

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit Mass at
Holy Family Church
Decatur, Illinois**

Fourth Sunday of Lent - *Gaudete Sunday* - Year A

March 15, 2026

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Rejoice! This is the first word for the Entrance Antiphon for today's Mass, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, known as Laetare Sunday, from the first word in Latin of chapter 66, verse 10 of the Prophet Isaiah, *Laetare, Ierusalem, ... omnes qui diligitis eam; gaudete!* which means, "Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful!" These words and the rose-colored vestments we wear set a tone of joyful anticipation of our upcoming celebration of Easter.

Today's Gospel passage (John 9:1-41) that we just heard is the detailed account of Jesus healing a man who had been blind from birth. It is one of seven signs found in the first half (chapters 1-12) of the Gospel of John. A sign here is a miracle that Jesus works that points beyond itself. It shows how Jesus reveals some aspect of God's divinity. This sign reveals that Jesus is the light of the world. He demonstrates this by healing a man who was blind from birth. This gift of sight undoubtedly brought

joy to the man born blind, but also causes the healed man a great deal of difficulty in dealing with those around him. The question is: Who is really blind in this story – and who can really see?

As the argument between the Pharisees and the healed man continues, it becomes clear that the Pharisees are the ones who are blind, whereas the blind man sees clearly. The healed man has moved beyond recognizing Jesus as the man who healed him; he describes Jesus as a prophet and finally as the Son of God. Spiritually, this healed man demonstrates a profound clarity of vision. Jesus reveals himself to the healed man as the Son of God, which the healed man fully believes. The Pharisees, however, increase in spiritual blindness as they continue to reject who Jesus is and what he has come to do. What we learn from this is that when we live in the truth of what God does in our lives, like the man born blind, we become Christ's witnesses.

As your Bishop, it is good to be with you for my Pastoral Visit to Holy Family Church here in Decatur, Illinois.

My Pastoral Visit here today includes celebrating the eight o'clock and ten o'clock Masses this morning. I will then meet with your parish councils to hear about all the good things that are happening here at your

parish to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod. I look forward to meeting and greeting many of you after Mass.

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 I 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

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>.