



Pastoral Letter on the Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary

Bishop James V. Johnston, Jr.
Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau
December 8, 2009





St. Mary of the Annunciation



Dear Friends in Christ,

From the tree of the cross, our Lord Jesus Christ bestowed upon us his greatest gifts. He won our redemption through his sacrificial death. From his pierced side, the Church was born. From the cross our Lord addressed these words to St. John: “Behold your mother,” (Jn. 19:27), thereby making Mary “our mother in the order of grace” (“Lumen Gentium” [“Light of Nations”], 61)

On this day on which we commemorate the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I wish to inform you that I will consecrate our diocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on **March 25, 2010**, the **Solemnity of the Annunciation**.

The act of consecration will occur following Mass in the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Annunciation in Cape Girardeau. Along with the diocesan consecration, I am also asking all of our priests to consecrate their parishes to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and I encourage each of you to consecrate yourselves individually.

With this pastoral letter, I wish to explain the meaning of consecration and the purposes for which it is to be carried out.

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The meaning of consecration

In anticipation, it is important to understand what is meant by consecration and why *consecration* to Mary is significant. In the primary sense, consecration means to make sacred, and it is something only God can do. God shares his holiness with us and allows us to participate in his holiness through the gift of grace. For each Christian, this begins with baptism. One’s Christian life is the ongoing transformation into God’s likeness with the help of grace which is communicated to us through the sacraments.

While consecration is first and foremost an act of God, we can also speak of consecration as our response to God. When we surrender to God’s will to transform us into his likeness and make us holy, we consecrate ourselves to him. We respond by setting ourselves apart to belonging to the Lord in a new way. Jesus is the best example of this consecratory response to the Father: “I consecrate myself for their sakes now, that they may be consecrated in truth” (John 17:19).

Jesus is “the Christ,” that is, the “Anointed,” which means that he is, as God’s Servant, totally at the service of God, that is,



consecrated to God. Again, this special belonging to God is shared with us through baptism, and it is sealed and strengthened through confirmation.

We can also speak of other consecrations such as that received by deacons, priests, and bishops, who through the reception of the sacrament of holy orders, are specially consecrated for service through a sharing in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Men and women consecrate themselves to God through vows and promises. Similarly, we can speak of married couples as being consecrated. We each consecrate

ourselves anew to God each Easter when we renew our baptismal promises. We can even say that our response of dedicated living of the Christian life is a consecratory response to God. So, in these senses, we see that consecration secondarily refers to our subjective response to God's primary act to consecrate us.

It is in this latter sense (that of trying to fully respond to God's will to make us holy) that we understand consecration to Mary. Mary is not God. But, it was God's will that Mary play a significant part in our Christian lives and, in particular, with our sanctification. Mary is the prototype of a consecratory

response to God's will. At the joyful mystery of the Annunciation, she responds to God's will for her by a total acceptance and faith-filled surrender: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Through the archangel, God confirms that in her person and in her response, Mary is truly "full of grace" (Lk 1:28). As the Father entrusted his divine Son to Mary, so are we entrusted to her as His members. She is the perfect example of the model disciple as well as the entire Church. She is the daughter of the Father, the spouse of the Holy Spirit, and the mother of the Son. Her will was and forever remains perfectly united to the Holy Trinity.

The consecration I announce today will be to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. That heart was so attuned to the Heart of Jesus that, even though at Cana He seemed to reject her request because His hour had not yet come (cf. John 2:1-5), she knew what was in His

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Immaculate Heart of Mary



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heart and she recognized His hour. "Full of grace," she was filled with God's love. In her heart, there was no room for self; she was wholly the handmaid of the Lord. At her Son's Passion and death, her Heart was pierced by a sword of sorrow as Simeon had foretold (Luke 2:34-35), indicating her profound union with His Heart at His hour. By consecrating the diocese and ourselves to this Heart of Mary, we are drawn into union with His Heart in a singular and certain way.

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well as a Christ-centered orientation. Mary is a sure and certain path toward union with the will of God and union with her Son. Consecration to Mary deepens and strengthens our commitment to Christ. For this reason, consecration to Mary must explicitly state that our ultimate end and goal is God and His will. We entrust and commend ourselves to her Immaculate Heart, for she leads us to the Sacred Heart of Jesus without fail.

The purposes of consecration

Holiness

I have chosen to consecrate the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau at this time for several important reasons, the first being holiness of life. Each of us who belong to Christ is called to holiness of life. This is something we must never tire of seeking. This is something that we must never be discouraged in pursuing. We humbly realize that holiness and growing in God's likeness are due to God's grace and our faithful and persistent cooperation with it. We are aided by the grace of the sacraments, the light of God's Word and the authentic Teaching of the Church; Also by prayer, by the example of the saints, and with the encouragement and strength of the family of God, the Church.

In this holy communion of the mystical Body of Christ, the Church has always recognized Mary as a mother, a guide, an intercessor, and a friend. Mary loves us and desires to help us follow her Son more fully. The Catholic faithful have always implored this maternal



help of Our Lady as beautifully expressed in the prayer based on the words of Sacred Scripture and concluding with the affirming and petitioning words of the Church—the Hail Mary. Many of her traditional titles invoke her special role in the divine plan as our special helper on the narrow way of holiness and heaven: Gate of Heaven, Refuge of Sinners, Help of Christians. Scripture and Tradition recall her role in aiding the faithful in the struggle against the devil and overcoming sin. Many of us may recall from childhood depictions of Mary crushing the head of the ancient serpent.

Mary has also been called the Ark of the New Covenant. It is interesting that the three greatest gifts that God gave to the Israelites—the Ten Commandments, the Manna, and the Priesthood—were all represented inside the Ark of the Covenant. St. Paul in his Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 9:4) states that the Ark contained the tablets of the Law, a jar of Manna, and the rod of Aaron—prefiguring the Word of God, the Bread of Life, and both priest and sacrifice who is Christ. When we consecrate ourselves to Mary, we in essence offer our intention to be placed within the womb of the Ark—to share in that threefold gift of Christ—priest (rod of Aaron), prophet (Word of God), and king (communion of life and reigning).

In addition to all the faithful who make up our diocese, I am especially aware of our priests during this special Jubilee Year for Priests. It must be recalled that the primary purpose for which Pope Benedict XVI dedicated this the Year for Priests, was “to encourage priests in this striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends.” The Holy Father added that the lay faithful should also embark on the quest for spiritual perfection. Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary is ordered toward our

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Our Lady of Grace



common vocation to holiness; to fulfilling the purpose of our original consecration at baptism, deepened and strengthened at confirmation; and, for our priests, supplemented by a special consecration in holy orders. Entrusted to Mary and consecrated to her Immaculate Heart, the goal is made closer for each of us.

Fruitfulness

Closely related to holiness, is fruitfulness. Each of us is called to bear “fruit that will last” (John 15:16). This fruitfulness is manifested in a preeminent way through the “fruit of the Spirit ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,” and is contrasted with the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19-23).

Here it would be good to recall the harsh words of God to fallen man—“You are dust (of the earth) and to dust (the earth) you shall return” (Genesis 3:19); words which in fact communicate man’s new reality because of sin. Due to his disobedience, man must now cultivate and tend not only the earth beneath his feet, but the very earth of his being in order to bring forth fruits of holiness. Adam and Eve’s sin was that they partook of a fruit that was outside of their communion with God. Our labor then, both corporal and spiritual, must always seek that communion with God without which we ultimately labor in vain for things that are simply perishable instead of everlasting, those things that are of little profit to our soul. Without this consecration of our lives, our family, our work, our very existence, we seek God to partake of God’s generosity without first receiving His blessing; it is akin to opening a Christmas present before Christmas day.

We are each called to bear fruit in our respective Christian vocations: marriage, priesthood, consecrated religious life, and the Christian single state. Married couples are privileged to cooperate with God in bringing forth children, the “fruit” of their covenant of love. Countless couples who have had difficulty in conceiving children



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have found both refuge and help from Mary. While Mary is the Mother of the only begotten Son of the Father, she models that openness and respect for life that Christian marriage exemplifies.

Priests are called in a special way to bring forth spiritual children for the kingdom of God. Given that their ministry is so important for the salvation of so many souls, Mary is a special mother to all priests. She is a powerful help for priests to maintain their fidelity and their purity. She is a comfort and a source of strength for priests in their day-to-day service of the Body of Christ. As she was present at the cross, she is present at every Mass.

Consecrated religious find in Mary a model of total self-giving which is a special gift to the Church. In fact, it can be said that the consecrated life of men and women religious is especially fruitful in that it is an incomparable sign of God's kingdom for the entire Church. It serves to inspire and invigorate all the members of the Church by the radical manifestation of the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, and obedience) and the hope of the kingdom. Mary is the embodiment and the perfection of this consecrated life.

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Finally, those who are living a dedicated life in the Christian single state find a special comfort and strength in Mary. She serves to model a fair and pure love for Christ that must be at the heart of those who live as single people today. In a world that often glorifies self-indulgence and self-centeredness, Mary models for the single person generous self-giving, sacrificial

love, and single-heartedness all of which form the basis for pure and wholesome friendships that bear fruit.

Along with our individual vocations, as a diocesan Church we are engaged in many pastoral initiatives that we must entrust to Mary so that they might bear fruit. I think first of the important work of fostering vocations. While we must help all of our young people discover the Lord's plan for them, I place a very high priority on fostering priestly vocations. We each must "beg the harvest master to send forth laborers to gather his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38). After all, as



Pope Benedict has pointed out, without the ministerial priesthood, “there would be neither the Eucharist, nor even the mission nor the Church herself.”

On Nov. 6, 2009, our diocese launched Catholic Charities of Southern Missouri. At this crucial time of its infancy, I commend the future of this agency to Mary, that it might bear spiritual fruit in not only the lives of the poor and their families, but for the wider community of our diocese.

Our diocese, including each of our parishes and schools, has a special mission to serve and strengthen the family, the “domestic church.” As we seek through various pastoral, spiritual, and catechetical initiatives to build up every family, including those that are broken or in crisis, we commend our families to Mary. In her place in the Holy Family, she carried out a singular vocation which extends beyond Nazareth. She embodies and models fruitful and sacrificial love so essential for wholesome family life. She also manifests a love and solidarity for every family and all of our children.

For this reason, I also take this occasion to strongly encourage each of us individually, and our families together, to take up the holy prayer of the Rosary. With this ancient practice, we solidify our consecration to Our Lady. This “simple prayer of the Rosary,” Pope John Paul II once wrote, “marks the rhythm of human life” and brings it “into harmony with the rhythm of God’s own life, in the joyful communion of the Holy Trinity, our life’s destiny and deepest longing. ... Anyone who contemplates Christ through the various stages of his life cannot fail to receive in him the truth about man.” Each mystery then, sheds light on the mystery of who we are and helps us each day to live our vocation in fruitfulness. The practice of praying the Rosary as a family is particularly to be recommended. If this is not possible, then offer your Rosary for the intention of binding your spouse or family members to the care of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

As an outward sign of our consecration, I would also like to recommend the wearing of the Brown Scapular which is a reminder to its wearers of the saving grace of Christ—“All you who have been

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Our Lady of Guadalupe



baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves in him” (Galatians 3:27). The Brown Scapular is a particular sign of parental love, the love of Our Mother in Heaven who desires to clothe us in the holiness of Christ.

In the coming years we will embark on a renewed love of the Sacred Liturgy. This opportunity is occasioned by the imminent arrival of the new English translation of the Roman Missal. It will provide all of our Catholic faithful with a time for deepening our understanding and love for the “source and summit” of the Christian life: the celebration of the Eucharist at the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. May our consecration to Our Lady especially bring us to a deeper love of the Mass and increase in us a holy desire to unite ourselves to Christ in His sacrificial offering. In doing so, may we learn to make of our daily life a series of offertories, as gifts of oneself to both God and to neighbor. In the words of St. Gregory the Great, “The Mass will be a sacrifice for us to God when we have made an offering of ourselves.”

Lastly, I mention the priority of what Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI have referred to as the *new evangelization*. This is the call for the Church to re-dedicate itself to its mission—the mission which Christ gave to the apostles to go “and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). In the US, and in southern Missouri, this often means re-evangelizing those who are Catholic in name only, or who have fallen away from the faith. Pope John Paul II declared that Mary, under her title of Our Lady of Guadalupe, is the “star of the new evangelization.” In recalling her role, the Holy Father noted: “It is my heartfelt hope that she, whose intercession was responsible for strengthening the faith of the first disciples (cf. John 2:11), will by her maternal intercession guide the Church in America, obtaining the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as she once did for the early Church (cf. Acts 1:14), so that the new evangelization may yield a splendid flowering of Christian life.” (“Ecclesia in America” [“The Church in America”], 11)

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Mother of the Eucharist, Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of Mary



Along with these priorities, there are many other aspects of the Church's life and mission that I entrust to Mary through this special consecration. It is my confident hope that in carrying out each of these initiatives, "through Mary, in Mary, and for Mary," we will in fact be more perfectly carrying them out "through Jesus Christ, with Him, in Him, and for Him." Through our consecration may we respond each day in ever-greater fashion to the words of Our Lady at the wedding feast of Cana, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5).

Protection

Lastly, I have chosen to consecrate our diocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary so that our diocese may be protected from evil. We live in tumultuous times, but we should not fear if we hope in the Lord, who has won the victory that we share in already. Once again, I recall the marvelous mystery of Divine Providence that God the Father chose to entrust his only begotten Son, the Word made Flesh, as an infant, to Mary. In one of the most known and loved images of Marian piety, I think especially of the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the original being displayed in the Church of St. Alphonsus Ligouri in Rome.

In the image, the Christ child clings to Mary, his mother, looking with trepidation at the instruments of crucifixion that two angels hold out to him as a foreshad-

owing of his passion. His tiny sandal, which has slipped off of one of his feet, is a sign of haste with which we should all turn to run to Our Mother's refuge and care. It is an image that every Christian can relate to as we each face the struggles and trials that come to us as we take up our crosses each day and follow in the footsteps of our Savior.

In similar fashion, Christ bids us to turn to his Mother, entrusting ourselves, our families, our Church, to her loving and Immaculate Heart, that we might be consoled, strengthened, and filled with peace to respond in faith to God's will. May we ever persevere in remaining faithful to the end of our lives. We petition Our Lady to intercede for this special grace in the conclusion to the Hail Mary, as we implore

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Our Lady of Perpetual Help

her intercession for a happy death, in a state of grace, in our final hour. As the Ark of the Covenant stood on dry ground between the Jordan River's divided waters (Joshua 3:14-17) while the Israelites made their crossing into the Promised Land, so Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant stands at the divide between this life and eternity, beckoning us and guiding us.



Conclusion

In light of what we have reflected upon, the mystery of the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple, as recounted in Luke's Gospel (2:41-52), takes on deeper meaning. We hear the reply of Jesus to the impassioned question of his mother who, with St. Joseph, had searched for him for three days: "Why did you search for me? Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" Jesus was where he was supposed to be—in his Father's house. But in accepting her maternal role as Mother of the Church at the foot of the Cross (John 19:26-27), Mary must now search for all her children who because of sin are not where they are supposed to be, in their Father's house. In consecrating ourselves, with greater resolve each day, we take Mary's hand and allow her to lead us ever closer to Our Father's house. We likewise assist her in seeking out the many around us who are lost and disoriented and know not their way to true peace.

The words of hope that conclude Pope Pius IX's Apostolic Constitution, "Ineffabilis Deus" ["Ineffable God"], on Dec. 8, 1854, defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, are fitting for us to recall today: "We have, therefore, a very certain hope and complete confidence that the most Blessed Virgin will ensure by her most powerful patronage that all difficulties be removed and all errors dissipated, so that our Holy Mother the Catholic Church may flourish daily more and more throughout all the nations and countries ... and may enjoy genuine peace, tranquility, and liberty. We are firm in our confidence that she will obtain pardon for the sinner, health for the sick, strength of heart for the weak, consolation for the afflicted, help for those in danger; that she will remove spiritual blindness from all who are in error, so that they may return to the path of truth and justice, and that there may be one flock and one shepherd."

For all of these reasons I will perform this special consecration of our diocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on March 25, 2010. I share this with you on this day, December 8, 2009, the day on which we celebrate Mary's Immaculate Conception as the masterpiece of God's creation, that she might fulfill her singular vocation as the Mother of God; in this season of hope in which we look forward to the coming of Christ at Christmas and at the end of time.

With the assurance of my prayers, and invoking the intercession of Our Lady, I am,

Devotedly yours in Christ,

+ James V. Johnston, Jr.

Most Reverend James V. Johnston, Jr.
Bishop of Springfield-Cape Girardeau
8 December 2009



Prayer of Consecration

O Most Holy Trinity: Our Father in Heaven, You chose Mary as the fairest of Your daughters; God the Son, You chose Mary as Your Mother; Holy Spirit, You chose Mary as Your spouse; in union with Mary, we adore Your majesty and acknowledge Your supreme, eternal dominion and authority. Most Holy Trinity, we place the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau into the hands of Mary Immaculate in order that she may present this diocese to You.

Immaculate Queen of Heaven and Earth, refuge of sinners and our most loving Mother Mary, we humbly cast ourselves at your feet, consecrating to your Immaculate Heart all peoples and parishes of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau. Protect the bishop of this diocese and all his priests and deacons. Protect the consecrated religious of this diocese. Protect the families of this diocese. Draw forth the precious gift of many vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Look after sinners, the sick, the poor, the tempted and upon all who are in need of your intercession.

O Mary, Immaculate Virgin, we ask that you draw all of us closer to your Son's Eucharistic Heart. Let all of us be fit instruments in your immaculate and merciful hands for introducing and increasing God's glory to the maximum in all the many strayed and indifferent souls. Help us as far as possible to serve the advancement of the blessed kingdom of the most Sacred Heart of Jesus. For wherever you enter you obtain grace of conversion and growth in holiness, since it is through your hands that all graces come to us from the most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you!



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