

Cathedral Dedication Homily

May 9, 2017

*“This is Holy Ground. We’re standing on Holy Ground.
For the Lord is present, and where He is Holy.”*

In the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke describes the origin and development of the early Christian communities, from the Resurrection of Jesus to Paul’s first imprisonment. One viewpoint is that Luke’s approach to church history was predominantly theological in nature and less about historical facts. He wanted to convey that the Church was a mystery of God, established by the action of the Holy Spirit, and introduced into history through the preaching of the Apostles, in particular, the ministry of Peter and Paul.

The passage just proclaimed offers a brief summary of life in the early Church. It was a community of learning, fellowship and charity, prayer, and worship. Christians were eager to learn more about Jesus through the teachings of the Apostles, and were committed to a community of life and concern for one another, such that they would freely combine their possessions and divide them according to each one’s need. And although it was common to “break bread” in their homes, meeting and praying together in the temple was an essential mark of the believers. In the temple, their unity and holiness were made visible.

In these same early days, St. Paul wrote to the people of the city of Corinth which, at that time, was an extremely corrupt city. The ideal Christian community described in Acts was not the case in Corinth. The Corinthians were involved in pagan cults and lacking in morals, even to the point of practicing religious prostitution. Besides these pagan influences, the believers were divided into factions. Because of their way of life and divisions, they lacked the ability and moral integrity to deal with serious issues and spread the Gospel. These concerns were reflected in the way in which they celebrated the Eucharistic liturgy. Paul chastised them, saying: *“When you assemble, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, for everyone is in haste to eat his own supper. One person goes hungry while another gets drunk”* (1Cor. 11:20). The newly baptized Christians found it challenging to remain faithful to Christ, and many fell backwards.

In both his letters to the Corinthians, Paul urged the people to adhere to the basics of the Faith, to live as the Body of Christ, so that their very lives would be a sign to others of God’s love for us and Jesus’ invitation to follow Him. This led to Paul’s teaching that they were the temple of God. *“Brothers and Sisters, do you*

not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?...for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.

Nonetheless, Paul's description of the "community" as the temple did not render the physical temple obsolete. On the contrary, the temple remained the Holy Place where the Body of Christ met, worshipped and cared for one another.

Every time I visit St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, I am in awe of the magnitude and artistic beauty of this historic church. Whenever I lead a group of pilgrims to Rome, I like to enter the Basilica first and watch the people's response as they enter for the first time. Their common reaction is to peer deep into the church, look all around, slowly raise their eyes to the ceiling and, often, in a quiet whisper, say "WOW!"

That response was exactly what the architects of St. Peter's - and many other similar churches throughout the world - hoped would be the reaction of visitors. They intended to create a sense of the transcendent, to raise hearts and minds, beyond the customary world, to the realities of God and His heavenly kingdom. Realizing that people were all too familiar with the passing world in which they lived - the challenges and burdens of this imperfect world - these visionaries wished to provide an opportunity for them, and for us today, to imagine ourselves in a spiritual realm. That was our vision for this Cathedral.

Today's dedication ceremony offers a unique opportunity to explain the meaning and purpose of a church building, and to describe the art and beauty of this Cathedral and how it serves to teach the faith and care for all. While time does not permit a complete explanation, I wish to call your attention to some specific aspects. Over the years, by its very structure and design, this Cathedral has taught the Faith. It is my hope that this renovation and, in some respects restoration, will continue to convey the Faith to all who enter here.

Church buildings are more than just gathering spaces. The U.S Bishops explain that "*the religious artworks that beautify (church buildings) are (actually) forms of worship themselves*" which "*both inspire and reflect the prayer of the community as well as the inner life of grace.*"(18) "*The church's great treasury of art and architecture helps to transcend the limitations of any one culture, region, or period of time. Through their colorful stained glass windows, Stations of the Cross, statuary, and other art forms, these churches actually teach the faith.*" They create for the faithful a textbook, as it were, of salvation history and a remembrance of those holy people who gave witness to their faith throughout generations."(45)

Certainly, more recent concepts of church architecture, art forms which are more contemporary, smaller in scale and simpler in design, can be equally instructive. The spiritual nature of such churches teaches that the People of God, the faithful who worship in these holy places, provide the beauty and art which inspire the faithful to commit themselves to the mission of Jesus Christ.

Whatever their design, church buildings should be beautiful. The Bishops remind us that, both externally and internally, church buildings “*should be expressive of the dignified beauty of God’s holy people. Liturgical art and architecture reflect and announce the presence of the God who calls the community to worship, and invite believers to raise their minds and hearts to the one who is the source of all beauty and truth.*”(44)

This wonderful church building, dedicated to the memory of Mary’s Assumption into heaven, was built in 1901, under the direction of Father Dalton, to serve as a parish church. It replaced the original church built in 1863 and was formed in the model of traditional gothic architecture. The prominence of wood, which once enwrapped the entire interior of the building, spoke of the city of Saginaw, widely known for its lumber industry. In 1938, when Bishop William Murphy was named the first Bishop of Saginaw, he indicated that he chose St. Mary’s church to be the Cathedral because of its beauty and art form.

The diocesan Cathedral is more than a parish church. It is the center of the life of the local Church and connects it with the universal Church. The word “cathedral” comes from the Latin word “cathedra” which means a chair or seat. The prominence of a raised chair was often reserved for a teacher or magistrate. And so, it was common for the bishop to preach the Gospel of Christ and teach while seated in the cathedra, symbolic of his three-fold responsibility to teach, govern, and sanctify. Like a shepherd, the bishop is called to instruct, encourage and sometimes admonish the flock, but always called to challenge them.

As you enter the main vestibule, you immediately encounter the baptismal font, which I blessed at the beginning of the Mass, and are invited to bless yourself with holy water, as a constant reminder of your own baptism and initiation into the Church, the Body of Christ.

Adjacent to the baptistery is the Reconciliation Room which offers us the opportunity, time and again, to confess our sins, receive the Lord’s forgiveness and begin anew to follow Christ.

The four main glass doors bear etchings of the four Evangelists; and the two side entrance doors, the images of Peter and Paul, all of whom, by their recorded

Word of God, invite us into this holy place to experience the Good News in Word and Sacrament and to recommit ourselves to emulate the faithfulness of the early Christian community.

The Stations of the Cross are the original stations of this church which have been restored. While praying the Stations of the Cross, we are reminded of Christ's suffering and death, and the depth of His love for us: "*There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends*" (John 15:13).

The beautiful stained glass windows were also cleaned and restored. On your left, they depict the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary and, on the right, other moments in the life of our Blessed Mother and her beloved Son. At some point, **but not now**, you should take note of the beautiful rose window in the choir loft which was removed and completely restored.

Speaking of the choir loft, only the pipes from our previous organ were worth salvaging. So, we purchased the pipes and organ formerly used in St. Joseph Church in Bay City, had it completely restored and, combined with our own pipes, it provides magnificent beauty and sound.

Like the original church, the wainscoting was restored, although a different style, as were the pews and kneelers. The angels that line the walls were given a face lift which brings forth the delicacy and beauty of these carvings.

Everything in the Cathedral leads you to the focal point which is the Sanctuary, where there are five main objects of importance. Perhaps the most notable images are the tabernacle, housing our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and the striking marble crucifix. Several years ago, the Sisters of Mercy of Alma made a gift of this tabernacle to this Cathedral.

The crucifix, a true treasure, was hand carved in 1877 by Herman Kirn, a German sculptor living in Philadelphia, who carved a number of famous statues throughout the City. It was a gift to our Cathedral from Cardinal Rigali and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

The Ambo, which many of you know as the pulpit, was carved in Italy, as was all the marble which you see in the Cathedral, including the baptismal font and the statue of the Assumption.

During liturgical celebrations, the altar becomes the focal point. It stands as the symbol of Christ. That is why the priest, at the beginning and end of each liturgical celebration, reverences or kisses the altar, and ministers bow as they pass by. In this Mass, I will anoint the altar with Sacred Chrism, highlighting the

immense sacredness and dignity of the altar. Two first class relics were carried in procession, to be placed in the body of the altar: one of St. Pius X and the other of St. John Neumann. Pius X was Pope from 1903 to 1914 and canonized in 1954. He was revered for his pastoral leadership and encouragement towards personal holiness and piety, along with a daily lifestyle which reflected deep Christian values. He is venerated as the Pope of the Eucharist, having encouraged frequent reception of Holy Communion and establishing the age of reason as the time for one's first Holy Communion.

As many of you know, I have a strong devotion to St. John Neumann, the fourth bishop of my home Diocese of Philadelphia. He lived a short life, from 1811 to 1860. He was also short in stature and was ridiculed because, when riding a horse, his feet did not reach the stirrups. I always identified with him in that regard. As a young boy, my Uncle John used to call me "No legs Joe." Bishop Neumann was an immigrant to this country and had a welcoming heart for all immigrants, particularly in his day, those from Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe. Discouraged by constant conflicts with racially and religiously prejudiced people, as well as the riots and burning of churches by the Know-Nothing political party, known for its anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic prejudice, he offered his resignation to Rome, although it was not accepted. He was the first bishop in the country to organize a diocesan school system and he established the Forty Hours Eucharistic Devotion here in the United States, a devotion which had begun in Milan in 1537.

Finally, you will notice the Cathedra, or the Bishop's Seat, of which I spoke earlier.

St. John Neumann is also depicted in one of the etched doors as you enter the side vestibule, along with an etching of St. Katherine Drexel, welcoming all people to this sacred place.

St. Katharine Drexel was born in 1858. She died in 1955 and was canonized in the Jubilee Year 2000. She was an American heiress and philanthropist, who renounced all her possessions to become a religious sister. She founded the Blessed Sacrament Sisters, based upon her special love for and devotion to our Lord in the Eucharist. Despite her wealthy upbringing, she became an advocate for the poor and for racial justice, holding to the strong belief of providing quality education for all. She and her community ministered specifically to African Americans and Native Americans, establishing missions in 21 states as well as Haiti.

In addition to these two symbols of welcome and openness, you will also find at this side entrance a beautiful mosaic of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas and most beloved by our Hispanic community.

As a Church, we have not always been welcoming to those not of our race or nationality. It is our hope and prayer that Our Lady and these great saints will stand as a sign of our openness to all peoples and nations, and inspire us to be greater evangelizers and missionary disciples in this regard.

Although there is so much more that could be said to describe our Cathedral, I draw your attention to one final addition, that of the statue of Our Lady of the Assumption. When this parish was established in 1863, it was dedicated to Mary of the Assumption. In 1938, Bishop Murphy dedicated the entire Diocese under the patroness of Mary of the Assumption. This image of Mary being assumed into heaven is an essential reminder, to each one of us, of the call to seek the Kingdom of Heaven above all things.

When I called Cardinal Rigali to invite him to this dedication, he immediately recalled that Blessed Paul VI, on May 9th, in the Jubilee Year of 1975, published an Apostolic Exhortation entitled *“On Christian Joy.”* Pope Paul, speaking of the importance of Mary in the life of the Church, wrote: *“She stands, the Mother of Sorrows, at the foot of the cross, associated in an eminent way with the sacrifice of the innocent Servant. But she is also open in an unlimited degree to the joy of the resurrection; and she is also taken up, body and soul, into the glory of heaven. The first of the redeemed, immaculate from the moment of her conception, the incomparable dwelling-place of the Spirit, the pure abode of the Redeemer of mankind, she is – at the same time – the beloved Daughter of God and, in Christ, the Mother of all. She is the perfect model of the Church both on earth and in glory.”*

This Cathedral is meant to welcome all who come, believers and non-believers, people who belong to our Catholic community and those who do not. It invites all of us to a future full of hope and promise. Today we dedicate a work of love which involved both a renovation and restoration. I pray it will be a symbolic call to all within the Diocese of Saginaw to see ourselves as God’s temple, to renovate those aspects of our lives which have drawn us away from the Lord, restore those aspects which draw us ever closer to Jesus and to one another, and empower us to become true missionary disciples who not only follow Jesus Christ but proclaim His message to all.

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