

4th Sunday of Easter

22 April 2018

Closing Mass at St. John Bosco Church in Malone

“...and there will be one flock.” (*Jn. 10:16*) Baptism is so very important. Each time we enter any Catholic Church, as we dip our fingers into the Holy Water font, we are reminded that, through the waters of baptism, we are all members of the one family of faith, the one Body of Christ. Every one of us is called to follow Jesus Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Baptism is the great equalizer—we are all equal in the eyes of God: Pope, consecrated religious, bishop, priest, deacon, lay woman or lay man. No one is better than anyone else.

As we walk the journey of life, we are gifted with a local family of faith, a parish of our neighborhood where we are nourished, supported and challenged to follow Jesus. Back on March 4, 1935, Bishop Conroy established St. John Bosco parish in this neighborhood of faithful Catholics in Malone.

This parish patron, Father John Bosco, upon his ordination as a priest, began working with orphans over in his native Italy. He had such a difficult time obtaining the services of young priests to work with the outcast orphans that he began to train his own priests. They formed the Salesians, back in 1859. Today is World Day of Prayer for Vocations. We seek St. John Bosco’s powerful intercession, as we continue to pray for an increase in Church vocations in our Diocese, from Malone.

The first Mass of this new parish was offered in the basement of this church building on Christmas Eve in 1935. In 1963, Bishop Navagh entrusted the care of the folks here to the Pallottine Fathers who served here so faithfully until 1990. We thank God for their dedicated ministry here at St. John Bosco, those twenty-seven years. We are so grateful to all the clergy and consecrated religious who have served here at St. John Bosco through the years. I have such fond memories of your native son, Fr. Norman Poupore, who died back in 2014. The Catholic faith was nurtured here so well.

There has been no more difficult a task that I have had since being installed as Bishop of Ogdensburg than to make the decision, after much prayer and consultation, that a parish church must close. Within my first couple of years as bishop I had to approve the closure of three Catholic Schools and even more parish churches. One of those schools was almost in my back yard growing up (Champlain) and two of the parishes I closed were nearby parishes to my home: Coopersville and Churubusco.

When I looked out at the people of those parishes, I saw my relatives, classmates, lifelong friends and neighbors who were baptized, made their First Communions and Confirmations in that church. They were married and buried their deceased loved ones from the very parish church that was about to close. The closing of the doors of these Houses of Worship all happened under this local boy’s watch. In a just few weeks, I will soon go back for final Masses

in the parish where I was baptized and another parish, my sister-in-law's home parish where she married my brother. Closings touch my life, personally, as well.

And now, today, I look out into this congregation and see the faces of women and men who, through the waters of baptism in this St. John Bosco Church, became members of the Body of Christ. And, likewise, many of you made your First and then received a lifetime of Holy Communion here. You were confirmed in the faith and many exchanged your wedding vows at this altar. Some of your loved ones were buried here and this faith family gathered together at their funerals to support one another and pray for the repose of their souls.

While this is surely a sad time and certain mourning should be expected, we know that we live under God's providence. We remember that He has a plan, all the details of which we do not know, but we do know and firmly believe that the Easter message that we preach is the message of Jesus, risen from the dead. The brightness of this message brings the apostles out into Jerusalem to preach and to do works of healing, stories about which we have been hearing this Easter Season from the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospels.

Jesus' rising from the tomb lifts the clouds that threaten to darken our lives. St. John, writing many years later, rejoices in the beauty of the Easter message. We are children of God, he says. By belonging to Christ, by virtue of our baptism, we have become God's children. His concern for us is total; his love for us is complete. In His risen life, He now embraces us. We are His brothers and sisters, children of the resurrection. That is why Peter in our first reading is so happy to tell the whole world about the risen Lord. That is why he is not afraid anymore.

Maybe, if we find the future unclear and we harbor fear, resentment or even anger, we should remember that the Church has been doing pastoral planning since the First Pentecost as Jesus' first disciples prayed and considered Jesus' mandate: "Go, teach all nations." And so we do. Jesus has placed you and me here, at this time in history, to grow closer to Him, to worship Him, and to share our faith with others by word and deed.

We must make a special effort to pray for vocations to the consecrated religious life and ordained ministry. We must continue to create a culture of vocations, strengthen faith formation in family life, and build vibrant parishes. We stir into flame our own faith and those of our family members so that the pews in our churches are filled once again. I should be opening new parish churches and Catholic schools, not closing them.

Keenly aware of the critical shortage of priests and the need to address pastoral planning in the Diocese of Ogdensburg, as you know, this will be the last Sunday Mass celebrated at this St. John Bosco Church. Masses will continue to be celebrated at St. Andre Bessette parish and the Sacraments administered. This sacred structure will continue to be used as a valuable parish pastoral outreach center.

I want to thank Fr. Giroux for his pastoral leadership...he has a very difficult responsibility in tending to the pastoral needs of the local church, particularly, given our dramatically changing demographics—smaller families, folks moving out of the area, religion on margins of our society today. We don't learn in the seminary how to attend to the specifics of parish reconfigurations and closures. This is OJT for all of us.

Again, it's so important to remember that the pastoral care of all the parishioners here continues. The Catholic Church has not moved away. If I could, I would like to share with you part of a reflection by a parishioner of St. John Bosco that I found printed in the 1989 Newsletter of this parish. The author wrote: "*Pain and joy certainly go together – for this is growth. We may feel only the burdens at times and not the joy, but by opening ourselves up to Christ and trusting in Him by sharing our burdens eventually we will reap the joy that is within us. Thus we rise to a new life, too, as we allow Jesus to transform us into His likeness.*"

This morning, let us thank the Lord for the gift of St. John Bosco Church and for all who, through the years, have made this a truly sacred home. I give thanks to Almighty God for your faithfulness and continuing support. As we move into the future, *Christ-fed, Christ-led, and Hope-filled*, let us pray for each other and support one another in our common journey to the Father. Through it all: May God be praised...forever may God be praised!