

August 8, 2021 11:00 a.m. St. Mary of the Lake, New Buffalo
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Parish Jubilee Visit/Installation of Pastor

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, as I said at the beginning of our Mass this morning, it is such a joy for me here with you on this beautiful early-August Sunday morning.

The beautiful words from today's special Second Reading, from the Book of Revelation, included a greeting to God's Holy Ones that is worth repeating to all of you: "*Grace to you, and peace from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness.*" (Rev.1:5-8)

That term ----"*the Faithful Witness*"---referring to Jesus, Who, thru His Suffering, Death and Resurrection, destroyed the power of sin and death, is truly for all believers, including all of us, the most *Faithful Witness*. And the best way for us to give Jesus glory is by being faithful witnesses in our own lives!

One of the reasons for my Pastoral Visit with you today is because I want to visit as many of our Parishes throughout the Diocese in this, our ***Diocesan Golden Jubilee Year***. Just three weeks ago, on July 21st, we celebrated the anniversary of the establishment of our Diocese, which took place on July 21, 1971---50 years ago this year! Over the course of these five decades, and by the Grace of God, wonderful things have been taking place here in our Diocese: the Gospel of Jesus is being preached; the Catholic Faith is being taught; the Sacraments are being celebrated; and those who are poor, vulnerable and with special needs are being cared for by the generosity of the Faithful people in our 59 parishes, and through the good works of Catholic Charities throughout the nine counties of our Diocese.

Now, 50 years is not really all that long compared to the longevity of the practice of the Catholic Faith here in the 9 counties of our Diocese, including right here in this most southwestern corner of our Diocese, bordering Indiana, and so close to the Archdiocese of Chicago, in these 3 parishes which have been teaching and sharing the Catholic Faith----St. Agnes in Sawyer, the youngest of these 3 parishes, dating back to your establishment in 1924, and the other two parishes---St.Mary of the Assumption (Three Oaks) dating back

to your establishment in 1880, and this parish of St. Mary of the Lake, going back even further in history to your establishment in 1856. And through these nearly two centuries since the Catholic Faith first came to this area, and in particular through this last half-century as part of the Diocese of Kalamazoo, you, and those who have come before you, have been living, teaching, and giving witness to our Catholic Faith. So, my first and primary reason for being with you today is to celebrate our oneness in the Faith.

But another reason for my Pastoral Visit today, more particular to this Parish Collaborative, is to liturgically and formally install your Pastor, Father Basker Lopez, who has succeeded his fellow Missionary of St. Francis de Sales, Fr. John Peter, your former pastor, and Fr. Vanaithan Savarimuthu, your parochial vicar, who were both recently recalled by their Provincial Superior for a time of renewal back to India. With Father Basker's assignment, he begins another new chapter in the illustrious and well-established history of these three parishes.

For these past 5 decades that the Diocese has been established, and for many more decades of the life of these 3 parishes, a number of pastors and thousands of people who have come before us have labored diligently to build up a sense of unity in these 3, and among all of the rest of the, parishes that make up the Church in these nine counties, united with other Dioceses throughout the world, and all in communion with our Holy Father, Pope Francis in Rome.

Our priests are a special blessing to all of us. And not just a blessing----priests are essential to our spiritual and sacramental life, and we should never take them for granted. Father Basker responded to God's call to be a priest just 10 years ago ---in fact you just celebrated your 10th anniversary on May 10th, Fr. Basker, so congratulations on your first decade of priestly service.

But as we all know, here in our Diocese, as is the case in many Dioceses throughout the country, there is a serious shortage of priests. That is why we are so indebted to the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales community for sending us fine priests like Fr. John Peter and Fr. Van, and now Fr. Basker, who are really doing "missionary work" here among us in our Diocese until we can

encourage members of our own Faithful to respond to God's call to consider becoming a priest.

I urge all of you to pray fervently for an increase in Priestly Vocations. I also ask every member of this parish, in addition to praying for Vocations to the Priesthood, to also encourage every young person to prayerfully consider what God's plan for them is: marriage?, committed single life?, ordained ministry?, consecrated or religious life? We can never be truly happy in this life, unless we are trying to discern what God's will is for us.

I'm sure we are all so grateful that we seem to be returning to "normal" in society, as well as in regard to the practice of our Faith, now that most of the restrictions due to the pandemic have been lifted; though we continue to pray for an end to every variant of this Covid-19 Virus.

But long before the Pandemic, which radically changed everyone's life, I think we would all agree that life had been slowly but steadily changing in many ways over these last 50 years since our Diocese was established. Besides the many changes that have taken place in Society and in the broader Culture, we have also seen a steady decline in the regular practice of Faith over these years---not just the Catholic Faith, but Faith in general. Yet the Good News of our Faith remains always the same: Jesus Christ....the Faithful Witness....loves us and has freed us from our sins by His Blood.....He is the 'Alpha and the Omega'...the One who is and who was and who is to come."

So, in the face of this reality, we might ask ourselves what we can do? I think the most important thing for us is to remember who we are----children of God, and sisters and brothers in Christ with one another; to embrace the Gift of God's Grace that He gives us so generously; and to open our hearts to the powerful and persistent promptings of the Holy Spirit.

That's exactly what Pope Francis means when he says that we Catholics need to be "*missionary disciples*". Whether we are lay people or Clergy----all of us are first, last and always: Followers of Jesus Christ; and each of us needs to do whatever it takes to be His "faithful witnesses". Jesus didn't give us a "one-size-fits-all Pastoral Plan" that works in any/all circumstances. What Jesus did is to give us a **Vision** of the Kingdom of God on Earth; and then, He sent us on

a **Mission**: “to go and teach the Good news to all people”. Just like the Apostles had to figure out their own “Plan” for how they, guided by the Holy Spirit, would go about implementing their Plan, so must we---figure out our Plan for how we are to adapt to these new/changing/challenging circumstances of this secularist world in which we are living.

Both our First Reading this morning, and the beautiful Gospel passage we just heard, remind us that, like Elijah and like the Jewish people murmuring against Jesus but still following Him looking for signs, all of us are also on a journey. We are “traveling” through this world as followers of Jesus, on a Faith journey that began for all of us on the day of our Baptisms, and which will conclude when we pass from this life and enter into Eternal Life with God. And just like Elijah, and the Jewish “murmurers”, we need “Food for the Journey”. Elijah was given food by God’s Angel who ordered him to eat and drink “*else the journey will be too long for you*”.

Jesus did something far greater than provide “food and drink for the journey” given by God’s Angel which lasted only for “*forty days and nights to get Elijah to Mt. Horeb*”. We heard Jesus proclaim: “*Amen, amen, I say to you: I am the Bread of Life....(I am) the Bread that comes down from Heaven, so that one may eat it and not die.*” And to make His point even more emphatically, Jesus went further: “*I am the Living Bread that came down from Heaven; whoever eats this Bread will live forever---And this Bread that I will give is My Flesh for the life of the world.*”

My sisters and brothers, this is an amazing Promise directly from Jesus. It should be because of that Promise that we come to Mass every week---every day if we’re able---because this is where we find the Life-giving Food that sustains us on our journey of faith.

I recently wrote a Letter to all Catholics in our Diocese about this very topic: the Gift of the Eucharist. As I write in this Letter: “*The Eucharist is the amazing Gift Jesus gives to us of Himself to be our Spiritual Food that will nourish our lives both to renew us as the Body of Christ, and to reignite the ‘Flame of Faith’ within us to bring the Love of Jesus Christ to all.*”

Jesus has given us this most precious Gift of Himself in the Eucharist so that we have the spiritual strength and stamina to Love God and to Love Neighbor AS Jesus loves us---which means to lay down our lives for one another. I urge all of you as parishioners/regular visitors to these 3 parish communities to collaborate with each other, working toward being one Community of Faith; to be united in your Love for Jesus, to be strengthened by the Eucharist, and to be motivated to work together in becoming “missionary disciples” and “faithful witnesses” to all who desperately need to hear the Good News of Jesus’ Love.

Today’s beautiful and joyful Mass encourages all of us---priests and lay faithful-- to be messengers of hope and ministers of healing to each other and to all the people we are called to serve, with the tender Love of God the Father, the Good News of Jesus the Son, and the soothing anointing of the Holy Spirit.

May God bless you abundantly in this vibrant Parish Collaborative; may God bless your pastor and guide him to be a good shepherd; may you----priests and people together---experience the courage and enthusiasm that comes from the Holy Spirit; and may all of us in our Diocese live as joyful, faith-filled witnesses of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! And why must we do this? Because, in the words of today’s Second Reading: *“Jesus Christ---the Faithful Witness--- has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father. To him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.”*

God bless you today and always!