

**Homily for Ash Wednesday Mass
February 18, 2015**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Today we begin the season of Lent, during which every year we examine our lives to see where we have strayed from God and how we can turn our hearts back to the Lord in preparation for the celebration of His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday. This examination of conscience is both an individual and a communal task, that is, each person examines his or her own personal life to turn away from sin, but we as a society also need to take a look at how together we are living either in conformity with God's plan or contrary to it.

There are many practices that we can do individually during Lent, such as fasting and abstinence from meat on Fridays, making charitable contributions, and increasing our time spent in prayer, including Eucharistic adoration, saying the Rosary, praying the Stations of the Cross, reading the Bible and going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We also practice bodily mortification by "giving up" or sacrificing something we

like, such as alcohol, dessert, candy, television or social media, as a means of penance for our sins so that we can grow spiritually.

As a community, there are many things that we can do as well. Some of the religious practices mentioned above that we can do individually can also be done with others in the community of faith or with our families, such as Eucharistic adoration, saying the Rosary, praying the Stations of the Cross, studying the Bible, or volunteering at a soup kitchen. I would also like to suggest something by which we can examine the moral condition of our society with regard to marriage and family life, namely, by completing the questionnaire for the 2015 Synod on the Family that will take place in Rome later this year. It is available on our diocesan website at www.dio.org until March 1. This questionnaire consists of three parts: 1) Listening: The Context and Challenges of the Family, 2) Looking at Christ: The Gospel of the Family and 3) Confronting the Situation: Pastoral Perspectives.

The questionnaire is a matter of re-thinking “with renewed freshness and enthusiasm, what revelation, transmitted in the Church’s faith, tells us about the beauty, the role and the dignity of the family” (*Relatio Synodi*, n. 4). From this vantage point, in the words of Pope Francis, we have “to find

concrete solutions to so many difficulties and innumerable challenges that families must confront” (Pope Francis, *Concluding Discourse*, October 18, 2014).

Among these “many difficulties and innumerable challenges that families must confront,” as identified by the Extraordinary Synod that took place last year, are pornography, divorce, cohabitation without marriage, children born outside of marriage, “troubling individualism which deforms family bonds,” homosexuality, “civil legislation which compromises marriage and the family,” secularization and “the crisis of faith, witnessed among a great many Catholics, which oftentimes underlies the crisis in marriage and the family” (*Relatio Synodi*, nn. 4-58).

A prime example of the sickness of our society with regard to human sexuality can be seen in the popularity of the movie, “Fifty Shades of Grey,” which shattered records with a staggering \$94.4 million debut at the box office last weekend. “Fifty Shades of Grey” presents itself as “a saucy evening out for couples looking to spice up their love lives.” In fact, Joe Morgenstern, film critic for THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, describes “Fifty Shades of Grey” as “a study in sadomasochism” and “bondage.” According to Al Alexander’s movie review in the *State Journal-Register*,

“More than anything, “Fifty Shades” lacks a reason to exist. It has no discernible story, no subtext and no point” (see “Movie review: 'Fifty Shades' of boring,” February 13, 2015). I have not seen this movie and have no intention of seeing it. I feel sorry for you if you have seen it, as unfortunately you now have some very disturbing images stuck in your memory. If you have not, do yourself a favor and don't see it. The Catholic News Service classification is O -- morally offensive. Since so many people around the world form their impression of American culture from what comes out of Hollywood movies, it is no wonder that people of other countries, especially those that value family life, often view the culture of the United States as morally bankrupt.

Rather than waste your time on a worthless movie, take the time to reflect on the true purpose of human sexuality and its relation to marriage, procreation and family life. Take the survey for the Synod on the Family at www.dio.org. Most of all, pray hard during this season of Lent for a conversion of our culture from its preoccupation with selfish sensuality to a greater appreciation for the total giving of man and woman to each other in the sacred bond of marriage.

May God give us this grace. Amen.