

I want to extend my thanks and admiration for all the people who worked so hard and dreamed so big about the renovation of our church: the building and renovation committee, the pastoral council, the finance council, the stewardship council, and all of you who sacrificed and prayed for us.

This has been an eventful week. Bishop Raymond Boland was here for a beautiful ceremony Tuesday night; he anointed our altar with chrism and dedicated it for use at mass. A few days later we gathered in tremendous grief at the funeral of Karen Kemper. During the dedication mass, the bishop asked God to make this altar a place “where the friends of Christ may hasten to cast upon you their burdens and cares and take up their journey restored.” Our altar is already working very hard to do that for us.

Every ceremony in a Catholic church is elaborate. We say prescribed prayers. We stand, sit and kneel when we’re supposed to. We sing songs. We make responses. We use appropriate furniture. The ministers wear special vestments. All this is part of our piety, and it helps us pray. There is a danger that comes with all this structure; namely, thinking that the proper execution of the prayer is more important than praying from the heart. Sometimes we Catholics get bogged down in the fine points of the ritual, and we confuse execution of the details with the spiritual business of lifting our minds and hearts to God in prayer. When it works well, the details of our rituals help us pray richly, but it does take work, concentration and sincerity of purpose. Even when there isn’t much going on at mass, you know how easy it is to get distracted. Going through the motions isn’t enough; it’s better than not going through the motions at all, but not as good as meaning the motions that we go through.

In St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, he writes about a similar problem, the distinction between faith and works of the law. Paul says we are justified by faith. He doesn’t say you can ignore the works of the law, but you can’t rely on them alone. It isn’t just our actions that matter, it’s the attitude we bring to our actions that matters. We can’t just go through the motions of the spiritual life; we need to intend what we do.

This is true not just at mass and not just in faith, but in all the important aspects of life, whether it’s marriage or friendships, jobs or school. It isn’t enough just to do our duty; it all works better when we really care about what we do.

As we begin regular worship again in our renovated space, let us allow God to renovate our hearts as well. When we gather for worship, let’s pray like we really mean it. Let’s sing like we really mean it. Then the house we have built will stand strong upon its solid foundation: Jesus Christ.