

JUNE 24, 2018 - SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

Reading 1 [IS 49:1-6](#); [PS 139:1B-3, 13-14AB, 14C-15](#); Reading 2 [ACTS 13:22-26](#); Gospel [LK 1:57-66, 80](#)

HOMILY:

Last week, I introduced to you the “Gathered in Your Name” proposal, which has been under consideration by the parish’s Pastoral Council as part of its envisioning of the upcoming 2020 observance of the 75th Anniversary of St. Edward Parish. This project seeks to address our need for a more ample space for our church family to gather. This week, I would like begin to speak more directly to the Rationale for this project.

The Catholic Bishops speak in their document *Built of Living Stones* from the year 2000 about the proper design and, by extension, renovation of churches. Among the many aspects of Catholic Churches (Altars, baptismal fonts, Eucharistic chapels, etc.) they also add the following statement on the importance of a gathering space: *“The gathering space helps believers to make the transition from everyday lives to the celebration of the liturgy, and after the liturgy, it helps them return to daily life to live out the mystery that has been celebrated.”*

What might they mean by this? To shed some light, I would like to share an experience from my recent travel home to see my father, brother, and his family. Since I’m not able to be home very often, we’ve learned we have to be very deliberate and intentional about how these visits go. My father, the family “social director,” is always ready to let us all know where and when (NOT “if”) the gathering of the whole family will occur, a gathering which always includes a meal. This last time, we were told by the Social Director to be at my brother’s house for a meal “sometime after 4 pm.” *Why such an imprecise time?* Of course, because our gatherings are more than merely a “feed.” They are food for our family’s soul! We would never think about arriving exactly at an appointed time, sitting down immediately to eat, and then saying our goodbyes. “Sometime after 4 pm,” for such a rare family gathering, means some time in what my brother calls “the living room,” where, before dinner, we reestablish ourselves as a family by getting “caught up” and sharing our lives. Only later, after this is over, would we think about “the business” of a meal. While the conversation continues during the eating, it is enhanced and prepared because we had some time to gather in the living room. Then, it would seem the very model of rudeness (or at least a sorry shame!) if one of the family, with the completion of dessert, would immediately declare, “Well, see ya!” Instead, we always go back to the living room, and rather than getting caught up, the focus shifts to where we’re going from here—what’s on the schedule the next days and weeks until we meet again. Anything less than gathering, sharing and meal, and then gathering after the food is gone seems abrupt, incomplete, and quite unsatisfying! This last visit, there was a necessary outlier! My niece Alexis (She loves when I mention her in homilies!) arrived home from work just at the time the meal began, and then, since she is also a college student, had to immediately proceed from the feeding to the feeding of her mind, in preparation for an exam the next day. Everyone understood, but my visit with Alexis was wholly less than I’d hoped. I want more than a quick meal with her—I really love to hear how she’s doing!

As with our families, at least when we’re at our best, so too with our family of faith. It is for this reason that Catholic churches through the ages often have included an ample gathering space for the community, where, as the bishops suggest, we believers *“make the transition from everyday lives to the celebration of the liturgy, and after the liturgy, it helps them return to daily life to live out the mystery that has been celebrated.”* There are many practical and important pragmatic considerations about why a church building benefits from a gathering space. But, in the end, it is about providing a “living room” where our faith community can gather before and after the “source and summit” of our faith, the Eucharist. We Catholics do not discover God alone—we prove, time and time again, each week, that how we discover God is as Jesus promised we would: when “two or three are gathered together in His name” (Matt. 18:20).

The primary motive behind our “Gathered in Your Name” project is to provide us a place where it is easier to grow more fully and richly into a community of faith where we discover together the Living Lord. The Rationale Statement, now posted on our parish website for you to read at your convenience, begins with this essential good

and then speaks of specific ways this will happen. But, before I say more, *a word about the past*. The Church building that our ancestors have given has served us marvelously! Imagine the life and faith that has been experienced here! Some might therefore say, “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it!” However, it’s not a question of being “not broke”—it’s a realization that we can build what already has been given to us into more—more for our present and for our future as a parish community. *Change is not necessarily a critique of the past but it can be a hope for more.*

The Rationale Statement then speaks to how an enhancement of our parish building will, in specific ways, help our community to gather more fully in particularly important occasions. **Welcoming:** The space will serve as an open, hospitable place for us to welcome not only parishioners who attend Mass each week, but also those who may be joining us for the first time. We must not underestimate the experience of those who are our visitors, who could remain “strangers” when our architecture lacks a place of welcome before the praying assembly attends to the ritual of the liturgy. **Community Gathering:** We do not gather for Sunday Mass as strangers; we gather as a community of faith. A gathering space will offer a place for us to gather with our brothers and sisters in faith before and after Mass. Jesus intended us to discover Him as the Living, Risen Lord with others. The stronger is our community, the more fully this will be realized. **Space for Families:** Currently, parents do not have many options for places to take their children if they “need a break” during Mass. This space will allow parents and children to stay connected to the liturgy if they have to step out, especially with increased visibility between this proposed gathering space and this, our worship space. **Accessibility:** To get into the Church through the front entrance requires one to walk up twelve steps, many of them *outdoors*. The new gathering space would be designed to eliminate the necessity of using steps to get into the Church proper. While our church does have an elevator, outdoor steps (especially in the winter) are unsafe for all and are remarkably difficult to maintain for safe use. **Funeral hospitality:** There is little space available for visitations prior to funerals. The space currently available can be unsafe, due to the steps in our current vestibule. The new gathering space would provide a safe, open, and hospitable place during this sacred time for families. In this tender time, we want to be able to provide for families a spacious, safe, and welcoming place where they can receive the comfort and consolation of friends and the parish family. **Relocation of Parish Offices:** Our parish offices are the place where many of the interactions of our parish family occur. The current location of our office, in a building originally constructed as a residence for our priests, increasingly presents difficulties for such interactions. The multiple sets of steps can be an obstacle to accessibility to many. Even more, parish offices more proximate to the parish church (and with additional needed meeting rooms) will render staff more visible and available where and when our parish family gathers.

What about the Parish Center? This building, as mentioned previously, was originally designed primarily to be a residence. The proposed return of this space to its original purpose (pastor’s residence) will allow us to make the accessibility modifications to a residence that would not be possible, according to building code, if the building remains an office space. Furthermore, it would be the hope to offer hospitality and residence to some retired priests, to provide them support in their retirement and to benefit from their ongoing pastoral care to our parish.

Of course, mere church architecture is no guarantee of a vibrant family of faith within! It is for this reason that that same document of the bishops that prompts us to include a traditional gathering space in our church buildings adds, “In every church building, art and architecture become the joint work of the Holy Spirit and the local community, in preparing a place to receive God's Word and to enter more fully into communion with him.” Both are needed: a place of welcome and welcoming hearts! We must continue to do our part, in architecture and in words and gestures, to prepare this place where the Lord will complete this sacred work with His Holy Spirit and gather many by His Word more fully into the Communion with Him that is nothing less than the fullness of life itself, and have it in abundance (*cf.* John 10:10).

Our continued consideration of “Gathered in Your Name” fits well on this Feast of St. John the Baptist. The Baptist, whose very life was dedicated to prepare the way for others to discover the Lord, displays what we hope will happen more fully at St. Edward. St. John the Baptist, model of humility, help us by your prayers, that our efforts and sacrifices may prepare the way for generations to come to be gathered in the Holy Spirit by our Savior Jesus Christ into the fullness of life that the Kingdom of God promises. To Him be the glory, for ever and ever!