

**Homily for Ash Wednesday Mass  
March 1, 2017**

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

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

For the first time in over half a century, we begin this Lenten season in anticipation of our Diocesan Synod, which will formally open during the Chrism Mass celebrated during Holy Week at our Cathedral at 6:30 in the evening on Tuesday, April 11. The word “synod” in Greek simply means a meeting, but the Catholic Church uses this Greek word to indicate a very special type of meeting. Our Diocesan Synod will be special and historic not only because it will be only the fourth such meeting since our diocese was founded in 1853 and the first since 1963, but also because it will involve clergy and laity from across our diocese to assist me as Diocesan Bishop in guiding the pastoral direction of our diocese for the foreseeable future, especially with regard to the themes of discipleship and stewardship.

May I suggest that in our spiritual practices during Lent this year we look into our own hearts to see how we are living the stewardship and discipleship way of life. In the Gospel passage for Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18), Jesus gives a clear focus on the Lenten practices of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. The whole point of each of these practices is that God the Father “who sees what is hidden will repay you.” The purpose of our Lenten observances is not to bring us human praise, but a heavenly reward. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting are designed to foster our relationship with God the Father as disciples of His son, Jesus, and as stewards of His creation.

By fasting, we limit our intake of food and drink to help us to be spiritually hungry and thirsty for God.

By praying, we engage in conversation with God to discern more clearly His will for us and strengthen our commitment to live in accord with His divine will.

By giving alms or gifts of charity as an act of virtue, we move beyond our self-centered desires to expand our generosity to embrace love of God and love of neighbor more fully.

The practices of fasting, praying and almsgiving have their greatest

effect on our spiritual well-being when they are done not out of obligation, but out of love, although a sense of duty is often a helpful starting point. Father Robert Spitzer, a Jesuit priest who speaks of the four levels of happiness, points out that we achieve true happiness when we move beyond level one happiness of pleasure-seeking and level two happiness of personal achievement, to the more fulfilling experiences of level three happiness of self-giving and level four happiness of union with God.

In this regard, I would like to look more closely at the happiness that comes from almsgiving. While it may seem more obvious how prayer and fasting foster a closer relationship with God, the connection between our use of money and our relationship with God may not be so clear to us. Yet our culture is so focused on finances and so dependent on money that we overlook a crucial component of our lives if we try to separate how we use our money from how we relate to God.

A recent study by Notre Dame's Catholic Social and Pastoral Research Initiative examined the relationship between spirituality and the use of money by Catholics in a report entitled, "Unleashing Catholic Generosity: Explaining the Catholic Giving Gap in the United States." This report compared Catholics' self-reported religious giving and philanthropy

with those of other religious groups, using a nationally representative survey of about 2,000 Americans conducted in 2010. The report showed that, on average, “Catholics are less generous in voluntary financial giving than other Christian groups in the United States.” The report is not saying that Catholics are ungenerous, but seeks to understand “why some religious groups in the United States tend to be more generous than Catholics, and why some American Catholics are more generous than other Catholics.”

In their analyses, the study found that the single most important factor explaining the gap between giving by Catholics as compared to other religious groups is what they called “a lack of spiritual engagement with money on the part of most American Catholics. Rather than seeing their use of money and possessions as a part of their spiritual life, as a part of Christian formation and faithfulness, American Catholics tend to compartmentalize, to separate money from matters of faith, to think that money and material possessions do not have much to do with spiritual or religious issues. Catholics who do engage with money as a spiritual matter and who see their money as ultimately God’s, however, are much more financially generous, reducing the Catholic giving gap almost entirely.”

Ultimately, the issue is not whether we talk about money too much or too little in the Catholic Church, but the key is how we talk about money and what we have to say about it. It is clear from reading the Gospels that Jesus did not hesitate to talk about money. He did not talk about money as a fundraiser, but in terms of the proper stewardship of God's gifts of creation.

In this regard, the Notre Dame study found that Catholics are more likely "to focus on giving as 'paying the bills' rather than 'living the vision' when thinking about money. Because many Catholics are more concerned about 'paying the bills,' they lack spiritual engagement with money—the belief that proper stewardship of money is a deeply spiritual matter—which further reduces Catholic financial giving."

In sum, the Notre Dame study concludes that most important of all is "fostering parish cultures in which the use of money is not seen as a mere secular or profane matter, but, as the Bible teaches, a spiritual concern that God cares about, that shapes one's personal spiritual life profoundly, and that can genuinely help transform the world along Christian values and purposes.

May God give us this grace. Amen.