

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit Mass at
Saint Bernard Church of Holy Angels Parish
Wood River, Illinois**

Third Sunday of Advent - *Gaudete Sunday* - Year A

December 13-14, 2025

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As your Bishop, it is good to be with you for my Pastoral Visit to Saint Bernard Church of Holy Angels Parish here in Wood River, Illinois.

My Pastoral Visit here this weekend includes celebrating the 4:30 Saturday evening Mass and the eight o'clock and 10:30 Masses on Sunday morning. I will then meet with your parish councils on Sunday afternoon to hear about all the good things that are happening here at your parishes to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod. I look forward to meeting and greeting many of you this weekend.

My visit this weekend is also an opportunity to share with you my hopes and my vision as your bishop for the future of our diocese, building on and implementing our Diocesan Synod held in 2017 on the theme of discipleship and stewardship.

Following our Diocesan Synod, I published my third pastoral letter, *Ars vivendi et moriendi in Dei gratia*, Latin for, “The Art of Living and Dying in God’s Grace.” In it, I provided a summary of the Fourth Diocesan Synod and some pastoral commentary on the twelve declarations that were adopted. I also offered some theological reflections on the art of living and dying in God’s grace.

In this pastoral letter, I said that the “art of living and dying in God’s grace is the key to everlasting happiness in eternal life. The Christian faithful die to sin through the saving waters of baptism. By dying to their selfish desires through acts of mortification and self-sacrifice, the Christian faithful grow in love of God and neighbor. The whole Christian life aims at reaching this goal of everlasting happiness in eternal life by turning from sin and growing in virtue through God’s grace.”

As an expression of how to reach this goal of everlasting happiness, we adopted a new mission statement at our Fourth Diocesan Synod for all of us as members of this Diocese. It says, “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.”

To further this mission, the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is committed to implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely, hospitality, prayer, formation and service. In other words, we 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.

Through prayer, discernment, and consultation with others, it has become evident that the Lord is inviting us to embrace more fully our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.¹

My brothers and sisters in Christ: The Catholic Church will soon be concluding the Ordinary Jubilee Year of 2025. A Jubilee Year is a significant moment in the life of the Church in which she celebrates the year of messianic favor inaugurated by Christ through his Incarnation and Paschal Mystery.² Proclaimed every twenty-five years since the thirteenth century, the celebration of a jubilee year provides opportunities

to receive the Lord's mercy, especially through the practice of the Jubilee indulgence, and lead to the performance of works of mercy.

The theme for this Jubilee Year is "Pilgrims of Hope." The title given by the late Pope Francis to his document declaring the Jubilee Year of 2025 is *Spes non confundit*, Latin for "Hope does not disappoint," taken from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans (*Rom* 5:5), in which Saint Paul offered these words of encouragement to the Christian community of Rome. Similarly, Pope Francis wrote, "Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross ... By his perennial presence in the life of the pilgrim Church, the Holy Spirit illumines all believers with the light of hope. He keeps that light burning, like an ever-burning lamp, to sustain and invigorate our lives. Christian hope does not deceive or disappoint because it is grounded in the certainty that nothing and no one may ever separate us from God's love."³

During this Jubilee Year 2025, we also have been celebrating the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which promulgated the Nicene Creed that we still use today and recite right after the homily at Mass on Sundays and Holydays of Obligation. Just imagine, seventeen centuries during which, using these words, billions of Christians have expressed their belief in God as the One who loves, the One who is

beloved, and the One who is the Love between them. During that gathering in Nicaea, in the year 325, the Council delegates came to a unified statement of who Jesus Christ is. We are the heirs of those who gathered so long ago, and we too believe in the mystery of God's continuing presence in our world, and in our call to live in that mystery.

This third Sunday of Advent is called "*Gaudete*" Sunday and that is why we light the pink candle. "*Gaudete*" is a Latin word that means "rejoice." Today's first reading from Isaiah is full of joy. The prophet inspires thoughts of a world of hope, a world of God's sure and strong promise to lift those who are bowed down. All creation will be fruitful, reflecting God's love. In the Gospel we sense a feeling of anticipation growing among the people. This is picked up in the Psalm and the second reading, which emphasize God's faithfulness to us.

In the Gospel reading we encounter John in prison, near the end of his life. He has heard of the things that Jesus has done and said. John knows his life is likely to end very soon on the command of Herod, so he wants to make sure he has not been mistaken in identifying Jesus as the awaited one. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or have do we have to wait for someone else?"

Jesus' answer is that to see the signs of God requires noticing what is all around. Jesus tells John's disciples to tell their master what they had seen and heard, the signs of the messianic age: "the blind see... the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor." There is one more statement that Jesus makes about the signs he has produced to show the kingdom of God is at hand. He says, "blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." Christmas always renews our commitment to bring God's love into a world that so desperately needs it. It is the Lord who brings love and healing into our lives.

I concluded my third pastoral letter by telling a personal anecdote, which I would like to share with you now to close this homily.

Once when I was catching a flight to concelebrate an out-of-town wedding for a friend of mine, I had gift-wrapped a figurine of the Blessed Mother as a wedding present for the newlyweds and put the gift in my carry-on bag. When I got to the airport and put my bag on the conveyer belt for security screening, the TSA agent looked at the x-ray of my bag and called out, "Bag check." I immediately realized the problem: the figurine was made of leaded crystal and the security agent must have thought it was some sort of weapon. The TSA supervisor came over, saw

me standing there wearing my clerical suit and Roman collar, then looked at the x-ray image of the figurine and exclaimed, “For heaven’s sake, it’s the Blessed Mother, let him through!” Of course, I was greatly relieved. While this incident makes us laugh, it is a true story, and the words of the TSA supervisor are an exact quote.

Reflecting on it, I have often thought that this little vignette is exactly the scenario I hope for when I die: I pray that I will arrive at the gates of heaven with the Blessed Mother at my side. Seeing me standing there with Our Lady beside me, Saint Peter will exclaim, “For heaven’s sake, he’s with the Blessed Mother, let him through!”

Staying close to our Blessed Mother throughout life provides faithful assurance that she will lead us to her Son Jesus at the hour of our death, so that we may die in God’s grace and enjoy everlasting happiness in eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992, p. 8; <http://www.usccb.org/upload/stewardship-disciples-response-10th-anniversary.pdf>.

² (Cf. Lk 4:19; John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nos. 11- 16).

³ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, given in Rome on May 9, 2024, par. 3; accessed online December 23, 2024, at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.