

**Homily for the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Father McGivney Catholic High School, Glen Carbon, Illinois**

**Mass for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C | August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022 AD**

**† 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 to praise God for ten years of His grace at work here at Father McGivney Catholic High School. I recall fondly even before I had officially been installed as Bishop of Springfield in 2010 that one of the first matters brought to my attention was a conversation with Father Jeff Goekner to discuss a proposal to establish a new Catholic high school in this area named after Father Michael McGivney. Plans had been in the works for some time and efforts were coming to fruition. As you know, I gave my approval to start by taking one step at a time, starting in the Fall of 2012 with a freshman class of 19 students, using a wing of the building of St. John Neumann Catholic School in Maryville. The next year, a sophomore class was added, and in the third year the school grew to include a junior class. As it became apparent that Father McGivney Catholic High School was quickly outgrowing its temporary facility, I gave approval to construct this new building, for which we had our ground-breaking ceremony on September 22, 2014, after the capital campaign crossed the \$5 million mark in pledges from

over 1,400 donors. Less than a year later, on August 30, 2015, we dedicated this new building ceremony.

A decade after those humble beginnings in 2012, this school has now had hundreds of graduates carrying the faith and formation that they received here out to our diocese, and far beyond. May God be praised!

As you know, the name chosen as the school's mascot is the griffin. The reason for choosing this mascot was to honor Bishop James Griffin, who served as the Fourth Bishop of our diocese from 1923 until 1948. Rather than talk about Bishop Griffin, however, I would like to reflect on the legendary creature known as a griffin, which had the body, tail, and back legs of a lion; the head and wings of an eagle; and sometimes an eagle's talons as its front feet. At first, perhaps, this may seem to be a funny image to take for our meditation today. We find it first inscribed in Egyptian imagery around 3100 BC, almost two millennia before the Israelites left during the Exodus. It is amazing to consider that Joseph, and Moses, may have seen something like your mascot as they walked along the Nile. Ever since that ancient time, we find variations of this symbolic creature all around the Mediterranean. The combination of lion and eagle specifically was first popular in and around Persia (east of the Promised Land in what is present-day Iran). It was carried up to Greece by merchants

traveling along the silk road, and from the land of Alexander the Great made its way into Roman imagery a few centuries later. It was always seen as a symbol of power, with the ferocity and intelligence of the eagle combined with the strength and power of the lion. Beyond simply physical power, it quickly also carried the idea of kingly authority, combining both the ruler of the skies and the king of the animal kingdom. From that kingly character, and perhaps from its connection to rich foreign lands, the griffin also gained the legendary status as a creature that guards treasure, in some myths laying precious stones and protecting hoards of gold or gems.

Later, when the Apostles carried to all the earth the Good News that Christ had come, redeemed us from our sins, and conquered even death, and as they went from Jerusalem to Egypt, and Persia, and Greece, and Rome, they had a better story for the griffin than simply a chimera among the coolest members of the animal kingdom that probably had a pile of gold somewhere. The Church has an even better story for the griffin than that given in Harry Potter, Dungeons and Dragons, or The Witcher. You see, whether on obelisks in Egypt or on coins in Rome, or, as friends and defenders of Harry Potter or Percy Jackson, the griffin can only stand as a symbol of earthly power, protection, adventure, or accumulated wealth. But, the Fathers of the Church,

when they saw the griffin, they did not see the power and glory of Caesar, but Christ. Who truly reigns over the powers of the skies and the world? Who has truly brought together heaven and earth? Who had real authority, real treasure, real splendor? Not Caesar, but Christ! The astonishing thing was that by seeing the griffin as a foreshadowing of Christ, rather than a misguided hope for worldly status and power, this symbolic creature actually became the image of a much better story. Our readings today are a powerful reminder of this truth.

The pagan-griffin symbolizes the search for the power of the lion and the pride of the eagle. Seen, however, when we are in relationship with Jesus Christ, we find that these things that the world counts as important are actually insignificant and fleeting. Yet, in Jesus, we find ourselves given instead the much greater gifts of inalienable dignity and eternal treasure. In the book of Sirach, we read words from a Jewish father to his son, "My child, conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts. Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God" (Sirach 3:17-18).

The ancient world, and our world too, has many virtues – courage, bravery, truthfulness, generosity, justice – but it has no room for humility. To

have humility was to be weak, small, not-enough ... humility was what happened to you when you were enslaved, conquered, or poor. But then Jesus Christ died the death of a slave, lived the life of a conquered people, was poor and little and inconsequential in the eyes of the world... and yet His humility and obedience and love changed the world more than Rome's might.

Moreover, the dignity and freedom that Jesus has as the Son of God, no matter how humiliated He was by those in power, meant that every weak, small, poor, or suffering person on this planet now was given the dignity of a son or daughter of God. This immutable identity, given to those baptized as children of God, transformed the world! Slavery, abortion, sexual-exploitation, and all such evils have no place in a culture that knows the dignity of those made in the image and likeness of God! Humility does not mean you are unloved, but actually is the characteristic virtue of those who know themselves to be eternally loved by the One, True, God!

But the story gets better! The griffin was always also a symbol of the melding of the human and divine, the earthly and heavenly. But, in a world without Christ, this can only be a forlorn hope that somehow earthly success would eventually raise us to the status of gods. In contrast, when God becomes man, we all have a real hope that we are, and can be more and more, friends

with God. Recall our passage from the Letter to the Hebrews: “You have not approached that which could be touched and a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and trumpet blast and a voice speaking words ... no, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God...” (Hebrews 12:18-19, 22). No longer are we stranded outside the temple, stuck with just trumpets and torches and oracles claiming to show us something about God, but the curtain of the temple has been torn and God’s heart has been opened to us. You do not have to be the priest, prophet, or king to have access to God; every single Christian participates in Jesus’ identity as priest, prophet, and king, and this is not just the gift of personal inestimable worth, but gives us real access to our Heavenly Father! We get to go inside the Temple, to truly enter heaven, every time we turn our hearts to God in prayer, and every time He opens His heart again to us in Holy Communion.

But the story gets even better still! The griffin, in ancient imagery, was always seen as a powerful protector of wealth. Kings and pharaohs would carve them on their treasure chambers, and wizards and demigods are still depicted as protected by griffin-sidekicks. It was a magical creature that protected you from someone stealing your valuables, status, kingdom, or life. I think we have all wanted a protector of this sort: something, or someone, that

would defend our bank-account from depreciation, our lives when uncertainty looms, our honor when we face failure or inadequacy, or our health when sickness threatens. The fact is, just as stone griffins on Roman ruins did nothing to keep the Caesars in power, our modern-day griffins of insurance, life-coaches, hard-work, and natural talents, also cannot protect us ultimately from the hardships of human life. Not in ourselves, nor in any earthly power, can we find assurances of life or protection for our future, but we can find that kind of defense in Christ.

Consider Our Lord's parable of those invited to a wedding banquet, vying for a higher position, seeking to protect their status, looking for a way to maintain their value in a hierarchical society. Jesus short-circuits this whole foolish project when He tells His followers to abandon all those pretenses, to put their worth not in their own wealth, talents, or position, but simply in Him. Yes, we should be grateful for whatever gifts that God has given us, but if they dwindle, or if you find yourself at the bottom of the pecking order, trust that He is our true protector and guardian. When we are defended by Christ, our true treasure can never be taken from us. No earthly calamity can steal the peace that He gives. No worldly tragedy can destroy the hope we have in Him.

No future situation that you will find yourself in can stop you from proclaiming His goodness and love!

My friends, young and old, whenever you wear the griffin over your heart, you defiantly proclaim the subversive and world-changing truth of the One that the griffin now symbolizes. As the griffin holds a place in your heart, remember that you proclaim the real power and dignity that are given to even the humblest child of God. In every griffin emblazoned throughout this school, see the union not of beast and bird, but of God and man, and give glory to Our Father Who does not expect us to get ourselves to heaven, but sends His own Son to open heaven, and His heart, to us, and promises to carry us on high.

Finally, in the face of that human desire to protect ourselves and meet the expectations of our world, instead see yourself as God sees you, and trust that the divine-griffin, Our Lord Himself, defends you at every moment and thus you have nothing to fear. Do not settle for pagan griffins! Let us find our dignity, our identity, and our protection in Christ our King!

May God give us this grace. Amen.