

Passing on our Faith

The Catholic Review

Last week, I had the privilege and honor of preaching the homily at the Mass to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Parish of the Most Holy Trinity in Augusta, Georgia.

Though I had ties to the community dating back to the 1970s, I was asked to preach at this momentous occasion because of my succession to Archbishop John Carroll. It was Archbishop Carroll who, two centuries ago, founded the parish. Though in Georgia, the parish was under his jurisdiction as Archbishop of the Premier See-in 1810, the Archdiocese of Baltimore stretched from Maryland to the Florida Panhandle and west to the Mississippi River.

It's easy for us to forget the instrumental role the Church in Baltimore has played in the spread of the Catholic Church in the United States. And though the growth of the U.S. population seemed to occur quickly and with ease, the spread of Catholicism proved much more difficult for my predecessors.

In my homily in Augusta, I recounted for those present one of the many challenges facing Archbishop Carroll as he oversaw the propagation of the faith 200 years ago in that area of the Archdiocese. Archbishop Carroll's eminent biographer, Dr. Annabelle Melville wrote: "One area John Carroll had never succeeded in pacifying was the region of the South. The issues of Trusteeism and independent churches reared their ugly heads in Norfolk, Virginia, in Charleston, South Carolina and in Augusta, Georgia."

Even the clergy he appointed to help chart the course for Catholicism presented a challenge. Of the first pastor of Holy Trinity Parish, Augustinian Father Robert Browne, one historian wrote that he "remained insubordinate and bothersome to the end."

At a time when young America was inhaling the fresh breezes of independence after the Revolution and the War of 1812, Father Browne seemed to be one of those who

wished a similar and complete independence of the Church of Augusta from the Church of Rome.

In fact in 1817, Fr. Browne left his post in Augusta to travel to Rome to argue for the order of bishop on behalf of his collaborator, Fr. Simon Felix Gallagher of Charleston. Their plan was to have Gallagher made the bishop of Georgia and the Carolinas. They failed, gratefully, for historian Msgr. Peter Guilday suggests “Gallagher and Brown seemed to have formed a conspiracy to control the Church in the states of North and South Carolina and Georgia and they nearly succeeded in setting up an independent church in this country.”

Few dioceses in the years of the 19th century Trusteeism escaped severe divisions and near schisms. These were years of growing pains in a land of democracy, Catholics striving to find the balance between the new American experiment and the ancient Church of Rome founded by Christ upon the Apostles and their successors, the bishops.

To remember such moments of tension that in some, hopefully, lesser degree mark every parish even to this day, is to understand, in the words of our Catechism of the Catholic Church, that

“The Church is both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities... so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinate to the divine, the visible to the invisible.”

That divine, invisible reality in the Church of every age is the Holy Spirit promised by Christ to his Apostles at the Last Supper. This is how the Church—through her vibrant and life-giving parishes—has survived for 2,000 years. It is what likely prompted one Church historian to remark: “No American institution has endured throughout our national life as firmly as the parish. It is a haven and home, the stamp of spiritual identity.”

This celebration of their parish by our Cousins-in-Faith in Augusta is an apt reminder for each of us of the importance of the parish in our own faith lives and the life of our Church. For the many early years in American history when Catholics were not

accepted into the larger community because of their faith, their language or their customs, they gained their sense of belonging by gathering as parish communities and experiencing the unifying strength of the Spirit. And in modern day, when advanced technology can tend to isolate and depersonalize, the parish again should play a critical role.

I offered similar reflections just two days later as I celebrated the Mass to dedicate the new parish hall and catechetical center at St. Ignatius Church in Hickory. The oldest continually active parish in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, St. Ignatius is a perfect example of what Pope John Paul the Great stressed some 10 years ago: "The importance of the parish in welcoming the stranger, in integrating baptized persons from different cultures and in dialoguing with believers of other religions stems from the mission of every parish community... This is not an optional, supplementary role for the parish community, but a duty inherent in its task as an institution."

A glance at any Catholic parish bulletin gives evidence that these vital worshipping communities still serve as spiritual, educational and social hubs for so many of its members. For Catholics, it is the parish that is the most important part of the Catholic Church, their primary experience of the Church, existing not for itself, but for the mission of Christ.