

October 8, 2017

10:30 a.m.

St. Stanislaus Parish, Dorr

125th Anniversary of Dedication of the Church, October 8, 1892

Scripture Readings: 1 Kings 8:22-23,27-30; 1 Peter 2:4-9; Mt. 16:13-19

Praised be Jesus Christ! What a beautiful day to celebrate this very special moment in the life of this parish community.

It was 125 years ago today---October 8, 1892---when the early residents of this Hilliards/Dorr community, most of whom had just recently immigrated from Poland to this area by way of either Chicago or New York, to avail themselves of the rich agricultural lands of this still-mostly-undeveloped area of the relatively-new state of Michigan, completed and dedicated this very church building. Under the watchful eye of the first pastor, Father Casimir Wolajjts, ground was broken just 6 months before that, but through the hard work of the people themselves, many of whom provided the field stone from their own property which was used to build the foundation, and some professional architectural work from people in Grand Rapids and the Paddock Brothers local Brick layers, this church was built for the amazing cost of \$33,000, which today seems so inexpensive, but then was probably quite huge.

I really enjoyed re-reading some of the early history about the festivities of that day, which described an excursion train of six coaches that brought people from Grand Rapids, and a steady supply of beer provided free of charge by the Toledo Brewing Company to be sold that day as a fund raiser to offset the costs of construction (which also might be why the history adds that the local Sheriff and Prosecuting Attorney were also invited to help maintain the peace). These were some of your parents and grandparents four or five times removed who, through their hard work, great sacrifice and strong faith, provided this Church for the glory and praise of God which has stood here for a century and a quarter. How many of you here this morning can trace your ancestors back to some of these founding members? Those first Catholics had been in this area for a number of years already, practicing their faith by attending other churches nearby in Byron Center or New Salem or Grand Rapids, or sometimes in the home of one of the early strong Catholic leaders, Michael Burkhardt, when a priest was able to travel to this out of the way Polish Station already under the patronage of St. Stanislaus. Of course, while sacrificing themselves by traveling some major distances on foot or in a horse-drawn buggy to be able to get to Mass elsewhere, they were putting their initial efforts into building a school right here so their children could get a good education, and arranged for the Felician Sisters to come

here from Detroit to teach, which they did for more than 100 years before there were no more Sisters to send.

But being able to have their own parish church, and their own priest who could preach and hear their confessions in Polish was what they were dreaming for, and that dream came true 125 years ago today. And ever since that time, through these more than 12 decades, the Eucharist has been faithfully celebrated here in St. Stanislaus Church, and the faith has been taught here in this School to those children who have attended, as well as through the strong religious education programs for the other children and adults.

So, this is truly a day to celebrate all that has taken place here at St. Stanislaus for 125 years plus! But as worthy of praise as are all the sacrificial accomplishments of those who have gone before us, whether it was in 1892 when our forefathers and mothers first gathered here to give praise to God, or now on October 8, 2017 when we are gathered here, what we are doing is what is more important than church buildings, or whether we got here on horseback 125 years ago or in our modern “horseless carriages” today. What we are doing, which this Church has provided us the space to do, is the very same act of worship that we heard Solomon teaching us about in today’s First Reading from the first Book of Kings.

The great Solomon, David’s son, and the one whom we know as the truly Wise One, had a similar goal: to build a worthy place for the Ark of the Covenant---the very Sign of God’s Presence among the Jewish people---so that it could have a more permanent dwelling place. But this very wise person asked an extremely important question to God the Most High: “*If the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain You, how much less this temple which I have built?*” And of course the answer is that neither Solomon’s magnificent temple, nor this beautiful 125-year-old church “contains” God.

But it is the place where God chooses to make His dwelling, as we prayed in today’s Psalm Refrain: “*How lovely is Your dwelling place, Lord, mighty God.*”

Whether it’s Solomon’s Temple or St. Stanislaus Church, this is where God’s People gather to celebrate God’s Presence among us. And Solomon’s prayer from today’s Reading is precisely what we need to pray as well: “*May Your eyes watch night and day over this temple....and may You heed the prayer which we, Your servants, offer in this place....Listen from Your heavenly dwelling, and grant us Your pardon.*”

That's the purpose of any church----to be the place where we come to encounter God. This is a sacred place because God chooses to allow Himself to be experienced here among us through the proclamation of His Word and through His Real Presence in the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. While there have been changes in some of the external aspects of the Mass, what we celebrate here today is the very same celebration of the Eucharist that your founding fathers and mothers celebrated on October 8, 1892, and the very same Eucharist that Jesus gave to us at the Last Supper.

That's why this Church is holy and why our celebration today is so special---not only because this building has lasted for 125 years; but because of what this church building represents in the community, and because of the sacredness of what is celebrated in this church building every day, of every week, in each of the 6,500 weeks that make up these 125 years.

Today's powerful Gospel Reading reminds us of the moment when Jesus taught us what "Church" really is. As Jesus and the Apostles were making their way to Jerusalem, and they passed through the area of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the Apostles: "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" And we know that they spoke all at once telling Jesus what they were saying: Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah---maybe one of the other Prophets. But then Jesus turns to them; He doesn't ask them what they think about that first question---who did they think the Son of Man was. He asks a much more profoundly important question: "*But you---who do you say that I am?*" Only Peter was willing to speak up and say what they were all beginning to realize: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*" And we know Jesus' response almost off by heart: You are truly blessed, Simon son of Jonah. It's interesting that Jesus refers to him according to his given name, Simon. Because Jesus is about to change his name from Simon to Peter, which comes from "petra", which means Rock! And the reason for that was because Peter's answer was so insightful that Jesus knew that he could not have come to that conclusion on his own; he had to have been inspired by His heavenly Father through the Holy Spirit. And so he says: "*You are Peter/Petra; and upon you---the Rock---I will build my Church.*" There was more too as Jesus gave Peter divine authority thru the symbol of giving him the "keys to the Kingdom of Heaven" to bind and loose on earth as it would be acknowledged in heaven. But this was the beginning of Jesus' Church, built on the authority of Peter, and composed of those who acknowledge Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God".

The Church would eventually become commissioned and begin its mission on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit empowered the Apostles to go forth to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Good News of Jesus' Victory over sin and death. And that's how your ancestors, traveling from Poland to Hilliards, and placing themselves under the patronage of the great Polish Saint Stanislaus, Bishop of Krakow and Martyr for the Faith, and Patron Saint of Poland, motivated by their strong Catholic faith, established this Church, which for generations has brought all of us together who are a part of the Catholic Church, to BE the Church Alive when we gather here as God's People.

In the Second Reading this morning from St. Peter's first Letter, he taught us all so beautifully when he said: "*Come....like living stones; let yourselves be built into a spiritual house....to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own so that you may announce Jesus' praises.*" Just as we honor and give thanks for this building made of field stone and bricks and lumber, and decorated so beautifully, a building which has stood as a constant witness to the rest of the world for 125 years, so we---those who are the "living stones" because of our Baptism into Christ---come here to offer our thanks and praise to God as members of the Living Body of Christ.

Here, in this Church, we learn and grow in our Faith, we deepen our Love for Jesus in the Eucharist, and most of all, we know, and live our lives according to the answer to Jesus' most important question: Who do YOU say that I am? When we not only KNOW the right answer, but live our lives motivated by that answer, that is what makes today's celebration truly one in which we can truly rejoice. When what happens in this Church building enables us to BE the living, practicing, and faithfully witnessing members of the Church in the world, then not only are we giving thanks to God, but we will also hear Jesus say to us what He said to Peter: "*Blessed are you!*"

Through the intercession of St. Stanislaus, and our dear Blessed Mother under the patronage of Our Lady of Czestochowa, may Solomon's prayer be our prayer: "*Look kindly on the prayers and petitions of Your servants; may Your eyes watch night and day over this temple...and may You heed the prayers which we, Your servants offer in this place.*" Amen!