

Mass at the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere

I. Introduction

It is a particular joy for me to celebrate Mass here in this Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, during these days which bring me to Rome to receive the Pallium from the Holy Father, symbolizing my communion and that of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the first of the dioceses of the United States, with the Holy Father and with the Holy See.

II. Link with Baltimore

This ancient and venerable Basilica we are in today has a special link with the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The patroness of the Premier See of the United States is the Blessed Virgin Mary, and by some accounts (including the inscription on the Bishop's chair) this is the first church dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God. Significantly, too, this Basilica is likely the place where Mass was first openly celebrated in this City. Here the Eucharistic sacrifice has been offered to God for nearly 18 centuries.

Moreover, from 1887 to 1921, the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere was the titular church of James Cardinal Gibbons, the ninth Archbishop of Baltimore.

III. Cardinal Gibbons

When he took possession of this church on March 25, Cardinal Gibbons stood beneath these magnificent 12th Century mosaics, placed here by Pope Innocent II. Here he highlighted this fact that, whereas this was likely the first church dedicated to the Mother of God, so too the first cathedral in the United States, the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is dedicated to Our Lady as well.

On that day, he gave thanks to God for the blessings of liberty bestowed by the Creator on us all, which found particular expression in the American experiment. So memorably, he said "[W]ithout closing my eyes to our shortcomings as a nation, I say, with a deep sense of pride and gratitude, that I belong to a country where the civil government holds over us the aegis of its protection, without

interfering with us in the legitimate exercise of our sublime mission as ministers of the Gospel of Christ. Our country has liberty without license, and authority without despotism.”

In the legacy of Cardinal Gibbons, we recognize with gratitude the heroism of those who have gone before us, as they showed to all the world that loyal sons and daughters of the Church are always loyal sons and daughters of their native land.

IV. Our Call Today

This right and duty, however, belongs not just to the past. In our own day, American Catholics are called — with an urgency unseen in our lifetimes - to exercise particular vigilance for the gift of religious liberty.

Today we remember that, but for the grace of God and the bravery and generosity of those who have gone before us, the Faith may never have reached us, and we might never have come to know the life of grace that is found in Jesus Christ, and the Church might never have come to flourish in the United States.

The Church has flourished in our land, and for that we give thanks to God. But at the same time, when the Church grows strong, her members are susceptible to becoming complacent. We as Americans are so used to the idea of religious liberty that to some degree we take it for granted. Yet when religious liberty is taken for granted, then this, the first of our liberties, is most in danger of being taken from us.

Indeed, on that spring day in 1887, Cardinal Gibbons also noted, in words which can be spoken as truly now as then: “There are, indeed, grave social problems now employing the earnest attention of the citizens of the United States.”

He continued, however:

“But I have no doubt that, with God’s blessing, these problems will be solved by the calm judgment and sound sense of the American people, without violence or revolution, or any injury to individual right.

V. Conclusion

So together, building on the legacy of Cardinal Gibbons, and with the certainty that

we are accompanied by the prayers and the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, patroness of this Basilica, of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and of the United States of America, we pray:

O God our Creator,
through the power and working of your Holy Spirit, you call us to live out our faith in the midst of the world, bringing the light and the saving truth of the Gospel to every corner of society.

We ask you to bless us in our vigilance for the gift of religious liberty. Give us the strength of mind and heart to readily defend our freedoms when they are threatened; give us courage in making our voices heard on behalf of the rights of your Church and the freedom of conscience of all people of faith.

Grant, we pray, O heavenly Father, a clear and united voice to all your sons and daughters gathered in your Church in this decisive hour in the history of our nation, so that, with every trial withstood and every danger overcome—for the sake of our children, our grandchildren, and all who come after us—this great land will always be “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.