

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
Mother of Dolors Parish, Vandalia, and Saint Joseph Parish, Ramsey, Illinois
Sixth Sunday of Easter - Year A**

May 14, 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 Mother of Dolors Parish in Vandalia and Saint Joseph Parish in Ramsey. Yesterday I celebrated Mass for the 125th anniversary of the dedication of Mother of Dolors Church. At that Mass, I administered the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion to some young people and adults from your parishes. By receiving these sacraments, these parishioners 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 Masses this morning, 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 Sixth Sunday of Easter. In our first reading today from the *Acts of the Apostles*, Previous chapters recounted the Gospel message proclaimed by Stephen within the city of Jerusalem. This account ends with his martyrdom and a

persecution of believers that forced many of them to leave the city. Far from weakening the community of faith, however, this dispersal has brought the Gospel to other regions. Thus in this reading, we find Philip proclaiming the risen Lord to people in Samaria. The crowds who welcome the Gospel are overjoyed as they witness the marvelous works Philip does through the power of the Holy Spirit he received. People find themselves delivered from the influence of unclean spirits. People once paralyzed or crippled are able to walk freely. The Gospel has certainly made a dramatic change in their lives.

In today's Gospel, Jesus continues his farewell discourse addressed to his disciples. The opening sentence emphasizes the importance of keeping Jesus' commandments. Doing so is the primary criteria for demonstrating love of Jesus. Reference to another Advocate occurs precisely within the context of loving Jesus and keeping his commandments.

Loving Jesus and keeping his commandments will allow his disciples to ask the Father, who will give the disciples "another Advocate," who will be with them always. The question now emerges regarding the word "another." John's Gospel has no reference to a first Advocate. There is, however reference to one in 1 John 2:1: "But if anyone

does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one.” Thus Jesus is the first Advocate, and the other Advocate is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send to the disciples.

An Advocate or “Paraclete” is a legal term designating someone who represents the case of a defendant in the legal trial or hearing. Here the Advocate is also referred to as the Spirit of truth. The Spirit is usually portrayed as a force or power. Here the Spirit is described as personal. This Advocate will be with the disciples and remain with them. The primary function of the Advocate is to proclaim only what he hears – not his own words. He will also glorify Jesus.

Knowing that his disciples were surprised and shocked at the news that he was leaving them and returning to the Father, Jesus promises that he will not leave his disciples orphans. He promises they will always be with him through mutual indwelling. This is something that the disciples will realize and gradually understand. All of this will be manifest when Jesus is glorified and exalted at his crucifixion. In the meantime, the disciples are urged to keep Jesus’ commandments. The observance of these commandments will manifest how much the disciples love Jesus. In return, they will be loved by the Father.

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>.