

**Homily for the Solemnity of Pentecost
May 31, 2020**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

After not having people in the pews for Mass for over two months now due to the coronavirus pandemic, it is interesting to notice some details in the Scriptures that previously may not have caught our attention. For example, our first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles says this: “When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together” (Acts 2:1). Yes, they were all in one place . . . together. They were not isolated, each in their separate homes. They were together . . . all in one place.

Similarly, in today’s Gospel passage, we read that “the doors were locked, where the disciples were” (John 20:19). Again, they were not each locked individually and separately in their own homes. They were all together, locked in the same room.

Perhaps you can feel the difference as you watch this Mass on livestream video. It is wonderful that we have the technology for you to watch the Mass on your computer screen, tablet, or smart phone. But I am sure you would agree that it is not the same as being here in person.

Thus, I was pleased to announce and I am sure that you were happy to hear the good news announced this past Thursday that we are now preparing to join together once more in person for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, beginning on the next weekend, June 6-7, 2020. It is fitting that we do so on Trinity Sunday, since our very entrance into the Church came by being baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

As we resume public Masses with people in the pews, we will implement and continue modifications, limitations, and precautions to maintain proper safe-distancing and recommended sanitary measures for some time to come. My dispensation from the obligation to attend Holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation remains in effect for an indefinite period, until further notice. Those who are not well must remain at home and those who believe they are at risk of infection should exercise prudence.

At the same time, there are many people who have missed coming to church and are longing to participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass again in person. I know because I have heard from you. Adhering to the public health guideline of limiting public gatherings to less than ten people for the past two months has effectively placed a substantial burden on the ability for our Church to engage in the free exercise of religion as intended by Jesus as a community gathered in faith throughout the entire Easter season and much of Lent. While our priests have offered Masses on behalf of the lay faithful during these most holy seasons of the Church, and individuals and families have prayed privately in their homes, our faith is not a private matter.

We are one body, as Saint Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:12), and when we gather together in prayer, we know that Christ is in our midst, as we read in the Gospel of Matthew (18:20). Also, our faith is not a “virtual” faith; our Lord Himself became incarnate and gave us the sacraments, with their physical signs and hidden but real effects. Our Lord said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will

raise him on the last day” (John 6:53-54). Our faith is a tangible, physical, and communal reality. In the letter to the Hebrews, it says, “We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:25). We simply cannot properly practice our faith apart from one another and separated from the physical realities of the sacraments. Therefore, the suspension of the Church’s liturgical and sacramental life can only be temporary and thankfully will soon come to an end.

As Christian citizens, we have out of necessity temporarily accepted the suspension of the normal liturgical and sacramental practice of our faith as a profound and consequential sacrifice for the sake of the greater good. We have done so with particular concern to do our part in preventing a surge in hospitalizations that may have overwhelmed health system capacity in our cities and towns, as we saw unfolding in places like New York City earlier this year. While concerns about the Coronavirus continue, there is no evidence of imminent threat to the capacity of our local health system, and most aspects of social and economic life are beginning to be restored. As such, it is time for us, as a people of faith, to begin a gradual return to our proper liturgical life as well.

We have all done our best to unite in prayer and acts of spiritual communion during this time, offering this sacrifice for the good of our neighbor. It is now time for the Church to return to the proper practice of the faith and celebration of the sacraments in order to be the ministers of God's grace that Christ has established us to be.

We are pleased to see that government officials have now recognized that houses of worship are essential and that people of faith need to gather together in this uncertain time and can do so safely and responsibly, following safe-distance standards with guidance to limit attendance to 25% of the capacity of the worship space, along with hygienic and sanitary safety measures.

With this in mind, public Masses and other liturgical celebrations will be allowed to resume next weekend June 6-7, provided parish leadership teams attend a mandatory training webinar and complete a readiness checklist.

Today we celebrate the great Solemnity of Pentecost. In the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke describes how, fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit upon the believers was manifest by tongues of fire, the rushing of the wind, and the speaking in

tongues. This is commonly understood to be the birth of the Church. However, Acts is not the only place where we encounter the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples to become the Church. Today's Gospel passage from John describes this empowering and a commissioning of the disciples to carry on the work of Jesus. The work of Jesus continues as the work of the Church.

In this regard, we should note that the word *Church* comes from the Greek *Ekklēsia*, which means *Assembly*. In other words, the Church is meant to assemble, to gather together, to work as one, not as isolated individuals.

When Jesus appears to His disciples as they are gathered together behind locked door, he greets them twice with a message of peace – Shalom. But Jesus does not allow the disciples to linger after they have recognized who He really is. He immediately moves from peace to commissioning. This commissioning involves His sending His disciples just as the Father had sent Jesus. This sending is about doing the work that Jesus did while on earth. This work was primarily revealing God's divine presence in the words and deeds of Jesus. This commissioning is divinely sanctioned by Jesus' breathing the Holy Spirit upon his disciples.

After the Jesus rose from the dead, He knew His time on earth was coming to an end; His work, however, had not. As His final gift, the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples, the Spirit that will embolden them to do His work on earth.

May God give us this grace. Amen.