

150th Anniversary of St. Mary's Visitation Parish

(Scripture Readings and Prayers from Feast of the Visitation)

July 31, 2016 11:00 a.m. 18th Sunday of the Year

How wonderful it is to be here for this joyful celebration with my brother priests, especially two of your former pastors, Father Tom Hack and Msgr. Mike Hazard, your two current priests, Father Steve Rodrigo and Father Chris Derda, your two Deacons, Dean Hermann and Russ Podzynski. I'm happy to welcome civic officials, special guests and former parishioners, and dear friends; and most of all, I am very happy to recognize the dear parishioners of St. Mary's Visitation Parish. On this historic and joyful occasion, let us make the words of Zephaniah the Prophet from this morning's First Reading our own: "*Shout for joy, dear parishioners; Sing joyfully, beloved People of God; Be glad and exult with all your heart, the entire Diocese of Kalamazoo! The Lord our God has smiled upon this parish community for 150 years. This is the Day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*"

As the rest of the Catholic world gathers together to celebrate the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, this part of the universal Catholic Family gathers together so that we can do three things: 1) think back on the history of this parish and give thanks; 2) look around at the signs of God's abundant blessings in each of our lives and in the life of this parish and sing His praises; and 3) look to the future in anticipation of the Catholic families who will continue to worship here in this beautiful church for generations to come and be filled with hope.

This truly is a joyful and happy occasion for this Parish, for the new Collaborative here in this part of the Diocese which also now includes St. Stanislaus Parish in Dorr and Sacred Heart in Watson, and for the entire Diocese of Kalamazoo----and I am so pleased to be here to celebrate with you on this great occasion.

From those first days back in 1866 when St. Mary Parish was part of the Diocese of Detroit, through the years that it was a part of the Diocese of Grand Rapids, and for the last 45 years that it has been a valued parish in the Diocese of Kalamazoo---during which time St. Mary Parish and Visitation Parish were joined together to form St. Mary's Visitation Parish in 1981 under the careful pastoral guidance of Msgr. Mike Hazard----- this Parish has faithfully, courageously and consistently taught the Catholic faith and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to

generations of Catholics, and for a century and a half, has been an agent of bringing salvation and eternal life to tens of thousands of people.

We all know that this is the 31st and last day of July, in the middle of the summer season, and yet we might feel a sense of déjà vous. As we celebrate the Scripture Readings and the Mass prayers for the Feast of the Visitation, we recall that it was exactly two months ago today-- --on May 31st---when we actually celebrated that Feast, right after the Memorial Day weekend.

But besides feeling like we're reliving what happened two months ago, we might also allow ourselves to be transported 150 years ago---to the summer of 1866---when the original Catholic community joined with Father Marco to celebrate Mass for the first time in their brand new wood church built by their very own hands in the newly-established Parish of St. Mary of New Salem.

1866-----Just think about what a different world people lived in at that time. Michigan had become the 26th State just 29 years before that in 1837. The country was still raw, grieving and trying to heal following the devastating Civil War that officially ended just a year before in 1865, as well as the heart-breaking assassination of President Lincoln that same year in 1865. And in the life of the universal Catholic Church, preparations were excitedly being completed for the first Vatican Council that took place in Rome just two years later----the first such world-wide Council since the Council of Trent 300 years earlier. The original Catholic community that gathered to initiate this Parish truly lived in a different world.

But, while their life circumstances and the world events that they were facing were quite different than ours, we need to remember what we share in common with our great-great-great-great-great-great grandparents from 1866. They held to the same faith that all of us do multiple generations later. They professed the same Creed that we will profess in just a few moments. They found comfort --- new life---- mercy----strength---and grace in the same seven Sacraments as we do. They grew in love for God and for their neighbor through listening to the same Scripture Readings that we have just heard. And in a very particular way, they found their weekly spiritual nourishment, strength, and intimate one-ness with Jesus through the regular celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

St. Mary Parish was in union with their Bishop, even though he was all the way in Detroit, and they were a part of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” in union with the Holy Father at that time, the great Pope Leo XIII.

For 150 years here in New Salem/Byron Center, the faith has been taught, the mission of the Church has been continued, and the Kingdom of God has been advanced. Or, as your anniversary theme so appropriately puts it: "By Faith they built it; By Faith we grow in God's Love."

As I already paraphrased from this morning's First Reading from the Prophet Zephaniah to explain why today is a day of great joy, the true and critically important message from the Prophet was that we must "*shout for joy....be glad and exult with all your heart*" for a reason: because "*the Lord has removed ... judgment against you*" and "*has turned away your enemies*".

But there's a part of that Reading that I think we oftentimes miss----I know I have. Besides reminding ourselves why we must rejoice in the Lord, the last part of this morning's Reading gives us a beautiful and powerful insight into how much **God** delights in us. The Prophet told us: "*The Lord your God....will rejoice over YOU with gladness and renew you in His love; the Lord your God will sing joyfully because of YOU.*" Isn't that a great image to try to picture in your mind? The Lord our God does a "happy dance" whenever He thinks of us because He loves us so much!

And speaking of a "happy dance", today's Gospel passage which recounts for us how our Blessed Mother, who has just become pregnant with our unborn Savior by the power of the Holy Spirit, goes to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who was six-months pregnant with the Savior's Forerunner, his cousin, John the Baptist. Elizabeth was somehow inspired not only to know that her young cousin, Mary, was pregnant, but that the "fruit of her womb was indeed **most blessed**." But it was Elizabeth's unborn child who also recognized the Messiah within Mary and did a "happy dance" in Elizabeth's womb, or in her words: "*At the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.*" And then Mary sings her Song of Joy, which we have come to know as the "Magnificat": "*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*"

God's Word today, and essentially all of God's Word, is filled with the joyful message of God's unconditional love for us, and our responsibility to live in that Love. That's why the Gospel is called the "Good News". And that's why God's Word counters any other "word" that comes to us from so many other sources in our world that tries to sell us various versions of "bad news".

In today's Second Reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, Paul was giving very good, direct and practical advice about how they were to live their lives: "*Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good....rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer.....*" etc. etc.

That's what St. Mary's Visitation Parish has done throughout these 150 years. Just as St. Paul taught the Romans how to live in such a way that they could be joyful and faithful members of the Body of Christ, that is what a Parish is for: to teach us about God's love----to be a place where we experience God's love in the Mass and the Sacraments----and to be a place from which we are sent forth at the end of every Mass to go and announce the Gospel of the Lord; go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.

This is a day to rejoice----to shout for joy----to rejoice in God our Savior---as we celebrate this 150th anniversary of St. Mary's Visitation Parish. We give thanks for all that has been done to pass on the gift of our Catholic faith for generations of people who have preceded us, right down to many of you who have been born, baptized, and raised in the faith here. We give thanks today for the tens of thousands of times the Mass and the Sacraments have been celebrated here by the more than 20 priests who have served here for 150 years, we give thanks for the Gospel message that has been preached, and the faith that has been taught---shared---and spread by the hundreds of Sisters and dedicated lay teachers in St. Mary's Visitation School, and we give thanks for the scores of great and generous lay leaders who have given themselves in loving service throughout this whole time.

But my dear sisters and brothers in faith, we too are living in a very different world than our ancestors did. We're living in a world that is drifting further away from God and God's ways. We're living in a world that does not feel the joy of God's Love nor feel the need for God's strength. We're living in a world that resorts to violence and terrorism to advance a cause, who just last week slaughtered an elderly priest in France at the very altar where he was celebrating Mass. We are living in a world that thinks they don't need God, even though they will be lost without God.

That makes St. Mary's Visitation Parish----and all our Parishes---that much more important as we are visible witnesses to God's Presence in the world. St. Mary's Visitation Church was described in one part of the written history: "A beautiful Church on a Hill". Jesus used that same image to tell us how we need to let our Light shine like a city set on a hill whose Light shines for all the world to see.

But coming here to St. Mary's Visitation Parish, or any of our parishes, is not the goal---it is the means to an end. Pope Francis likes to describe a parish as a "way station" or as a "rest stop" along the journey of our faith. We come here----get refreshed---get reminded about who we are----do our "happy dance" about how much God loves us and delights in us, even as we are to find our delight and strength in Him----but then, we are sent out to be the "witnesses" of our faith to that world that isn't all that interested in what we have to say; into a world that might challenge us for our beliefs and our principles of the dignity and value of human life, and the importance of the sanctity of marriage, and the beauty of living lives of virtue, and seeking after God's ways of extending mercy and working for justice.

Once again, as your Anniversary theme says so beautifully: "By Faith they built it; By Faith we Grow in God's Love." And I would add: "And by Faith we must joyfully witness to God's abiding Presence in this world as we make our way to the Eternal Life of the world to come!"

When your children and our successors gather to celebrate the 200th anniversary in 2066, may they find an even more vibrant parish community of St. Mary's Visitation, committed to teaching the same Truths of the church, professing the same Creed of our faith, and living together as strong, courageous and joy-filled witnesses to our faith as members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

God bless you, now and always!

Bishop Paul J. Bradley