Sustaining the Legacy

A Statement from Reverend Father Robert T. Cooper to the Parishioners of St. Benilde Catholic Church

My Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

The celebration of St. Benilde’s 50th Anniversary reminds us that Christian people living in the midst of the world’s history are like Janus of Roman mythology, who looked simultaneously forward and backward. Fifty years of celebrating baptisms, first communions, matrimonies, and hearing penance; fifty years of educating young people, forming married couples and caring for the elderly, and we have done all that by God’s grace. Our look back at fifty years of this parish’s life gives us courage and hope for the next fifty years to come.

As we gather this day with great joy in our hearts and gratitude to God, I want to propose to you a text that marks a similar turning point in Sacred Scripture: the opening seventeen verses of St. Matthew’s Gospel. Here St. Matthew recites seventeen verses of names stating “who was the father of whom” for forty-two generations. It seems like mere background information which one might be tempted to skip over or even ignore. However, in St. Matthew’s understanding of the Gospel, and in the logic of the New Testament canon that places Matthew’s Gospel first, this genealogy is the proper beginning for the story of Jesus. Why is Jesus’ family history so important at this juncture in Sacred Scripture?

Jesus’ genealogy serves two purposes. First, it tells us just who Jesus was. The original readers of this Gospel were Jewish people, who St. Matthew believed could best understand Jesus if they knew how He fit into their history. "You know who Abraham was," he says, "and Isaac and Jacob and David and Solomon. This Jesus, the Christ, is their descendant."

Second, this list of generations told St. Matthew’s readers the meaning of their own history. In Jesus’ day, the people of Israel looked to the past for their purpose. They were the people who had been delivered from Egypt, had received the Ten Commandments, and had inherited the Promised Land. But they had become subjects
of one foreign empire after another, and they were inclined to see all their glory in the past; they also felt as though God had abandoned them. In this long genealogy of Jesus, St. Matthew tells them, "The meaning of your history is not in the past, but in the present. The significance of Abraham and Jacob and David is not that they lived in the 'good old days' when God really cared, but that they were forerunners of Jesus." The importance of Israel's history, for St. Matthew, was the outcome toward which it was leading for those forty-two generations: the birth of the Savior.

St. Matthew's two reasons for beginning his Gospel with Jesus' genealogy suggest a Christian view of history that shapes our reflections on this anniversary. First, as a parish we are formed and identified by our history, by where we have been in our past. And second, the meaning of that history is determined by the future, by where our history is leading us.

Henry Ford once said that history is bunk. We all know that isn't true, and perhaps no institution is more clearly defined by its history than the Church. The Christian faith is based on a collection of writings that dates from antiquity. We read the stories about what God did for His people thousands of years ago: about the birth of Isaac, the burning bush and the parting of the Red Sea, about David and Goliath. We tell the story of the risen Savior just as it was told the first time, two thousand years back in our history. That ancient Word seizes our attention and makes us the people of God.

Our faith is further shaped by the centuries of Christian history since Sacred Scripture was written. We make our confession in the words of ancient creeds; we sing hymns hundreds of years old; we practice rites and liturgies older than the languages in which we recite them. And of course on this 50th Anniversary we remember the history of this parish family: the members of your own families who have been born, baptized, confirmed, married and buried here; the traditions that you have created, and that have in turn made you the people you are. Today we are proud to say that we are part of that whole history, just as Jesus was part of the history of Israel, all forty-two generations from Abraham on down.

We owe who we are to our past, our heritage, our upbringing and education, our traditions. You and I, and this parish family, are products of where we have been.

St. Matthew also knew that the past is not enough. He wanted to correct the vision of those people who always looked to the past for meaning. The real point of all those generations of Israelites, he claimed, was that they were leading up to something that was to follow them. We can learn a lot from the past, but its most important function is to lead us into the future. Jesus made that very clear. He told His disciples to remember what He had done, but He also turned their attention to the future task that His ministry was preparing them for: "Go and be my witnesses," He told them. "Go and work in the vineyard. Go and make disciples." Jesus never let His disciples dwell on what had already been done. Their purpose was not to be found in where they had been, but in where they were going.

Our faith is born and nurtured in a historical experience, in what God has done for us in the past, but it always leads us into the future. As a parish family today, our anniversary celebration naturally turns our gaze back on our history. But we must let
that history be part of our movement into the future. Jesus has commissioned us and sent us into the world with a mission: how will we fulfill it?

We have a responsibility to our young people, to form them as disciples of Jesus. We have a responsibility to our elderly, to help meet their needs in a changing world. We have a responsibility to the community around us, to proclaim the good news of salvation and to be examples of Christ’s love. Let the stories of faith, commitment, and service that are told today as we remember the history of this parish strengthen you, prepare you, and propel you into the next fifty years of your ministry in this place.

The question "Where are we going?" has a still greater significance, because as Christians we know that our history has an eternal direction, an ultimate goal. In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ the world has been set toward its final moment, in which it will be both finished and begun anew. We – along with Abraham and Sarah, Boaz and Ruth, Joseph and Mary, and hundreds of generations of the sons and daughters of God – are part of the history that flows into God’s own eternity. The promise that the future is ultimately in God’s hands is the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day. It is our faith in the end of time that directs our journey through time.

The Church is the first-fruits of the Kingdom of God, the first dawning of God’s presence in the world in our day. Its purpose is both to remember God’s faithfulness, kindness, mercy, and providence through our history up to now, and to move us and our world toward the mission and ministry that God has given us.

So during our 50th Anniversary celebration, we stand at a place much like the place from which St. Matthew told the story of Jesus. We look to our history – the history of God’s people, of the Catholic Church, of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, of this parish family – remembering who we are and where we have been. And at the same time we look to the future, remembering what we have been put here to do and where we are going. Our history is always leading us somewhere; our glory as God’s children is always yet to come.

And so we come today, to gather at a place where we can speak to God, to pray, to listen to the teachings of the apostles, to form a community of faith, and to celebrate the Eucharist. We come together here to recognize that for fifty years we have been alive in the spirit, blessed in God, and to say ... today is our moment!