

Second Sunday in Lent
February 24, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 9:28b-36

Four years ago this month when I was the chaplain at Holy Cross High School in Dunmore, I visited the feeder schools of the Diocese of Scranton, hoping to encourage the students in eighth grade to consider enrolling for ninth grade at Holy Cross. One of my visits was to Holy Ghost Church in Jessup, host of the only bi-ritual elementary school—Latin and Byzantine—in the state. Msgr. Sekellick, the long-time pastor, invited me to concelebrate the Mass for the Feast of the Presentation.

The church is beautiful, the highlight of which is the iconostasis, the screen that separates the sanctuary from the nave and which is adorned with icons of the angels and the saints. This is very clearly intended to be a vision of heaven, a preview of what we shall see face to face when our course on earth is finished. A preview of this sort of precisely what Peter, James, and John received when they ascended the holy mount with Jesus and witnessed our Lord's transfiguration. Jesus was in the center and on either side were the saints. Their conversation was about the sacrifice of Calvary, where Jesus offered His life for their salvation.

Though we do not have an iconostasis here at St. Joseph since this is a Latin Rite Church, we do have an altar rail within which are twelve mosaics of the eleven apostles, plus St. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. We have also on either side of the high altar a place for statues of St. Mary, which we have, and St. Joseph, which we don't yet possess. We have made a down payment on this adornment, having located one with the help of the men who installed our altar. But getting the St. Joseph statue is a priority for a big reason other than the fact that the foster father of our Lord is the patron of this building. The statue of St. Joseph will complete the vision of heaven that was implicit when this church was designed.

We have, of course, Jesus in the center, with the image of the Holy Spirit above the tabernacle. The Holy of Holies, so to speak, is at the top of the stairs, the highest point in the church, a reminder that in the Mass heaven is brought down to earth and earth is brought up to heaven. Above the altar is the crucifix, the sign mandated by canon law that teaches us that our celebration today is a *re-presentation* of the sacrifice once offered on Calvary. We are participants in the marriage supper of the Lamb in the presence of Him who died for us and rose again.

Joining with us in praise and thanksgiving are the angels and saints, unseen but nonetheless present with us as truly as are the other people in your pew. That we may never forget their presence among us at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we see St. Mary at her Son's right hand, and St. Joseph, Jesus' earthly protector, at His left—at least we shall soon see him there.

The point is that the Church has been configured to give the faithful a preview of the vision they will enjoy when together we bow before the Throne of Grace. This is not beauty for the sake of aesthetics, but to best evoke the impression that we are precisely where Holy Mother Church teaches we are. We are at the Transfiguration, upon the Holy Mount with Peter, James, and John, but our experience is actually better and more momentous than theirs. At the end of what they saw, they walked off the mountain not sure of what it all meant. Before we have to leave today, we get to receive our Lord's Body

and Blood, which not only gives us clarity of mind but also provides strength of body and spirit to face what comes tomorrow.

You'll notice also that to get here to receive this vision of heaven you had to ascend two flights of stairs, reminiscent of the hike the apostles made to see Jesus transfigured. And when you go out into the world after the blessing and dismissal, you'll have to walk off the mountain, just as Peter, James, and John had to come back down to earth after witnessing the most beautiful event they had ever seen. But again, here we have it better. We get to come here week after week to see what they were privileged to see only once.

Why did the Lord give this beautiful vision to Peter, James, and John? Indeed, why does He impart this vision to us through the ageless architecture of this church we inherited? The vision has to do not only with the glory yet to be revealed, the preview of heaven Jesus gives us to convey the reward we look forward to. This vision is an encouragement to us who still must carry the cross.

When Jesus and the three disciples went off Mt. Tabor, they were on their way to Mt. Calvary. And though Peter, James, and John did not suffer at the same time Jesus did, they suffered many trials before they finally received the beatific vision with all the saints in light. The Transfiguration was their encouragement to soldier on even in the midst of tribulation, knowing that their various trials were nothing in comparison with what they knew in the end they would receive from the Lord of Life.

The Mass, then, is our encouragement, as well. Most of us here will have many more trials to endure before we meet our Maker face to face, before we receive the fullness of which this is a dim preview. Thus, to give us the strength, the fortitude we require, so that we will not waver before the devil's taunts, God has given us our foretaste of heaven. If we choose, we can come receive this encouragement every day of the year, save Good Friday, when we mourn the reason we need encouragement in the first place. But God in His mercy deigns even on this day to give us the opportunity to receive Holy Communion. Every day the church is open, the Mass is celebrated, so that we weak, poor souls can be reminded by beauty that all our suffering is not in vain. Even if we do have to walk back down those stairs to take another punch in the gut, we can come back here tomorrow and the next day and the day after that until our hope is so strong we have chests of steel. We can withstand every assault when we have fresh memories of the eternal gifts God will give us when our work is done.

This is the timeless tradition of the Church in both the East and the West, to give through the beauty of our Churches, the beauty of our worship, and the beauty of our song the graces we need to carry our cross. In giving to us a foretaste of heaven that helps us resist the temptations of hell, what we receive is so great that to go to Mass is more an opportunity than an obligation.