

**Homily for the Dedication of the  
Church and Altar Following the Renovation of  
Sacred Heart Church  
Effingham, Illinois**

**February 8, 2020**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

*This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.... The joy of the Lord is your strength.<sup>1</sup>*

Father Rosa, Reverend Fathers, deacons, consecrated religious, members of Sacred Heart Parish in Effingham, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: these words taken from the book of Nehemiah set the tone for our Mass today. It is indeed most fitting that we should rejoice, giving praise and thanks to God on this day, when we dedicate the altar and church to the Glory of God, following the renovation of Sacred Heart Church here in Effingham.

As I look back at places that have been important to me in my lifetime, I notice something very unusual. The house that I grew up in was an apartment building where our whole family lived above our family pharmacy. When I say, "our whole family," that would be my Mom, Dad, six brothers and two sisters. It was a stately-looking building, at least from

the outside. It was built in 1917 with a façade of heavy granite stone on the two sides of the building that faced the main street and the side street of the corner where our drug store stood. Unfortunately, the other two sides of the building, the one adjacent to the next-door building and the side facing the back alley, were built with regular red-face brick. I say, “unfortunately” because the two sides with the heavy granite façade over the years gradually pulled the building down towards those two sides, which were much heavier than the other two sides with the lighter brick. Some of the granite stone eventually fell off the top of the building. No one was hurt, but it would have been too expensive to repair and so the whole building was torn down in 1979.

Another memorable building in which I spent a lot of time in my youth was the old Chicago Stadium. I remember my Dad taking me as a young boy along with Mom and my older brother and sister and climbing up the stairs to the second balcony to watch the Chicago Blackhawks play hockey. What a historic building, and to this day I still “remember the roar” of the crowd. Unfortunately, Chicago stadium was demolished in 1995 after the United Center was built across the street.

Then, of course, there is that other sports shrine where I was frequently in attendance over the years since my youth, Comiskey Park. It was demolished in 1991 and was replaced by a new ballpark.

The college seminary that I attended was known as Niles College of Loyola University, located in the Village of Niles, Illinois. In 1995, the Archdiocese moved the college to Loyola's Lake Shore Campus, selling the old facilities to a developer who tore down all the buildings and replaced them with condominiums.

Are you starting to see a pattern here?

One implication from all this might be that you're feeling a little shaky about the future of this building right about now! But I do assure you that not *every* building that I've frequented in my life has been torn down or crumbled to the ground! In fact the church of my home parish, St. Casimir Church, where I was baptized and confirmed, made my First Confession, received my First Communion, and celebrated my First Mass as a priest and as a bishop, is still standing and looking quite grand. So my string of bad luck doesn't seem to affect church building!

My point in telling you about these demolished buildings is simply to serve as a reminder that everything in this world will eventually pass

away, even this beautifully renovated church that we are dedicating today. I don't say that to put a damper on our festivities or on your well-deserved sense of accomplishment, but to keep our liturgy in perspective. Every Eucharist is a foretaste of heaven, and a beautiful new worship space such as this one helps us to imagine the delight of sharing in the heavenly banquet someday in the splendor of God's kingdom. But let's not lose our focus on that prize. We don't want to be like the traveler who was so enamored with the pleasant sights along the way that he forgot where he was going.

Our scripture readings today help us to keep that focus. The first reading that we heard was from the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a man of action who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem after the Jews were released from captivity in Babylon and returned to their homeland. The other person named in this reading was the priest Ezra, a great religious reformer. Together, Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. But the passage we have today is not about the rebuilding of the city walls or the temple, but the restoration of God's law as the constitution of the returned community. In the same way, our cause for

rejoicing today is not ultimately in this building itself, but in the fact that this new church will help us to find the law of God's love in our hearts.

Similarly, Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians asks the people this very pertinent question: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16). Saint Paul reminds us that *we* are God's building, and the foundation of that building must be Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:9-11).

Jesus also makes it clear in today's passage from the Gospel of St. John that the place of true worship of God is not on a mountain or in the temple. He says that true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth (John 4:19-24).

Today's dedication Mass provides a unique opportunity to explain the meaning and purpose of this church building through the lens of the dedication ceremony. At the beginning of the Mass today, I sprinkled the entire building – the altar, the ambo, the sanctuary, and you, the people gathered here – with the blessed water that recalls our own baptism, by which we were made us a part of God's holy people.

In just a few moments I will proclaim the prayer of consecration over this church and altar by which it will be set aside for the sacred purpose of the celebration of the Mass and the other sacraments.

After this prayer, the altar and walls will be anointed with Sacred Chrism. This chrism, which I consecrate each year during Holy Week at the Chrism Mass in our Cathedral in Springfield, is normally used to anoint the recipients of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders. It is also used for the dedication of the church and the altar, which is a symbol of Christ, the Anointed One, who offered on the altar of His Body the sacrifice for the salvation of all.<sup>2</sup>

Following the anointing, incense will be burned on the altar *to signify that Christ's sacrifice...ascends to God as an odor of sweetness, and also to signify that the people's prayers rise up pleasing and acceptable, reaching the throne of God.*<sup>3</sup>

Next, the altar is covered with a white cloth, indicating that the altar is the table of the Lord where the Eucharistic meal is celebrated and where we receive the gift of the divine food as our spiritual nourishment.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the candles at the altar as well as the dedication candles throughout the church are lit. Since the altar is a symbol of Christ, the light

signifies that Christ is the *light of the world*.<sup>5</sup> The prayer for the lighting of the church also reminds us that we, who share in His life through Baptism and the Eucharist, are to reflect the light of Christ in the way that we live our lives.

In this way, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is in this sacred space that we, like the disciples, have an opportunity to encounter the Living God. May you, through the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist, come to know our Lord and strive to follow Him as His disciples.

As you may be aware, I have a custom of singing in my homilies at Confirmation as well as on special occasions such as this. As we dedicate this sacred space, I would ask that you join in repeating after me this one verse of the song, "Holy Ground."<sup>6</sup> May you always draw your strength from the Lord's presence that dwells in this sacred place.

**Holy Ground**  
**By: Christopher Beatty**

This is holy ground  
We're standing on holy ground  
For the Lord is here  
And where He is is holy  
This is holy ground  
We're standing on holy ground  
For the Lord is here  
And where He is is holy

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah 8:9-10

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, ch. 4, *Dedication of an Altar* (hereafter *DA*), no. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *DA*, no. 22

<sup>4</sup> *DA*, no. 22

<sup>5</sup> John 9:5

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Beatty, "Holy Ground," (Birdsong Music/BMG Songs, EMI CMG Publishing, 1982).