

**Homily for the Closing Mass of the *Simbang Gabi* Christmas Novena  
December 23, 2013**

**Saint Katherine Drexel Parish - Sacred Heart Church  
Springfield, Illinois**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I am pleased to be with you for this closing Mass of the *Simbang Gabi* Novena in preparation for the celebration of Christmas. As we hear in the response to the psalm for today: "Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand" (Luke 21:28). Christ, our redemption, is indeed near at hand, which is a source of great rejoicing for us.

During these final days of Advent, the Church gives us various readings from the Gospels which focus specifically on the coming of Christ in history nearly two thousand years ago. In addition to hearing the details of Christ's genealogy and His conception in the womb of Mary, we also hear the unfolding of the story of the birth of St. John the Baptist, an important part of the overall picture of the coming of Christ. A few days ago, we heard the account of the visit of the archangel Gabriel to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. When told by the angel that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son, he did not fully believe the promise, resulting in his being struck mute and thus unable to speak.

In today's Gospel, we hear the story of the birth of John the Baptist and his circumcision on the eighth day according to the Jewish custom. Part of this ceremony involved the formal naming of the child. It was expected among the bystanders that this child would be named after his father. Elizabeth, instead, replied: "No. He will be called John" (Luke 1:60). In an attempt to preserve the custom, the people turned to Zechariah for his input. Still unable to speak, he wrote on a tablet, to the amazement of all: "John is his name" (Luke 1:63).

Some might look upon this action of Zechariah as being an act of solidarity with his wife by agreeing with her as the good husband that he was. There is far greater significance, though, to his response, as can be seen in the following verse, where we read: "Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God" (Luke 1:64). Recall that God had caused Zechariah to be mute because of his disbelief. Now, his mouth is opened because he has obeyed God who had told him through the angel that the boy's name was to be John. This act of obedience is an act of faith whereby Zechariah finally gives his full assent to what God had promised to him.

The example of Zechariah is an important one for us in the living out of our faith. Zechariah was certainly a man of faith, but his faith was an imperfect faith. When confronted with something that seemed impossible, he chose not to believe. A similar thing can happen to us in our lives. When difficult and tragic situations occur in our world and in our lives, there is a temptation for us to question our faith. We have been told that God is with us and that He will never abandon us, but when faced with those unexplainable moments, it can, at times, seem impossible that this is indeed true.

Last year, less than two weeks before Christmas, our country was shocked by the tragic news of the death of twenty innocent children at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. More recently, and closer to many of you, was the fierce typhoon that struck the Philippines in November, resulting in massive destruction and the loss of more than 6,000 lives. In both situations, there is the temptation to think that God had abandoned the people in those situations. Many fall into thinking like Zechariah: they are people of faith, but when challenged with something so tragic, choose not to believe that God could still be present.

One of the most popular songs for this time of preparation for Christmas is the hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” The word ‘Emmanuel’, as you know, means “God is with us.” This is the great message of Christmas. It is not just a remembrance of a past event where God was with us when He was born and then for the next 33 years. Nor is it just our hopeful anticipation of His coming at the end of time. Christ is with us here and now, at all times and in every circumstance. Just before He ascended into Heaven, He made this promise: “behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). God is faithful to His promises. We, in faith, are called to trust those promises, especially when we do not understand or cannot see His presence in the midst of those difficult circumstances.

In this regard, we can turn to the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She found herself in a seemingly impossible situation when told by Gabriel that she would bear the Son of God. She, like Zechariah, asks a question of the angel and, on the surface, it may appear as though she is doubting the possibility of such a thing. In reality, Mary was not questioning from the position of doubt, as with Zechariah, but from the position of wonder at how this great mystery would be accomplished through her.

Following the example of Mary, when we find ourselves facing that which is seemingly impossible, we are called to make an act of faith, trusting that God is indeed with us and that with God “all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). It does not mean that we cannot ask the question ‘how’ or ‘why,’ but we have to be content that we may not receive an answer right away, or at all on this side of eternity. We place our faith completely in God without any reservations or conditions, trusting in His presence among us.

As we draw close to the celebration of the birth of Lord, let us be reminded that by His entrance into the world, He has come to remain with us. His birth has brought a great light to “[t]he people who walked in darkness” (Isaiah 9:1). As we will hear in the Gospel on Christmas morning, that “light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). No darkness will overcome the light of Christ dwelling among us. Christmas is a time for us to renew our faith in that promise and to remain steadfast in following that light which leads us to Him in Heaven. Let us open our hearts that we might be prepared to welcome Emmanuel, God with us, at this Mass, at Christmas, and every day of our lives. May God give us this grace. Amen.