

August 15, 2015 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

100th Anniversary of the Dedication of the Church

St. Joseph Parish, Kalamazoo, 5:30 p.m. Mass

What a joyful and happy occasion this is as we come together to celebrate the 100th anniversary of this beautiful parish church. I am very grateful to Msgr. Hazard for inviting me to join you for this happy event. On anniversaries such as this, marking 100 years of history, we can't help but think back to what it must have been like for the group of people----some of your distant relatives perhaps, but certainly our sisters and brothers in the faith----who were gathered here for the very first Mass on August 15, 1915.

There may be photos somewhere around. It would be fun to see how they were dressed----was it a hot and humid day like it is today? It would be interesting to see how the Church was decorated? And how the choir was situated?

It was in 1910 that St. Joseph was established as an independent parish, separate from St. Augustine's, with Father William Fitzpatrick as the first resident pastor. I love the story of how the parish came to get its name.....(The Bishop allowed the parishioners to choose a name. Father Fitzpatrick allowed people to vote for 10 cents a person as a fundraiser. St. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus was unanimously chosen because of the importance of the family). Father Fitzpatrick was here for only three years. It was the 2nd pastor, Father Frank McQueen, who had the vision to build this beautiful church building in only two years, with the help and support of all those first generation parishioners.

Much has happened over the course of these 100 years since 1915, both here in this part of Kalamazoo, as well as throughout our country and the Church universal. Just think of all that has taken place in these 100 years and through it all, St. Joseph Church has stood here, inviting people to come in to know and love Jesus, and to become a part of the Body of Christ, the Church. This Church is really important to all of us----it's a sacred place---a dwelling place of God in the midst of His people. It's been the spiritual home for generations of people who have come before us, and it is your spiritual home.

But as we all know, this sacred building is not the only, or even the most important, way of understanding what the Church is. As I'm sure you know, the root word for "Church" comes from the Greek word *ek-kles-i-a*, which translates into the Latin as *ecclesia*, which literally

means “the gathering of the people”. Of course that word is the root for some of our English words, like “ecclesiastical” to describe official Church matters.

So, while this is a joyful day for us to celebrate the 100 years that this church building---this sacred, ecclesiastical space----has been here to be the gathering place for Catholics to join together to grow in faith, the most important reality we celebrate today is all of us. For we are the Church. The Church isn't a building; the Church is a living, vibrant, organic gathering of people who profess a shared faith in a Trinity of Persons, Father---Son---Holy Spirit, and who proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of our lives.

That's why our Scripture Readings that we've just listened to for this 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time are so appropriate for what is most important to us---the Church Alive----and this Church building, God's dwelling place in this neighborhood.

I really enjoyed reviewing the parish history once again in preparing for tonight. Over the course of these 105 years, and through the leadership of the 12 priests who have been your Pastors and Shepherds throughout this more than a century----including dear Msgr. Fitz who we all just recently “laid to rest” after a long and loving priestly life----it is clear that St. Joseph Parish has always been a welcoming parish---a parish with the Eucharist and the preaching of God's Word at its center, and a parish that has always had outreach to those in need as what has naturally flowed from the Eucharist and the Good News of Jesus Christ!

That's exactly what the Book of Proverbs was talking about in our First Reading as we are told that “Wisdom”, which is a synonym for “God”, has “*built her house*” and “*has sent her maidens*” to extend this invitation----but only to those with a particular openness of spirit: “*Let whoever is simple turn in here. To the one who lacks understanding, she says, ‘Come, eat of my food and drink of the wine I have mixed! Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding.’*” God, Who is all-Wisdom, invites all people to come to His House---not just to a particular building but to these sacred places where God has allowed Himself to be found in special ways---to find the meaning of life, and to experience what is most important.

St. Paul tells us the same basic message in tonight's Second Reading from his Letter to the Ephesians: “*Watch carefully how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise....Do not continue in ignorance but come to understand what is the Will of the Lord.....and be filled with the Holy Spirit.*”

In both of those Readings, we experience God through the image of food and drink because as human beings, we absolutely need food and water to keep ourselves alive. But what God needs for us to know is that as spiritual beings, we absolutely need him to keep ourselves spiritually alive. And God comes to us in the special food and drink of His Word and His very Self. As this evening's Psalm Refrain said so beautifully: *"Taste and see the goodness of the Lord"*.

But it is this evening's Gospel that is so important for us to hear as clearly as we possibly can. For the past several weeks, we've been listening to the 6th Chapter of St. John's Gospel known as the "Bread of Life" discourse, where Jesus is laying out how He is our sustenance--- He is our Food and Drink---He is what gives us life---and it is He Who strengthens us to live in this world and in the life of the world to come! And so we heard Jesus say as clearly as He possibly could this evening: *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever.....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.....remains in Me and I in him.....will have life because of Me.....will live forever."*

St. John tells us that some of the people grumbled among themselves. Next week we'll hear that many of the disciples stopped following Jesus. But Jesus did not change His teaching, because He was revealing to us the central truth of our faith, what we as Catholics have come to call the "source and summit of our Faith", namely our belief in the Truth that Jesus Christ is truly Present in the Eucharist to be our sustenance---to be our food and drink---to be our strength and courage. And for 100 years, through 12 Pastors and for generations of people, that Truth has been taught and experienced in this beautiful Church building.

But, the Eucharist is not given to us to keep to ourselves. It is for the purpose of "sending us out" to live our faith with joy! The Eucharist is for the purpose of giving us the strength and the courage to be the Presence of Jesus to those outside these Church doors who are in need--- who are having difficulties---who are alone or suffering in any way. The Eucharist is to be our nourishment to bring Christ to others.

Pope Francis, who as we know has been calling the entire Church to be renewed in our faith and to remember what is most important and essential to our faith, has described the parish Church in this way: "The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities, the parish encourages and

trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.”
(*Evangelii Gaudium*, #28)

That sounds a lot like St. Joseph Parish to me:

- This parish is the “presence” of the Church in this area;
- It’s a beautiful environment for hearing God’s Word
- It’s where generations of people have grown in the Christian life---dialogue---proclaiming the Truth---charitable outreach---and vibrant Worship of God in the regular celebration of the Eucharist.
- This parish, through the proper celebration of the Eucharist and the teaching of God’s Word, should be preparing all of us to be “Evangelizers”----people who give witness to our faith!
- And this parish is truly a community of communities---and a center for missionary outreach!

On this 100th anniversary of the day this Church building first officially celebrated the Eucharist, down through every one of the tens of thousands of times the Eucharist has been celebrated throughout these 100 years, including our celebration this evening, let us give thanks to God for the blessings of these 100 years. And the best way to express that gratitude is to recommit ourselves, and the generations to come after us, to remain God’s faithful and joyful witnesses, whose lives are centered in the Eucharist, and who are “Wise” and “Simple” enough to realize that Jesus is our Food and Drink---that Jesus is our Living Bread and it is Jesus Who shows us the Way, teaches us the Truth and leads us to everlasting Life.

God bless you, now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ, + Bishop Paul J. Bradley