

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit
Saints Peter & Paul Church, Alton, Illinois
23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year A**

September 9-10, 2023

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you here in Alton for this pastoral visit to Saints Peter & Paul Church, our diocese's former cathedral. As we continue to observe the centennial of the transfer of our See City from Alton to Springfield, I am grateful that the Holy See has granted a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions for those who make a pilgrimage here to Saints Peter & Paul Church or to our current Cathedral in Springfield during our Diocese's year of the Eucharist that will conclude on December 8th.

After celebrating Mass on Saturday evening, I will meet with your parish councils to hear about all the good things that are happening here at your parish to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod. I will also celebrate Mass and deliver the homily at the Masses here on Sunday morning.

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 provide a summary of the Fourth Diocesan Synod and some pastoral commentary on the twelve declarations that were adopted. I also offered some theological reflections on the art of living and dying in God’s grace.

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: In today's first reading (Ezekiel 33:7-9), God emphasizes for the prophet Ezekiel his important task as watchman. The people have the freedom to choose to ignore his words; nevertheless, they must have the opportunity to hear those words. Ezekiel, in fact, did not fail in his responsibility as an agent of life. His book is filled with precise dates for many of his oracles, clear testimony to his diligence as a lookout for the spiritual welfare of the people. He never ceased guiding the nation along the way leading to life. It was their responsibility to listen to his message. They, of course, failed to listen and thus suffered serious consequences. In fact, before this chapter of the book closes, they receive word that the city of Jerusalem has collapsed (33:21).

My episcopal motto as a bishop, *Lex cordis caritas*, Latin for “The Law of the Heart is Love,” is derived in part from our second reading (Romans 13:8-10), where Saint Paul tells the Romans that “love is the fulfillment of the law.” In this way, Saint Paul reaffirms the new commandment that we are to love one another as the Lord has loved us.

Today’s Gospel passage (Matthew 18:15-20) reflects the basic elements of Church order and discipline. The early Christian communities experienced internal and external conflicts as we do today. The Christian approach to these challenges, especially the internal conflicts, was to deal with them honestly, with compassion, and from within the community itself.

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>.