

**Homily for the Dedication of the Altar and the Blessing of the
Baptismal Font, Tabernacle, Presider's Chair and Ambo
Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - Cycle A
Saint Gertrude Church
Grantfork, Illinois**

August 13, 2017

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Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for this Mass, at which we will celebrate the dedication of the new Altar and the blessing of the Baptismal Font, Tabernacle, Presider's Chair and Ambo of Saint Gertrude Church. These sanctuary furnishings are central to the divine worship that will take place in this sacred space for many years to come, so it is fitting that we designate them and consecrate them to be used exclusively to give glory and praise to God.

When I was in high school a few years ago – actually, half a century ago! – my sophomore English class was assigned to read a book called *The Power and the Glory*. What I did not know was that there was more than one book by this title, so I borrowed the wrong book from the library and wrote a book report about it. My English teacher was very gracious and accepted my report on the wrong book because she had not named the author of the

book that she wanted us to read. Even though I was excused from having to read the correct book, which was the classic book by Graham Greene entitled, *The Power and the Glory*, I felt somewhat left out of the classroom discussion of the book. Over the years, whenever someone would mention this classic of literature I would wince, thinking to myself, there's that book again that I should have read when I was in high school. So last year when the priest who was directing our bishops' retreat mentioned that book, I finally decided to read it, and this time I borrowed the correct book from the library!

I mention this by way of introduction to the final scene of Graham Greene's novel, *The Power and the Glory*, which begins with these words: "When he woke up it was dawn. He woke with a huge feeling of hope which suddenly and completely left him at the first sight of the prison yard. It was the morning of his death..."¹

Set in Mexico in the 1920's during the government persecution of the Church, the book follows the life of a middle-aged disreputable priest, known only as "the Whiskey Priest," as he hides from the police, hears a

few confessions, tries to reconcile with his illegitimate child, and gets drunk.

The priest considers himself a failure—as a man and especially as a priest. Yes, he had decided to stay during the persecution, but he had done so for less than perfect motives; he had broken his priestly promises; and because of his personal weakness and the situation he found himself in, facing his execution, he assumed God had abandoned him.

The scene continues: “What a fool he had been to think that he was strong enough to stay when others fled. I have done nothing for anybody, I might just as well have never lived... He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage.”²

The priest is right: It does take courage to be a saint. But is Christian courage, as he believes, strength of will? Is it simply a matter of self-restraint, of not being weak and choosing the right thing?

Like the priest, we may be tempted to think so. But Matthew, in the selection from his Gospel today, offers a corrective.

The setting is important. Matthew begins with the line, “Jesus made the disciples get into a boat...” From the earliest days of Christianity, the Church was depicted as a boat, the new ark, in which the new creation is kept safe from the chaos and death that tosses it and rocks it from the outside, which is the exact situation the disciples find themselves in, being tossed about by the wind and waves. This word “tossed,” in the original Greek text, translates literally as “to be tortured.”³ The boat is being tortured by the wind and waves.

We now begin to see what Matthew is getting at: that he is not simply telling a story of Jesus rescuing the disciples in a precarious situation; that He is, instead, speaking about and to the believers of His time who found themselves suffering a great deal of persecution for being followers of Jesus.

“The disciples struggling to make headway in a boat battered by the sea is the [Church after Jesus’ ascension]. Like [the disciples in the boat], the Church struggles against forces that threaten to engulf it, keenly

sensing the physical absence of its Lord.”⁴ Yet then the disciples see Jesus — that he isn’t absent — but that, incredibly, he walks unharmed across the tortuous and chaotic waves, towards them.

Then, seeing their fear, he says to them, “Take courage; It is I. Do not be afraid.” Jesus asks his disciples to take courage, and Matthew writes this section of Scripture to do just that: to ENCOURAGE the Church, to assure believers that even though Christ has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, even though they might feel they are alone amidst the storm of exile and persecution, He had not abandoned them.

Exiled, martyred, frightened, Christians of Matthew’s day were asking: “Where is the Lord? Has he abandoned us? Have we failed?” This is the community Matthew lived in, and the ones he desires to comfort and strengthen with the words and example of Jesus.

This is the community in which we live too. No, we are not exiled. No, we are not facing martyrdom by physical death as did the early Christians or the Whiskey Priest, but the Church today DOES need the comforting, stabilizing, and stirring words, example, and presence of Jesus as we face a different set of challenges. We have been tossed and battered

today by the storms of scandal, unbelief, and apathy. We may feel like the disciples in the boat, rocked by the storm, like the whiskey priest, a failure because of our own shortcomings, either as individuals or as a Church. But the Lord has not abandoned us. He continues to appear, even in the darkest moments, to enter the boat, to calm the storms, and to save those in his Church.

That is why we are here today: to consecrate and bless those items in this boat, this church, through which Jesus arrives, undeterred by our sin and our fear to bring us His peace, security, and deliverance from death. It begins here at the font of baptism, for as Jesus says, "No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." (Jn. 3:5) Here, the power of the Holy Spirit is sent down upon these waters for the forgiveness of sins and that the newly baptized may be initiated into new life in Christ. Becoming a member of Christ's body at baptism, the baptized becomes a member of God's family, His son or daughter, and a brother or sister to all believers, and set on the lifelong path to holiness.

Jesus continues to come to his disciples at the ambo, or pulpit, where the transformative word of God is proclaimed. From it we hear the story of creation, of the sometimes harmonious and often contentious relationship between God and His people Israel, of the prophets demanding right worship and justice, and of God's choosing to save humanity through the incarnation and paschal mystery of His Son.

Then, having received the word with the ear of our hearts, we approach the altar to receive the Word of God made flesh, Jesus Himself. Here Christ enters into the interior tempests of our minds and souls to bring His peace. He then allows himself to be present in the Tabernacle, making each Catholic Church throughout the world a place of divine peace and reconciliation.

Each of these objects, the baptismal font, the ambo, the altar, and the tabernacle are signs to us of Jesus and reminders that He never abandons His disciples, especially in times of tribulation and suffering. Jesus takes His love for his followers with absolute seriousness. So He gives us these wellsprings of his presence not only to reveal His power – whether it be to forgive sins, speak a saving word, or transform bread and wine into His

body and blood—but also enable the faithful, like Peter, like you, like me, to participate in Jesus’ divine power: to tread underfoot, for a few moments, at least, the forces of death and destruction.

We cannot and will not do everything right. We will fail because of weakness, and we will be afraid of problems as they gather on the horizon. But as Matthew reveals, Christian courage is not any of those things.

Instead, it is what the whiskey priest does without knowing it—going to God empty-handed; it is what Peter does—shouting, “Lord, save me!” and reaching up his empty hand for the Lord to grasp.

Christian courage is, succinctly, to approach this newly blessed font and ambo, and this consecrated altar with nothing but the willingness to allow Jesus to pull us up out of the perilous place He finds us.

Catholicism, the whiskey priest had forgotten, is not based on: “if only I could have been a little better, a little more self-restrained.” It’s rooted in what happens at each one of these sacramental places: of God lifting us out of darkness, error, and danger and making us his family, part of His own flesh and blood.

We need not be disappointed to approach God empty-handed. We will fall into sin, we will become distracted by the storms swirling around us and take our eyes off of Jesus. But He continues to come to us, undisturbed by the chaos in which we find ourselves. And He comes, stretching out His hand in water, word, and sacrament. He is there, he is here, ready to grasp us and pull us into the safety of His presence.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: Viking Press, 1946).

² Ibid.

³ Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Liturgical Press, 2004), 119.

⁴ Ibid.