

50th Anniversary Mass

“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church.” Jesus proclaimed, – upon you, Peter, upon the rock of your faith – I will build my Church

How privileged some have been to hear this singular gospel proclaimed at the very entrance to Peter’s tomb in his Basilica in Rome, the main altar directly above the burial place of the first apostle and Michelangelo’s dome soaring 394 feet above that.

One who has had that opportunity can reflect how wonderfully, how wonderfully literally, have the Lord’s words to Peter been fulfilled: St. Peter’s Basilica is a monument for all ages to the indefectibility of our Catholic Church, our Catholic Faith: I will be with you all the days—even to the end of the world.

One cannot be certain that Jesus was envisioning the far off construction of St. Peter’s Basilica when he made this promise almost 2 millennia ago. What Jesus most certainly did envision at that moment, however, were the thousands, yes the billions of those who, down through the centuries, would become his disciples through the preaching and the shepherding of Peter, the apostles and their successors, the bishops, right down to this present day.

Since those very beginnings, faithful disciples have gathered to fulfill the Lord’s Holy Thursday command: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Leaving the Upper Room, they always sought a fitting space for the celebration of the Eucharist. In the earliest days we see them gather around the table in the home of one of the believers. Then huddled before the tomb of one of the catacomb’s martyrs. Then, in east and west and for centuries thereafter, assemblies of the faithful, living stones of the Church, took great pain and pride with brick and stone to fashion temples in which their risen Lord could continue to offer His Father fitting worship through, with, and in his priestly people. Whether splendid in their simplicity or opulent in their magnificence, Eucharistic churches are their people’s treasure, often the result of the willing offerings and the extraordinary sacrifices of her poorest members, gifts made in the Spirit and generosity of Christ Himself.

So it was in our Country, the Catholic Church's premier Cathedral, the first in the United States, was dedicated 188 years ago to the Assumption of Our Lady. Designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, our Nation's first professionally trained architect, the Basilica has been known as the "St. Peter's of North America," host to the early provincial and plenary councils which gradually and successfully charted the course of Catholic America's very beginnings. Restored and rededicated three years ago through the herculean and continuing efforts of Cardinal William Keeler, the Basilica of the Assumption of Our Lady was further blessed with a younger sister, of sorts, this grand co-cathedral of Mary Our Queen whose golden jubilee we are so happy to celebrate today.

The gift of a grateful department store entrepreneur, Mr. Thomas O'Neill, the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, the Archbishop's Church, boasts a lively Catholic community with a highly respected elementary school, programs for old and young, and outreach to poorer parishes of the Archdiocese, to the hungry of Our Daily Bread and to the troubled, expecting single mothers seeking help to have their baby.

Our readings today give us insight into the way this grand Cathedral should serve the community. Ezekiel witnesses the vision of the living waters flowing from the temple, waters which cleanse and give life to the world outside of the temple. So too, the Life and the Grace that come from this temple, not the grand stonework or the graceful windows, but the grace of ordinary bread and wine transformed into Christ's Body and Blood, the grace of ordinary men and women transformed into the living Body of Christ. This is the grace, you are the grace that flows from here into the community, to refresh and renew this city and this culture.

Pope John Paul II emphasized this during his visit here in October of 1995, saying:

When Cardinal Lawrence Shehan of Baltimore publicly defended the civil rights of African Americans almost 30 years ago, he was expressing a moral truth about the equal dignity before God of all human beings. The same convictions lead his successors and should compel all of you today to defend the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death, to care for and protect the unborn and all those whom others might deem "inconvenient" or "undesirable." That moral principal is not alien to America, but rather speaks to the very origins of this notion.

Do not the majestic spires of this house of God serve as reminders to the thousands who pass by daily on this busy thoroughfare, reminders of the Church's role in this and in every community, in proclaiming in a myriad of concrete ways, God's love for every human being?

Might not, should not, these spires remind all who see them of the Catholic beginnings of Maryland, especially in a time when some would mute the Catholic voice addressing major moral issues of the day: the sacredness of marriage between a man and woman, conscience rights of health care providers, the obligation of all toward the alien and stranger, the basic and prior right of parents to educate their children with assistance from their own taxes, the right of the poor to proper housing, health care, safe streets and quality education.

The America of the 21st century would have been difficult to imagine in 1959 when this Cathedral church opened its doors to the people of the Archdiocese and became the center of our liturgical life as a community of Catholic Faith. Religious freedom and the rights of conscience are being challenged in 21st century America as they have not been challenged for decades. Yet this local Church, from which so much of the Catholic experience in America springs, has long been familiar with challenge.

The vibrant presence of this Cathedral and her daughter churches in towns and villages throughout our Archdiocese is a daily reminder that secularism is not the religion of an America whose motto is "In God We Trust," and whose founders "proclaimed the self-evident truth that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights grounded in the laws of nature and of nature's God."

In this Mass, we salute Thomas J. O'Neill and all those like him who showed their gratitude in great generosity whether of large amounts or of widows' mite, all of the sacrifices that have brought us to this day. In a particular way, we celebrate our Cathedral's rectors. Founding rector, Monsignor Thomas A. Whelan, whose chalice, left to the then young curate, Fr. Paul Cook, we are using today. Past rectors who concelebrate today: Father Al Rose, and of course, Bishop William Newman. And how could we fail to recognize the rector of this past quarter century, the indomitable, irrepressible Monsignor Robert A. Armstrong. All ever guided by Archbishop Francis Keough, Cardinal Lawrence Shehan, Archbishop William

Borders and Cardinal William Keeler.

We look forward to the future with all its challenges, convinced that Mary Our Queen will ever intercede for us with her Son and will richly reward you and future generations of good Catholics as you make whatever sacrifices necessary to keep these stones living and proclaiming the glory of God.