

December 13, 2020 Gaudete Sunday 2:30 p.m.

The Solemn Mass of the Rededication of St. Augustine Cathedral

(Neh.8:1-6, 8-10; 1 Thess.5:16-24; Jn.6:48-58)

Words of Introduction:

My Sisters and Brothers in Christ, on this Gaudete Sunday, when our Liturgical Calendar urges the whole Church to rejoice because the “Lord is near”, THIS Local Church rejoices with a particular Joy on this day when our Cathedral---the Mother Church of our Diocese---having been repaired, renewed and restored---is ready to be rededicated in this Solemn but Joyful Liturgy. And so I repeat the Refrain from today’s Entrance Antiphon for this, the Third Sunday of Advent, and say: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice!”*¹

I am so very happy to offer a heartfelt welcome to all of you who are gathered here today, as well as to all who are participating via “live-stream”, in this Solemn celebration of the Rededication of our Beloved Cathedral of Saint Augustine.

I am especially privileged to welcome four of my brother Bishops from the Province of Michigan, in particular our Metropolitan, Archbishop Allen Vigneron, the Archbishop of Detroit; our neighbor to the East, Bishop Earl Boyea, the Bishop of Lansing; and two of our Detroit Auxiliary Bishops, Bishop Gerald Battersby and Bishop Robert Fisher. I am so pleased that, in these busy days of Advent, you could come to join us for this happy occasion.

I heartily welcome those priests and deacons, and their wives, who are able to join us, our Seminarians, members of our Diocesan Pastoral Staff, and Representatives of our 59 Parishes from throughout the nine counties of our Diocese. Welcome!

And in a particular way, I welcome the members of the Cathedral Parish of St. Augustine. While the Cathedral is the Mother Church of the entire Diocese, this is your parish Church where you come to worship regularly, and so this is an especially happy day for all of you.

And so, as God’s Holy People joined for this celebration of His Presence with us, let us ask God’s blessings upon us and upon this Cathedral:

Sprinkling Rite.....

Homily:

Peace be with you! This truly is a day for our entire Diocese to rejoice as we celebrate this Mass of Rededication, and to do so on such an appropriate occasion.

The Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday from the Latin word which means “rejoice.” The longing we experience during this special Advent Season of the Church’s New Year can no longer be contained, because the Blessed Event of the Birth of Jesus, which we will celebrate on Christmas, is less than two weeks away. But of course, what is cause for even greater Joy is the realization, which our Faith assures us, that Jesus is already here with us now, in the Church, in us who are Baptized into His Body, in the Sacred Liturgy, and most especially in the Holy Eucharist, even while we wait for His coming at the end of all time.

As our Holy Father Pope Francis recently wrote: “A God who draws near out of love, walks with His people... We could never have imagined that the same Lord would become one of us and walk with us, be present with us, present in His Church, present in His Word, present in the Eucharist, present in the poor. He is as close to us as a Shepherd is close to His flock whom He knows, one by one.” (Pope Francis Homily, Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, June 7, 2013)

The Readings we have just heard proclaimed are very appropriate for our celebration today, two of them the assigned Readings for Gaudete Sunday, and two of them chosen especially because of the Rededication.

In today’s First Reading from Nehemiah, one of our “special” Readings, we heard that “*the whole people*” came together to spend the entire day listening attentively to the Word of God and giving Him worship and praise. Ezra, the priest, told them: “*Today is holy to the LORD your God. Do not lament, do not weep!*” It is for that reason, God being with us, that all sadness and anxiety are to be set aside. And that’s why Ezra told the People to celebrate: “*Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and allot portions to those who had nothing prepared; for today is holy to our LORD...Rejoicing in the LORD is your strength!*”

Today’s Responsorial Psalm, the proper one for Gaudete Sunday, is taken from the *Magnificat*, and sums up our Blessed Mother’s entire life: “*My soul rejoices; my souls rejoices in my God.*” Our Blessed Mother always remains very close to us, and has as her whole purpose to lead us, rejoicing, to be one with her Son, Jesus.

In today's Second Reading, St. Paul tells us to "*rejoice always*". As God's Holy People, we're not supposed to be gloomy or impatient; rather we are to live in this world as People of Faith, even while *waiting in joyful hope* for "*the God of Peace Who will make you perfectly holy*". In other words, the seeds of Faith, planted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit on the Day of our Baptism, and brought to maturity on the Day of our Confirmation, need to bear Fruit in us by becoming Witnesses to Jesus' Love in the world.

But "*waiting*" doesn't mean just sitting around, doing nothing. No, we are to be "active", busy in our "waiting" by living the Good News of the Gospel, and being guided by the Beatitudes; we are to be "joyful" while we wait; and while we "joyfully wait", we are to be people who never lose Hope, even as we live in the midst of a world which is increasingly moving away from God and God's ways, and in these times of increased violence, division, social unrest, and the unrelenting grip of a worldwide pandemic. St. Paul put it best in the last part of today's Reading; no matter what goes on around us, we are to: "*Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. (And---) Do not quench the Spirit!*"

The Rededication of our Cathedral today brings to an end the first phase of what has been quite a lengthy project. While there were many good reasons to think about doing some upgrading of our Cathedral for a number of years, it became an absolute necessity when we learned over the past two years that the Sanctuary wall was in need of major repair, so major that the work required us to close off the Sanctuary and cover over our beautiful Cathedral Organ, a project that began over a year ago. And since we were doing that, and thanks to the benevolence of a number of very generous donors, we decided to make the liturgical changes and renovations that were needed. As we complete this first (and most aggressive) Phase of this project, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to all who have made this repair and renewal possible—the architects, the construction engineers, the various artisans, and everyone who worked on the project by your planning, hard work, your generous financial support, and your prayers.

The major Liturgical changes had to do with moving the Tabernacle from the side Chapel to the High Altar; repositioning the Cathedra to a more visible and prominent place; providing this Ambo from which God's Word is proclaimed and preached; and the placing of this beautiful new Altar, which is the focus of our Rededication today.

The Cathedra, the official Chair of the Bishop of the Diocese, symbolizes our unity as the Church here in these 9 counties of southwest Michigan. We are not some loose federation of parishes; we are one Local Church, united with our Bishop and with each other, and in communion with all the other Churches throughout the Universal Church by allegiance to our Holy Father, the Pope. The Cathedra (from which of course the word “Cathedral” takes its name) represents the Teaching authority of the Bishop and a sign of our Unity in the Church.

This Ambo, from which God’s Word is proclaimed “in season and out of season”, represents God’s Presence among us in His Living Word. As you might be able to see, there’s a beautiful inscription here on this Ambo, which in Latin says: “*Tolle lege*”, which means “Take and read.” These are the words that the great St. Augustine, our Diocesan Patron, heard one day which led him, after a long time of resistance on his part, and after a lifetime of prayers and tears on his mother, St. Monica’s part, to allow God to change his heart. He became not only a Catholic, but one of the greatest Doctors of the Church. And that’s what we pray we will do: that we will be willing to “*take and read*” ----to allow God’s Word to inspire us to listen attentively when God’s Holy Word is proclaimed from this Ambo—or wherever we encounter it—and to say ‘yes’ to whatever God asks of us in our daily lives.

And most importantly, we, God’s Holy People, come here to “*gather around the Table of the Lord*”. A central focus of today’s beautiful Rededication Liturgy focuses on the new Main Altar, enfolded by this gorgeous Baldacchino, which forms a permanent canopy over the Altar, helping us to visualize that the Altar is where Heaven and Earth meet, the place where Jesus comes to be with us, to be so close to us that He becomes our spiritual Food and Drink. This Altar, which will be blessed, anointed, consecrated and adorned, is the Table around which we, the Body of Christ, are gathered so that we can receive the Body and Blood of Christ as Jesus has commanded us to do, as He told us: “Do this in Memory of Me!”. This Table of the Lord also is the Altar of Sacrifice, upon which the supreme action of our Redemption is repeated, sacramentally, each time Holy Mass is celebrated here in this Cathedral.

That’s exactly what we heard Jesus urge us to do in today’s Gospel reading. Even as we conclude our Diocese’s special observance of our “Year of the Eucharist”, which though it certainly didn’t go exactly like most of us expected due to the pandemic, this Year has continually encouraged all of us to focus more intently on Jesus’ powerful message that He is the Bread of Life; that He is the Source of our Salvation, and that the Eucharist is the primary way for us to

remain spiritually alive and well. As we heard Jesus tell us in today's Gospel so clearly: *"Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For My Flesh is true food, and My Blood is true drink. Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood remains in me and I in him."*

St. Augustine often wrote and preached about the Eucharist. In one of his most famous homilies, he reminded us that we ourselves are the Body of Christ. This means that what we receive during Holy Communion is the same "Body of Christ" that St. Paul tells us we have become as a result of our Baptism. When we receive the Eucharist, and say "Amen", St. Augustine teaches, we are making a commitment to truly reflect the Presence of Our Lord in our daily lives, and to share Him with everyone we encounter. In other words, when we receive the Eucharist, we agree to be Christ with, and for, others. (Sermon 272)

Finally, in an effort to give renewed prominence to the Real Presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, the Tabernacle in this Cathedral has been repositioned to the High Altar in the center of the Sanctuary. It is my hope and prayer, that this new position of prominence will help encourage and strengthen devotion to the Blessed Sacrament in this Cathedral and throughout our Diocese, so that we can truly be a Eucharistic People.

But as we all know, Jesus gave us the Gift of the Eucharist, not just to be our Spiritual Food, and not only to be that Abiding Presence before Whom we can spend time in adoration and prayer, but also to be our Strength---to be our Nourishment---to be the "fuel" to give us the spiritual Energy we need to live our lives according to the Beatitudes, to be His Joyful witnesses in the world, and to have the Grace to fulfill His Great Command. We can't possibly do what Jesus commands us to do---to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves; we can't possibly do what Jesus tells us we must do in His example, such as serving the needs of others as Jesus washed the Feet of His disciples; we can't possibly do what Jesus tells us, "Do this in Memory of Me", meaning for us to likewise lay down our lives in sacrificial love for others-----we can't do any of that without the Grace of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the Source and Summit of our Faith; but also, the Eucharist gives us a life-time mission as Jesus' disciples: *"Do as I have done in Memory of Me"*.

The Lord of Life overcomes all sadness by His Presence. He is near to us now---in His Holy Word just proclaimed, in the miracle of His Body and Blood which we are about to receive (either physically or through a Spiritual Communion), and through the Mission given to each of us by our Baptism, and strengthened by the reception of Christ's Body and Blood: to love God and love our neighbor.

As we continue this Mass of Rededication, it is my profound hope that this joyful celebration will help us prepare for the Lord's coming again this Christmas, and for His coming into our hearts and our lives during the New Year. The Year 2021 represents our 50th year as the Diocese of Kalamazoo. Let us rejoice and give thanks for all the blessings we have received over the course of these past 50 years, and, in the spirit of Blessed Solanus Casey, let us thank God ahead of time for all the graces we are confident God will bring to us in the Church's next 50 years here in southwest Michigan.

As St. Paul said to the Thessalonians (and to us) in today's Second Reading: "*Rejoice always.*" Today, may we rededicate not just this Cathedral, but let us also rededicate our hearts and our very selves. The glory and beauty of this Cathedral should encourage each of us to renew and beautify our own lives as we move forward on our Journey of Faith. Let us pray that because of God's abiding Presence here in this Church, our hearts too will be a worthy place where the Lord can make His Temple. Let us pray that our Blessed Mother, to whom we have consecrated our Diocese two years ago, will help us to say with her: "*Our souls rejoice in our God.*" May we follow St. Paul's urging and "*not quench the Holy Spirit*"; even more, let us ask, pray, and plead for the Holy Spirit to set our hearts on Fire with a passionate Love for God and Neighbor---that the Holy Spirit of Jesus will compel us to be joyful, courageous and bold witnesses in all that we do, all the while "*waiting in joyful hope*" for whenever, and however, the Lord comes.

God bless you, now and always!