

**Homily for the Mass Commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Dedication  
of Saint Francis of Assisi Church  
at  
The Church of St. Francis of Assisi  
Springfield, Illinois**

**April 27, 2024**

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

My dear brother priests, deacons, seminarians, consecrated men and women religious, brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you to celebrate this Mass together as we commemorate the dedication of this awe-inspiring Church of St. Francis of Assisi on this day 100 years ago, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1924.

We welcome all the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis. It is thanks to your life of devotion and service that we are gathered here today in this strikingly sacred and truly beautiful Church of St. Francis of Assisi Church. The collective memory of your community and the religious life for each of you is intimately connected to this sacred space, which has been your spiritual home for a century and the place of so many important celebrations and milestones.

We are all so grateful to you for your service, your witness, and for the treasure of this Church which your community has so carefully cared for over these hundred years.

We also welcome, in a particular way, and are grateful to all those friends of the Hospital Sisters gathered here who, through their generosity and devotion, have helped support the Hospital Sisters' ministry and care of this beautiful church.

I welcome Bishop Kevin Vann, who is *of* the Diocese of Orange but truly and always *from* the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. It is an honor and a privilege to have Bishop Vann with us today, as he has been so much a part of the history and ongoing mission in service of the Church, and, I know, a true and good friend to the Hospital Sisters and so many of us gathered here. In fact, Bishop Vann is a former employee of the Hospital Sisters, having worked as a lab technician at St. John's Hospital. Welcome home Bishop Vann.

I also welcome Father Gabriel Stack, Executive Assistant to Abbot Eugene Hayes of St. Michael's Abbey in the Diocese of Orange, California; along with Father Chrysostom Baer, Prior of St. Michael's Abbey; Father Augustine Puchner, Prior of Corpus Christi Priory here on this campus, and

the six other Norbertine Fathers of Corpus Christi Priory, which was founded here on July first of last year. We are deeply grateful to all of you for your presence and ministry here in our Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, and most importantly, we are especially grateful for the reverence and devotion with which you have embraced your responsibility for the custody of this sacred place.

I welcome the priests, deacons, religious of our diocese, along with the members of our Diocesan Finance Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, and Curia staff who represent the lay faithful of the diocese in celebrating this important moment for our local church. I also welcome Mr. Damond Boatwright, CEO of Hospital Sisters Health System, and the other representatives from HSHS who dutifully carry on the mission and ministry of the Hospital Sisters.

It is fitting that we celebrate this historic milestone in the days between Easter and Pentecost. This is certainly a time of celebration in the life of the Church, and it is also an in-between time. It is a time of great joy, but it is also a time of anxious waiting. It is a time of awe and consolation, but it is also a time of uncertainty and seeking. In our liturgical calendar, Our Lord is risen, but He has not yet ascended to the Father nor sent the Holy Spirit.

In our Scripture readings during these days, we recount the experience of the disciples in the in-between time, moving from fear and hiding after the passion and crucifixion, to incredulity and delight at encountering our risen Lord. Yet we also clearly see the disciples struggling to understand the meaning of the resurrection and the Lord's teaching about the ascension which is yet to come. In today's Gospel, Jesus reassures the disciples, saying, "If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him." Likely speaking for all the disciples, Philip expresses his confusion about the meaning of our Lord's words, saying, "Show us the Father, and that will be enough for us." It is tempting for us to chuckle a bit judgmentally at Phillip in this moment as we hear Jesus respond, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip?"

Yet do not we, ourselves, often struggle like Philip in the confusion of the in-between time in which we live today? Our Lord has been crucified, has risen from the dead, has ascended to heaven, and has sent the Holy Spirit to be with us always. His victory over sin and death is complete and definitive. We are certain of these truths and what they mean for our salvation and eternal life.

Yet each of us still struggles daily with the challenges, difficulties, joys, and sorrows of life—and yes, with our own sins as well. We live in the “already-but-not-yet” reality of the Christian life.

Likely close to this very moment on this day, 100 years ago, Bishop James Griffin stood here and concluded the dedication of this strikingly beautiful sacred space. After five years of construction, can you imagine the excitement and joy of the sisters and the community that gathered here to dedicate this spiritual home officially for the community? We recall the great intentionality and devotion to the lives of the Saints that marked the Hospital Sisters’ design and use of this space, as we remember that the tuberculosis patients that they treated were seated in the balcony over the Chapel of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, here at the right side of the altar. Over the decades, those of you who answered Our Lord’s call to dedicate your life to healing and prayer as sisters, and all the friends of the community, can vividly recall myriad grace-filled moments of celebration, sadness, consolation of the many Masses, the hundreds and hundreds of ceremonies marking entrances, investitures, professions of vows, jubilees, and funerals, that happened in this sacred space over the decades since that day.

It is impossible to know on this side of eternity how many souls were inspired, encouraged, and consoled by the hallowed beauty of this sacred space. The Lord has clearly been at work in all of this and in the life of the Hospital Sisters, including in the renovations of this church in 1944, 1964, and 2004. There is much here for us to celebrate, in gratitude for God's providence and blessings in the history of this place.

Yet we are also in a period of change and a new future is taking shape, under the Lord's inspiration and guidance. As we gather here today, the Norbertine Fathers of Corpus Christi Priory have left behind all they have known---some for thirty or more years -- at the Abbey in California to take up responsibility for pastoral care of this historic church. This is a solemn responsibility which, I know, they assume with great diligence and reverence. Already it has also become the heart of their own ministry here, serving as the primary locus of liturgical worship, sacramental celebrations, and spiritual formation for visitors and retreatants. As the spiritual centerpiece of the *Evermode Institute* Days of Reflection, it is the space where the faculty and staff of our diocesan schools pray together for the renewal of our formation of students and the pastoral care of all the families we serve in the 43 schools and 129 parishes of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois.

In all of these ways, the Norbertine Fathers have taken up the torch and are bringing the wisdom and healing of Jesus Christ to those who live and work in Central Illinois.

Nevertheless, I can only imagine that this transition is bittersweet for the Hospital Sisters and for your many friends. We are experiencing an in-between time as we mark this historic occasion, while also looking to the future. We celebrate the great and inspiring history of this sacred place, which has been the heart of the Hospital Sisters' ministry and life here for nearly a century, while also looking forward to a future of more blessings and graces to come.

Even if we do not fully see or understand the particular details of Our Lord's plan for this future, may we all proceed confidently, with the faith of the disciples, in trust and faith that our Father keeps His promises, and with gratitude for all that the Lord has provided for us and entrusted to our stewardship and care.

May God give us this grace. Amen.