

**Homily for the Mass of Christian Burial for Zoe Photina Johnson
Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church, Bettendorf, Iowa**

October 13, 2023

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

“It is good that we are here” (Mt 17:1-9). These are the words that Saint Peter exclaimed when he saw Christ transfigured in His glory on the high mountain. We can also say that most fittingly at every Mass and even at this Mass today. How can that be? How can we say that it is good to be at the Mass of Christian Burial for this infant baby, Zoe Photina Johnson, who lived for only 80 days in this world?

Saint Peter said it was good to be here because he was in the presence of our glorified Lord, seeing his Divine Redeemer face-to-face. So it is our firm hope that Zoe is now in the presence of our glorified Lord, seeing her Divine Redeemer face-to-face.

Over the years, I have heard many people, sometimes even priests in their homilies, talking about a person who had died and assuring us that the deceased is now in heaven. I always cringe when I hear that, because if someone is in heaven, that means he or she is a saint, and only the Pope can

infallibly declare someone to be a saint. In the case of an adult who has died, there is a likelihood that the deceased, even if he or she was basically a good person, may still be in purgatory for that final purification before being admitted to the divine presence to see God face-to-face.

In the case of Zoe Photina Johnson, who was baptized and never reached the age of reason in her short life, we can be fairly certain that she never sinned, since sin requires knowledge that something is wrong and the intent to commit that wrong. So when I say that it is our firm hope that Zoe is now in the presence of our glorified Lord, seeing her Divine Redeemer face-to-face, we must understand that the theological virtue of hope is not wishful thinking, but the assurance of our faith in Christ's promise of eternal life and happiness in the kingdom of heaven, placing our trust in God and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.¹

Zoe's uncle, Morgan Davis, wrote a beautiful reflection on his niece's name, Zoe Photina, in the parish bulletin for this Sunday. He wrote:

“Zoe” comes from the Greek word for ‘life’, and “Photina” comes from the Greek word for ‘light’. Together, her name recalls the beautiful prologue of the Gospel of John that says, “In

Him is life, and that life is the light of men.” Amidst this dark world, little Zoe pointed people to Christ – the Savior of the world who alone is its life and light.

Photina is also the traditional name of the Samaritan woman at the well. She is called the first herald of the gospel because she was completely changed by her encounter with the Lord. At the well, Christ saw the depths of Photina’s wounded heart and she experienced, probably for the first time, a divine love that satisfied and transformed her. From that encounter, she proclaimed the Gospel message to anyone who would hear it and pointed others to Jesus! Throughout Zoe’s time in the NICU, she pointed others to Jesus through her simple witness and her parent’s profound example of love.

As I said earlier, Zoe lived exactly 80 days. Kara, being the scripture scholar, noted that the number 8 in Sacred Scripture indicates eternity, while the number 40 days indicates a time of testing. So, we could say that the 80 days of Zoe’s life represents 40 days of testing for Kara and 40 days of testing for Adam.

Many doctors, nurses, and aids at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) remarked that Zoe, Kara, and Adam had a major impact on their lives. They shared the story of one nurse, a beautiful young lady and a fallen

away Catholic, after watching Kara and Adam during the time in NICU with Zoe, who said that she now knows what kind of marriage she wants, telling Kara and Adam, "I want what you have." Serving Zoe and her parents during this time also helped her to remember why she entered nursing. She recalled the beauty of watching Kara and Adam tenderly caring for Zoe: Kara holding Zoe for hours during the day and singing songs to her, and Adam playing the ukulele.

Kara and Adam noted that Our Lady, in particular, Our Lady of Fatima, was very present to them during these 80 days:

- Adam's birthday is on May 13th, the Feast of Lady of Fatima.
- Zoe was born at 5:13 pm.
- Zoe was called by God from this life on The Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.
- Today (October 13th) is the 106th anniversary of Our Lady of Fatima's last public appearance and the occurrence of the great "Miracle of the Sun," which was well-documented in the secular press at the time and is one of the most famous Marian miracles in the history of the Church.

Zoe had an incredible impact on people's lives despite never leaving her NICU room in Miami, Florida. All of the grandparents readily testify to the fact that little Zoe changed their lives forever. Despite their more limited participation in the difficult time of testing than Kara and Adam, and mostly from afar, all of the grandparents indicated that this experience will comfort them as they confront the prospect of their own death, trusting that their beloved little Zoe, God willing, will be on the other side to welcome them someday into paradise.

Kara and Adam said that one of the greatest lessons Zoe taught them was to truly live each moment of the day. They remarked that so many future cares melted away once Zoe came along. They made sure they enjoyed every moment of every day with her.

That brings us to the inevitable question: If Zoe brought so much joy into people's lives during her short time on earth, why did the Lord take her so soon? As I told Kara and Adam, Zoe was so blessed to experience the outpouring of love shown to her in the short span of her life. Perhaps that was her main purpose in her brief life: to bring joy into our lives and give us the opportunity to show our love for her.

We must also remember that God loves Zoe too, infinitely more than we ever could. I think we can also be sure that God derives joy from this beautiful little girl as well! So in the end, perhaps it is simply a matter that God wanted her to be with Him now. Since sharing in the joy of heaven in the presence of the boundless love of God is the goal for each and every one of us, we should rejoice that she has gone before us more quickly and we should therefore live our lives with the hope of being reunited with Zoe and all our loved ones in the presence of our loving God, where we can all say, "Lord, it is good that we are here."

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1817.