

January 24, 2019 4:30 p.m. St. Clare Parish Mission, Centreville

Dedication and Consecration of the new Church

(Neh. 8:1-4a; 1 Cor. 3: 9c-11, 16-17; Mt. 16:13-19)

“Today is holy to the Lord your God....for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength.” That’s what we heard Nehemiah and Ezra proclaim to the people of God in this afternoon’s First Reading as the people gathered to hear God’s saving Word proclaimed to them. They were overjoyed because their time of captivity in Babylon was over, and they were able to return to the new temple in Jerusalem – it was a time of great rejoicing!

That is clearly the sentiment of our gathering here as God’s Holy People. While you haven’t been in “captivity”, and I know you loved your precious former Church, I also know you have been longing for, dreaming about, and working hard to turn that dream into a reality with this new, beautiful and safe Church, a sacred place where you, and all those who will come after you, can now worship and sing your praises to our loving God. And so, this truly is a “holy” day, both to you and to “the Lord your God”, as we gather to bless, dedicate and consecrate this sacred and brand new St. Clare Church. And, as always, we begin, as Nehemiah reminded his people, by *rejoicing in the Lord*, praising Him for His love for us and giving thanks for all His many gifts – that is what gives us *our strength*.

My dear Father Antony and all my brother priests and deacons; members of the Clergy and sisters and brothers in our Faith in Jesus from the neighboring Christian churches; special guests; Mr. Michael Emmons, Chancellor and Director of Worship for the Diocese; members of the building committee, and parishioners and friends of St. Clare Church – or as Nehemiah summed up all the people gathered in our First Reading: all of us *“men, women, and children old enough to understand”* – How good it is for us to gather on this blustery and snowy January evening to dedicate and bless this beautiful new church of God and to consecrate this new Altar of Sacrifice and these church walls.

A new church building is constructed for many reasons, but for only one primary purpose: to be the place where “the Church” can gather to give praise to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and through Him, to give honor and glory to our Loving Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. Whether it is the huge and historic St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, or the most modest chapel, what makes any church building truly sacred are those who make up the Church who worship there.

That's why we heard St. Paul reminding us about who we are – we are God's building – we are God's temple – we ARE the Church, but only if we have as the "foundation" of our lives Jesus our Lord!

Today's Solemn Mass, which celebrates the Rite of Dedication of a new Church, is one of the most beautiful Liturgies in our Catholic tradition, and it provides all of us with a wonderful opportunity to remember who we are as God's Holy People.

The blessing of ourselves, and this structure, with Holy Water at the beginning of today's Mass is because this building, now blessed, "houses" those of us who have been washed clean in the waters of baptism. That is what makes us "holy ones"; not because we're perfect, for sure; but because we are on a journey of faith which, one day (God willing), when our journey in this life is completed, will lead us into the eternal dwelling place of God in Heaven.

Very shortly we will anoint this new Altar of Sacrifice with Sacred Chrism, because Jesus is "Cristos" – "The Christ"/"The Anointed One". On this altar, we will celebrate the sacrifice of our redemption at every Mass. It is through the Sacrifice of Jesus' Body and Blood on Calvary, accomplished once for all 2,000 years ago, that we celebrate anew in an unbloody way at every Mass, by which Jesus' Body and Blood is made present for us to be our Food and Drink in the Holy Eucharist. In turn, we will anoint the 4 walls with the same Sacred Chrism, because this church building brings together those of us who are also "the anointed ones" through baptism and confirmation in Jesus the Christ.

The Preface for today's Mass of Dedication, which we will pray shortly, gives us a number of powerful images of why the church building is important to us: *"You allow us to dedicate to Your service places designed for Your worship....this work of our hands, this house of prayer....this church is the image on earth of Your heavenly City."*

But as beautiful and as holy as this church building is, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, and as wonderful as it is to dedicate this building to the honor and glory of God and have it be the visible sign to the wider community of Centreville and St. Joseph County of God's abiding presence among us – this building fades in comparison to the "beauty" of who we are called to be as "God Holy People" – we who ARE the Church! A little bit later in the Preface for today's Mass, we are reminded: *"You have established the Church...founded on the*

Apostles, with Jesus Christ its cornerstone...and continue to build Your Church with (living) stones, enlivened by the Spirit, and cemented together by love.” That is who we are, dear sisters and brothers in Christ: we are the LIVING stones – and what gives us LIFE is the Holy Spirit; and what keeps us “cemented together” is the Love of Christ and our Love for one another.

In the Gospel passage we heard just a few minutes ago, we heard those very familiar words of Jesus’: *“You are Peter and upon this Rock I will build My Church.”* Jesus is clearly saying that it is His Church, and yet He has delegated His power and leadership authority to Peter, and the other Apostles, and their Successors. Jesus’ Church was not a fancy, majestic building made of rock; Jesus built His Church on Simon, whose name He changed to “Petra”, that is Peter, which means “Rock”. Jesus built His Church on the rock-solid faith of the one who was able to see precisely Who Jesus is, when Peter answered Jesus’ question to all the disciples *“Who do YOU say that I am?”*.

When they were all guessing some prophet of old, Peter made the essential profession of faith: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”*. That’s what mattered to Jesus. He knew that Peter was imperfect; He knew that Peter would make mistakes; He knew that Peter would deny even knowing Him on the night before Jesus died. It wasn’t perfection Jesus was looking for, but faith. And so while Jesus entrusted His Church to Peter, and to all the succeeding “Peters” down through the history of the Church, Jesus promised that He would remain with the Church, that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church, and that no power on earth, including the power of “the netherworld” would ever prevail against the Church.

We truly rejoice in this special moment in the life of this community of faith – those of you here today and those who came before you – who have worshipped together for the past 57 + years.

St. Clare was established in 1961 as then a part of the Diocese of Lansing, and a mission church of Immaculate Conception Parish. The History of the Parish records that the original members of St. Clare mission parish consisted of 40 families and worshipped in the former St. Paul Lutheran Church, which was purchased for \$3,500. And over these last five decades, with a lot of upgrades and an addition to the building for a very nice parish hall and catechetical center, that has been your spiritual and liturgical home. But for much of that time, there

was always the hope that there could be a new Church, which is what we celebrate today.

But the much more important point is, no matter how modest or how new a Church building is, our primary purpose is to offer our prayers and worship to God. None of you live here. You all live in your homes; you all have other responsibilities. But you come here to give thanks to God, to listen to God's Holy Word, to be nourished by the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist..... And THEN, to be sent forth, back to your homes, to your work places, to your schools, to your lives so that you can "glorify the Lord by your lives", or so that you can "go and announce the Gospel of the Lord".

We come here so that we too can renew the same Profession of Faith that Peter made – to make sure that we know Who Jesus is, and to re-commit ourselves to following Him Who is the Christ, the Son of the Living God; we come here so that we can be strengthened in our resolve to live as faithfully as we can that most important of all our "callings", which is to live lives of holiness, and to be Joyful Witnesses of the Gospel to the world around us.

Today then, we truly rejoice because this is a very special occasion, and this new Church is a "dream come true". But let's always keep in mind, as St. Paul reminds us: we ARE the Church, and as we commit ourselves to stay united to Christ, His promise applies to us as well: He remains with us through His Holy Spirit and the "gates of the netherworld" shall not prevail against us!

That is the cause of our joy! And that is why Nehemiah was right on target: *"Today is holy to the Lord your God...for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength."*

God bless you, now and always!