

Homily
Dedication, St. Joseph's Church
Winterset, Iowa
Aug. 23, 2009

Today, heartfelt congratulations are in order to Father Chris Hartshorn, the parish leadership including the trustees, Parish Council, Finance Council all of the chairs, committees, individuals indeed the whole parish community who have been extraordinarily dedicated and worked so hard to come to this point – the dedication of your new St. Joseph Church. You have constructed a beautiful temple of the Lord.

The sentiments in our hearts are similar to those of Ezra and companions some 2500 years ago when he proclaimed: “Today is holy to our Lord. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength.” (Nehemiah 8,10)

With the dedication of this Church, the parishioners of St. Joseph have established another milestone in the history of your community. You join the insightful pioneers of St. Joseph who recognizing the primacy of God in their lives, sacrificed much in 1877 for a simple wooden church and equally so in 1911 for a beautiful brick church which has served so well to this day.

In building this House of God all of you have done the same as your forebears and now carry the torch forward. You have done so that God may be worshipped, that his name be known, that his love be planted and through the ongoing transformation of a people bring light and hope to the world and enable His Kingdom to come about in 2009 and decades to come.

In building this Church, you have made a more significant work in Winterset's history than the covered bridge or the world famous quilts and I even dare say it exceeds the exploits of your native son, John Wayne.

For here you have constructed a temple of the Lord where our God regularly visits and communicates with his people and puts us in touch with our eternal destiny. All material reality will fade but God's love and life born herein will last forever in each of us.

Here we as humans encounter the divine and are forever transformed.

Whenever we are sprinkled with holy water as happened today or bless ourselves from the font as we come and go we remind ourselves of our identity. We have been initiated into God's family. The waters of baptism washed away our sins and

established each of us as a beloved daughter and son of God. Mindful of this identity we commit ourselves to a way of life – our actions give witness to the fact we belong to God.

Gathering here weekly and aware of our relationship with God individually and as His people we join together in this sacred space in worship that is life-giving. God’s Word is proclaimed as has been done today from the books of Nehemiah and Revelation and the Gospel of John.

In the first reading we are taken aback when we hear that we should rejoice at the proclamation of God’s law. Human nature almost instinctively resists the imposition of authority or law and its seeming restriction. We want to be independent and free. But compliance with God’s law and continuing absorption of God’s Word into the very fabric of our very being achieves the opposite. For God’s law and God’s Word gives birth to love in our hearts. We are in turn then able to love others, all others, fulfilling our purpose as human beings and arriving at our deepest identity. When we arrive at this point we arrive at authentic freedom. No wonder the prophet Ezra upon the proclamation of the law insisted: “Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing must be your strength.”

Our celebration of Mass in this place moves from the table of the Word with its call for continuing conversion to the Table of the Eucharist where we become one with Jesus the priest in the perfect expression of love.

The Israelites of old tried to compensate for their failings, renew their covenant with God, demonstrate their dependence on God through sacrifice – most often animal sacrifice. These expressions reveal the innate need in the human spirit to both worship and appease God . . . to somehow connect and reconcile.

The Israelite sacrifices as well as those of other faith traditions were imperfect and required repetition. Purely human and with our limited ability we are not capable of making the definitive connection with God.

The fullness of revelation came with Jesus. Being fully human exactly like you and me and fully Divine exactly like the Father and Spirit he was able to finally establish the unbreakable bond between God and the human race. And his sacrifice, the giving of himself fully and for all time gave perfect worship to the Father and reconciled us with Our Father. The motivation and unifying

force for Jesus was love – love of the Father and love for each of us – his sisters and brothers in the human family.

This sacrifice and our participation in its timeless reality occurs for us at St. Joseph Parish at the altar now to be consecrated. For here Jesus becomes truly present as the priest calls down the powerful Holy Spirit to change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus. And we as a baptized people, a priestly people, a Holy people are joined as the Sacrifice of Jesus is once again made present and together in, through and with Jesus we offer perfect praise to the Father and our redemption is assured.

To symbolize the centrality – the focal point of the Altar in this church, after invoking the saints of the church and we include all of those involved on the 138 year history of St. Joseph Church, I will take Sacred Chrism and rub it into the grain of the Altar.

Chrism is the special oil and balsam consecrated by the Bishop at the annual Chrism Mass and then distributed throughout the Diocese to mark and brand each person baptized, each person confirmed, each person ordained to priesthood in their relationship with God and with one another. In consecrating the altar with chrism it bonds each of us so consecrated with the same chrism to

this altar and enables us to be one with Jesus as from this altar the return gift to the Father is made.

The unity that we as people of God have is enhanced from this altar as we are fed and nourished with the body and blood of Jesus . . . growing ever more in the very life of God which as been shared with us.

The realization that the Church building provides the setting and space for the actualization of church which in fact is you and me in community is clear in the words that I will soon speak in this ceremony of dedication when I say:

“In dedicating these sacred objects, let us never forget that the Church of God is represented here in this place; the Church herself is made of living stones – the baptized in communion with each other from all times.”

Thus, beyond dedicating this building, we are called to dedicate ourselves with the realization that as Church, as God’s Holy ones, as His people – we are the timeless ones.

And in dedicating ourselves we commit to an integrity of life – so that what we hear, say and do within these walls of St. Joseph becomes the substance of our life everywhere.

Our continuing conversion in accord with the mind of the Gospel and our ever fuller identification with the sacrificial love of Jesus in the Mass mold us to be who we are in our marriages, in our roles as fathers and mothers and sons and daughters. From this identity we derive the vision for our social, economic, civic way of life. We become committed to justice, peace, compassion and sacrifice for the sake of others. Because Jesus lives in us – the Kingdom of God is present in our day through us.

Come, therefore, my friends. Let us dedicate this beautiful space, these sacred objects to God’s service and God’s work. But more importantly, let us dedicate ourselves anew as His living stones – as those privileged to be anointed by the Spirit of God.

“Today is holy to our Lord. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing must be your strength.”