

“The Vocation of a Cathedral and the Vision and Legacy of St. Mary of the Assumption”
Homily for the Solemnity of the Assumption
Mass for 50th Anniversary of St. Mary’s Cathedral

Introduction

Our Mass this Sunday witnesses a very rare concurrence of events. First of all, this Solemnity of the Assumption falls on a Sunday – somewhat rare already – but all the more so because it falls within this Year “B” of the Sunday Lectionary cycle. As you may know, the Sunday Mass readings are divided up into a three-year cycle, such that the same readings come up every three years. In this Year “B,” when the Gospel readings are taken from the Gospel of St. Mark, there are five Sundays in which the readings instead come from the Gospel of St. John. As the readings Sunday after Sunday progress through the Gospel of St. Mark, the narratives lead up to the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. At that point the Sunday Gospel reading shifts to St. John’s version of that story, which is followed by our Lord’s “Bread of Life” discourse.

This Solemnity of the Assumption falls within these five Sundays, and since the feast day of the Assumption has the highest degree of solemnity, its readings take precedent over the readings of the Sunday. The last time this happened was a long time ago, so long ago, in fact, that it was the year that I was ordained a priest: in 1982. That was thirty-nine years ago! The next time this will happen will be thirty-nine years from now, in 2060 (not counting the year 2027, when the Assumption will once again fall on a Sunday in Year “B,” but with Easter occurring so early that year, the five Sundays of the Gospel readings from the Bread of Life discourse will have been completed by then).

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In addition to this, these Gospel readings in which our Lord teaches that he is the Bread of Life come down from heaven so that we may eat and live forever with him, his flesh being real food in his blood real drink, are very timely given this particular moment in the history of our Church. We bishops are working on a vision of Eucharistic revival, given the decline in Catholic belief in the core Catholic teaching of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. There is a great need to recover the beauty and depth of this truth. And to top it all off, this is the feast day of our Cathedral, and, indeed, the very day in which we are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of its dedication.

Vocation of a Cathedral

The convergence of these many events and themes points exactly to what marks our celebration today, what I would call the “vocation” of a cathedral. If you think about the construction of a cathedral, or of any church building for that matter, it is an entire edifice that is constructed and adorned with art and beauty for one purpose: to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, when our Lord once again becomes the Bread of Life come down from heaven, and to reserve his presence in the tabernacle. We invest huge resources and great love and devotion for the truth about the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

In the case of a cathedral, its construction is meant to encompass even more: the mother church of the diocese; the bishop’s church which contains the cathedra, the symbol of his teaching authority that he received from the apostles through apostolic succession; the center of teaching, service, and sanctification of the people of God

entrusted to the bishop's pastoral care. The beauty and holiness of this majestic structure, which has stood here for fifty years, reflects well this vocation, as has her predecessors all throughout the history of our Archdiocese.

The Vocation of St. Mary's Cathedral Throughout History

The first Archbishop of San Francisco, Joseph Alemany, opened the first Cathedral for the Archdiocese on Christmas Eve 1854 under the title of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception. The title was quite intentional and timely, as just three weeks earlier Pope Pius IX had proclaimed the doctrine that our Lady was conceived without original sin and was preserved from sin her whole life to be an infallible teaching of the Catholic Church. The Cathedral was then the tallest and largest building in the city, and it ministered not only to her inhabitants' spiritual needs but also served as a major educational and cultural center, including hosting sacred music programs with full orchestra. From the start our Cathedral has fulfilled her vocation of being a center and focal point of the life of her community.

It was the second Archbishop of San Francisco, Patrick Riordan, who completed and dedicated the new Cathedral on January 11, 1891, this time under the title of St. Mary of the Assumption. Understandable: the truth of our Lady being assumed body and soul into heaven, without undergoing bodily corruption, is the logical consequence of her having been preserved from sin. The consequence of sin is death and bodily corruption; spared this stain in a singular way from the first moment of her conception, she is the first to share in her Son's glory. And, it was nearly sixty years later that this, too, was

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declared an infallible dogma of the Catholic faith, to be exact, on November 1, 1950 by Pope Pius XII.

As is well known, this second Cathedral was destroyed beyond repair by a tragic fire that broke out on September 7, 1962. The newly appointed Archbishop at the time, Joseph McGucken, immediately initiated the process of building a new Cathedral, and St. Mary's was once again true to her legacy and the character of this city. Being built as the first cathedral church in the world after the Second Vatican Council, Archbishop McGucken advised his architects that he wanted "a cathedral that would accommodate large numbers of people; one that would enable even large crowds to surround the altar; and a structure that would be a statement that God is present in beauty in the earthly city." And the entire city rallied around the project.

The architecture critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, Allan Temko, called for a bold new cathedral that would reveal the soul of the city and, most especially, would underscore San Francisco's greatness as an international city of world renown. He observed: "The Cathedral should, and can be a great building in every sense of greatness, if only the church and the city together make the best of this tremendous opportunity ... the Cathedral must belong to its own people and place, but also to the world." His words reflect the healthy vision of a society in which Church and civil government, the spiritual and the temporal, work together, each making its own unique contribution, for the common good and the promotion of an ennobling spirit which forms citizens in the virtues necessary for a society to be truly just, equitable and at peace.

Ark of the Covenant

It makes us happy to celebrate our Lady's glorification in heaven on this the day of the Solemnity of her Assumption, and in this magnificent building dedicated to her under this title. We see her glory, and her place in God's plan of salvation, described by St. John in recounting his vision in the book of Revelation: God's temple in heaven is opened, and the ark of His covenant could be seen in heaven.

Our Lady is the house of God, the dwelling place of His presence on earth. She herself is the sanctuary of His temple. And she is the ark of the new and eternal Covenant. Just as in the Old Testament the ark enshrined the Law of God written on tablets of stone, our Lady is the new ark who contains the Word of God present to us in flesh and blood. Just as the ark of ancient Israel held an urn containing manna – the miraculous bread which came down from heaven and fed the Israelites in the desert – our Lady carries within herself he who is the true Bread from heaven, the Bread of Life (John 6:41). The building of this Cathedral also envisioned this mystery in its design. The seventh Archbishop of San Francisco, Cardinal Levada (of happy memory), described it this way:

The distinctive shape of St. Mary's Cathedral is meant to evoke the image of the meeting tent which housed the Ark of the Covenant during Israel's 40-year desert journey from slavery into freedom. That tent was a reminder for the people of Israel as well as a sign to the nations that God had definitely "pitched His tent" with His people, traveling with them on their pilgrim journey and sharing with them their joys and hopes, their sorrows

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and tribulations. That revelation of God's presence with His people was but a foreshadowing of the marvelous fulfillment of the Incarnation of the Son of God, when Jesus Christ took our flesh from the womb of the Virgin Mary and dwelt among us.

In the Byzantine patristic tradition, commentators on this feast saw the mystery of our Lady's earthly end and bodily glorification as analogous to the mystery of the Lord's death and Resurrection because the flesh of the Son and the flesh of the Mother are one and the same flesh. "My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink" (John 6:55) he teaches us in the Bread of Life discourse.

He received his flesh and his blood from his Mother, and only from his Mother; as he receives his soul and divinity from his Heavenly Father. Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity: this is what – who – we consume in the Most Holy Eucharist. Mary was the first tabernacle – literally meaning "tent" – in which God pitched His presence among us. And He continues to pitch His presence among us in all the tabernacles throughout the world.

Conclusion

Do we really believe this? And not just with words, but with our actions: how we conduct ourselves in church, at Mass, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament; receiving with proper reverence and being properly disposed, availing ourselves frequently of the sacrament of Penance; how we live our lives outside the walls of the church, a life marked by those virtues which distinguish a true Christian believer and contribute to the

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building of a just, loving and equitable society. All of this constitutes the measure of Eucharistic faith, the revival of which the Church in our country is now embarking upon. St. Mary's Cathedral has been true to her vocation of inculcating this Eucharistic faith in the faithful of San Francisco, even to the point of giving us a reminder when we leave this sacred space.

The mysteries of our Lord's glorification and his Mother's participation in it, a glorification which transpires through his body which Mary brought into the world and whose presence remains with us as the Bread of Life come down from heaven and reserved in every Catholic church throughout the world, is neatly all summed up artistically here in our Cathedral. It is seen, yes, as one exits from the main doors, serving as a reminder to the worshippers of who they are called to be as they go back out into the world. For as they finally turn to leave, the panel above the doors, now seen from inside, reveals something unexpected: the side figures are no longer men and women climbing a hill, as is seen from the outside of the Cathedral. Instead, with light streaming through the glass, one now clearly sees a golden chalice, the embodiment of the Eucharist, and in the cup of the chalice, there appears the ascended Christ, returning to his Father in glory.

Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What a precious gift, one of which we can never be worthy on our own merits. But love makes us want to be. May our Mother intercede for us, she who now shares the glory of her Son, so that helped by his grace we may live lives pleasing to him, and one day come to share the fullness of that glory.