

Homily of Bishop Terry LaValley
July 7, 2018 – 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Final Mass at St. Joseph's Church in Malone

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 become members of the one family of faith, the one Body of Christ. Each of us is called to follow Jesus Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

As we set out and 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. Over one hundred fifty years ago, St. Joseph's began. Since that time, through serious fires and other challenges, faith-filled parishioners of St. Joseph's have built up the family of faith in this neighborhood.

A new chapter in the faith history of this local community is being written today as we respond to changing demographics up here in the North Country. As we turn the page and begin this new chapter, we look forward and will not be discouraged from living our faith just as enthusiastically as the generations did before us.

I'm reminded of a quote by a parishioner that was printed in the local paper at the time of the 1970 dedication of this structure after the dreadful fire. It said, "With a great deal of *faith*, *courage* and *self-denial* a new church building went up, a new church with no capital at the start." My sisters and brothers, these same virtues will be called upon as we close St. Joseph's Church today.

We have *faith* in God's providence, His plan for us. We possess the *courage* and trust that God's Spirit is present and guiding us. We accept the *sacrifice* that comes with leaving this church building as we thank God for the graces received and cherish the memories of these many years.

Faith, courage, and the sacrifice of parishioners would not allow horrific fires to have the last say. Similarly, your active participation in the life of your family of faith of St. Andre Bessette continues the Catholic faith legacy here in Malone. Our faith assures us that through this most difficult time, as the Psalmist insists, "Our eyes are fixed on the Lord." With St. Paul, we hear the Lord tell us that "His grace is sufficient for us." These days call for you and me to have a fresh outlook, a creative spirit, and energy borne of hope founded on the love our God has lavished upon us. We 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.

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 extensive consultation, that a parish church must close. Since my consecration as your bishop, I've had to close too many

schools and parish churches. Last month, I celebrated the closing Mass at the parish where I was baptized (St. Joseph's in Mooers). 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. Joseph's 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 of you 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. God 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 remember that He has a plan, all the details of which we do not know.

It's natural to take a look at life up here in Northern Tier and compare it to what it used to be. I drive through our villages and reminisce about the good old days. But, you know, in our own families, as the years go by, we adapt to changes. The kids move out. Many find jobs and move out of this area. Our needs change, so we adapt for the sake of the family. Sometimes, we move out of the homes where we raised our families. But family remains intact, even growing. Of course, we feel badly when we move out of our home, but we move forward because it's the right decision for today.

The Church isn't going anywhere. Your pastor, Father Giroux, faithful deacons, and staff will continue to minister to your pastoral needs. Masses will continue to be celebrated at St. Andre Bessette Church and the Sacraments administered. We must continue to create a culture of vocations, strengthen faith formation in family life, and build vibrant parishes. I know St. Joseph's has nurtured several Church vocations and we are so grateful. We are so appreciative of all who have pastored this parish through the years. We are truly graced to welcome back to this Mass Fathers Dan Keefe and Jim Shurtleff, two of your much-loved former pastors.

We stir into flame our own faith and those of our family members so that the pews in our churches are filled once again. 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 Mass celebrated at this St. Joseph's Church. I want to thank Fr. Giroux for his tireless pastoral leadership. He has a very challenging responsibility in tending to the pastoral needs of the local church, particularly, given our dramatically changing demographics.

This afternoon, let us thank the Lord for the gift of St. Joseph's 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 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. St. Joseph, pray for us. St. Andre Bessette, pray for us.