

Blessing of New School and Parish Center - St. Louis Parish, Clarksville

Introduction

First, allow me to say what a joy it is to offer Mass once again here at St. Louis Parish, and to join you in giving thanks for the completion of the beautiful new Parish Center and Gymnasium. Yesterday I was here to take part in a program for the deacons of the Archdiocese; Msgr. Luca took the occasion to give me a whirlwind tour of the new facility - Warmest congratulations! This is the result of wise planning, great generosity & hard work on the part of many - but all of us know that Msgr. Luca's strong and loving leadership was essential to this wonderful accomplishment! Warmest thanks!

I look forward to blessing this beautiful new facility after Mass and remaining for the parish celebration that will follow. It is always a joy to pray and celebrate with this family of faith here at St. Louis.

A Tale of Three Vineyards

And now, taking my cue from today's Scripture readings, I would like to speak briefly with you about three vineyards and parish, viz., yours. And without further ado, let's make our way into the first of them.

This is the vineyard that belonged to Isaiah's friend as described in our 1st reading. Isaiah's friend did all the things one is supposed to do to create a great vineyard. He chose fertile land, cultivated it, planted the choicest vines, adopted the best security measures of the day and had a winepress ready for the harvest. But all he got for his trouble were wild grapes. Isaiah used his friend's sad experience as metaphor for God's people. God chose them as his vine, brought them through the desert and planted them in a fertile land, cultivated them with his Word, and watched over them... The Lord had spared nothing in establishing his vineyard on earth and now he was looking for a harvest of righteousness and peace; but instead he reaped the wild grapes of sin and rebellion. Isaiah makes clear that God would not ultimately

tolerate such an outcome.

Since things aren't going so well in the first vineyard, let's quickly move to the second, the one which Jesus described in today's passage from the Gospel of St. Matthew. Jesus describes this 2nd vineyard much the way Isaiah described his friend's vineyard. The landowner "planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower" - all the things that made up a first class vineyard back in the day. Now, Isaiah does not tell us who worked in his friend's vineyard but Jesus *does* tell us that landowner hired tenants to work in the vineyard. When the landowner sent his servants to obtain the harvest, the tenants treat them shamefully. When the landowner sent his son to reason with the tenants, they killed him. Reading between the lines of this parable, you get the idea that if the tenants had labored generously and produced a good harvest, the landowner and his son would have dealt generously with them. It is not hard to see that God the Father is the landowner who sent his only begotten Son not only to reason with us but to save us. The vineyard is the Church, the vine, God's people, the hedge is God's law of love, the winepress is our share in the sufferings of Christ, and the tower is the Father's providential care for us. The harvest, the good fruit which God the Father wishes to gather from us are the fruits of the Holy Spirit by which we show that we truly belong to Christ: "charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity" (CCC, no. 1832).

Well, I promised you three vineyards and knowing you are giddy with anticipation at the prospect of finding out just what that 3rd vineyard is, I now invite you to consider the 2nd reading from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. While this reading makes no mention of a vineyard or a garden, St. Paul does speak to us about what a well-cultivated and fruitful church looks like. After all, it was Paul the Apostle who was sent by Christ to Philippi to plant the seed of the Word of God and to provide it with good pastoral care. You can see how St. Paul cultivated that vineyard in today's reading where he says: "Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you." Like Isaiah's friend and the landowner we met in the Gospel, St. Paul is expecting good fruit from the Philippians: If they respond to the way in which he cultivated them in Christ, they too will produce a wonderful harvest for the Kingdom of God: "whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely and gracious, if there is any excellence and if

there is anything worthy of praise...”

Three Vineyards and a Parish

Well, dear friends, it's time to bring all this home, home to Saint Louis Parish in Clarksville, Maryland. If ever there were a carefully planted vineyard, this must it. Like the vineyards described in Isaiah and in the Gospel, this parish is a truly beautiful. Its beauty and functionality has been greatly enhanced by the wonderful new Parish Center and Gymnasium we are about to bless.

But its beauty is not merely outward for here the vine of the Lord's Church has been carefully tended and the Son of the Eternal Father has been warmly welcomed, and the harvest remains abundant... To confirm this, all I have to do is to think of the number of priestly vocations that have come from St. Louis Parish and God willing, will continue to come. All I have to do is to think of you, the families of this parish, who take your faith seriously, try to hand it on to your children through the school and the religious education program. The harvest is also evident in the loving outreach of this parish to those in need.

And yes, all of us struggle with sin and human frailty, all of us know there are regions of the soul that need to be cultivated, yet in the midst of it all, here is a wonderful parish where you can experience “the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.” At the end of the day it is up to each of us to respond to God's grace so that we might be fruitful branches on the vine and so that the life of Christ growing in us might be transmitted to those around us, including those who no longer practice their Catholic faith.

On this happy day of dedication and blessing, I pray that the Lord will always bless his portion of the vineyard we call St. Louis Parish and make it always extraordinarily fruitful for the glory of His Name and the salvation of our souls. God bless you and keep you always in His love!