

Homily given by Steve Patti, OFM

22nd Sunday – August 30, 2020

Over this past week or so I have been packing up all kinds of things, and one day, among a pile of papers on my desk, I found a blue program, stapled together, with a picture of the original St. Francis church building, and the words “The Consecration and Dedication of St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church, Raleigh, NC, October 9, 1983.” It’s a little faded around the edges. It has a drawing of the original church, which was then mostly in the woods, and an image of St. Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds.

It’s the program for the dedication of the original church, and inside is the list of those who were there: Bishop Joseph Gossman, Fr. Jim English, a Jesuit who was the original pastor, and many others. There is a description, in the back of the program, of how the name of the church was decided, and this goes back to April 25th, 1982, before the church was built, when mass was held either outside or in peoples’ homes:

“Fr. English gave careful thought to the name of our parish – he narrowed the possibilities down to two saints and decided to let the saints choose. He talked to St. Francis – he said, ‘St. Francis of Assisi, you know I’m searching for a name for our church, and I would like to announce our parish name during the outdoor mass on April 25th. So, I’m putting you in charge of the weather and if it rains, I will recommend that the parish be named after St. Ignatius of Loyola.’ Well, on that day we had a beautiful sunny Carolina day. Father English suggested the church be called ‘The St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church’ and his recommendation was received with resounding applause.”

There is also in the program a reading taken from the life of St. Francis of Assisi. It’s the story of Francis before the crucifix in the ruined church of San Damiano. Francis used to go there often to pray. It’s a small, quiet space, and you can imagine a young Francis, looking for some sense of what to do with his life, gazing at this image of Christ on the cross, and the image of Christ looking upon Francis with love. Francis was held there. The reading in the program begins with Francis speaking to this image of Christ:

“Lord, what do you want of me?”

And the old crucifix in the church spoke: “Francis,” the Lord said, “rebuild my church, which as you see is falling into ruin.”

Francis, flailing his arms in wide circles jumped up and smiled – he had found his purpose in life. Francis sprinted out of the church to begin his work.”

There is much in that story that describes what it means to be Franciscan: prayer, listening, a love of the church and a willingness to help build it up where it might be falling down, a deep joy in receiving the words of the gospel and reflecting those gospel words to a world which longs to hear them.

And so because it did not rain on Sunday, April 25th, 1982, this parish has lived under the name of St. Francis of Assisi, and in the nearly four decades of its life, this parish has, in its own way,

asked the same question that Francis asked in front of that crucifix: “Lord, what do you want of us?”

Our response to that question has taken us places. Francis of Assisi was not one to stay locked within the walls of Assisi, but one who went outside the walls, encountered people, brought people together who might not otherwise be together, learned from other faith traditions, looked upon all of God’s creation as holy and good, had a deep sense of God’s presence found within the ordinary stuff of everyday life.

One of my favorite stories about Francis: one day while walking along a pathway, he found a worm in the middle of the path. He reached down, picked up the worm, and brought it to the side of the path so that it would not be harmed. On one level it’s a charming little story. On another level it tells us something about what it means to be Franciscan: to pay attention to and care for the vulnerable, to look upon what is lowly and ignored and forgotten and see its goodness, to see and respond to what the world often does not see or respond to, through the eyes of Christ.

And so from our beginnings as a parish pastored by a Jesuit who leaned Franciscan, to the arrival of the Franciscan friars in 1987, we have lived into the question together: “Lord, what do you want of us?” How have we responded to that call?

- We have come into this church sanctuary and listened to the living word and received the body of Christ, the source and summit of everything we are.
- We have gone around the world to hear the gospel in places like Guatemala, Chernobyl, Cuba, Morocco, Italy, El Salvador.
- We have gone into hospitals and nursing homes and assisted care facilities and kept vigil with the sick and the dying.
- We have installed solar panels on our campus to better care for our Sister Mother Earth.
- We have written letters to otherwise forgotten inmates in prison.
- We have taught our young people what it means to carry on their faith, in classrooms and summer camps and mission trips.
- We have brought thousands of pounds of food to people in need.
- We have had lunch with migrant workers in the fields.
- We began a preschool, a gem which continues to care for our young children
- We began a K-8 school, TFS, another gem which celebrates its 20th birthday this year.

Like Francis of Assisi himself on that day long ago in the ruins of the old church, we have heard the word of the Lord and we have gone to work. God has been faithful to us along the way.

St. Francis, toward the end of his life, said to the friars “Let us begin again, for up until now, we have done nothing.” Those are hopeful words, looking at the present in terms of a hopeful future.

A calling from God is never a one-time thing. As we, like Francis, continue to pray at the foot of the cross, that calling keeps coming to us new and fresh and urgent in our own times as we ask ourselves, to what kind of life is God calling us? How do we respond to the times we’re in now in light of the gospel?

We know the times we're in. There is a harshness to life. There is a lack of civility among many. There is a diminishment of public discourse. There is a diminishment of people of different faith traditions, nationalities, ethnicities, languages, ages, physical and intellectual capacities. We continue to address deep-seated issues of racism in our country. There is a rise in what is known as surveillance capitalism in which we are identified not as who we are, but as what we buy online. There is a rise in authoritarianism, of technology as a way of control, of violence toward others and toward our planet.

And there is Francis, by himself in a small abandoned church outside the walls of Assisi, praying in front of a cross that he might know and follow the way of Christ. For Francis, it meant that he had to lose something of his former way of life, a way of life that was determined by whatever the crowd was doing or saying at the moment, a life defined by possessions, by war as a path to glory and fame, by looking good or respectable before others.

He let go of that life. It was Christ on the cross who gave him another way of life, a life which brought him places he never could have imagined: among lepers, among Muslims, among all kinds of people with whom he could share the freeing gospel of Christ, a life of peace and reconciliation and joy, a life close to the earth among people and God's creatures, a life of looking up at the night sky in deep wonder, a life unencumbered by the need to possess anything other than Christ.

For more than 30 years, you have shared that life with us, and we are grateful.

Let me say some words of thanks to our Franciscan predecessors who have come before us and helped bring us to this day.

Fr. David McBriar, who arrived in 1987 as the first Franciscan pastor and who asked the question, what can we as a church do for the city? So much of what we are today stands on his vision.

Fr. Dan Kenna, who succeeded David, continued his vision, and whose vision of Catholic education led to the creation of our Franciscan School in 2000.

Fr. Mark Reamer, who succeeded Dan and who continued the vision of David and Dan before him, and whose own vision added to our school and preschool and built our beautiful chapel.

Let me say thank you also to Fr. Bill McConville who was here when I arrived in 2014 and whose spiritual depth and reflections have added so much to so many lives.

Let me say thank you to Fr. Steve Kluge, who arrived here in 2015 and by his pastoral ministry and spiritual care has brought comfort and hope to many.

Let me say thank you to Fr. Jim Sabak, who arrived here in 2017 and at the time had no idea of what he was walking into, had never been assigned to a parish, and who has thrived in ways that he could not have imagined when he arrived here, and it's been a joy to watch.

Let me say thank you to our parish staff: church, school, preschool, community center, for your witness and dedication to the mission of St. Francis.

And let me say thank you to you, the people of St. Francis, who have supported our mission through the years, who have prayed before the cross and been faithful witnesses of the gospel in ways known and unknown by your own lives.

In the faded blue program for the dedication of the church from 1983, there are notes written in pen in the margins. One of them says, at the beginning, “proceed up from the woods.” Those were different days. There was an opening procession and a blessing and a sprinkling with holy water. During the sprinkling rite, a hymn was sung, “Veni Creator Spiritus”, Latin for “Come, Creator Spirit.”

The hymn on that day was sung by a priest who had been ordained only three years, and his name is listed in the program as Rev. Michael G. Clay. Could he have known at that time that thirty-seven years later, he would be the new pastor of this church that has most definitely “proceeded up from the woods?”

The Creator Spirit at work on that fall day in 1983 is the same Creator Spirit at work in these late summer Covid days of 2020, and this beautiful and vibrant parish will be in very good hands with both Msgr. Clay and his new associate Fr. Jairo Maldonado.

Msgr. Clay and I have been in touch often throughout the summer. He is getting to know the parish. He is asking questions. He is looking forward to getting started and getting to know the people. He is the right choice for St. Francis, and we are grateful to our good bishop for listening. Please welcome Msgr. Clay and Fr. Jairo as you have welcomed us. And thank you, once again, for your Franciscan witness. In the words of St. Francis of Assisi, may the Lord give you peace!