

**Homily for the Dedication of the  
Church and Altar Following the Renovation of  
Sacred Heart Church  
Virден, Illinois**

**January 28, 2018**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

*This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.... The joy of the Lord is your strength.*<sup>1</sup> Father Palakudy, Reverend Fathers, deacons, consecrated religious, members of Sacred Heart Parish in Virден, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: these words taken from the book of Nehemiah set the tone for our Mass today. It is indeed most fitting that we should rejoice, giving praise and thanks to God on this day, when we dedicate the altar and church to the Glory of God, following the renovation of Sacred Heart Church here in Virден.

Each time that I have the opportunity to visit Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, I am always impressed by the magnitude and beauty of this sacred place. In addition to admiring the architectural splendor of Saint Peter's, it is fascinating to watch the many pilgrims who are entering the Basilica for the first time. The common reaction among many of these people is to gaze deep into the church, to the high altar, and to look all around trying to take

everything in; then slowly they raise their eyes to the soaring ceiling above; and sometimes audibly let out a gasp when gazing upon the grandeur that they are seeing. This is exactly what the builders of Saint Peter's Basilica and other similar churches hoped would be the reaction of the pilgrims who visited these sacred places. It was their goal to create an image of the transcendent beauty experienced only in the heavenly realms, so to raise their hearts and minds beyond the pedestrian nature of their daily world to the realities of God and His heavenly kingdom.

So too is the case for us today. Over the course of the past year, a dedicated committee of your parishioners has worked collaboratively with a number of very skilled tradespeople to restore this sacred space to the beauty that was present when the church was built over 100 years ago. Once again, this holy ground raises our hearts and minds from our terrestrial existence to the heavenly kingdom.

Today's dedication Mass provides a unique opportunity to explain the meaning and purpose of this church building through the lens of the dedication ceremony. At the beginning of the Mass today, I sprinkled the entire building — the altar, the ambo, the sanctuary, and you, the people

gathered here – with the blessed water that recalls our own baptism, by which we were made us a part of God’s holy people.

In just a few moments I will proclaim the prayer of consecration over this church and altar by which it will be set aside for the sacred purpose of the celebration of the Mass and the other sacraments.

After this prayer, the altar and walls will be anointed with Sacred Chrism. This chrism, which I consecrate each year during Holy Week at the Chrism Mass in our Cathedral in Springfield, is normally used to anoint the recipients of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders. It is also used for the dedication of the church and the altar, which is a symbol of Christ, the Anointed One, who offered on the altar of His Body the sacrifice for the salvation of all.<sup>2</sup>

Following the anointing, incense will be burned on the altar *to signify that Christ’s sacrifice...ascends to God as an odor of sweetness, and also to signify that the people’s prayers rise up pleasing and acceptable, reaching the throne of God.*<sup>3</sup>

Next, the altar is covered with a white cloth, indicating that the altar is the table of the Lord where the Eucharistic meal is celebrated and where we receive the gift of the divine food as our spiritual nourishment.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the candles at the altar as well as the dedication candles throughout the church are lit. Since the altar is a symbol of Christ, the light signifies that Christ is the *light of the world*.<sup>5</sup> The prayer for the lighting of the church also reminds us that we, who share in His life through Baptism and the Eucharist, are to reflect the light of Christ in the way that we live our lives.

In this way, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is in this sacred space that we, like the disciples, have an opportunity to encounter the Living God. May you, through the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist, come to know our Lord and strive to follow Him as His disciples.

In the scripture passage that we heard from the Gospel of Saint Matthew, the Lord asked Simon Peter, "*Who do you say that I am?*"<sup>6</sup> Because Saint Peter answered by professing, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,*"<sup>7</sup> Jesus proclaimed, "*You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.*"<sup>8</sup> Our Lord asks the same question of each one of us: "*Who do you say that I am?*" If we are able to answer confidently as Saint Peter did, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,*" Christ will build His Church on the foundation of our faith in Him.

As you may be aware, I have a custom of singing in my homilies at Confirmation as well as on special occasions such as this. As we dedicate this sacred space, I would ask that you join in repeating after me this one verse of the song, "Holy Ground."<sup>9</sup> May you always draw your strength from the Lord's presence that dwells in this sacred place.

**Holy Ground**  
**By: Christopher Beatty**

This is holy ground

We're standing on holy ground

For the Lord is present

And where He is is holy

This is holy ground

We're standing on holy ground

For the Lord is present

And where He is is holy

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah 8:9-10

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, ch. 4, *Dedication of an Altar* (hereafter *DA*), no. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *DA*, no. 22

<sup>4</sup> *DA*, no. 22

<sup>5</sup> John 9:5

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:15

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 16:16

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 16:18

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Beatty, "Holy Ground," (Birdsong Music/BMG Songs, EMI CMG Publishing, 1982).