

“Reading the Signs that Point to Christ and Being that Sign for Others”

Homily at the Mass for the 100th Anniversary of St. Cecilia Parish

Solemnity of the Epiphany, January 7, 2017

Introduction

It is indeed a joy for me to be here to celebrate this Mass, and an honor to preach this homily, on this happy and auspicious occasion. The presence of so many people significant in the life of our Archdiocese is a sign of what an exemplary parish and guiding light St. Cecilia has been over this last century.

Reading the Signs

But while much can be said – and has been said and, I’m sure, *will* be said – about these great 100 years at Saint Cecilia parish, I suppose it would be more appropriate for me to begin this homily by reflecting on the mystery the Church has us celebrate this Sunday, now that we are toward the end of the Christmas season: the mystery of the Epiphany.

Epiphany literally means an appearance, especially an appearance of the divine. For us, it refers to the manifestations of Christ’s divinity, of his glory. The Church perceives these manifestations at key moments in the life of Christ that we acknowledge at the end of the Christmas season, such as – especially – the visit of the Magi to the Christ child that we celebrate today, and also the mystery of Christ’s Baptism, which marks the last day of the Christmas season.

Today, though, we see revealed not only his divine origin but also his mission, *who* came to save. That is, he came to save all peoples. As the prophet Isaiah tells us in the first reading for Mass today, it is not only Israel that will worship the Lord, but the Lord will reveal himself to *all* the nations: “...dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD.” The visit of the Magi is the sign of the fulfillment of this prophecy. They came from the east, which could only mean Persia, as that was the only significant civilization

east of the land of Israel at that time. Thus, they were learned men of an advanced civilization; as we see here, they could read the constellations and other natural phenomena and detect messages through them from above, and so they perceived an unusual natural phenomenon in the star, and were able to navigate by it to reach the newborn king. These, then, were men who were sincere in seeking the truth; they were alert to searching it out, to detecting the signs pointing to it and to following those signs to the very end. And when they arrived, they rejoiced and paid him homage. Very significant is the fact of them prostrating themselves, for this was an act of submission to a person of great dignity or authority.

The Magi here serve as a model for us: we are to do the same, to read the signs that will lead us to the encounter with Christ. And this is precisely what this parish has done for its 100-year history: it has it been able to read the signs of the times and to adjust to changing circumstances in order to keep the parish effective in its proclamation of the Gospel.

It has done so, for example, with its facilities, especially the church building itself, such as early on in the parish's history when it relocated and expanded the parish hall into a church in order to accommodate the growing population which resulted from the Twin Peaks tunnel that connected the previously cut-off west side of the city from the downtown business district. And, of course, it did so again with the new burst of population growth after the Second World War in building this beautiful monument to the glory of God. More recently in your parish's history is the construction of the Durocher Pavilion, named after the foundress of the Holy Names sisters who started and built up the school for the majority of the parish's history – a vision which takes advantage of new opportunities to respond to greater needs of the parish. Likewise with the school: you have been very alert to accommodating changing realities in the life of the school in terms of demographics, personnel and technology. And there have been numerous other initiatives as well to enhance the life of the parish community in light of changing realities, such as the formation of the Knights of St. Cecilia in order to allow the

church to remain safely open during the day, as well as to provide for other needs of the church.

Stewardship of God's Grace

In so many ways St. Cecilia has heeded the call to read the signs of the times to find Christ, to encounter him, and so be changed forever – just as the Magi. Notice that they returned home by another way: yes, this was the message given to them in order to protect the Christ child, but in a spiritual way it also refers to how we are changed forever once we truly encounter Christ and give our all to him.

In addition to reading the signs that point us to Christ, though, we are also called to *be* that sign guiding others there, just as the light of the star guided the Magi to the Christ child. As I mentioned at the start of the homily, St. Cecilia has been such a guiding light in our Archdiocese. You have lived out what Saint Paul says in reference to himself in his letter to the Ephesians: “You have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for your benefit.”

The legacy of your parish is a great grace that God has entrusted to your stewardship, and you have stewarded well the material and spiritual resources of the parish. In reality, though, these are your own resources, and you have shared them generously: just as the Magi brought their gifts in homage to the new-born King, so you have brought your gifts and talents and treasure to serve Christ our King in very real and concrete ways – in your parish, in your school and in your community.

It is a grace for all of us to be together on this very day of the 100th anniversary of the founding of St. Cecilia parish. But I want to congratulate you on another milestone likewise notable: this month also marks the 52nd anniversary of the paying off of the debt of this beautiful church, a daunting challenge that was completed within nine years of its construction. This, too, is a sign, a powerful sign, of your generous stewardship of the blessings God has entrusted to you.

This has been the case in large part because of the quality of the pastoral leadership with which your parish has been blessed throughout its history. In particular I want to take advantage of this opportunity to thank Msgr. Harriman, especially in view of the fact that he will soon come to the end of his long and distinguished tenure as pastor here: it wasn't always a cakewalk (even here at St. Cecilia's!), but his hard work and love of you his people from the very start and persevering throughout these last (almost) 23 years has brought renewed vitality to the parish and a renewed sense of community and cohesion.

Now, everyone knows well the saying that the legendary Monsignor Collins coined and for which he was famous. But I have no doubt that he would hasten to point out what that favorite saying of his really means; he would have no hesitation because it is the way he lived his Priesthood: the finest, the greatest and the best are what we are to give to God. All of the legacy of this parish – this beautiful church, the beautiful art, the vestments, the music, overlooking no detail and going to the expense necessary to make it all the best and most beautiful that it can be – all of this is not for us, not for our glory, or to make our group better than anyone else's, but it is all for the glory of God. We give our best to God. That is how we steward the grace God has given us, the resources He has entrusted to us. We do so first and foremost simply because we owe it to God. But we also do so because this is how we become that sign, that guiding light, pointing others to the encounter with Jesus Christ. Just as the Magi in ancient times so today there are people who are open to the truth and sincerely seek it, who know that there must be a better way, but for whom no one has ever shown it to them. They will follow the light to the truth and recognize the truth when they see it, but they need someone to show them the way.

Conclusion

This is that “stewardship of God's grace” which has been given us for the benefit of others of which St. Paul speaks. In the Liturgy of the Hours for this Solemnity of the Epiphany, in the longer reading in the Office of Readings, Pope St. Leo the Great makes

this same point: “The obedience of the star calls us to imitate its humble service: to be servants, as best we can, of the grace that invites all people to find Christ.” The stewardship of God’s grace inviting all people to find Christ by giving him our best has distinguished St. Cecilia parish in the first century of its history; may it continue to do so for the next 100 years and beyond. With the grace of God and our good faith, it will be so. Amen.