



From our ...

CELEBRATION OF THE 125TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CHURCH OF ST. PAUL, NORWALK January 28, 2018

Homily, January 28, 2018
Msgr. Ken Morman, Pastor

As I said at the beginning, we celebrate today the fact that this church building is now 125 years old. The story of how it came to be built is not very edifying: it's marked by conflict and division between Catholics. Back in the mid-1800's the German Catholics of Norwalk didn't want to keep traveling to Peru to go to Mass. So they built a church in 1842, named St. Peter's, on West Main Street where the Sorrowful Mother Shrine is now. The story actually gets much worse from there but we can leave that whole tale till we celebrate the 150th anniversary of our *parish as such*, less than five years from now. For now, focusing on this building, we'll just say that thirty-some years later a large part of the parish split away in another division. They said West Main Street was way too far out in the country and moved into town and built a new church on North Hester Street; so for a while we had *two* St. Peter's Catholic churches in Norwalk! Finally, in 1890 the present church was begun on this location on East Main and dedicated by the bishop to St. Paul 125 years ago this month. So like our patron saint himself, who actually persecuted the Church at the start, our story begins a bit problematically. ~ I'll come back to that. But just to say it in so many words, if our beginning was marked by division and conflict, today our history must be marked by the opposite, Anglo Catholics and Hispanic Catholics worshiping together, in peace and unity; that's what Jesus wants. In his day our Patron, St. Paul, worked so hard to bring Jews and Gentiles together; today his parish in Norwalk continues his work, fostering unity between Catholics of our two diverse cultural backgrounds.

In any case, the important thing now is what the Lord has done here ever since. And that's the story of enormous grace. As we look around this church we can recall with gratitude so many blessings that the Lord has granted us here:

- When we see the wall candles burning – it's a reminder of how solid and well-built the building is – today let's give thanks to the Lord for all the workmen, who not only built it in the first place, those *Builders Bold* of the Prelude, but those who have worked on it and repaired it and added to it through the years, as well as all the folks who have cleaned it and decorated it so amazingly, season after season, decade after decade, so that we could worship worthily here.
- When we see the windows in the sanctuary and the chandeliers – we can remember how much light and grace and beauty have come into our lives from the Lord in this place.
- Our beloved stations – how many times you and I have made the stations in this church and gazed on these scenes, and marveled at the depths of the Lord's love for us!
- The presider's chair – one of the three focal points in the liturgy. As you look on it today, maybe you might want to remember the priests over the years that you've been particularly close to – and why... I don't know what the bishop prayed in 1893, but today the prayer over the chair goes like this –

Lord Jesus Christ, you taught the pastors of the Church not to want to be served, but to serve. Grant that those who preside from this chair will proclaim your word ardently and celebrate your sacraments rightly, so that together with the people entrusted to their care, they may come before the seat of your heavenly majesty, there to praise you without ceasing, for you live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

Please pray for us priests, that we live up to that prayer – wanting to serve, not be served, to proclaim the word *ardently* and celebrate the sacraments rightly!

- This ambo or pulpit – reminds us of the second way the Lord comes to be present to us in the liturgy – in his Word. As at Emmaus, it really is the Lord who speaks to our hearts and causes them to burn within us when the Scriptures are proclaimed from this place. Maybe we could remember with gratitude today some specific insight into these familiar readings that really hit us, some comment in a homily that moved us – and thank the Holy Spirit for sowing that seed in our soul. We could pray then, as the bishop does in blessing the ambo:



O God... grant that we may listen to the voice of your Son, so that, responding to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we may not be hearers only, but doers of your word, walking in the ways of Christ, and follow him faithfully until we reach eternal life. Through Christ our Lord.

Let's today pray for all our parish's lectors and deacons who have proclaimed God's word to us in this church over all these years.

- The altar – is the third principal focal point of the church, simpler in shape today than in the church of 125 years ago. Back then, people couldn't see or hear anything of what was going on, so the *backdrops* to the altar became more and more elaborate to give them something to look at. Today there is nothing to distract us from what happens here – on this *table* the Lord loves us so much that he gives us his own life – his body and blood – to feed and nourish us, and on this *altar* we offer to him in return not the lives of animals but our life / our body and blood – we give it all, as he gave his all to us. Let's do that again today as totally / completely as we can.....
- The baptismal font – it all starts here – the miracle by which God uses ordinary H₂O to give eternal life to us and our children. Perhaps you can recall the baptism of your children in this font, how they went down into the grave with Christ and rose with him to new life. Remember how the paschal candle which symbolizes that life coming out of death – Christ's and ours – stood there; or how it stood again at the head of the aisle for the funeral of someone you loved very much and how it comforted us through our tears with the assurance that, as our patron St. Paul said, "as we have died with Christ in our baptism so we shall rise with him to glory". Let's pray for all our parishioners who were baptized in this church and whose funerals were held here these last 125 years....



There are so many other elements of this church that God has used to touch our hearts:

- the reconciliation room – maybe you can remember one confession in particular that you emerged from, lifted up from your burden ~ do you remember what that felt like? Thank Him again now.
- the organ and music area – how our hearts just *soar* with particularly powerful or beautiful singing and playing, how our talented musicians over the years have been able to give voice to the deepest movements of our heart. Let's pray for all of them and what they've done for us...
- the statues and artwork, the image of Our Lad of Guadalupe and our magnificent tabernacle– how many prayers we've uttered here in our joy and our sorrow! the beauty that has enriched our soul, the comfort of knowing that here we are in the presence of the living God.
- How many weddings and graduations and first communions and evening prayers and rosaries and Forty Hours Eucharistic devotions and many other celebrations have taken place in this space – God has been so good to us!



The styles of dress of the people who sat in these pews where we sit today has changed so much since 1893, but the human heart has remained the same, and so has the good God who has come to meet us here.

As I said at the beginning, the story of how this church got here is a little rocky at the beginning, but so was the start of our great patron St. Paul himself – he actually persecuted the Church! But what matters is that because he was then afterwards willing to put his life at the service of the Lord, the Lord was able to use him to do *enormous* good. This church stands as a kind of parable in stone to that same truth – no matter how imperfect our past may have been, the Lord can bring out of it enormous good.

Let's emerge from our celebration this year more determined than ever to put our lives at the service of the Lord from this moment on, with all our imperfections and frailties, and not wait for some ideal time in the future when we'll be perfect – that day will never come. Today, in honor of our patron St. Paul, and in gratitude for all that the Lord has done for us in this building for 125 years, let's give ourselves wholeheartedly to his service and the service of his *united* people for all the years ahead – for, with us, as with this building, his blessings are only just beginning!

St. Paul, pray for us.