

Cathedral Rededication and Diocesan 150th Anniversary Homily at Mass

It is a joy to return to Savannah for another historic, jubilant day in the life of your Diocese as you mark your 150th anniversary. I had come for the Episcopal ordinations and installations of Bishops Lessard and Boland, and I thank Bishop Boland for the gracious invitation that underscores the historic links between this See and the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Seven of the first eight bishops of Savannah were ordained bishops by Archbishops of Baltimore, four of them at the historic mother cathedral of our country, now known as the Basilica of the Assumption.

The Reading from the First Book of Maccabees recalls the exuberant and holy joy of God's people at the re-consecration of the Temple. They celebrated the event with "songs, harps, flutes, and cymbals." Today, as three times in the past, the Diocese of Savannah dedicates its central place of worship, the mother church of 79 parishes and missions across Georgia. In 1853, Bishop Gartland celebrated the expansion of the parish church of St. Joseph into the first cathedral of the infant diocese. In 1876, at the invitation of Bishop William H. Gross, Archbishop James Roosevelt Bayley came from Baltimore to bless the new cathedral. Bishop Augustin Verot, who had been bishop here through the 1860's, returned from St. Augustine to celebrate the Dedication Mass and Bishop Patrick Lynch of Charleston preached the sermon.

Twenty-two years later, a devastating fire reduced most of the Cathedral to ashes. Bishop Thomas Becker called forth every effort to speed its restoration, but he died the following year, in 1899. His successor, Bishop Benjamin Keiley, selected October 28, 1900, one century, one month and one day ago, for the dedication of the rebuilt

edifice by the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Sebastian Martinelli. On that Sunday morning, the congregation must have felt themselves in the antechamber of heaven.

Once again, the Church of Savannah celebrates its Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist. From foundation to new roof, the venerable building stands renewed, with plaster and paint giving a fresh glory to the interior, and new systems in place to illumine the church and fill it with the sounds of prayer and preaching and God's praises sung with power. Through the remounted stained glass windows pours sunlight, a reminder of the love of God that surrounds and sustains us on our pilgrim way.

In the second reading the Apostle Paul moves us from celebrating the completion of a physical building to reflecting on the dynamic reality of the spiritual building of the Church, the Body of Christ. It rests on the one foundation of Jesus Christ, and individuals can build upon that foundation with various kinds of motives, energy and commitment. The Apostle writes of those who build with "gold, silver, precious stones," the unselfish, faith-motivated generous movement through life of people whose serenity and kindness reflect the gospel values taught by Jesus. There are others who build with "wood, hay or straw," fashioning in a half-hearted, distracted way a less worthy structure but still one related to the Lord.

The Apostle reminds us of our dignity, the dignity of every baptized person: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" With that dignity, the liturgy today recalls for us, is a destiny, a destiny that is eternal and one in which those who worship God "must worship in Spirit and truth." The passage from the Gospel of John opens the way for us to see how we should be positioned in this Year of the Great Jubilee 2000. Jesus is meeting the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well near Sychar, a city of Samaria. We learn that Jesus was tired from his journey and that the disciples had gone to buy food. The Lord is shown as alone, weary and fasting. He begins a dialogue with the Samaritan woman, who

came to draw water at the well.

He asks her for something to drink. She is astonished and she a