

Homily for the 175th Anniversary of St. Luke Parish

**St Luke Parish
Virginia, Illinois**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here to celebrate this historic occasion of the 175th Anniversary of St. Luke Parish in Virginia. Since 1840, Catholics in this community have found a home in which they can join together in prayer and fellowship to journey together as disciples of Jesus Christ. The spiritual foundation laid so long ago continues to remain firm due to God's grace which has made possible the many good works and sacrifices of so many who have preceded us. We celebrate this Mass with a profound sense of gratitude for those gifts which we have received as we ask God's continued guidance so that we might continue to be good stewards of those gifts.

Our celebration today is one that is not limited to include just current and former parishioners of this parish. By virtue of the fact that this is a Catholic parish, is it a celebration in which the entire diocese, and indeed the universal Church, shares. My presence here as the bishop of this diocese is a visible reminder of your connection with Catholics not only

here in our diocese, but also with those scattered throughout the entire world. We are all united in our common bond of faith as the Body of Christ and, as St. Paul reminds us, “if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy” (1 Corinthians 12:26). The readings that we have just heard invite us to this larger perspective of the Catholic Church and the important role that this parish plays in it.

The first reading comes from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah and it is one that is used each year when the Church celebrates the Epiphany. This prophecy speaks of the holy city of Jerusalem which is an image used in the Old Testament to point to the Church. The visit of the Magi marks the beginning of the procession of mankind to the light of Christ which takes place in the context of the Church, which, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, “is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”¹ In his homily for the Epiphany this past January, Pope Francis said the following regarding this procession:

These wise men from the East were the first in that great procession of which the prophet Isaiah spoke in today’s first reading (cf. 60:1-6): a procession which from that time on has continued uninterrupted; in

every age it hears the message of the star and finds the Child who reveals the tenderness of God. New persons are always being enlightened by that star; they find the way and come into his presence.²

In the Gospel, we have the account of the Great Commission where Jesus explicitly instructs His apostles to continue that procession by bringing “the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.”³ The Church has the sacred role of introducing as many people as possible to this light that is the person of Jesus Christ “who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).

The spreading of this light began small with the Church in Jerusalem, about which we heard in the second reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The apostles had been impacted in a profound way by the love of Christ and they could not help but share that gift with others. That gift spread quickly like a fire in that early community and the Scriptures tell us that “every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

The lesson we gain from the early Church is that the growth of the Church happens through the lives of her members who have themselves been enlightened by Christ. This is at the very heart of the missionary activity of the Church throughout the ages. In one of his homilies for this same feast day, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on this dynamic by explaining how the Magi, the apostles, and other saints of the Church have been catalysts for the growth of the Church by spreading this light of faith from person to person. He said of them that they

have themselves gradually become constellations of God that mark out the path. In all these people, being touched by God's word has, as it were, released an explosion of light, through which God's radiance shines upon our world and shows us the path. The saints are stars of God, by whom we let ourselves be led to him for whom our whole being longs.⁴

For nearly two-thousand years, those explosions of light have spread to nearly every corner of the world, yet they all have their origin in that one light which is Christ. At a point in time 175 years ago, one of those explosions of light took place here through the lives of some of those holy

people who themselves saw this light, chose to follow it, and resolved to invite others to share in its radiance.

As this light of our faith spreads and finds a place in a location such as this, constant attention must be given to ensure that this light does not become extinguished. Those who have preceded you here in this parish have taken great care to keep this light burning for others to see by living lives based on the truths of this light of our Catholic faith. Even though this parish may be smaller than others in size, the light that burns here is nevertheless important in that it adds to the overall splendor of the light of Christ that shines so brilliantly here in our diocese and throughout the entire Church.

As recipients of this light of our Catholic faith, it is now up to you to keep that light alive now and to hand it on to future generations. Such a task is not easy, and one which is sure to be met with difficulties and obstacles. But we do not let ourselves be discouraged, for we have the same promise given by Jesus to His first disciples and every one since: “behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Being united to other Catholics in this diocese and throughout the world,

we also recognize that we are not alone in this important work, but that we all work together and benefit from one another in our efforts.

As we continue our celebration of this Mass, let us thank the Lord for the lives of those who have gone before us, especially the founders and ancestors of this parish, for they have lit up the path for us that leads to Christ. We pray that we will continue to welcome that light of the love of Christ into our hearts so that we, like the all of the saints, will feel compelled to joyfully share that light with as many people as possible. By doing this, we will contribute in a positive way to the whole world being illumed by this light, thus inviting all people to join in that procession toward the new and eternal Jerusalem in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, §1.

² Pope Francis, *Homily for the Solemnity of Epiphany*, 6 January 2015.

³ *Lumen Gentium*, §1.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily for the Solemnity of Epiphany*, 6 January 2012.