

**Homily for the Installation of Father Jason Stone as  
Pastor of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish, Decatur, Illinois  
Mass for Sunday of the 18<sup>th</sup> Week in Ordinary Time, Year B | August 4, 2024, A.D.**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good for us to be here today for this Mass and Rite of Installation of Father Jason Stone as Pastor of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish here in Decatur.

The Rite of Installation that we celebrate today is not a pre-requisite for a priest to begin functioning as the pastor of a parish, but every year when new pastors are appointed around our diocese, I or my delegate do this rite with them because it reminds all of us of an essential part of being a disciple: Disciples do not choose their own path, they follow Christ where He leads them. For example, I did not just show up here in the Diocese of Springfield one day and claim the title of bishop for myself. No, I was sent, I was commissioned, by then Pope Benedict XVI, himself having been given his authority as Pope after Christ gave it to St. Peter when He founded the Church: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).

In a similar way, a priest is *sent* and *entrusted* with the pastoral responsibilities of a parish by his bishop, and it is during the rite of installation that we celebrate here this morning that this handing over of the “keys of the kingdom” (albeit only a small part of Christ’s Kingdom) takes place.

At the same time, Jesus’ gift of responsibility and authority over His Church as entrusted to Peter, and my giving a part of that to your new pastor today, is not something that happens only to the Pope, or to priests. *Every one of us* has been entrusted with a small part of Jesus’ Kingdom. For some of you, that is upholding Christ’s reign in your family, as you work, or among the people you are friends with. For all of us, Christ has given us the responsibility, and dignity, of caring for and protecting His Kingdom *in our own hearts*.

One of the ways that we do this happens every Sunday when we profess our faith by praying the Creed. For Saint Peter Himself, it was only after his profession of faith in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” that he was made leader of the Church. Today, in a special way, all of us, with your new pastor, will recite the Creed, professing individually and together our common faith in Christ. By that profession, I officially ask your pastor to take on the responsibilities of this parish with the heart of Christ. But every time we profess the Creed, every time we *pray* those words that billions of Christians

have prayed down through the centuries, we each renew our own commitment to Jesus! Does He reign over our hearts? Is He the Lord of our *time*? Of our *bank accounts*? Of those He has entrusted to our care. I have heard this question asked rather provocatively: if I were taken before a court and charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me? If Jesus is truly “Christ” and “Son of the Living God,” as we confess, then He *must be the only king of our lives*, and that should be evident in the way we live.

Of course, our prayer together this morning is not just a recommitment to the Lord, it is also to give thanksgiving and worship to God, who daily provides for us. Before officially installing your new Pastor, we offer thanks and gratitude to God for Father Michael Friedel, who was appointed your Pastor in 2020, and Father Peter Chineke and his priestly care of this parish from 2022 to 2023. We wish them well and ask God’s blessings on them in their new assignments.

I also want to thank Father Jason Stone for his own fidelity to the Lord, and obedience to me, in taking on this new assignment as your Pastor of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish here in Decatur.

Father Stone was born in Decatur, Illinois, on June 29, 1971. He attended Sullivan High School and the University of Illinois, where he obtained his

bachelor's degree in 1993 and his law degree in 1996. Baptized and raised as a Protestant, he was received into the Catholic Church in 2007. After practicing law with a private law firm in Quincy for several years, he heard God's call to serve as a priest. After completing the pre-theology program at Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis and his theological studies and pastoral formation at Mundelein Seminary in the Archdiocese of Chicago, I ordained Father Stone to the priesthood in 2015. Following his ordination, Father Stone served as Parochial Vicar at Holy Family Parish in Granite City, St. Mary and St. Mark Parish in Madison, Illinois, and at Saints Peter and Paul Parish in Alton, where he then served as Pastor from 2017 to 2020. From 2020 to 2023, he was Pastor of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Parish in Mt. Zion and St. Isidore Parish in Bethany. Father Stone has also served as my Delegate for Legal Professionals and Chaplain of the Saint Thomas More Lawyers Guild. For the past year, he has served as Parochial Administrator here at Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish.

Father Stone will serve you now as pastor as we continue forward into this Third Millennium of Christianity, so I think it is fitting to call to mind a theme suggested by our late Holy Father, the Great Pope Saint John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, "On Entering the New Millennium," which I quote as follows (nos. 30-31): "First of all, I have no

hesitation in saying that *all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness.*"

Holiness consists of following Jesus as His disciples, as people who listen and learn from Him, and who put Him first in our lives. In a real relationship with Christ, we discover that everything we have was first a gift from our Heavenly Father.

Saint Peter wrote of this realization and consequent conversion in these words: "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10). This is why *stewardship* naturally flows from the authentic *disciple*. We cannot help but make return to the Lord of all the good things He has done for us.

In the Fall of 2015, I published my second pastoral letter, entitled, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for "The Art of Growing in God's Grace." In it, 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." All of us are not just called to receive God's love for ourselves, but to become instruments of that love in those around us! This is how the Church will grow. That is how *this* Church will grow.

In 2017 we concluded our Fourth Diocesan Synod in which the clergy, consecrated religious, and delegates from all 129 parishes in this Diocese voted

overwhelmingly to adopt a dozen declarations on how we should live out our identity as disciples and stewards in this diocese for the coming years. The first of these declarations was a bold response to God's call: "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."

Four pillars, essential areas for our faithful discipleship and stewardship, came from those synodal discussions: **hospitality, prayer, formation, and service**. In other words, we are the kind of Catholic Christians who 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.

If we look briefly at our readings today, our passage from the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Saint John's Gospel picks up where we left off last Sunday, when we heard

how Jesus had fed 5,000 people with five barley loaves and two fish and then came to his disciples, walking on the water. These signs disclose his divine identity, but the crowds and the disciples see only the miracle, not its deeper sign value. Now comes the discourse on the Bread of Life; Jesus explains the deeper meaning of his multiplying the loaves and fishes. He reminds the people that God was responsible for the miraculous feeding in the desert with manna, the “bread from heaven” that we heard about in our first reading from the Book of Exodus. Jesus makes His divine disclosure to the people: “I am the bread of life.” This bread brings life everlasting, satisfying all hunger and thirst beyond our imagination.

This Gospel message about Jesus being the Bread of Life is very timely, coming just two weeks after our National Eucharistic Congress took place last month in Indianapolis, where 60,000 Catholics gathered for this moving and memorable event, and countless more joined us via livestream. The National Eucharistic Revival, of which the Congress was a major part, now continues with a special Year of Mission, which calls for Catholics to share their rekindled love of the Eucharist with other people. This is an essential aspect of our being disciples of Jesus Christ and stewards of God’s gifts of creation.

Now, your parish has already begun following Christ as disciples and stewards, so when Our Lord comes to us again today in this Eucharist, each of us is invited into an even more complete following after Him. Jesus asks your new pastor for trust, for courage, and for prayer in continuing God's mission in this parish. But your pastor cannot do this alone; he needs the commitment and cooperation of all of you. Today it is my joy to join you all in our worship of God and receive the gift of His Son in this Eucharist. I pray that all of you will work with Father Jason Stone in seeking to be intentional disciples of the Lord and generous stewards of the gifts entrusted to us for the growth of the Church as we journey together toward our inheritance in the glory of Heaven. Therefore, dear parishioners of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish here in Decatur, I urge you to strive for holiness, to work and pray with your new pastor. Support him, help him, pray for him, and most of all, love him as he loves you and as Christ calls us to love each other.

May God give us this grace. Amen.