

Rebuild my Church

Homily for February 18 and 19th 2023

Francesco Bernadone was a restless young man, unable to find his calling. His dreams of being a heroic knight had turned into a bit of a nightmare after spending time as a prisoner of war. His father, Pietro, wanted his son to follow in the family business, but that didn't interest Francesco, either. What to do? He found himself wandering about the outskirts of his hometown of Assisi in the hills of Umbria – breathtaking vistas at every turn, but he seemed to hardly notice. Until he came upon San Damiano, a little church in need of a good bit of repair. He entered and knelt down underneath a large wooden crucifix painted in the Byzantine style of an icon.

The open eyes of Jesus on the cross seemed to lock him in a stare that was both intimidating and beckoning at the same time. He couldn't look away as feelings of doubt and fear, guilt and desire welled up within him. "Lord, what do you want me to do?" he asked. "Show me what you want me to do with my life."

And the Lord answered! A voice as clear as the day responded: "Francis, go and rebuild my church which, as you see, is falling down." That was all he heard. That was all he needed to hear. It took a bit longer, however, to realize that Jesus wasn't asking him to physically rebuild San Damiano as well as a few other rundown churches near Assisi. He did that, of course, but it gradually dawned on him that his vocation was to rebuild the church, the human institution that was perilously close to falling apart.

Today, some 800 years later, the Church is facing yet more crises and is in need of repair. But amidst all the cries of anguish and anger we've been hearing of late, there are also firm statements of faith and resolve from folks who will not let the betrayals and disappointments distract them from their commitment to Jesus Christ. Yes, the Church is divine, but also very human, and Jesus uses human beings in all their fragility and sinfulness to be the sacrament of his love and mercy in a world that seems to be increasingly unpredictable. Like Francis kneeling before the cross of San Damiano, we need to keep our gaze focused on Jesus, who beckons us to follow him.

It is this theme of participating with Jesus in the rebuilding of the Church that has been at the heart of the homily series I have presented over the past month. As we have considered the threefold ministry of Jesus Christ as Prophet, Priest and King, I have reminded us that because we are Baptized, Jesus calls us to be involved in the rebuilding of his Church through our active participation in the life of our local Church, St Peter's. This is realized as we see Jesus looking us in the eye and speaking into our hearts this invitation to partner with him in the life of worship (Priestly), Service (Kingly) and Evangelization (Prophetic).

This call to work for the rebuilding of the Church has been issued to us by the first pope to take the name Francis. In the document he released at the beginning of his papacy, *Evangelii Gaudium* (the Joy of the Gospel) the Holy Father envisions the Church that gives concrete expression to the words we heard from Leviticus 19. There the Lord said:

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

Holiness is all about sharing in the life of God. It is a realization that our relationship with God, the vertical dimension of the Cross is to be at the centre of our lives. Worship of God invites us to share in the wonder and beauty of God in a way that is ordered and awe inspiring.

In thinking about what it means to be holy, I love to share this image of the Rose Window in Notre Dame Cathedral Paris. At the centre of the Window is our Lady and the Saviour. From this centre the window expands in sequence of stunning florets that total 88. In medieval imagination 88 is the number of perfection, of the New Creation, of holiness.

Another medieval expression of holiness is found in Dante Alighieri's masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*. As the main character of the poem, Dante comes ever closer to the beatific vision of the Blessed Trinity he describes what he sees.

And all around that center, wings outstretched, I saw more than one thousand festive angels, each one distinct in brilliance and art. And they're smiling upon their games and song. I saw a beauty that reflected bliss within the eyes of the other saints."

What a great description of holiness. Angels distinct in brilliance and art, smiling upon their games and songs. And there the saints reflected in their eyes the bliss of this heavenly vision.

With these images in mind, listen to the words of Pope Francis and his vision of holiness for the 21st century Church:

"Instead of imposing new obligations, (Christians) should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet."

This is the life of worship, for it is only out of this centre where we reflect the beauty of our Holy God that in turn, we can hear the next words from Leviticus:

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Here the Lord speaks about the horizontal dimension of the Cross. As we are conformed ever more into the image of Jesus and the Saints by deepening holiness – we in turn want to live in relation to others where we embody the voice of Jesus in tangible expressions of speaking the Gospel, which is evangelization; and embody the hands Jesus in tangible expressions of the loving Gospel which is service.

When we live purposefully in this way, we are reflecting the perfect compassion of the Father expressed in the last verse of today's Psalm:

*As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him¹*

It is the Father's compassion Jesus says at the end of today's Gospel we are to emulate.

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect²

Now with this in mind listen please to this quote from Pope Francis:

“The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”

To rebuild the Church is to understand that we all have a place to live out our baptismal mission. During Lent I will be making a series of videos that will be shared with the parishioners on our website and via email where I will talk in more detail about all the ministries of St Peter's life that fall under the headings of Worship, Evangelization and Service. I know there are many of you who are actively involved in the threefold ministry of our Parish, and for this I am so appreciative. There are others of you, who faithfully come to Mass but perhaps have not had opportunity to find an area of ministry that can enable you to live out your baptism in the way I have been describing. I want to invite you to prayerfully consider where you could enter the life of St Peter's in an intentional and active way.

This invitation is called My Stewardship of Ministry and will allow all who want to prepare for Palm Sunday, April 2nd. At the beginning of Holy Week will have an offering Sunday, where we can present our Stewardship of Ministry. By using offering Cards we will be able to recommit to areas where we are currently involved. For others you may be committing for the first time to a ministry under the heading of worship, service or evangelization. There will also be an opportunity for a financial commitment that day.

It is my hope and prayer that the time we have spent in the past month and the six weeks of Lent will provide for us a way to enter the Easter Season with a renewed sense of how each of us as active parishioners of St Peter's can grow our faith through generosity and thereby live out our baptism as members of Jesus Christ, Priest, Prophet and King and so follow in the spirit of St Francis and Pope Francis in rebuilding the Church that Jesus so loves.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Ps 103:13). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Mt 5:48). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.