

**Homily for the 8th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Cycle C
Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of Catholic Charities of the
Diocese of Springfield in Illinois
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

March 1, 2025

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Everyday we are inundated with words – words in our conversations, text messages, social media, email and postal mail, newspapers, magazines, books, websites, etc. We see so many words that we may wonder what impact any of them have. But some words do have the power to change lives, words such as “I love you” or “Will you marry me?”

I came across some words that changed my life when I was in college seminary and read a document called “Justice in the World,” the Post-Synodal Statement of the 1971 Synod of Bishops. Although the document contained 77 paragraphs, one sentence caught my attention. It said, “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”¹

The significance and impact of that statement was in the assertion that “Action on behalf of justice . . . [is] a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.” In other words, action on behalf of justice was not something Christians do as an afterthought when we have finished tending to more important matters, but in saying that it was “constitutive” means that action on behalf of justice is an essential and indispensable component of preaching the Gospel. Being a young and idealistic seminarian, I decided that I wanted to make action on behalf of justice a constitutive dimension of my priesthood, so after I was ordained a priest I went to law school while I was serving in a parish comprised mostly of blue-collar immigrants who were working in the local steel mills. When I graduated law school and passed the Illinois bar exam, I co-founded the Chicago Legal Clinic to provide legal services for the poor. I had planned to spend my life as a parish priest serving the poor, and although my ecclesiastical superiors had other plans for me, my heart has never weakened or waned in my desire to help the poor. That commitment to the least among us would eventually take on other forms, such as my unwavering support for our Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. It is for this reason that I am especially pleased to celebrate this Mass today for the 100th anniversary of our Catholic Charities!

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois opened its doors one hundred years ago today on March 1, 1925, with a staff of just one. The first employee of Catholic Charities, a social worker named Elizabeth Kuhlman, provided help and relief to the suffering under the direction of Bishop James A. Griffin. Kuhlman also served as the president of the Ladies of Charity, an organization established by Bishop Griffin with the purpose of providing support to Catholic Charities, however necessary. This organization funded the works of Catholic Charities and provided material goods like blankets and clothing to be given to the needy.

Catholic Charities has grown remarkably in the past century. Today Catholic Charities provides services to broken families, senior citizens, veterans, abused children, the sick, the hungry and the poor with an array of programs designed to treat people with love, dignity, and respect. As our Executive Director, Steve Roach, likes to say, "We do these things not because it is a 'nice thing to do,' but because we are commanded by our Savior to love one another. As Catholics, we are taught that charitable works are so integral to our faith that without them, our faith is dead."²

In 2013, our diocese received a substantial bequest, the only stipulation being that the money had to be used to help the poor. Without hesitation, I

directed that this generous bequest be used to create an endowment to establish and fund Catholic Charities Legal Services, with the mission that, regardless of one's ability to pay, every human being has the right to competent legal counsel. In this way, I was able to bring to fruition as the bishop of our diocese the dream I had as a young priest to promote justice by providing legal services for the poor.

While justice is not the same as charity, they are closely related. The definition of justice is to give others their due that is owed to them as members of the human race created in the image and likeness of God. Charity is what we do in seeking the best for others in need out of love for them. Charity is related to justice in that one of the best ways to love people is to treat them justly.

For 100 years, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois has served, nourished, loved, and listened to the needs of countless people in Central Illinois. Thanks to the unwavering support of the members of the Church, a tremendous base of donors and volunteers, and a skilled staff dedicated to the mission of Catholic Charities, Catholic Charities has been fortunate enough to maintain a strong presence in our diocese since 1925. They strive to be there for the men, women, and children in need of the

healing and empowering presence of Jesus, and for that we are grateful to them and we give thanks to God.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: In today's Gospel reading (Luke 6:39-45), Jesus begins by saying that we cannot give to others what we do not have ourselves, and we cannot guide others when we lack direction ourselves. This would seem to be self-evident but is a necessary message for His listeners - He points to the common human tendency to attempt to correct the shortcomings of others, while overlooking our own. We must first pay attention to our own self-improvement before imagining we can improve our neighbour. More than any other vice, Jesus robustly criticizes hypocrisy as an insidious form of self-delusion which blocks true spiritual growth - and challenges hypocrites to live more honestly, humbly, and, perhaps, self-critically. It can be challenging to realise that we reveal ourselves for who we really are by the fruit we bear and in the words we utter. In using vivid visual imagery, Jesus is driving home His point. He both warns and inspires, criticizes and praises - what is not good is to be avoided, what is helpful is to be nurtured.

Of course, the most important word we hear is the Word of God, and that Word is life-changing for those who have ears to hear. Disciples are to model themselves on their teacher, listening to Him and let His words find a home in their heart. In this way their heart will be full of goodness, which can then be shared as a gift to all.

This Gospel passage is good material for an examination of conscience, and a gentle look at our own daily life. How do we conduct ourselves? What kind of things do we say to others? Do we try to be Christ-like? Do we bear fruit for God? The object here is not to dwell on our shortcomings, but to stand honestly before the Lord, ask his forgiveness where we need it, change our lives for the better as best we can, and give thanks to God for His grace.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Synod of Bishops, "Justice in the World" (Vatican City: 1971); available online at <https://christusliberat.org/journal/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf>.

² Steve Roach, "A Century of Compassion: Catholic Charities Turns 100," *Catholic Times*, February 16, 2025, page 10; available online at <https://catholictimes.dirxion.com/Catholic-Times-02162025-e-Edition/1/>.