



Homily for 6/28/2020

External Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul
Extraordinary Form

Very Rev. J. David Carter, JCL

Today we celebrate an External Solemnity of the Patronal Feast of our Parish. Sts. Peter and Paul are the patrons of our parish and their feast day of June 29, is this year the 130th anniversary of the dedication of this beautiful church. In the General Rubrics for the Roman Missal issued in 1962, we find in paragraph 356 it says “The ‘external solemnity’ of any feast means the celebration of the feast . . . , for the good of the faithful, . . . on a Sunday when the feast occurs during the week . . .” We further read that an External Solemnity belongs by right to: “the anniversary of the dedication of the church itself in which the Mass is said and to the titular feast of the church itself” both of which apply to us here. Finally, the rubrics indicate that “If an external solemnity belongs to a feast by right, it may be held . . . on the Sunday immediately preceding or immediately following . . .” Thus, for the good of the faithful of the Basilica parish, noting the very special privileges afforded us on our titular feast day and the anniversary of this magnificent Church’s 130th dedication, we are able to offer this Mass of Sts. Peter and Paul today.

St. John Henry Cardinal Newman once famously said, “To be steeped in History is to cease to be protestant.” It was this realization of the power of history to confirm the Universal Church that led him to make a profession of the Catholic faith. I propose that the same can be said about our own local history and for our present circumstances. The ancient Christian religion that is the Catholic faith has been practiced in the city of Chattanooga for almost 170 years! The parish of Sts. Peter and Paul was erected in 1852 to serve the growing population of Irish immigrants that had come to Chattanooga, in particular, to help build the railroads for which this city would eventually be known. However, it wasn’t until 1890 that this present church was able to be built. The history from the founding of the parish till the dedication of the church is inspiring, and it can help us contextualize the present circumstances we are enduring. For 38 years before this present church was constructed, the community grew in the midst of great adversity. There were many obstacles to overcome, and yet, by faith and God’s grace, the good people of this parish were able to overcome them all to produce the building whose 130th anniversary we mark today.

The first great adversity they faced was a tremendous anti-Catholic bias and prejudice against the Irish immigrants in the middle of the 19th century, even to the point of whole political movements like the ‘know-nothings’ and businesses posting signs like ‘No Irish need apply’. They were the poor, the downtrodden and the outcast of society, and yet they were faithful, and the Lord blessed their faithfulness. Then came war. From 1861-1865, the United States was locked in a death struggle that left hundreds of thousands dead and a society torn apart by racial and ideological divides, some of which continue to today. In fact, even as those poor downtrodden outcasts of society were trying to build a church and laying the foundation of this present building, the war came to Chattanooga, resulting in the dismantling of all their hard work up until that point, with the stones and building efforts going instead to siege works in defense of the city. The result was that the planned sanctuary was delayed by decades. But they were patient, and the Lord blessed their patience. Then came natural disasters. In 1878, the Yellow Fever struck this fair city and left hundreds dead and dying. For those who think that our present calamities are the end of the world or somehow unique, I would ask you to consider how much less people knew about epidemiology back then and therefore how much more fear the unknown brought to them. In fact, some 80% of the population of the city fled into the countryside rather than stay. Some, especially the poor and the sick, couldn’t flee. It was these that the Servant of God Fr. Patrick Ryan sought to serve, even to lay down his life for them, like the Good Shepherd. God accepted the offer of his life and on September 28th, 1878, after laboring amongst the worst hit parts of the city even after contracting the disease, he died a martyr to charity. The Catholic people of Chattanooga were generous, and God blessed their generosity.

It wasn’t until 12 years after the epidemic, after continuing the long and arduous road of reconstruction, that these faithful ancestors of our parish were able to finally construct our beautiful church building. And yet, despite those



nearly 40 years of adversity, just like the Israelites of old, they came into the promised land of this sanctuary to do what Christians have done since Jesus, our God and Savior, gave us the command to “Do this in memory of me.” It is the same reason why we are here today. Here we are celebrating the same Mass, the same prayers and rituals, 130 years later. We take note that so much of what we are presently experiencing had been experienced and overcome by our ancestors by the very faith we profess. Their faith, long suffering, and generosity were blessed by God in the end. How much more can we, knowing their example, persevere in our own day!

We should be comfortably steeped in our history in order to give a firm foundation to face future obstacles. But this is precisely the greatest threat we face, not only here in Chattanooga, but in our country and in our world. There are so many in a rage caused by a sense of injustice - a rage fanned by the passions and those bent on destruction, which has unleashed a dangerous current that threatens the very stability of our culture. There are those who, not content to call out the injustices of the past and rectify them for the future, are rather wanting to erase our history by blotting out the very reminders of the victory of our God over tyranny, sin and the frailty of fallen humanity. Anger is the natural reaction to a perceived injustice. It is legitimately and even virtuously acted upon when we take efforts to right those wrongs. And right them we must! Racism and police brutality, for instance, have no place in a civilized society, and peaceful and legitimate efforts to eradicate them are the duty of every believer in Christ. But the lesson that has been learned time and again from history is that violence is never the lasting answer to injustice. Anger can easily turn to wrath and then be fomented into hate. Both wrath and hatred lead to utter destruction – they are antithetical to the cause of justice. This is precisely the time, then, for the saving message of the Gospel to cast out hatred and establish true justice in right ordering of the soul and society towards the God of Love. This church is meant to be a beacon calling all humanity to something higher: a way past hatred and wrath into the way of peace. When the bell peals to beckon people to Mass, it is an invitation for all humanity to come and experience the righting of all wrongs in the blood of the innocent Lamb who willingly gave himself up as expiation for our sins out of a deep and abiding love for each and every human being that has ever lived. We, the living stones of the building, consecrated in the saving water of Baptism, confirmed by the Holy Spirit of God, and who feed on the Bread of Life and are inebriated by the Cup of Salvation, are meant to be an icon of this saving mystery. By our upright way of life we are meant to be the salt to cure the putrid disease of bigotry, racism and prejudice, light to dispel the darkness of division, hatred and violence and leaven to the unrisen material view of the world so that it can rise once again to the full glory of the presence of God for which we were all made.

Those who come to this parish should see that we ourselves have lived through racial profiling, hatred and prejudice, and yet we built this magnificent monument to an all loving and merciful God who wills not the death of the sinner, but rather that he turn back to him and live. Those who come to this parish should see that we have survived wartime and have lived to create this edifice to the great Peacemaker, Jesus Christ, whose blood reconciles sinners to God and speaks more eloquently than that of Abel to atone for the crime of fratricide. Surely those who enter these doors witness that it was built in honor of the Great Physician of souls who binds up the wounds of fallen humanity, healing not only the body but, more importantly, the soul. It was built by those who knew the heroic self-sacrifice of the servant of God Fr. Ryan and could trace his death as a continuation of the succession of martyrs throughout the life of the Church. Even if we were to keep silence, the very stones of our church would cry out these truths. However, it is for the living stones of this parish to imitate the people of Israel as they greeted Christ on Palm Sunday. And so we greet the coming of God-in-the-flesh into this City of Chattanooga: Glory to God in the highest! Every time we celebrate the Holy Sacrifice, the Great High Priest is made present as He offers the once-for-all sacrifice in the Holy of Holies of Heaven and we are caught up in this mystery of Divine Love and Redemption of His beloved. We are caught up and our city is caught – this fallen world is caught up – in the epic love story of God and mankind. Our prayer should be today that this Holy Sacrifice offered on this altar should have a saving effect upon us, our city, our nation, and the entire world.



THE BASILICA OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL
214 EAST 8TH STREET, CHATTANOOGA, TN

It is truly right and just, then, that we offer this Mass in honor of the Apostles of Rome, St. Peter and St. Paul, even as we ask them to intercede for us here in Chattanooga. Let us be steeped in the history and the glory and the majesty of our Catholic faith, including our own recent and local history.