

May All People Be Clothed with the Dignity of Your Children

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Introduction

Let us pray for Bishop Daniel Garcia's father and for all the sick. "O God, who willed that our infirmities / be borne by your Only Begotten Son / to show the value of human suffering, / listen in kindness to our prayers / for our brothers and sisters who are sick; / grant that all who are oppressed by pain, distress or other afflictions / may know that they are chosen / among those proclaimed blessed / and are united to Christ / in his suffering for the salvation of the world. / Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, / who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, / one God, for ever and ever." [Roman Missal, collect, Mass for the Sick]

As members of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, our prayers for those oppressed with sickness flow naturally from our love for the liturgy. In worship we praise God. In life we practice charity.

Our houses of worship bring to light the mystery of the church. They provide structure to our prayer, and they school us in compassion. They accomplish this from the moment of their dedication.

As we gather for our almost annual meeting this year, we are exploring the recently re-translated liturgical book, *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*. One of the greatest fruits of the Second Vatican Council, it houses treasures that few Catholics enjoy because they encounter its contents infrequently, if ever. The book outlines seven different ceremonies, but the most spectacular is the second, The Order of the Dedication of a Church. A central component is The Prayer of Dedication. Within that prayer, the bishop declares the relationship between the building and the people, and asks God "to make this for ever a holy place with a table always prepared for the Sacrifice of Christ." Then he lists what will result. From these concluding paragraphs comes the quote included in the description for this talk in your program:

The Prayer of Dedication makes clear that the church building is not only to be a place of worship, but also a place of refuge: "Here, may the poor find mercy, the oppressed attain true freedom, and all people be clothed with the dignity of your children, until they come exultant to the Jerusalem which is above." What does this say about the nature of our Church and the mandates to our parish mission? What implications does this have for our liturgical celebrations?

This excerpt offers a striking answer to a parishioner's question, "Why are we building a new church?" There could be many reasons: the migration of the population to an area distant from any Catholic church, the irreparable decay of the building that has served a community for generations, a donor who decided to change the skyline, or a pastor with a certain ideology. But there is another reason to build a new church: so that the poor may find mercy, the oppressed attain true freedom, and all people be clothed with the dignity of God's children. Some well-meaning people challenge new constructions on the grounds that the money could be given to the poor; but, of course, the poor deserve churches too. We think of new churches as places for liturgy, but they are also the font from which worshipers practice charity in the present and rise to the new Jerusalem of the future.

I divide this talk into three sections: History, Clothing, and the Poor and Oppressed.

History

Today's prayer of dedication relies upon the spirituality, witness and charity of previous generations, who fed us with faith, words, and buildings.

The earliest evidence for the inauguration of churches indicates that the mere celebration of Mass dedicated the new building. Even today the rite says, "The celebration of the Eucharist is the most important rite, and the only necessary one, for the dedication of a church" (ODCA II:15). However, by the eighth century an elaborate ceremony of dedication took place before Mass. Only in the twentieth century did it unfold within Mass.

The antecedent for a prayer of dedication goes all the way back to the son of King David. Solomon constructed a Temple in Jerusalem around 950 BC and prayed at its dedication (1 Kings 8:23-53). The passage blends key words with a posture for solemn prayer. Solomon approached the altar, stood before it, stretched out his arms toward heaven, and only then recalled the wonders that God had done. He addressed the Lord who had promised him a dynasty. Solomon reminded the Lord of that promise and asked for his faithfulness. Whereas today's prayer wants the people clothed with dignity, Solomon asked that God show his vigilance. Looking around at the new Temple and relying on God's help, Solomon prayed "that your eyes [, Lord, God of Israel,] may be open night and day toward this house."

Seventeen hundred years later, around 750 AD, the Gelasian Sacramentary recalled some of these sentiments in its dedication prayer: "Hear [, O God,] the prayers of your servants, and may your eyes be open upon this house day and night" (690). By the tenth century, the Roman-Germanic Pontifical expanded these thoughts. The bishop begged the presence of the eternal God:

May your Holy Spirit, overflowing with the richness of sevenfold grace, descend also upon this your church, which we, though unworthy, consecrate under the invocation of your holy name in honor of the holy cross on which your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, coeternal to you, was pleased to suffer for the redemption of the world, and [in honor] of your

holy martyr **N.**, so that whenever your holy name will be invoked in this your house, the prayers of those who will have called out to you may be heard by you, the loving Lord.

This prayer then makes subsequent requests that anticipate the lines we hear today. The tenth-century bishop asked that the church become a place where “the sick are healed, the weak recuperate, the disabled are cured, lepers are cleansed, the blind receive sight, and demons are driven out.” As bold as that request is, it is no more dreamy than the one we make today. Generations past asked for physical and spiritual healings in the new church; we ask for mercy, freedom and dignity.

Today, the bishop’s prayer makes many allusions to the bible before landing on the one about Jerusalem that concludes our citation. He recalls John’s vision of the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven “as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2). That is the church: the bride of the Lord. Jeremiah relayed God’s message to Israel, “I had planted you as a choice vine,” and Jesus called his followers the branches on him, the vine (John 15:5). That is the church: the chosen vine of God. St. Paul said that the followers of Christ are “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone”(Eph 2:20). That is the church: the building of God.

Jesus called his followers “the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden” (Matt 5:14). That is the church: a city on high. The bishop recalls John’s vision of a city that “had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb” (Rev 21:23). That is the church: the light of the Lamb.

Those allusions, brothers and sisters, prepare for the final intention that launches our gathering today. It prays that the People of God may “come exultant to the Jerusalem which is above.” The cascade of images bathes the assembly in the Word of God to dedicate a space where that Word will resound. God’s word is holy. The building is holy. God’s people are holy. This building will so form them that, at the end of their days, they may come exultant to the new and eternal Jerusalem because they have offered mercy, freedom and dignity.

Clothing

The prayer of dedication wraps this intention inside a metaphor of clothing. The same image appears also in the Order of Baptism and in the Order of Christian Funerals.

In the Order of Baptism of Children, immediately after the anointing with chrism, the priest or deacon addresses the infant with words that even adults may find mystifying: “**N.**, you have become a new creation / and have clothed yourself in Christ. May this white garment be a sign to you of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring it unstained into eternal life.” All answer, “Amen,” although they rarely do (99). Then a white garment is placed on the child.

White has biblical pedigree. In the book of Daniel, the Ancient One who sits upon the throne wore vesture white as snow (Dan 7:9). At the transfiguration, Jesus' garments became white as light (Matt 17:2, Luke 9:29, Mark 9:3), such as no bleach could improve. The mysterious angelic figures at the empty tomb and at the ascension of Jesus wore white (Matt 28:3, Mark 16:5, John 20:12, Acts 1:10). In the Book of Revelation, the inhabitants of heaven all wear white: the faithful few of Sardis (3:4), others who overcome tribulation (3:5 and 18), the twenty-four elders around the throne (4:4), the martyrs (6:11), the multitude with palm branches (7:9 and 13), and the armies of heaven astride white horses (19:14). White is the color of the uniform of heaven.

The rubric says that at baptism, "It is desirable that the families themselves provide this garment." I was baptized in the garment my grandmother made for her firstborn daughter, who lived to be exactly 100 years old. At her funeral, we knew the custom that called for the placing of a white pall by family members, friends or the priest (OCF 161), so we placed atop her remains the actual garment she wore at her baptism a century before.

The idea came from Saint Paul, of course, who told the Galatians, "all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (3:27). He told the Romans to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (13:14), the Ephesians to "put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth" (4:24), and the Colossians that they "have put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator" (3:10). In the Old Testament, Job declares, "I wore my righteousness like a garment" (29:14), and Isaiah describes the Lord as the one who "put on justice as his breastplate, victory as a helmet on his head; He clothed himself with garments of vengeance, wrapped himself in a mantle of zeal" (Isa 59:17). You see that the wearing of white garments is not a matter of fashion. It concerns justice. The garment defines the person not as one who looks a certain way, but one who lives a certain way, one who dies a certain way. Baptism is one way that people inside a dedicated church are clothed with the dignity of God's children.

However, when the Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar gets down to the business of the white altar cloth, it uses a different metaphor. In the ceremony, after the the bishop has dedicated the altar, he anoints the mensa with chrism and honors it with incense. The introduction to the ceremony explains, "The *covering of the altar* indicates that the Christian altar is the altar of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the table of the Lord.... For this reason the altar is prepared as the table of the sacrificial banquet and adorned as for a feast." Although the white cloth may cause resonances with a baptismal garment, the dedication associates it with a sacrificial banquet, a celebration that follows and inspires acts of self-effacing charity.

The covering of the altar used to be a lot more elaborate. Evidence from the ninth century says, "While the subdeacons or acolytes hold the linens or all the other ornaments of the church, as well as whatever sacred vessels seem to pertain to the worship of God for the church, the bishop blesses [them], as is preserved in the Sacramentary."

The tenth century pontifical offered the bishop four prayers over the altar cloths and more over various linens and vessels. After the bishop had set the relics in place, the blessed cloths were positioned over them and the altar. All that remains of those prayers today is the blessing of a chalice and paten, which any priest may do apart from the dedication of a church. Far from having the bishop bless the cloth in the middle of the ceremony, assistants simply put it in place, preparing the newly dedicated altar for the sacrifice to follow.

The covering of the altar is not the only act of clothing. A ninth century ordo makes this remark about the beginning of the celebration: “First, before the bishop may enter the church, twelve candles are lighted throughout the aisles of the church and [the clergy] put on sacred vestments” (Ordo XLI). As the clergy are vested in albs, so the church is vested in light. Today, at the lighting of the candles, the liturgy recommends music “in honor of Christ, the light of the world,” as well as the antiphon, “Your light has come, Jerusalem: the glory of the Lord has risen upon you, and the nations will walk in your light, alleluia” (see Isa 60:1-3). During Lent, a different antiphon is proposed: “Jerusalem, city of God, you will shine with splendid light, and all the ends of the earth will pay you homage.” It prophesies the mission of the entire Church: Yes, Christ is the light of the world, but the world glows in the light of Christ. The lights of the new church and altar do not merely vest the space. They inspire the People of God to evangelize.

We are all clothed in special garments: At our baptism and our funeral we wear the white uniform of heaven. At the dedication of a church and altar, the ministers vest. Very likely, the people who come to celebrate dress in a fitting manner. They will witness the clothing of the altar, where they celebrate the sacrifices that made this day possible. The People of God will also bask in the light of the candles, the light of Christ, who clothes them with dignity and mission.

The Poor and Oppressed

Our parish churches are to be places where the poor find mercy. Most parishioners are OK with that. They expect their contributions to support ministries toward those who have less. Social service organizations do this better, but each parish should know how to direct the needy to proper services. The parish offers something else: spiritual support. Inside its walls the poor should find the mercy they seek.

Our parish churches are to be places where the oppressed attain true freedom. Most parishioners are OK with that too. We no longer keep the tenth-century goals to heal the sick, restore the weak, cure the disabled, cleanse lepers, enlighten the blind, and drive out demons. We pray for the sick, but those oppressed with illness see a doctor, not the sacristan. Parishes offer “true freedom,” which is interior.

Amazingly, many of the materially poor and physically oppressed are spiritually rich. They have less of what the world prizes, but a deeper connection to God. In spite of all poverty and oppression, or perhaps because of it, their

hearts brim with hope. The materially poor often reveal to us how spiritually poor we can be. Overly focused on obtaining, we miss the rewards of vacancy. If a new church is the place for the poor and the oppressed, then it is the place for us, no matter the source of our want.

Most parishioners are OK with the poor and the oppressed, but not so much with a third group, the annoying. Every parish has its share of people in that category. And let's admit it, at some time or another, we've all annoyed other people at church. At a cathedral like the one where I serve, the poor, the oppressed, and the annoying all visit. A couple of weeks ago, a visitor greeted me on the way into church, trying, I'm sure, to be helpful, and pointing behind him. "Father, there's a guy sleeping over there." I smiled and said, "OK." He persisted, "He's right up against the church." I explained, "We offer a ministry to the homeless, and a lot of them feel welcome here."

Others come inside and create a stronger annoyance. One man with some mental deficiencies came for several months, stood up a couple of times during Sunday Mass, and shouted praise to Jesus. One of our best ushers started sitting with this man in the pew, and that seemed to calm him down. Similarly, a certain woman came a few times, stood in the back, and, as the music swept her spirit, she sang louder than our 50-rank pipe organ and higher than anyone else in the congregation, establishing her own key for the hymns. Some parishes have babies who wail; we had a soprano. We are not the place to provide mental health; we feed our guests and direct them toward proper assistance. But we give them what a church should give: mercy and freedom.

It's harder than you think. One day after Mass, one of our most faithful members pointed out to me an individual who looked suspicious to her. I recognized the man. I knew what he'd been through—recovery from drug abuse and then a scam artist. She knew none of that. He didn't dress well. He wore an empty expression on his face. I see a lot of people like that; so does she. I bit my tongue, but when she said, "He just looks unusual," I regret I did not challenge her with these words: "You mean, because he's black?"

The construction of a new church and altar demands a lot of a parish: a vision for the future, a trusted leader, a sense of common purpose, a willingness to sacrifice, a cumulation of talents, an openness to change, and faith in God. Construction requires sustainability, accessibility and artwork that engages. The finished building is to be a place where people feel comfortable enough to call it home, and challenged enough to call it church. They will enter the new building as God's own children, clothed in the dignity of their baptism. There they will welcome friend and stranger, the poor and the rich, perpetrators and victims. There will find mercy on the day of their poverty, and freedom when sorrows oppress.

Jerusalem is a city of contrasts. It was home to two Temples and the place of their destruction. It remains a city of conflict, yet a place of pilgrimage. Our scriptures promise a new Jerusalem. John says, the angel "took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of

heaven from God. It gleamed with the splendor of God. Its radiance was like that of a precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal. It had a massive, high wall, with twelve gates where twelve angels were stationed and on which names were inscribed, [the names] of the twelve tribes of the Israelites. There were three gates facing east, three north, three south, and three west. The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were inscribed the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

“The one who spoke to me held a gold measuring rod to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. The city was square, its length the same as [also] its width. He measured the city with the rod and found it fifteen hundred miles in length and width and height. He also measured its wall: one hundred and forty-four cubits according to the standard unit of measurement the angel used. The wall was constructed of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass.

“The foundations of the city wall were decorated with every precious stone; the first course of stones was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh hyacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made from a single pearl; and the street of the city was of pure gold, transparent as glass. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb.

“The nations will walk by its light, and to it the kings of the earth will bring their treasure. During the day its gates will never be shut, and there will be no night there. The treasure and wealth of the nations will be brought there, but nothing unclean will enter it, nor any[one] who does abominable things or tells lies. Only those will enter whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

Our houses of worship bring to light the mystery of the church. They provide structure to our prayer, and they school us in compassion. They will form us into a people clothed the dignity of the children of God that we may come exultant to that Jerusalem, which is above.