

**Springfield in Illinois Diocesan Council of Catholic Women
2014 Convention
Pere Marquette State Park
Grafton, Illinois**

October 29, 2014

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, dear sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here for the annual convention of the Springfield in Illinois Diocesan Council of Catholic Women. We gather here today at the beautiful Pere Marquette State Park, marveling at the wonder of God's creation that surrounds us here on the bluffs overlooking the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers.

This time of year, as you know, is particularly picturesque as we are treated to the many colors on the trees as they prepare to shed their leaves in preparation for winter. We have also witnessed in the past month the many crops that have been harvested, leaving empty fields which were once filled with rows and rows of healthy corn and soybeans. These annual occurrences serve as visible reminders of the reality that the things of this earth eventually come to an end.

In just a few days, we will enter into the month of November, a month in which the Church reminds us that our lives here on earth will

also come to an end. It can be a rather sobering topic to consider, but it is one that is at the center of our faith. Our Catholic faith teaches us that our earthly death is not an end, for by His death and Resurrection, Christ has conquered death and given us hope that we too shall share in the Resurrection when we reach the end of our earthly pilgrimage.

Even with that great hope, death still remains a mystery to us as we continue to live our lives here. Questions abound in this regard, questions such as: “What will Heaven look like?”; “What will we do in Heaven?”; and “Will we know our loved ones in Heaven?” Another question that arises when we speak about death is the question that we hear directed to Jesus in today’s Gospel: “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” (Luke 13:23)

Jesus addresses the topic of salvation in many places throughout the Gospels, but He never really gives a clear indication as to what to expect with regards to the number of those who will be saved and those who will not. There have been commentators that suggest that the number who will be saved will be few, while others hold out hope for the possibility that all will be saved. In the end, the number is not known.

In an article written in 2003, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles reflected on this mystery, saying that “God in His wisdom has seen fit not to disclose any statistics.”¹ After citing passages and writers who support both positions, he draws the following insightful conclusion:

All told, it is good that God has left us without exact information. If we knew that virtually everybody would be damned, we would be tempted to despair. If we knew that all, or nearly all, are saved, we might become presumptuous. If we knew that some fixed percent, say fifty, would be saved, we would be caught in an unholy rivalry. We would rejoice in every sign that others were among the lost, since our own chances of election would thereby be increased. Such a competitive spirit would hardly be compatible with the gospel.²

Jesus is a good teacher who knows His audience better than they know themselves. He knows how giving a specific number or a certain percentage could result in a problem. He therefore chooses to take the opportunity to answer the question by imparting an important lesson of how each of us should approach this critical issue of salvation.

He tells us that we should “strive to enter through the narrow gate for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough”

(Luke 13:24). This image of a narrow gate is one that challenges us to see that going to Heaven is not a given, but that it requires a serious effort on our part. We cannot just brush it off as though it is given that we will be saved, regardless of how we have lived our lives. This image, along with many others offered by Jesus, reminds us that attaining salvation is not automatic.

This point is seen clearly in an exchange between Jesus and His disciples following one of these challenging descriptions of the requirements for salvation. His disciples ask with a sense of desperation: “Who then can be saved?”, to which Jesus replied: “For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:25-26).

We see, then, that Jesus gives a challenging message about how to achieve salvation, while at the same time giving us words of great encouragement that He will freely give us the grace necessary to be found worthy to enter the wedding feast of Heaven at the end of our lives. We must never lose sight of the fact that He has a great desire for all people to be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4), and that none be lost, but raised on the last day (cf. John 6:39).

This gift of grace which enables us to be saved is not something He forces on us, but He gives us the freedom to accept it and so be with Him forever. Unfortunately, it is possible for some people to choose not to accept this gift and so be separated from Him for eternity.

As I mentioned earlier, talking about death and the number of people will be saved can seem a little sobering, but it does not have to be so. The more we give our lives over to Christ and let Him strengthen us by His grace, the greater our hope that He will continue to lead us throughout this life so that when our last day arrives, we will be ready to be welcomed into His loving embrace.

Just as the Lord comes to our aid on our pilgrimage through life, so too do we assist one another along that journey. Our friendship with fellow pilgrims is a source of great encouragement and support as we all strive to enter through that narrow gate. We live together in the bond of God's love which urges us to be of service to all with whom we come into contact.

This gathering for the annual convention of the Springfield in Illinois Diocesan Council of Catholic Women is a wonderful way for all of you to support one another in this journey. Being around others who share the

same love for God and a desire to be with Him and one another forever is a great gift. It is also an opportunity to be re-energized as you bring that love back to your parishes and families so that all of the faithful of our diocese might join with you in more eagerly working for the coming of the Kingdom.

In a particular way, we turn to the greatest woman the world has ever known, our Blessed Mother. Aside from God, she is our greatest source of support on this pilgrimage. We strive to imitate her single-minded dedication to following her Son and keeping her eyes always fixed on that gate that leads to eternal happiness. We ask her to intercede for all of us, the she might show us the way to be more faithful followers of the Lord as we journey together in confidence and hope toward the glory of Heaven, where she, along with all of the saints, await us with great joy.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Avery Cardinal Dulles, "The Population of Hell," *First Things*, May 2003.

² *ibid.*