

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit Mass at
Immaculate Conception Church, Mattoon, Illinois
and
Saint Columcille Church, Sullivan, Illinois
Solemnity of Christ the King - Year C**

November 22-23, 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 Immaculate Conception Church in Mattoon and Saint Columcille Church in Sullivan, Illinois.

My Pastoral Visit here this weekend includes celebrating the four o'clock Mass at Immaculate Conception Church and the six o'clock Mass at Saint Columcille Church on Saturday evening, and the eight o'clock and 10:30 Masses on Sunday morning at Immaculate Conception Church in Mattoon. The 10:30 Mass on Sunday morning will include the Sacraments of Initiation with Baptism, Confirmation, and First Holy Communion. After these Masses, 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: This year the Catholic Church is celebrating 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 celebrate 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.

Today's Solemnity of Christ the King marks the conclusion of our liturgical year. Jesus is our King, as disciples we must submit to His rule and authority. There is something in our human nature that resists this, unless we accept the esteemed status of the ruler and the wisdom and justice of the rules. In Jesus we have the perfect king, and His rule is absolutely wise and just. Remarkably, we are invited to share in His reign part of the Body of Christ. The challenge, then, is to serve and shepherd others, recognizing we have a duty to care for them as Jesus does.

Over the centuries, history has seen many monarchies, many kings and queens, come and go: their reigns came to an end. Today we celebrate Christ as Universal King, a king whose reign won't end. Above all, Christ

wants to reign in our hearts, and if we let him do so, the world can indeed be transformed into a kingdom of justice, peace and harmony. Today we acknowledge that our God, in Christ, does indeed reign supreme!

This coming Thursday is our national Thanksgiving holiday. It is a time for us to acknowledge that everything we have comes to us as undeserved gifts from God, not because we have earned them or are entitled to them. As the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, said, "To be grateful is to recognise the love of God in everything God has given us – and God has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of God's love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from God." Cultivating a grateful heart involves fostering this awareness of God's presence and his blessings in our lives while responding with humility, love, and service of others.

So, how can we make gratitude part of our lives? Well, why not start when you open your eyes first thing in the morning? Before you make another move, just pray a simple prayer; "Lord, thank you for this new day. May I spend it to your glory and in your service." Make gratitude a regular part of your prayer life. Start and end your day by thanking God for specific blessings, both big and small. The word "Eucharist" itself

means thanksgiving, so we can focus on praising and thanking God when we attend Mass.

Gratitude inspires us to give back. When we realise how much we have received, then we're more likely to serve our parish, community, or our family as an act of thanksgiving to God. Our Lady is a great example to us in this regard. She put herself at the service of God and of humanity and she sang the great song of praise and thanksgiving known as the "Magnificat." During this Jubilee Year, we remember Mary as she joyfully proclaims, "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." We too can make these words of praise and gratitude our own.

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.