

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit to Saint Alexius Parish
Beardstown, Illinois
2nd Sunday of Lent – Year B**

February 25, 2024

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As your Bishop, it is good to be with you this weekend for my Parish Pastoral Visit to the Parishes of Saint Alexius in Beardstown, St. Fidelis Parish in Arenzville, and Saint Luke Parish in Virginia.

Yesterday afternoon it was a blessing for me to celebrate the 4:00 o'clock Mass at St. Fidelis Church and the 5:30 Mass at Saint Luke Parish. After these Saturday evening Masses, I met with your parish councils to hear about all the good things that are happening here 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," I provided 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.

Last Fall at our Convocation of Priests, we reviewed how we have done over the past six years in implementing the twelve declarations that were adopted at our Diocesan Synod in 2017. I was pleased to report that we have made significant progress in putting into effect the steps needed to achieve the goals of most of the twelve declarations. For example, Declaration 6 called for the Sacraments of Christian Initiation to be offered in the proper sequence (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) for children at about the age of reason, which normally will be in the third grade of elementary school. We refer to this as the "restored order" for the Sacraments of Christian Initiation because this order – Baptism, Confirmation and then Eucharist – was the order for receiving these sacrament for 1900 years. It was not until about 100 years ago that Pope Pius X lowered the age for First Communion, but since he did not address lowering the age for Confirmation, the order was inverted to give children First Communion before Confirmation. So we are now going back to the order of receiving the sacraments that the Church observed for 1900 years and still does for adults.

The other reason for doing this flows from our Diocesan Synod, which was to promote discipleship and stewardship as a way of life from an early age. The concern was that too many children stopped going to church after being confirmed in eighth grade. Before I celebrate the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion, I send the candidates a questionnaire asking what receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation means to them. One student actually answered, "It means I graduate from the *Church!*" Unfortunately, that is the way too many students treated the reception of Confirmation. Pope Francis has even called Confirmation the "Sacrament of Farewell"!¹

I have heard that some parents have stopped sending their children to Catholic schools or parish schools of religion after third grade. In such cases, they really do not understand the purpose of religious education. It is not just to prepare them for receiving the sacraments, as important as that is, but essentially to teach them how to be disciples of Jesus Christ, that is, how live as Christians for the rest of their lives. The answer is not to move Confirmation back to eighth grade. Keeping them for another five years after which they stop going to church is not the goal. The goal is to keep them as active participating Catholics for the rest of their lives!

Although not part of the synodal declarations, we have also been celebrating these Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion at our Cathedral in Springfield, the mother church of our diocese, as a visible sign that they are being initiated into the Catholic Church, that is, the universal Church throughout the world, and not just their local parish.

One of the declarations that we have not done so well in implementing is Declaration 11, which calls for “striving to fulfill the Biblical command to tithe,” that is, giving 10% of our income to God by donating the suggested amount of at least 8% of our income to our parishes and 2% to other charities as an expression of their gratitude to God and of their stewardship of His manifold gifts of creation.

I know that priests are reluctant to talk about money, but the Gospels tell us that Jesus actually talked about money quite a bit, not as a fundraiser asking for donations, but on the proper use of money. On the other hand, Protestant pastors do not seem to be reluctant to talk about tithing and expect the members of their congregations to do so. They are not bashful to talk about tithing because it is a concept found in the Bible.

The first Scriptural reference is found in the Book of Genesis.² Before God makes his covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham, Abram is returning from a victorious battle and stops to give

the priest Melchizedek a “tenth of everything” that he had won in victory. Notice that Abram does not ask Melchizedek how much he needs or how his donation will be used. Nor was Abram’s tithe made prior to going to battle as a way of trying to win favor with God. Abram gives his gift in gratitude for what God has given to him. We, too, are called to be generous in giving to the Church as a way of showing our gratitude to God for all that He has given to us.

A national study in 2003 showed that Protestants typically give 2.6% of their income to their local churches, while Catholics give 1.2%.³ So we have quite a way to go to reach this goal of giving 10% to God!

In this 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.⁴

My brothers and sisters in Christ: In today's Gospel (Mark 9:2-10), Peter, James and John saw Jesus in a new light, literally so, when they

accompanied Him onto the Mount of Transfiguration. Mountaintops in the Bible are places of revelation; of encounter with God. It was on a mountain that Elijah called down fire from heaven, and on a mountain that Moses received the Commandments.

People had been speculating whether Jesus might be another Moses... or Elijah ... or even John the Baptist come back to life. The disciples were unsure. Their confidence in Jesus had been shaken recently. He kept talking about suffering and death. Then, suddenly, here on the mountain, they saw Him speaking with Moses and Elijah. He was radiant with light. It was wonderful for their Master to be in such company.

It was then that the realization struck. Jesus' dazzling appearance was not reflected glory coming from Moses or Elijah: the light was coming out of Him through His clothing! If they had had any doubts about whether Jesus ranked alongside these greatest of prophets, those doubts were now banished! Jesus was far greater: He was divine! The disciples found themselves enveloped in the bright cloud of God's presence and heard the Father's voice bestowing upon their Master a unique authority: "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him!" By this time, Moses and Elijah had faded from view. Now the disciples saw only Jesus.

The mountaintop can be a metaphor for any space where things... or people... are seen from a new perspective. We do not have to climb mountains for this to happen. A time of prayerful meditation can offer such a space. Lent provides us with the opportunity to spend time alone with Jesus, just as Peter, James and John did, listening to Him as our heavenly Father bids us.

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 celebrate 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. While this incident makes us laugh, it is a true story, and the words of the

TSA supervisor are an exact quote. Reflecting on it, 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 Pope Francis, Pastoral Visit to Cagliari – Meeting with Young People, September 22, 2013; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130922_giovani-cagliari.html

² "Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was a priest of God Most High. He blessed Abram with these words: 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your foes into your hand.' Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything" (Genesis 14:18-20).

³ Father Kenneth Doyle, "Protestants, Catholics and tithing," Catholic News Service, June 2, 2022; <https://evdiomessage.org/protestants-catholics-and-tithing/>.

⁴ 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>.