

SAINT MARY (IMMACULATE CONCEPTION) PARISH
150th Anniversary Mass - Altoona
Bishop's Homily Notes - June 13, 2010

While we in the Church celebrate the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, the times during which Saint Mary (Immaculate Conception) Parish came to be were less than ordinary. They were times of growth, - times of test, - times of faith. The color green of this liturgical season reminds us of the hope that gave rise and continued to give growth to this parish faith community.

The 1850s were a time of growth for the community of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Railroad extended its line into Blair County from Harrisburg, - completed the Horseshoe Curve in order to cross the Allegheny Mountains, - and, opened its repair shops that were to draw and employ thousands. People came to work and to raise their families. That included those of German ethnic heritage.

There were other signs of growth, as well. During the building of Saint Mary's Church, Congress established the Government Printing Office and the U.S. Secret Service was created. And in the month following the dedication of the new church building, Elisha Otis patented his steam elevator and Thomas Crapper patented his invention of a flush toilet with an overhead tank and chain. Of course, the new church did not include either of these.

Nationally, it was a time of testing, - whether or not the Union would survive.

As Konrad and Barbara Kiesel were donating the land on which the future Church of the Saint Mary would be built in May of 1860, the National Republican Party chose Abraham Lincoln as their candidate for the presidency, - being elected president later that same year. And, only two days after Bishop Michael Domenec of Pittsburgh dedicated the new church structure that December, South Carolina voted 169-0 for an Ordinance of Secession, becoming the first state to secede from the Union.

In less than a month following the dedication of the new Saint Mary Church, the states of Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and Georgia followed South Carolina into secession, - becoming the Confederacy. They elected Senator Jefferson Davis as their president. Two months after the dedication of Saint Mary's Church, he was inaugurated in Montgomery, Alabama, - just five days before Abraham Lincoln came to Washington secretly to take his oath of office.

Then came the Civil War, and the rest is history.

None of what was going on around them appears to have affected the faith of the German population that had congregated to form Saint Mary (Immaculate Conception) Parish, - not the war between the states in their backyard or even the financial panic of the 1870s, - called the long depression. Slowly but surely, there followed an expansion of church and school. Pastors and Sisters came and went.

And, the rest is history.

I would like to think that the German Catholics (and those that followed, - including other nationalities) became successful because they did not forget who they were. They were people of faith, - in themselves and in their God. They were members of the Lord's Body, - the Church. And, that was important to them. Other matters, which could appear much more important to the worldly mind, did not dissuade them from their convictions.

Some might say, "Well, that's the German." I would prefer to think that, "It's the Christian."

Lately, I have been using my homilies to encourage the Faithful always to "remember who they are." When speaking, when acting, when reacting, when choosing, and when making decisions, - **remember who you are**. Remember where you came from. Remember what the Lord has already done for you.

In the First Reading of this weekend's Liturgy, the Prophet Nathan accuses King David of not remembering who he is, - or, actually, who he was. Nathan reminds David how the Lord favored him and how David's behavior was not an appropriate response to that love. He forgot his God. He forgot what the Lord had already done for him.

Consider the beautiful Allegheny Mountain world in which we live. There is no crude oil drifting down the Juniata River. There have been no big floods threatening our towns and campgrounds in recent years. There have been no tornadoes ripping apart our homes and businesses. Even the plane that was a part of the nine-eleven plot and flew over our towns fell into an open field without injuring anyone on the ground. And, don't forget the nine miners that were trapped for days. They came out, - all alive. One of the miners told me that he was convinced that there were ten of them in that mine, - referring to the Lord's angel to whom he attributes his life.

It appears to me that we are being spared (for some reason) the calamities affecting so many of our fellow citizens in other parts of the nation. But, on the other hand, we can see the difficulties that have been ours and which our trust in the Lord has given us the strength to overcome.

Jesus speaks to this point in a more personal way in the Gospel scene proclaimed today. The Lord reminds his Pharisee host that the sinful woman had much to be forgiven and, therefore, loved much. Unlike the Pharisee, she remembered who she was, - a sinner. Her actions reflected the reality of her being. She presented herself to Christ as such.

Here, too, we can look at our own situation. The Lord, our God, did not have to call us into a relationship with him through Baptism and Confirmation. We did not have to be called to be a part of his Assembly of Believers that we call the Church. This parish of Saint Mary's did not have to last 150 years. It is all through the Lord's generous love. We have been saved from eternal damnation, and like the Israelites of old wandering in the desert, we are being led into the Promised Land.

The Apostle Paul, in the Second Reading, speaks of his life as no longer being his, - but, rather that of Christ. He also gives the reason why.

"... yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; - insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God **who has loved me and given himself up for me.**"

So, rather than speaking, acting, and reacting as if we were gods, let us let Christ's life live in us. Let us realize who we are as Catholic Christian men and women, - members of the Assembly of Believers that we call Saint Mary's within the Diocesan Church of Altoona-Johnstown. That is a constant challenge that all of us face, - not just the parishioners of this parish.

Let us follow the example of those who preceded us. We do not live in times that are any more challenging than were theirs. May we not allow the things around us to diminish our relationship with the Lord, - whether those matters are of nature, of government, or (even) of those who lead Christ's Church. The founders of Saint Mary (Immaculate Conception) Parish **did not**. That is why we are here in celebration today!

May we always remember who we are, - that we live **by** and **in** the grace of an Almighty God.