

July 22, 2018

9:00 a.m.

Sacred Heart, Watson (Allegan)

130th Anniversary and Dedication of the Second Church renamed Sacred Heart Church, 1888-1889; first Masses back to 1856

Scripture Readings: 1 Kings 8:22-23,27-30; 1 Peter 2:4-9; Mt. 16:13-19

My brother priests, deacons, parishioners and friends of Sacred Heart Church: Praised be Jesus Christ! What a beautiful day to celebrate this very special moment in the life of this Community of Faith.

The Church's presence in this beautiful part of Allegan County is long-standing, dating back to the 1850's, not long after Michigan became the 26th State in 1837. It was 130 years ago this year that this very church was built in 1888 and dedicated the following year, succeeding the original wooden church built in 1862 which, due to the growing population in this area, they finally outgrew.

Even before that original church, the records indicate that the Catholic faithful had been gathering in people's homes in this area for prayer and worship, and, when a priest was available, for Holy Mass, since as early as 1856.

This community of faith has worshipped together under the patronage of our Blessed Mother, as the original Church was named St. Mary's; then under the patronage of St. Patrick in honor of the large number of Irish immigrants who made their homes in this area; and then under the loving patronage of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, when in 1888, the name of the Church was changed to its current name.

I really enjoyed re-reading the parish history, and being reminded how the first acres of land were purchased for the church and the cemetery for \$50 and \$60; it was also so very inspiring to know that several families mortgaged their own homes to pool together enough money to build the original wooden church, and then how everyone came together to build this larger, beautiful brick church. This community of faith has always been a mission church, first of all connected with St. Mary's in Dorr, then with St. Margaret in Otsego, then Blessed Sacrament in Allegan, and for the past eight years with St. Stanislaus in Hilliards, which then most recently in 2017 became joined with St. Mary's Visitation in this particular Collaborative. But no matter under what Patronal Name, or connected with which parish, or for that matter associated with which Diocese, first with the Detroit Diocese, then Grand Rapids, and now with our Diocese of Kalamazoo, this

community of faith has been home to Catholics who for many generations now have practiced their faith, handed on the faith to the next generation, and have truly helped to build the Kingdom of God in this part of the universal Catholic Church through strong social and community outreach.

So let's just see: How many of you here today can trace your ancestors back to that first generation of Irish Catholics in the 1850's and 1860's? (*about 1/3 of the church-full of people*)

Ever since that time, through these more than 16 decades, the Eucharist has been faithfully celebrated here in Watson, the faith has been taught and handed on, and God's Presence among us has been celebrated, and has blessed the generations of Catholics who have made their pilgrimage of Faith in this world here in this church.

So, this is truly a day to celebrate all that has taken place here in this very Sacred Heart Church for 130 years, as well as in the first church and other places of worship for these all together more than 160 years.

But in spite of all the accomplishments of those who have gone before us, whether it was your forefathers and mothers who first gathered here to give praise to God, or this current generation of faithful followers of Jesus who are part of this community of faith in 2018, when we as followers of Jesus and faithful Catholic people gather together, WHAT we are doing is much more important than the church buildings that house us. WHAT we are doing is basically what we heard Solomon doing in today's First Reading from the first Book of Kings: we gather to offer our worship and to give our praise to the One Whom Solomon prayed to as the *"Lord our God besides Whom there is no God like You in heaven above or on earth below; You Who keep Your covenant of mercy with Your servants who are faithful to You with their whole heart."* The great Solomon, David's son, and the one whom we know as the truly Wise One, in desiring to build a worthy place---a Temple---to house the Ark of the Covenant, asked an extremely important question: *"If the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain You, how much less this temple which I have built?"* And of course as Solomon reminded us, neither Solomon's magnificent temple, nor this beautiful 130-year-old church, could possibly "contain" God, even though we call it "the House of God".

But this is the place where God chooses to make Himself available to us, and to make His dwelling among us, as we prayed in today's Psalm Refrain: *"How lovely is Your dwelling place, Lord, mighty God."* Whether it's Solomon's Temple or Sacred Heart Church, this is where the People of God gather to celebrate the Presence of God among us.

That's the purpose of any church----to be the place where we come to encounter God. This is a sacred place because God allows Himself to be experienced here among us through the proclamation of His Word and through His Real Presence in the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. What we celebrate here today is the very same celebration of the Eucharist that your great, great, great-grand fathers and mothers celebrated in 1888, in 1856, and the very same Eucharist that Jesus gave to us at the Last Supper.

That's why this Church, and every church, is holy and why our celebration today is so special---not only because this building has lasted for 130 years, but also because of what this church building represents in the community, because of the sacredness of what is celebrated in this church building every week, and because of you, your holiness, because you are God's *"holy people"*, who gather together in His Name.

That's what we heard in the Second Reading this morning from St. Peter's first Letter. He taught us all so beautifully when he said: *"Come....like living stones; let yourselves be built into a spiritual house....to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own so that you may announce Jesus' praises."* Just as we honor and give thanks for this building made of bricks, wood, and stained glass, so we---those who are the "living stones" because of our Baptism into Christ---come here to offer our thanks and praise to God as members of the Body of Christ vibrant and active in this part of the world.

Today's powerful Gospel Reading lets us know what Jesus means when He talks about "Church". As Jesus and the Apostles were making their way to Jerusalem, and they passed through the area of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the Apostles: *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* And we know that they spoke all at once telling Jesus what THEY were saying: Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah---maybe one of the other Prophets. But then Jesus turns to them; He doesn't ask them what they think about that first question---who did they think the Son of Man was. He asks a much more profoundly important question: *"But you---who do you say that I am?"* Only Peter

was willing to speak up and say what they were all beginning to realize: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"* And we know Jesus' response almost off by heart: *You are truly blessed, Simon son of Jonah.*

There was more too as Jesus says: *"You are Peter/Petra; and upon you---the Rock---I will build my Church."* And then, Jesus gave Peter divine authority thru the symbol of giving him the "keys to the Kingdom of Heaven" to bind and loose on earth as it would be acknowledged in heaven. This was the beginning of Jesus' Church, built on the authority of Peter, and composed of those who acknowledge Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God". The Church would eventually become commissioned and begin it's mission on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit empowered the Apostles to go forth to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Good News of Jesus' Victory over sin and death.

And that's how your ancestors, traveling from Ireland in Europe to Watson, Michigan in the United States, placed themselves under the patronage of the Blessed Mother, St. Patrick and the Sacred Heart, as they faithfully lived out their strong Catholic faith. They came together to be the "Church" here in this part of the world, which has, over these generations, now brought us all together, who are a part of the Catholic Church, and who are the presence of the Church, alive and well, here and now, in this part of the Diocese of Kalamazoo.

Here, in this Church, we learn and grow and find comfort/direction in our faith, we deepen our Love for Jesus in the Eucharist, and most of all, we know, and live our lives according to the answer to Jesus' most important question: Who do YOU say that I am?

When we not only KNOW the right answer, but live our lives and make our daily life choices motivated by that answer, THAT is what makes today's celebration one in which we can truly rejoice. When what happens in this Church building enables us to BE the living, practicing, and faithfully witnessing members of the Church in the world, then not only are we giving thanks to God, but we will also hear Jesus say to us what He said to Peter: *"Blessed are you!"*

Through the intercession of our Blessed Mother, St. Patrick, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, may Solomon's prayer be the prayer we offer with joy today, and repeat every day: *"Look kindly on the prayers and petitions of Your servants; may Your eyes watch night and day over this temple...and may You heed the prayers which we, Your servants offer in this place."* Amen!