

Mass celebrating the 150th Anniversary of St. Joseph Church (Island Grove)

**April 28, 2024
5th Sunday of Easter, Year B
St. Joseph Church
Island Grove, Illinois**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good that we are here to offer thanks to our Lord in celebration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Saint Joseph Church here in Island Grove. Since 1874, Catholics in this community have gathered here in prayer and fellowship to journey together as disciples of Jesus Christ. The spiritual foundation laid so long ago continues to remain firm due to God's grace, which has made possible the many good works of those who have preceded us. We come, therefore, to this celebration of the Eucharist with a profound sense of gratitude for the gifts we have received as we ask God's continued guidance, so that we might continue to be committed disciples of our Lord and good stewards of His abundant gifts.

In preparing for our Mass today, I did some research from our diocesan archives on the history of Catholics here Central Illinois and specifically in Island Grove. It is good for us to recall that history.

In 1843, the Diocese of Chicago was erected, taking over this territory that had previously been between the Dioceses of St. Louis, Missouri, and Vincennes, Indiana, but by 1853, with the Catholic population continuing to grow throughout our State, the diocese of Quincy was established and just a few years later moved to Alton.

In 1841, Island Grove precinct was erected along with seven other precincts in this area. A little over twenty years later, in the Fall of 1864, John Mammoser and family were the first Catholic family to arrive here. The next Catholic settler, Mathias Meinhart, the father of Matthew and Mike, came in the Spring of 1865. In the course of the next few years several other Catholic families arrived, so that by the close of 1870 there were twelve Catholic families in this community. The twelve families were: John Mammoser, Mathias Meinhart, Joseph Weishaar, Mike Trapp, Peter Lux, Landelin Koebele, Martin Lustig, Joseph Meyers, John Diekmann, Thomas Mulquin, Francis Dannan and John Grace. These families had to go to Teutopolis to attend Church, which at times created a hardship, especially during the cold and wet weather. For this reason the Catholic settlers were interested in building a church in the Island Grove vicinity.

Landelin Koebele, in the Fall of 1870, offered four acres of land to be used for church property and he personally asked Bishop Peter Joseph Baltes, who was the second Bishop of Alton, for the organization of a new parish. Bishop Baltes commissioned Father Mauritius Klosterman, O.F.M., to examine conditions and if he considered it expedient, to organize the parish. Father Mauritius came out in 1871 and at once decided to build the church. In March 1872, the foundation was started and the building was finished in the Fall of 1873 except for the interior which was held up due to bad weather.

In the Spring of 1874, Dr. Eversman of Teutopolis donated an altar for the church, and 16 benches accommodating 80 people were installed. On March 25, 1874, the Feast of the Annunciation, the first Mass was celebrated in the new church by Father Mauritius. At his suggestion the parish chose St. Joseph as its patron. It is interesting to note that due to the slowness of mail service, Bishop Baltes did not hear that the parish had chosen St. Joseph as its patron. In the meantime, the Bishop had placed the new parish under the patronage of St. Venantius and had it inscribed in the recorder's office at Newton by this name. With the Bishop's consent, this was later corrected in the recorder's office.

The second Mass was celebrated after Easter, and until September, Mass was held once a month, the Franciscan Fathers taking turns in coming. In September, Rev. Meinalphus Schmitz, O.F.M., was appointed first pastor and lived in the church sacristy. His appointment as pastor was short, but long enough for him to acquire most of the church furnishings. The college gave him vestments, a silver chalice, communion rail, candle sticks, and the furniture for his living quarters. Bishop Baltes furnished the parish with some vestments, a Brother from the seminary painted the stations which were canonically erected by Father Meinalphus.

A parochial school was started in rooms above the sacristy. The first teacher, Joseph Ehrhardt, later joined the Franciscans and became known as Brother Onesimus.

In October of 1888, Bishop James Ryan of Alton made his first visit to the parish. Since the parish was outgrowing their small church, the decision was made ten years later to build a new church, which was dedicated on the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, October 4, 1903. The parish history notes that in 1907, a parishioner by the name of Mike Meinhart released the parish from paying four notes totaling \$368.00. Unfortunately, ten years later, on December 29th, 1917, that church was destroyed by fire. Only \$4,000 worth

of insurance was carried, but the people immediately and resolutely started to rebuild their church. Subscriptions were taken up and the rebuilt church was dedicated on December 8, 1918.

All of these anecdotes move us to gratitude. Consider how many priests served here year after year over all those decades. There are far too many to mention by name, but numerous Franciscan Friars faithfully gave their service to Christ's flock here. Young women who were baptized here and were formed in their faith in this parish consecrated their lives to God as religious sisters in different congregations. All this does not even mention the countless lay faithful who received their sacraments here, vowed themselves to each other in marriage, raised their children in this parish, and at the end of their days received their final sacraments, and were given a Christian funeral within these walls.

I think all of this not only moves us to be grateful to the thousands of faithful Catholics who gave of themselves to build and maintain this parish, but I hope we also realize that God's work here in Island Grove is *not* primarily delineated by dates, and bricks, and sacraments, but is actually incarnated in those different members of Christ's Church *who allowed God to work and act in their lives.*

Today, in the Gospel reading about the vine, Jesus teaches us a new way to live in relationship with God. He uses the well-known image of the vine. In an agricultural society, people understand how to get the best out of a vine. If the grapes are to develop so that they can be turned into good wine, they need careful management. The energy of the plant has to be directed to the fruit through proper pruning. The vine cannot be left to do its own thing or it will simply produce lots of leaves and poor quality grapes. There is an obvious connection between root and branch, leaf and fruit – they share the one life. Cut off from that life, they shrivel and die.

This same interdependence Jesus describes for us as the relationship which gives us eternal life. We are one with him and with each other, sharing the one life, his life, and in this way we can live with him and like him and produce the fruits of his love. But, Jesus warns us, the vine cannot be left to its own devices; it needs a vinedresser to manage its growth and encourage its fruitfulness, and God is such a vinedresser. God knows us and knows what part of us needs to be cut away and what needs encouragement. We are in partnership with God to produce the best fruit in the way we live.

When we look at our world through the looking glass of our faith, we see just how interconnected we really are. We are all created in the image and likeness of God, who is love. We are created for love, to love and to be loved, and this love is not restricted to our nearest and dearest. We belong together. We need each other, just as the various parts of the vine need to be connected to the entire plant. Roots, stem, branches, leaves and fruit are all bonded in a purposeful unity. But this is just a tiny example of the unity of the entire cosmos, from the great galaxies and planets to the smallest particles of matter. All have their place, all work together. As human beings in our little fragment of this entire universe, we have been graced by God with a particular responsibility: to show that God's love that we share is the overriding force binding all things together.

The reason this church, this parish, this part of God's world has been a place where Our Lord has been present for the past 150 years and more is because thousands of different individuals - hundreds of priests, and religious, and families - have stayed connected to Our Lord. The reason this church, this parish, this part of God's world will continue to be a place where Our Lord will be present for the next 150 years and more will be if we - priests, religious, and families - also stay connected to Our Lord.

Across our whole diocese, we have church buildings approaching the century mark and many other parishes also right around their sesquicentennial. In part, our Diocesan Eucharistic Congress last October was to celebrate 100 years of the diocese being in Springfield, and in 2028 we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of our Cathedral being dedicated. Many of you may remember our diocesan celebration at the fairground in 2003 when the diocese had its 150th anniversary since being founded in 1853 in Quincy.

Considering all these historic moments, as well as the one we celebrate here today, I keep recalling one anecdote from my trip to Nigeria earlier this year. Visiting some of the dioceses in the south of that country, though there were few Catholics there at all until 150 or 200 years ago, now 90% of the population is Catholic, *and 90% of them come to Mass every Sunday*. What if Saint Joseph Church was like that in 150 years? What if our diocese was like that in 150 years? When Jesus called His apostles, this was the project He had in mind – inviting every person in the world to become His disciple – and that was the same project that Our Lord entrusted to the first members of this parish, and it is the same mission that Jesus entrusts to His Church, *to every one of us*, today.

Perhaps on your mind, like mine, is the question “how do I do that, concretely?” I think, providentially, our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows us how the early Christian community grew. We are told, “The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers” (Acts 9:26-31).

Our second reading from the First Letter of Saint John urges us to “love not in word or speech but in deed and truth” (1 Jn 3:18-24). Putting our faith into action is the way to make sure that the Catholic faith will continue to thrive here in Island Grove for many more years to come.

May God give us this grace. Amen.