

July 17, 2016 - 2:00 p.m. - St. John Church (Sts John/Bernard Parish)

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time and 125th Anniversary of St. John Parish

My brother priests, including all the living former pastors of St. John Parish—and deacons, newly-appointed pastor, Father Stanley, and dear parishioners of St. John and Bernard Parish—all of us gathered in the oneness of our faith: praised be Jesus Christ!

On this mid-July summer day, even as we join with the rest of the Catholic Family throughout the world celebrating the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we come together this afternoon to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the establishment of this great parish.

On July 14, 1891, the church record indicates that a large group of 1,500 people joined together with Bishop John Foley, the Bishop of Detroit to celebrate the dedication of the cornerstone for the newly-established parish of St. John the Evangelist here in Benton Harbor. Within a year, the first St. John Church—built on this very same location—was completed and dedicated in 1892 at a cost of between \$12,000 and \$15,000!

Now—125 years later—we gather together in this new St. John Church—built in 1938) and renovated and upgraded several times since, and joined together with St. Bernard Parish just 20 years ago—to celebrate and give thanks for all that has taken place to bring five generations of people the good news of the Gospel, the teachings of our Catholic faith, and to bring salvation and eternal life to tens of thousands of people over this century and a quarter.

1891—Just think about what a different world people lived in. Michigan had become the 26th state just 54 years before in 1837. The country was still trying to heal following the devastating Civil War 25 years earlier. The gasoline powered automobile was just making its debut on American roads. And in the life of the universal Catholic Church, people were even then trying to adapt to the recent changes effected by the First Vatican Council, which concluded in 1870—just 20 years earlier (primarily enunciated the doctrine of papal infallibility). The 1,500 people who gathered together with Bishop Foley 125 years ago on July 14th were truly living in a different world.

But, they shared the same faith as all of us who are gathered here five generations later. They professed the same Nicene Creed—they found comfort,

new life, mercy, strength and grace in the same seven Sacraments—they grew in love for God and for their neighbor through listening to the same Scriptures—and in a very particular way, they found their weekly nourishment, strength and intimate union with Jesus through the regular celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

St. John Parish, like every parish, was united with all the other parishes in the Diocese of Detroit and in unity with their Bishop—even if he lived all the way in Detroit—and in union with the Holy Father who at that time was the great, Pope Leo XIII.

For 125 years here in Benton Harbor the faith has been taught, the mission of the Church has been continued and the Kingdom of God has been furthered.

Now a vibrant and valued parish within the Diocese of Kalamazoo, and united with St. Bernard Parish for these past 20 years, we pause to give thanks for all that has been since 1891, and we recommit ourselves to continuing to teach the Faith, spread the Church's mission and further God's Kingdom of justice and peace here among us.

Because whether we were among the first of Jesus' 12 Apostles and other original disciples gathered in the Upper Room on Pentecost, or living in the early years of the Church during times of great persecution, or 125 years ago among our spiritual ancestors who established this parish, or looking around at ourselves here and now, what is central to the work of the Church is what we heard in today's Scripture Readings: to have a fervent, intimate, Mary-like love for Jesus; to sit at His feet to listen to and be taught by His Sacred Heart; and to allow that love for Jesus to motivate us with a Martha-like energy to reach out with loving hospitality and to serve those in need with the love of Jesus.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Genesis showed us an aged-Abraham, with whom God had already established a Covenant but before He revealed that He would be the father of countless number of the chosen people, demonstrating what true hospitality is all about. And as Abraham showed those three traveling strangers such loving hospitality, he came to realize that they were God's angels, who in turn revealed to Abraham that he and Sarah, in their old age, would be blessed with a son.

Today's Gospel passage follows immediately last Sunday's passage in which Jesus taught the powerful Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where He will encounter the Cross. But since He is passing right

through the village where His dear friends, Martha and Mary lived, He decided to stop for a visit. We're all familiar with this story—how Martha ran around in a frenzy throwing together a meal for their dear friend, while Mary sat quietly at Jesus' feet to visit with Him.

Sometimes this Gospel passage is seen as a “choice” between the spirituality which calls people to be engaged in acts of service to others, and that which calls people to a contemplative life—to a life of prayer and reflection. A “choice” that some people like to make between the “do-ers” and the “pray-ers”, if you will. Martha, who is quite upset, tries to get Jesus to side with her, and asks Him to tell Mary to help her. Jesus simply says: *“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her.”* In other words we need both—but it has to begin with a deep and personal love for Jesus, which then will clearly lead us to an active life of service to others. Our prayers to Christ lead us to Christ-like service.

Pope Francis has been calling the entire Church to be renewed in our faith and to remember what is most important and essential to our faith. He recently described the Church found in the parish in this way: “The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities, the parish encourages its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.” (Evangelii Gaudium, #28)

That sounds a lot like St. John Parish, doesn't it? St. John Parish has taught the faith, both here in the parish and through the foundation of the schools that were built as an essential part of the parish's mission as soon as it could do so, which has now evolved into Lake Michigan Catholic Schools. In the late 1950's the parish began broadcasting the Sunday Mass on radio to the shut-ins, and as an early effort at evangelization, which continues to this very day... In the mid-to-late 1970's and early 1980's, St. John Parish established the Catholic Community Center, Readiness Center, Soup Kitchen and other needed social outreach to the community, which also continues to do so to this very day. The St. Andrew Evangelization programs recently established are focusing on ways to help the parishioners to be evangelizers. St. John, now enriched by St. Bernard, is truly a parish that is a community of communities, helping people to sit at Jesus' feet to

grow deeply in love for Him, and to reach out in loving service, sharing that love for Jesus with the world.

On this 125th anniversary of the founding and dedication of the cornerstone of St. John the Evangelist Parish, we have many reasons to give thanks for all that has been done to pass on the gift of our Catholic faith—for the tens of thousands of times the Mass and the sacraments have been celebrated, the Gospel has been preached, and the faith has been taught, shared and spread.

But we too are living in a different world—a world that is drifting further away from God and God's ways—a world that is experiencing great uncertainty and insecurity—a world that is in desperate need for God, whether they think they do or not. Just as Pope Francis is urging us to do, we must think about new ways—creative ways—to go beyond the walls of the Church building to take the Gospel to those in need through our Catechetics, through our New Evangelization and through our Catholic charity. Strengthened with Mary's love we must go forth with Martha's passion and energy.

When our children and our successors gather to celebrate the 150th anniversary in 2031 and the 200th anniversary in 2082, may we find an even more vibrant Parish community committed to teaching the same truth of the Church, and the same creed of our faith, as members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

God bless you, now and always!

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley