

**Homily for the Dedication of the Parish Offices and Gathering Space
Saints Peter and Paul Parish
Collinsville, Illinois**

June 25, 2017

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for this Mass, after which we will celebrate the dedication of your new Parish Offices and gathering space here at Saints Peter and Paul Parish in Collinsville. As you look forward as a parish to making use of this space in the years to come, we take the opportunity to ask God to sanctify it at its beginning so that it may truly be a place where those who come here may grow closer to our Lord and one another.

Just this past week, for the sixth year in a row, the Catholic Church in the United States began the observance of a “Fortnight for Freedom.” This two-week period, which is called a fortnight, is a time when our liturgical calendar celebrates a series of great martyrs who remained faithful in the face of persecution by political power, including Saint Thomas More and Saint John Fisher, Saint John the Baptist, Saints Peter and Paul, and the First Martyrs of the Church of Rome. The purpose of this effort is to issue a

nationwide call to defend religious liberty and to urge efforts to protect the first freedom of the Bill of Rights.

The theme of this year's Fortnight is "Freedom for Mission." In past years, people have participated in the Fortnight in diverse ways, including interfaith prayer services, special Masses and holy hours, and public events where speakers have highlighted the various threats to religious liberty, both at home and abroad. This year, we encourage Christians to use these two weeks to reflect on the importance of religious freedom so that the Church might have space to carry out her mission of service and mercy. Additionally, I invite Christians to pray for our brothers and sisters who face intense persecution in other parts of the world.

The significance of this fortnight as an appropriate time to pray for religious freedom can be seen simply by looking at the liturgical calendar for this two-week period:

- As I previously mentioned, June 22nd marks the memorial of two English martyrs who refused to take the Oath of Supremacy, which purported to make the King head of the Church in England instead of the Pope. The king's desire to form a new church rose out of the Pope's refusal to grant an annulment of his marriage.

When King Henry VIII decided to annul his marriage to Queen Catherine of Aragon, Bishop John Fisher appeared in court on her behalf, where he declared that, like John the Baptist, he was ready to die on behalf of the indissolubility of marriage. Sir Thomas More, who had resigned as the King's Chancellor, and Bishop John Fisher had remained faithful to the Church. For this, they were both beheaded.

- On June 24th we celebrate the Solemnity of the birth of St. John the Baptist, who was beheaded by King Herod for telling the King that it was wrong for him to have divorced his wife so he could marry his brother's wife (cf. Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21; Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9).
- June 28th is the Memorial of St. Irenaeus, bishop and martyr, who gave his life defending the fullness of the Christian faith. His greatest work is "Against Heresies." As a bishop, he understood that he held a particular charism and responsibility to witness to the fullness of truth.

- June 29th is the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, both of whom died as martyrs in Rome, during the persecution of the Emperor Nero, for their public witness of faith in Jesus Christ.
- Friday, June 30th is the memorial of the First Martyrs of the Church of Rome, honoring those many Christian who were tortured, crucified, and burned alive in 64 A.D. in Nero's gardens on the Vatican Hill.
- And July 3rd is the Feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle, who evangelized Syria, Persia and India. He also died as a martyr for the faith.

Just a few moments ago in our Gospel reading for today we heard a section of the Gospel according to Matthew, more commonly known as Matthew's "mission discourse." In this excerpt from Sacred Scripture, we hear our Lord addressing His disciples and providing them with guidance in their task of preaching about the faith and the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

While at times some passages of Scripture may be more difficult to connect with our lives, I think that this passage of Scripture is very fitting for our lives today, for if we are to be disciples of our Lord and to follow

His call in our lives, we are bound to face some of the same challenges that the disciples did in the early Church.

To help our understanding of the application of this Scripture passage to our lives today, I would propose that there three main points that we can take away from the gospel reading. The first of these is our Lord's admonition to fear no one. Just as the members of the early Church stopped hiding their faith for fear of persecution, so we must not hide our faith by caving in to societal pressures and so succumb to the culture of the world in which we live. We should instead focus on the world that is yet to come and how we must live out truth and love on a daily basis so that we are worthy of our heavenly home.

The next section of the reading that is pertinent in our lives today is to recognize that we are precious in the eyes of God. In the early missionary activity of the Church there were certainly threats that Christ's disciples faced when they went out to spread the message of Christ to all peoples. As we know, through their faith and reliance on God's protection, the overall mission of the Church succeeded. While some of the disciples made the ultimate sacrifice for the faith, that of martyrdom, their faith in God turned their physical death into eternal life. Today in our lives we too

must identify the things that lead us closer to Christ and His Church, and distinguish them from those things which would lead us astray. We must at times choose to die to ourselves and things of this world so that our Lord might lead us to eternal life with Him.

The final section of our gospel reading that can be connected to our lives today is that of Jesus' message that everyone who acknowledges Him before others, He will acknowledge before the Father. We must always remember to invite our Lord into our lives each day, so that we can acknowledge Him in our words and deeds. When we live out true Christian discipleship, we will naturally spread the word of God to those around us, and so we will be like the disciples of the early Church, who acknowledged our Lord before others.

Throughout the course of our daily lives there are many opportunities and places for us to live as true disciples of our Lord, one of which is through our participation in the life of the Church within the context of our parishes. Each parish is a special place where we have the opportunity to grow in the understanding of our faith and to put it into practice in various forms of service and communal expressions of that shared faith in Jesus Christ. The new parish offices and gathering space

which I am about to bless will be significant to the life of this parish, as it will offer many opportunities for the members of this portion of the Mystical Body of Christ to gather together and continue that journey together through the various activities that take place in your parish. It will be a place where the Church will be made visible in a particular way through the gathering of God's people.

In St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, he speaks about the Church as the "household of God," explaining that it has "Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through Him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord" (Eph 2:20-21). The use of the word capstone, or in other translations, cornerstone, is significant here. Just as a cornerstone is essential to the structural foundation of a building, so too with the building of God. If the foundation of what we do and who we are is not Christ, the building is bound to fail. This applies to your new parish offices and gathering space as well. Although it may be very well constructed with good materials that will enable it to stand for many years, if its use is not rooted in Christ, its spiritual walls will crumble.

This spiritual foundation comes from our relationship with Christ, which is formed and nourished here in this church through prayer and the

sacraments, especially in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The parish offices and gathering space are to be seen as an extension of what takes place here in the church. It is only through a growing relationship with Christ as His disciples that we are able to grow in our relationships with one another in this parish community.

The blessing of your new parish offices and gathering space then, should serve as a renewal in your commitment to the celebration of your faith, especially in the Mass, so that all of the activities which will take place there will be guided and sustained by the power of God, thus ensuring the greatest use of this new space as a place where you will all be built up in Christ Jesus as the household of God, pleasing to the Lord.

May God give us this grace. Amen.