

Presentation of Rev. Paul Turner on the Dedication of a Church

Reprinted for the benefit of our readers is an excerpt from the keynote address of Rev. Paul Turner at the 2021 National Meeting of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions. Fr. Turner, a priest of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, framed his presentation on a passage in the Prayer of Dedication in the Order of the Dedication of a Church: "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."

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" (Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar, ch. II, no. 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 Kgs 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 40 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 (Jn 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” (Mt 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.