

100th Anniversary
Saint Peter Vietnamese Catholic Community
Homily
Bishop Richard Pates
June 28, 2015

Today's scriptures ground us in the essentials of our faith featuring two of the principal founders of the Catholic Church, the Apostles Peter and Paul.

Peter clearly proclaims the identity of Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." For this assertion, Jesus establishes Peter as the rock on which he will build his Church. During the 100 year history of St. Peter's Church in Des Moines, the constant thread that winds its way through the different phases of its varied history is the clear conviction that we firmly hold with Peter that Jesus is the Son of the living God. The St. Peter Community exists to keep alive this relationship with Christ and to benefit from participation in the life of God made present in this community.

Paul, in turn, speaks of his ministry in proclaiming the Gospel. It has consumed him. His special work was to extend the good news of salvation to the Gentiles – literally to all people of the world. In its history, St. Peter's has served the Anglos – those whose heritage is European origin. As a site of Our Lady of the Americas it focused on the Hispanic community. Finally, in these last days, those of Vietnamese origin have come together to be at the center of the parish community.

Of particular note is that the physical plant or the location of the churches and school are secondary to the very purpose of the gathered community – to experience the companionship of a loving and caring God who enters into our lives in a very direct way through the sacraments and parish life.

The parish was established on the southeast side of Des Moines in 1915 by Bishop Austin Dowling. The first pastor was Father George Toher. One building at that time served as both the church and school. Teaching at the school were the Sisters of Mercy of the Omaha Province.

The school served the St. Peter community until 1980 when the parishes of Visitation, St. John's Basilica and St. Peter formed Holy Family School which today is located on the Visitation/Our Lady of the America site. It remains the Catholic school of the three parish families. It is a thriving and effective learning center dedicated to the education of minorities and recently arrived immigrants.

Father Toher served as the pastor of St. Peter's for two years. He was succeeded over the course of 80 plus years by ten pastors a number of whom were of Irish descent attending to a community which basically traced its heritage to European origins.

In the course of its history, the church experienced a fire in 1949 and a new church under the leadership of Pastor William J. McMahon was built and dedicated by Bishop Edward C. Daly on October 23, 1960. It is the beautiful church in which we are gathered in today – a testimony to the vision of the parishioners following World War II.

At the close of the twentieth century, Des Moines witnessed a significant wave of Hispanic immigrants from Latin America. In order to provide for the language and cultural aspects of the faith of these newcomers, two parishes Visitation and St. Peter were combined into one parish – Our Lady of the Americas. On January 1, 2004, the former parish was now designated as the St. Peter's site of the new entity – Nuestra Senora de las Americas.

In order to bring the community together and to reduce costs, Our Lady of the Americas was later consolidated at the Visitation site. It was at this point, that Bishop Pates in conversation with leaders of the Vietnamese community, who were envisioning a Vietnamese center, came together and established St. Peter's Vietnamese Catholic Community on November 30, 2008.

Under the guidance of Father Ly Chu and energetic lay leaders, the Vietnamese community rallied strongly to update the church, the parish hall and the parish center. Much of the accomplishment is due to their personal energy in the form of physical labor classically known as “sweat equity.”

All of the parishioners both Anglo and Vietnamese are to be richly commended for the investment of your energy and personal gifts to the re-awakening of this parish of St. Peter. It keeps alive the traditions of St. Peter over the decades as well as those of your homeland, Vietnam, contributing to the rich and varied tapestry of the Diocese of Des Moines, embracing many nationalities and traditions. I commend all and assure you, as your Bishop, I am very proud of you.

The truth that emerges from the rich history of St. Peter’s “parishes” over these 100 years is that the buildings, while obviously beautiful and treasured, exist to serve the faith. We come together whether in liturgy, in sacramental celebration, in catechesis or social gatherings to activate the truth in our times what Peter attested of Jesus: “You are the son of the living God, you have the words of life.”

The history further testifies through its European, Hispanic and Vietnamese stages that it is the one God who comes to pitch his tent among the human family, a message that Paul conveyed as far as he could reach in his day. Indeed, St. Peter’s has been one parish for 100 years testifying to the fact, that it is the one Jesus always richly present and living in its different peoples, expressed so beautifully in varied language and culture.

Our hearts today are full of gratitude for what God has enabled St. Peter’s to be over the past century – an oasis of prayer and love from which God’s mercy has most generously flowed. May this spirit continue to enrich all of us in the next century so we, his sons and daughters, indeed all God’s family, may experience his salvation and unending love.