welcome you to your new home here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois and are grateful that you have chosen to establish your new foundation here.

I also welcome the friends and family of the Norbertine Fathers who are visiting our diocese from different parts of the country. We are grateful that you have travelled here to show your support for the Norbertine Fathers in their establishment of their new foundation.

I welcome the priests, deacons, and religious of our diocese, along with the members of our Diocesan Finance Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, and Curia staff, who represent the lay faithful of the diocese in celebrating this important moment for our local church.

Last but certainly not least, to all the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, it is thanks to your life of devotion and service that we are gathered here today in this beautiful St. Francis of Assisi Church. The collective memory of your community and the religious life for each of you is intimately connected to this sacred space, which has been your spiritual home for nearly a century and the place of so many important celebrations and milestones. I know that this is a bittersweet day for each of you. I thank you for your unwavering devotion and trust in God's providence.

In fact, today's scripture readings seem to have been preordained to mark this occasion, with stories of God's providence and our faithful, humble response to His plans – even when He acts in surprising ways and at unexpected times.

In our reading from Genesis this morning, Abraham and Sarah receive some unexpected guests with most surprising news. As we have been hearing in our readings throughout this week, the Lord had long ago promised to make Abraham a father of many nations, with offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky. In today's scene, Abraham and Sarah are old, and their childbearing years are well behind them. The Lord's promise appears to have been empty. Thus, one can empathize with Sarah's sarcastic snicker as she overhears the messengers' news that she will soon bear a son. Mixed with the bitterness of a seemingly unfulfilled promise is the clear understanding that, on a natural level, the prospect of having a child at this point is simply impossible. None the less, Abraham and Sarah respond in faith, and the Lord fulfills his promise. Without their faithful response, we would not be gathered here today. In fact, the whole course of salvation history would be altered.

Likewise, when the first group of Franciscan Sisters from Telgte, Germany, heeded the Lord's call to come to America, leaving behind all that was familiar, one can imagine the incredible leap of faith they made. As they travelled by ship, tossed about violently in a hurricane at sea, one can also imagine how those sisters may have confronted doubts about their "yes" to God's call. Yet here we stand, in this spectacular church, looking back at almost 150 years of the sisters' ministry of healing in our diocese, having built a network of hospitals and a worldwide mission of charitable service. Many would have laughed, like Sarah, if those first sisters had predicted all that has become of the life of this community. Yet how many lives have been saved and changed thanks to the sisters' faithful response?

Similarly, when seven Norbertine Fathers fled by foot in the dark of night to evade Communists who were about to occupy their abbey in Hungary, one can imagine the trepidation and doubt they must have confronted as they traversed the mountains and villages of war-torn Europe, eventually making their way to the United States. Those founding fathers eventually established St. Michael's Abbey in the Diocese of Orange, which is now teeming with vocations with 60 priests and 40 men in formation.

As those seven men trekked through the wilderness with nothing but the clothes on their backs and their faith in God's providence, one can imagine the laughter they would have encountered if they had predicted the future fruitfulness of their new abbey in America.

Even now, on this very day, as the Hospital Sisters entrust the care of this sacred space to the Norbertine Fathers, and as seven new founding fathers leave behind the only home most of them have known for their adult lives, we are witnessing anew the surprising, unexpected plans of our Lord and the generous response of men and women of faith. My dear sisters, my brother priests, you are all an inspirational witness to us. We congratulate you, and we thank you.

We hear a similar story of profound faith and God's providential care in today's Gospel reading from Matthew. In the words we repeat in each Mass, the centurion pleads, in great humility, that he is unworthy for the Lord to enter under his roof. But, in great faith, he trusts that the Lord can heal his ailing servant merely by saying the word. How fitting that our Gospel reading today is a story of healing.

Further, it is also noteworthy that we mark this new chapter on the memorial of Saint Junipero Serra. Saint Junipero was a Franciscan missionary, like our own Hospital Sisters, who travelled and ministered throughout California, the home of our new Norbertine friends. In fact, at this time next year, the Saint Junipero Serra route of the National Eucharistic Procession will pass through this very location at Saint Francis of Assisi Church, on the way from San Francisco to the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis.

As with so many moments during the new journey we have begun with the Hospital Sisters and Norbertine Fathers, it is clear to me that this historic day has been preordained by the Lord for the beginning of a great work new work in which he seeks our faithful response. It is also fitting, during our National Eucharistic Revival and our diocese's Year of the Eucharist, that we celebrate the opening of this new Norbertine Priory named after *Corpus Christi*, the Body of Christ, who comes to us now in this Eucharist, and whom we ask to be present in the lives of all who partake in the sacred mysteries in this holy place for many years to come.

May God give us this grace. Amen