

**Homily for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent - Cycle C**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In 1991, Billy Crystal and the late Jack Palance co-starred in *City Slickers*, a comical movie about friends going through a mid-life crisis. The men travel to a dude ranch and meet a guide named “Curly,” played by Palance. Midway through the journey, Curly holds up his index finger and asks them a focus question – “What is the one thing?” If everything in your life went away, what is the one thing that you look to and hold onto? The men want Curly to answer his own question, but he asks it rhetorically to evoke reflection and response from them.

“What is the number one thing above everything else that we want to hold onto?” That is a question we should ask ourselves frequently. That is the question that Saint Paul answers in his Letter to the Philippians (Phil 3:8-14) when he says, “I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and

be found in him.” For us as Christians, Christ should come before all else. From time to time, especially during this season of Lent, we need to do a self-assessment to review how well we are doing at keeping Christ ruling our hearts as our Sovereign Lord, which means everything else in comparison “counts as rubbish,” as Saint Paul puts it.

In today’s Gospel (John 8:1-11), the story about a woman caught in adultery takes place in the temple area where many people have gathered to hear the teaching of Jesus. In the midst of this, some scribes and Pharisees bring a woman they claim was caught in the act of adultery, insisting that that the law of Moses required such a woman to be stoned. They bring no witnesses as required by the law, and they also fail to indicate that the law condemned both the man and woman engaged in adultery (see Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22). The scribes and the Pharisees are clearly concerned neither with this woman nor justice; rather, they seek to trap Jesus into judging a no-win situation.

Jesus does not give a verbal reply to the scribes and Pharisees. Instead, he simply begins to write on the ground. This symbolic gesture indicates that Jesus is not even going to engage the question of the scribes and Pharisees. He clearly sees through their motives, and he will not play into their hands.

Such a gesture was equal to shunning a question by treating it as totally irrelevant. The content of the writing—if there was any—is unimportant. The meaning is in the gesture itself.

Jesus does finally give a verbal response to the scribes and Pharisees: Whoever is without sin gets to cast the first stone. They all leave without one stone being cast. When all had left, Jesus asks the woman if anyone has condemned her. No one has. He then tells the woman to go and sin no more. He does not pretend that she has not sinned or that her sins are insignificant. Instead, Jesus is giving her an opportunity to start over and from now on to sin no more. The woman is thus presented with the opportunity to begin a new life. This act of mercy demonstrates God's divine justice, for it seeks to bring life and healing, for that is precisely God's will. God offers us this same mercy, justice, and healing in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

This brings us to the last paragraph of the Nicene Creed adopted at the Council of Nicaea held 1,700 years ago in the year 325, which says, "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen."

These four characteristics — one, holy, catholic and apostolic — are inseparably linked with each other and indicate the essential features of the Church and her mission as established by Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: “The Church is one because of her source: ... ‘the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.’ The Church is one because of her founder: for ‘the Word made flesh, the prince of peace, reconciled all men to God by the cross, . . . restoring the unity of all in one people and one body.’ The Church is one because of her ‘soul’: “It is the Holy Spirit ... who brings about that wonderful communion of the faithful and joins them together so intimately in Christ that He is the principle of the Church’s unity.’ Unity is of the essence of the Church” (CCC 813).

Unfortunately, the unity of the one and only Church of God from its very beginnings has been wounded by heresies and rifts. In subsequent centuries “much more serious dissensions appeared and large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church” (CCC 817). We must continue to pray for the grace to overcome these divisions and strive for the unity that Christ desires in fulfillment of his prayer that “all may be one” (*John* 17:21).

The Church is holy because “Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is hailed as ‘alone holy,’ loved the Church as his Bride, giving himself up for her so as to sanctify her; He joined her to himself as his body and endowed her with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God” (CCC 823).

The word “catholic” means “universal,” The Church is catholic in a double sense: “First, the Church is catholic because Christ is present in her. ‘Where there is Christ Jesus, there is the Catholic Church.’ ... Secondly, the Church is catholic because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race” (CCC 83-831).

The word “apostle” is derived from classical Greek *apóstolos*, meaning “one who is sent.” “The Church is apostolic because she is founded on the apostles, in three ways: 1) she was and remains built on ‘the foundation of the Apostles,’ the witnesses chosen and sent on mission by Christ himself; 2) with the help of the Spirit dwelling in her, the Church keeps and hands on the teaching ... from the apostles; and 3) she continues to be taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles until Christ’s return, through their successors in pastoral office: the college of bishops, ‘assisted by priests, in union with the successor of Peter, the Church's supreme pastor’” (CCC 857).

We say that we “confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins” because “Our Lord tied the forgiveness of sins to faith and Baptism: ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved’” (CCC 857).

This leads to the final affirmation of our faith: “Belief in the resurrection of the dead has been an essential element of the Christian faith from its beginnings. ‘The confidence of Christians is the resurrection of the dead’” (CCC 991). Being raised from the dead implies that there is “life of the world to come,” namely, heaven or hell, or purgatory as a temporary stage of purgation or purification on the way to heaven. Our coming celebration of Easter calls us to focus on resurrection and eternal life.

The Creed, like the last book of the Bible, ends with the Hebrew word *amen*. Because it comes at the end of our prayers, it sounds like a period at the end of the sentence: “Amen.” Prayer is over! No, it is much more than that! In Hebrew, *amen* comes from the same root as the word “believe.” So when we say, “Amen,” we are affirming that we believe everything that we just said. Thus the Creed’s final “Amen” repeats and confirms its first words: “I believe.”

May God give us this grace. Amen.