

**Opening Remarks for the Luncheon Celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the  
Dedication of St. Francis of Assisi Church**

**St. Francis of Assisi Conference Center  
Bonaventure Hall  
Springfield, Illinois  
April 27, 2024**

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

Thank you all for joining me here today to commemorate this historic moment marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dedication of St. Francis of Assisi Church.

I am sure Bishop Vann will agree that presiding over the dedication of a church or chapel is one of the great privileges of being a bishop.

I can only imagine the great joy that Bishop Griffin, Monsignor Joseph Stroud, Mother Marciana Willebrand, and the Hospital Sisters would have experienced on this day 100 years ago today.

It is an honor to be here with you, commemorating this historic moment. It is a particularly joyful day as we celebrate not only a rich history and a major milestone, but also as we look forward to a promising future for this sacred place for generations to come.

I know that the Hospital Sisters will say that God's providence has made this possible. But they have certainly cooperated with His grace and have done so with great prudence and fidelity.

Sisters, I thank you for your faithfulness in stewarding all that the Lord has entrusted to your care and making both this rich history and promising future possible.

From their early days establishing St. John's hospital in the mid-1800's, the Hospital Sisters established and grew a health system that serves 1 million people and brings nearly 8,000 babies into the world every year.

The sisters also established the first-ever Catholic Nursing College, St. John's College of Nursing, which still operates here in Springfield today.

The legacy of the sisters' ministry of healing has impacted generations of people in our region and will last for generations to come.

In addition to the legacy of the Hospital Sisters Health System, the beautiful St. Francis of Assisi Church stands as both a sacred backdrop to the history of this great community and as an enduring, visible sign of the Hospital Sisters' impact on the spiritual life of this region.

In fact, as the transition of this property has unfolded, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the doors of St. Francis of Assisi Church are being thrown open, and the history of the Hospital Sisters is becoming visible to hundreds of people who had not known of this great community or this “hidden gem” of a church, tucked away on the outskirts of Springfield.

St. Francis of Assisi Church and the rest of these buildings and beautiful grounds are now owned by a Trust with the sole purpose of maintaining and keeping this place in service of the Church. Already, the future is unfolding as this campus is taking shape as a dynamic center for Catholic life.

We have named the property “the St. Francis of Assisi Campus,” and within this campus, the Hospital Sisters still have their convent and will remain here at their home.

Sisters, you have spent your lives in the care of others. It is our great honor now to do our part to take care of you. We are grateful for this honor and for your willingness to share your home in service of the mission of the Church.

Also, part of the building that many of you will remember as the Chiara Center, on the south side of the Church where you entered today, is now “Corpus Christi Priory,” the new Springfield home of the Norbertine Fathers of St. Michael’s Abbey.

Imagine that, when Sister Maureen approached me and my staff about the possibility of the diocese playing a role in the transition and future of the property, Bishop Vann, himself a former employee and long-time friend of the Hospital Sisters, happened to have already introduced me and Monsignor Hoefler, my Vicar General, to the Norbertine Fathers of St. Michael’s Abbey.

As it turns out, with 60 priests and 40 men in formation, the Norbertines had already outgrown their brand-new abbey in Bishop Vann’s diocese of Orange in California and were looking to establish a new foundation.

You can call this all coincidence, I suppose, but I see it clearly as the hand of God at work arranging plans for the Sisters, the Norbertines, and the faithful of our diocese.

The Norbertine Fathers now serve as chaplains to the Hospital Sisters and are establishing a ministry to all the faithful of our region, opening the beautiful St. Francis of Assisi church to the public, with Mass and prayer every day of the week and adoration and confessions on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings. The Norbertine Fathers are also supporting the formation of our permanent deacons and providing spiritual direction for many of our diocesan priests.

This section of the former Chiara Center with offices and conference rooms where we are now, has been named “the St. Francis of Assisi Office and Conference Center,” and is now home to two, new important Catholic endeavors.

The first is the Evermode Institute, an apostolate of the Norbertine Fathers, offering faith formation for Catholic school teachers, including online classes and spiritual retreats and conferences hosted here. All 43 of the schools in our diocese are participating in the Evermode Institute, and several hundred of our Catholic school teachers and principals have begun making regular visits here for prayer and formation.

Second, this building will soon house the offices and academic classrooms of the San Damiano College for the Trades, a new Catholic trade school that will provide liberal arts education, spiritual formation, and technical training in the building trades.

The college is named in memory of St. Francis' experience before the crucifix of San Damiano Church in Assisi, where he heard the Lord say, "Francis, rebuild my church."

This endeavor is a bit of a revival of the initial ministry of the Franciscan Brothers of the Holy Cross, right next door, and is coming at a time when there is a crisis for skilled trades people – and, thanks be to God, there is a renewal of interest in the trades, particularly among young men. The Norbertine Fathers will serve as chaplains and spiritual guides to the students.

I expect more apostolates will take shape here, and surely the number of visitors will continue to grow as these endeavors take shape and as more people become aware of this special place.

As we celebrate the history of this sacred place, we also see the hand of God at work in shaping its future. We are the mystical body of Christ. We are carrying forward Christ's mission in the world, and it is inspiring and humbling to be part of this journey with all of you.

Bishop Vann, I thank you for your support, encouragement, and blessing of this endeavor.

Father Gabriel and Father Chrysostom, as Abbot Eugene's representatives here today, I thank you, the Abbot's Leadership Council, and all your confreres for your prayerful discernment and courageous leap into the establishment of a new foundation here.

Father Augustine and the Norbertine Fathers of Corpus Christi Priory, I thank you all for your "yes" to this call from your Abbot to be part of establishing this new community. I also thank you for your priestly ministry to the Hospital Sisters and for your spiritual ministry to the priests, deacons, and lay faithful of our diocese.

To all the Hospital Sisters present here today and to those who could not be with us, I thank you for your faithful service to the people of our diocese and for your prudence and stewardship, and, above all, for your fidelity and faithful witness to the Gospel.

In particular, I would like to thank Sister Maureen O'Connor and Mr. Rick Haberkorn for their great partnership, wisdom, and collaboration without which this day would not have been possible.

Please pray for God's providence and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to continue to guide the various apostolic projects taking place on this campus. I will certainly remember them in my prayers as well. God bless you!