

**Homily for the Installation of Father Jason Stone as
Pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Parish
Alton, Illinois**

July 16, 2017

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good for us to be here today for this Mass and Rite of Installation of Father Jason Stone as pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Parish.

All of us know some people who are very devout Catholics, practice their faith fervently, and go to Mass weekly or even daily. All of us also know some people who were raised Catholic but now no longer practice the faith. Since the Word of God is the same as preached to everyone, we might wonder why it takes root in some but not in others. In today's scripture passage from the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Jesus addresses this seemingly insoluble problem of how and why the Word of God might be accepted by some and rejected by others. Jesus said,

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among

thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.¹

These words from our Gospel today seem to have perplexed those who had gathered to hear Jesus preach. Even the disciples of our Lord seem to have been left wondering at the meaning of what He had said. However, if we look at these words through the lens of our Lord speaking about the various groups of people whom He encountered in His ministry, then, perhaps we can more easily connect it to our lives today. In fact, toward the end of the Gospel, our Lord expounds upon what he meant in the parable in this very context. It is one of the few parables that Jesus explains in detail.

When considering how this applies to our lives, the question that each one of us must ask is: "Which group do I fall into?" Am I in the group of people who hear our Lord's call to discipleship and don't understand it, so I ignore it? Am I in the group of those who hear our Lord's call to discipleship and get excited at first, but then as the excitement fades, go back to my old ways? Am I in the group that hears our Lord's call to discipleship, but prefers the material goods that the world has to offer us

rather than the spiritual goods that come from a life of discipleship? Or am I in the group that hears our Lord's call to discipleship and responds with a heart that is open to receive the grace necessary to follow Him as a true disciple?

It is my hope that we can all answer that we fall into the last group: those whose hearts are open to receive the grace to live authentically as disciples of Our Lord in the midst of the world. If, however, we cannot all answer these questions that way, then let us dig ever deeper in prayer and discernment of how our Lord is calling us to live as His disciples.

Today at this Mass we mark the beginning of a new chapter in the life of Saints Peter and Paul Parish with the Installation of your new Pastor. I am very pleased that Father Stone has accepted the call to serve as the local shepherd of the Catholic community of faith here at Saints Peter and Paul Parish in Alton. I am deeply grateful to you, Father Stone, for the way you have faithfully served the people of our diocese for your first year of priesthood as parochial vicar of Holy Family Parish in Granite City and Saint Mary and Saint Mark Parish in Madison as well as parochial vicar of this parish for the past year. At the same time, I also wish to express my

deep appreciation to Father Albert Allen, for his dedicated ministry as Parochial Administrator of Saints Peter and Paul Parish for the past year.

Father Stone will now serve you as pastor in this Third Millennium of Christianity, so I think it is fitting to call to mind a theme suggested by our late Holy Father, the Great Pope Saint John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE*, "On entering the New Millennium," which I quote as follows (nos. 30-31): "First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness."

We grow in holiness by following Jesus as His disciples. Closely related to the notion of discipleship is the concept of stewardship. In the First Letter of St. Peter, he writes of stewardship in these words: "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace."²

In the Fall of 2015, I published my second pastoral letter, entitled, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for "The Art of Growing in God's Grace." In it, I wrote, "The art of growing in God's grace is the key to growth in the Church. Building a culture of growth in the Church starts with inviting people to experience the love of Jesus Christ."

Over the course of the years years leading up to the publication of my pastoral letter, I gave much thought to how we could, as a diocese, begin a process of strategic planning for growth in the Church. The growth envisioned is far more than just a quantitative increase in the number of people or the amount of money available to our parishes and the diocese. It is also essential to ensure that we give significant attention to the qualitative growth that will guarantee sustainability for generations that follow.

In my pastoral letter, I said that we must do four things to build a vibrant community of saints:

1. Invite people to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass (hospitality);
2. Study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith (formation);
3. Provide the sacraments as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven (prayer); and
4. Serve those in need by practicing charity and justice (service).

The verbs in these four action items correspond to the four pillars of stewardship and discipleship that we have begun talking about in our

diocese: hospitality, formation, prayer and service. We can all communicate more broadly the message of invitation.

Through prayer, discernment, and consultation with others, it has become evident that the Lord is inviting us to embrace more fully our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.³

Stewardship recognizes that everything we have comes from God. We are stewards whether we recognize it or not and whether we like it or not. Stewardship from God's perspective is that He has given us gifts to be used not just selfishly for ourselves, but to be shared with others. Becoming a disciple means making an intentional decision to accept the Lord's call to follow Him and live the discipleship and stewardship way of life.

I am aware that such a plan for growth is ambitious, but it is one about which I am very optimistic, especially given what this diocese has to offer and the many ways in which various groups are already poised to contribute to that growth. A key group that is essential to this plan for growth is the priests of our diocese, especially our pastors. But they cannot do this alone. They need the help and cooperation of all parishioners. To be able to put into practice the mission of Jesus, we need to be part of a team supporting each other.

Our priests are at the very heart of our journey forward. As Catholics, we rely first and foremost on God's grace. This grace comes to us through the sacraments of the Church of which the priests are the ministers. In a special way, it is the priest who celebrates the Eucharist for us, feeding us with the Bread of Life, nourishing and strengthening us for this journey.

Without the Eucharist, this way of life will never succeed. Without priests, we will not have the Eucharist. Therefore, we need our priests for this journey. I am very grateful for the fidelity with which our priests serve the diocese. They are men committed to the building up of the Kingdom and to the salvation of the souls of those in our diocese and beyond. Their example of tireless dedication is an inspiration to me and to all of us of how we are likewise called to serve the Lord as committed disciples of Jesus Christ. It is their joyful, humble example that is, I believe, one of the major factors contributing to the growth in the number of seminarians studying for the priesthood in our diocese. They too, are signs of hope and encouragement to us as we continue this journey.

I pray that all of you will work with Father Stone in seeking to be intentional disciples of the Lord and good stewards of the gifts entrusted to

us for the growth of the Church as we journey together toward our inheritance in the glory of Heaven.

Therefore, dear parishioners of Saints Peter and Paul Parish, I urge you to strive for holiness, to work and pray with your new pastor. Support him, help him, pray for him, and most of all, love him as he loves you and as Christ calls us to love each other.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Matthew 13:3-8.

² 1 Peter 4:10.

³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992, p. 8; <http://www.usccb.org/upload/stewardship-disciples-response-10th-anniversary.pdf>.