

**Homily for the Mass Celebrating the Diocesan Eucharistic Congress and
the Centennial of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois
Bank of Springfield Center
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My brother priests, deacons, seminarians, consecrated religious sisters and brothers, lay ecclesial leaders, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

We are made for mission.

That is what has brought us here today, to this Eucharistic Congress and celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois.

But not only that.

In fact, we owe our being here *at all* to Christian mission. What began in a stable in Bethlehem did not end with the empty tomb. In His last act before ascending to His Father, the risen Christ commissioned his disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”¹

The disciples took Christ's sacred command more seriously than their lifeblood, as did many of their successors. It was such faith, hope, charity, and sacrifice that converted Jew and Gentile alike, poor and privileged, emperors and empires, with many kingdoms and innumerable hearts to follow. Saints and scholars, monks and mothers evangelized and catechized kings, barbarians, neighbors, children.

Centuries of meditating on the scriptures and being formed by the Liturgy began to renew the human mind and more deeply convert the human heart, giving birth to the Christian culture, a culture equipped and eager to convert the New World discovered by Columbus.

This missionary drive compelled Pere Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit priest, and his companions to explore the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers in order to evangelize the peoples they encountered and to found Catholic Missions as outposts for spreading the Faith.

From this small but fervent beginning, the prayer, sacrifice, and sweat of the following generations of bishops, priests, religious, and lay faithful built up the Church in Central Illinois—erecting parishes and hospitals, orphanages and schools, universities, monasteries, and convents. These

generations were formed from and for a Christian culture in which economic, political, and social life were inspired and guided by the Gospel and the teachings of the Church.

That is no longer the case today. After two world wars, as well as the sexual and technological revolutions, our culture and consequently many living in it are shedding Christianity at an astounding rate. Nearly 30% of adults today, many reared in the Christian Faith, claim no religious affiliation,² considering themselves “spiritual, and not religious.”³ Consequently, our view of ourselves, our family life, and our purpose, has radically shifted away from that of the early Christians, the missionaries who brought The Faith to this place, and even of our own parents and grandparents.

The results are catastrophic: the sharp decline in the practice of the Faith, fewer births, baptisms, and weddings; the breakup of the family, divorce, the legalization and even wholesale promotion of abortion, euthanasia, gender confusion, and skyrocketing rates of depression.

What we see in our world and in our families today the Second Vatican Council forewarned, cautioning, “When God is forgotten...the creature itself grows unintelligible.”⁴

We no longer know who we are; we no longer know who we are because we know longer know who God is. We have forgotten Him.

But the Church is not unfamiliar with such crises; in fact, she was born in one. After the Last Supper and Christ’s arrest, the disciples fled—abandoning and even denying their Messiah and friend. They forgot *who* they were because they forgot *whose* they were.

It is in this context of spiritual malaise of the world today that the Catholic Bishops of the United States have called for a National Eucharistic Revival. You may be wondering: what is a revival? Revival literally means to bring something back to life. An Emergency Room doctor might revive someone whose heart has stopped. A spiritual revival is to bring back to life a faith that has become dormant or deadened. Thus, our Eucharistic Revival has a two-fold purpose. First, our Eucharistic Revival seeks to bring back to life the faith of those who have wavered in our Catholic belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist as His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity.

Second, our Eucharistic Revival seeks to bring back to a living practice of the faith those who have stopped coming to church, not only during the COVID shutdowns, but even before that.

The Church began in human failure and forgetfulness; but where we failed, God remained faithful. He not only remained faithful, He also instituted a pledge of His fidelity and ultimate victory on the night he was betrayed – the Eucharist – to reveal who He was: Our Lord and Savior; and to re-member us--to put us back together after our failure. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we renew the covenant of Christ's fidelity by consuming the flesh and blood of the Lamb of God and are made whole – and wholly His – by consuming Him. Here is where Discipleship begins – with Divine intimacy – with Christ sharing with us every part of Him and asking of us the very same.

At our Convocation of Priests last month, we were asked to recall a time when we experienced the love of our Eucharistic Lord. I immediately thought of my First Holy Communion, which I received 61 years ago, on May 6, 1962, when I was in Fourth Grade. At that point, I was almost ten years old, so receiving my First Holy Communion was something I had time

to think about and look forward to with great anticipation. I was not disappointed. Receiving my First Holy Communion was a profound moment of experiencing the love of Christ coming into my heart, and I continue to cherish that awareness of divine presence within me every time I receive Holy Communion.

If your experience of receiving Holy Communion has grown tepid and you wish to revive its power to move you spiritually, may I suggest that you think back to your own First Holy Communion, which I hope was also a profoundly moving spiritual experience for yourself.

If the disciple wishes to live and spread the Gospel, if he wishes to be successful, he must love the Lord and must commune with Him heart to heart. Jesus said, "He who abides in me and I in Him, he it is that bears much fruit..."⁵ Pope St. John Paul II commented on this passage, saying, "Communion with Jesus, which gives rise to the communion of Christians among themselves, is an indispensable condition for bearing fruit: 'Apart from me you can do nothing.'"⁶

No matter the personal cost, the disciple chooses to live a deep, intimate knowledge of, and life-long, life-giving covenantal love with Christ.

This is the only way Jesus describes eternal life: “that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”⁷ By knowing and loving Christ, we become part of His family, so to speak, being ushered into the life of the Trinity, and we take on God’s characteristics.

All our pastoral initiatives, then, must be set in relation to holiness, that is, union with God.⁸ We would be unhappy, ineffective disciples without divine intimacy. We would not be disciples at all.

In short, we are called to be saints.

How do we grow in this intimacy which we call holiness? As we said at our Fourth Diocesan Synod in 2017, there are four pillars to help us:

1. Hospitality—to invite and welcome others proactively to join us in prayer, especially the Mass.
2. Prayer—to spend time in personal prayer, to offer penance and sacrifice for ours and others’ conversions; to meditate on the Scriptures and live the sacramental life.
3. Formation—to study the Scriptures, the *Catechism*, the lives of the saints, and to die to sin and grow in virtue.

4. Service—to serve each other, especially those in need, by practicing charity and justice.

To do this, we must grow in the interior life, striving to accept God's grace and His will for us. That is how the hearts and minds of disciples are formed. And that is what attracts others to the Faith. Holy disciples are the greatest witness to the power of God and attest to the possibility of living a new life in Christ.

Holy disciples are the friends of God. Being a friend of God means loving what He loves. Disciples love Jesus and they love His mission. Jesus modeled this for us: He shared His knowledge and love of His Father; He also shared Himself, inviting people to follow Him, to share table fellowship with Him, and taking a personal interest in them. Christ befriended others. He accompanied and invested Himself in those around Him. Divine intimacy breathes the life of Christ into us, but it is friendship that provides the setting for effective evangelization.⁹

Many in the world today lack authentic friendships; and they are agonizingly lonely. They seek real connection with others, they search for a community that pursues the Truth, lives Goodness, and experiences Beauty.

Our parishes ought to be the first and most obvious places to encounter these spiritual treasures because the one who is Truth, the One who is Goodness, the One who is Beauty dwells with us and has befriended us and we live in relationship with Him.

Disciples prioritize relationships: with Christ, with others, while planning for future generations. Like St. Paul with Timothy, and like the missionaries who have come before us, we seek not only to convert one generation, but all succeeding ones too, making missionary disciples of all peoples.

For that reason, we work to foster a better understanding, participation, and love of the Liturgy, centered on the Eucharist. We work to clarify and renew the mission of our Catholic schools to infuse our families to their core with the Biblical and Catholic identity needed to keep them firm in the face of an adversarial culture. We work to reach out and heal those hurt by the sexual and technological revolutions, and to care for those disregarded by a world who considers them worthless.

We live in a difficult moment, a moment of transition, of moving out of a culture informed and guided by Christianity and into a secular age.

Tragically, the hearts of many have been wounded by it. God is forgotten or forcibly removed from our institutions and our collective memories. God is said to be a stumbling block to our freedom and material success instead of what He really is: our loving Father and merciful Redeemer. Forgetting Him, we grow unfamiliar to ourselves and descend into pain and confusion.

But there is another way. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life,¹⁰ who offers hope, healing, and a new way of being – living in divine intimacy and authentic friendship in and through His missionary disciples.

We live in a moment of great opportunity, and we stand ready with renewed vigor, confidence, and faith that we can imitate the ordinary people Christ called so many centuries ago to be, with Him, extraordinary ministers of His message and mysteries. Today we remember and pledge to imitate the courage and sacrifice of the missionaries and faithful Catholics who settled here in this diocese and left us the gift and legacy of the Catholic Faith.

Never have we had better resources to form the people we have, reform those who have left, and inform those who do not know Christ or His Church.

It is time; time for conversion of heart; time or a renewal of the vision handed on to us; time for a reawakening of the charisms and gifts the Spirit bestows; time to take our Christian vocation as seriously as those who have come before knowing God will sustain us by Word and Sacrament.

The Word of God is living and effective.¹¹ It shall not return to God empty, but shall do what pleases Him, achieving the end for which He sent it.¹² And that end is the conversion of the world to Christ by a new generation of saints and scholars, mothers and fathers, servants and friends. We trust in the power of the Word of God to teach and reprove, in the Word made flesh, Jesus our Lord who has called us to follow Him in friendship, imitating His life and equipping us for discipleship by His example, His teaching, His sacrifice.

We ask our Lady, who received the Word at the Annunciation, who journeyed with her son in His ministry, who stood at the foot of the cross, who witnessed her risen Son, who received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to

intercede for us and our work of becoming holy, effective disciples, that she may accompany us and guide us toward her Son. We entrust to her, the Immaculate Conception, the patroness of our diocese, the success of our mission.

Immaculate Mary, your praises we sing.

You reign now in splendor with Jesus our King.

[Refrain:]

Ave, Ave, Ave, Maria!

Ave, Ave, Maria!

In heaven the blessed your glory proclaim;

On earth we your children invoke your fair name. [Refrain]

We pray for our Mother, the Church upon earth,

And bless, Holy Mary, the land of our birth. [Refrain]

May God give us this grace.

¹ Mt. 28:19-20a

² Peter Smith, "America's Nonreligious are a Growing, Diverse Phenomenon: They Really Don't like Organized Religion," *Associated Press*, October 4, 2023.

³ Cara Tabachnick, "Americans turn from Religion, but believe in a 'higher power,' Poll Finds." October 4, 2023.

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

⁵ Jn 15:5

⁶ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 32.

⁷ Jn 17:3.

⁸ Fourth Diocesan Synod of Springfield in Illinois, Declaration 2; quoting Pope Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, "On entering the New Millennium," January 6, 2001, n. 30.

⁹ Curtis Martin, *Making Missionary Disciples*, 21.

¹⁰ Jn. 14:6

¹¹ Hebrews 4:12

¹² Isaiah 55:11.