

Sermon Given by Cardinal DiNardo, Archbishop of Galveston-Houston
Blessing of St. Athanasius Chapel Hall
Followed by Solemn Mass of St. Athanasius
October 29, 2016

Praise be the Lord Jesus Christ. Congratulations to you all on this occasion of the blessing of your new chapel, which canonically, is a public oratory for the use of Regina Caeli Parish as their church building.

Congratulations go clearly to the parish, the Finance Council, the Parish Council and to all who have served in various capacities. I immediately add a word of thanks to those from the Fraternity of St. Peter for all of the work they have done, and that leads me to the one man you should thank: Fr. Van Vliet, your pastor. Because he's not only your pastor, he's your shepherd, he's an architect, a contractor, he can dig tunnels for water, he's a woodworker and a carpenter, he built this beautiful altar. Not bad for a pastor, right? *[Laughter]* How much do you pay him a month? *[More laughter]* Congratulations Father Van Vliet. We also thank Jerry Tipps, the architect, and Dan and Mark of Stewart Builders, who are both here today. Thank you very much.

Sisters and brothers, this is your first building along with the rectory. It's a simple building, but it's very lovely and, as I said to Fr. Van Vliet today, it's very useful for your needs right now. And for that reason, we are grateful to the Lord and grateful to all of you, as I always say at the blessings and dedications of churches. I have dedicated 26 new church buildings since 2006. This is number 27; although it's a blessing, it is like a dedication of a church. Congratulations and may God bless you and continue you in your dedication to the word of the Lord, dedication to the treasures of the church, dedication to teaching.

Bene fundata est domus Domini... That is what we sang at the very beginning, at the door. "That the house of the Lord is well founded." Why? Because it is founded on Christ and on the rock of St. Peter. The saints are the crowd of witnesses that support and encourage us even as we beg the prayers of Regina Caeli, the Virgin Mary. She is the new and Heavenly Jerusalem of which the stones of any church in this age are merely small, vague reminders. For she is the one who is the symbol of the church that the Book of Revelations makes so clear. She is the model of the church. We pray that her prayers may continue here on behalf of all of those who come to the church and this chapel, and that, as they enter, they may feel, as it says in the blessing, *auxillium tuae misericordiae*, the merciful aid of the Lord, in this joyful Year of Mercy and beyond.

I have a few words to say about the readings my dear sisters and brothers, but I am having mercy on you. I look at all of the children here. They have been enduring quite well, and though they have been behaving quite well for the last hour and ten minutes, there is still more to go. So the last thing you want here is the long sermon that you are used to. *[Laughter]* So being more accommodating, I am going to just feast you with a few observations.

St. Athanasius. In the Greek Byzantine Church, sung endlessly on his feast day, is a hymn that begins - and it's great in Greek *[he recites the Greek, then translates]*: "You have become a

veritable pillar of orthodoxy with your Godlike teachings of dogma. You indeed, oh holy Hierarchy Athanasius have upheld the church. You announced *homoousian* - you know what that means? consubstantial with the Father – “and defended it. You shamed Arius.” I love the word they use in Greek here, it sounds so bad. *Aischune!* You shamed him!

You, St. Athanasius, upheld the doctrine of the incarnation. The Word of truth, the Word of mercy, the Word which is God, the Son of God, became flesh! It is difficult for the human mind to understand. It was the brilliance of Athanasius, who was at the Council of Niceae as a deacon accompanying Bishop Alexander, whom after his death, he would later succeed, though quite young. There has always been a story about whether Athanasius was of the right canonical age to become the bishop of Alexandria. We'll leave that as a testy question, but what does matter is that, from the time of the Council on, he was frequently the sole defender in the Eastern Church of *homoousios*. He was exiled five times. Can you imagine? He never knew what would happen next. One time they were chasing him in a boat and they caught up and hollered at him, “Is Athanasius nearby?” Athanasius screamed back, “He’s not far away!” [*laughter*], and they sailed off.

He had to fight doctrine on two fronts and also had the king, orphans and widows, and the social services of the church calling despite his exile. So you get some idea of what he was up against. Some people say, “I wish I had lived in the fourth century.” Thank God you did not live in the fourth century. Those were tough times. Real tough times.

St. Athanasius fought on the one hand, the right wing of the Niceaeans, like Marcellus of Ancyra, who was favored by Rome until it became clear he didn’t understand the dogma of the Trinity at all. He fought on the left, the Arians, who were really some of the most wicked. Remember this name: Eusebius of Nicomedia. He’s the bad boy of the bishops of the Eastern Church and he was at the court in Constantinople. He caused Athanasius immeasurable trouble throughout the years he was archbishop in Alexandria.

Why do I bring out these little historical notes? What is fascinating is the relative serenity of mind that Athanasius had, as reflected in his writings during these turbulent years. His great concern was the unity of the church and for the poor, the widows, the orphans in Alexandria. His constant reminder to the Church in Alexandria, “Stay aligned with Rome”. Now remember in the fourth century, with communications being what it was and a lot of other things, it was an amazingly important, and even heroic, thing to say.

So the words of Athanasius are very good and applicable to us today. Stay with the truth always! Make sure in all things that you attend to concerns of the widows and orphans. Stay in unity with Rome. Three councils that Athanasius gave then and gives us now. He is the patron of this chapel, along of course with the Blessed Virgin Mary, your heavenly patron for the parish. I would say you are in good stead.

Now a couple of observations on the readings today. Today we are doing the votive Mass of the feast of St. Athanasius, and notice that on his feast day, we read from the second letter of St. Paul

to the Corinthians. The Corinthians were St. Paul's troubled children. They were very pouting children. They had many gifts. When you read letters of St. Paul, he always says, "I thank God for you and for all the good things...da..da...da..." To the Corinthians, when he thanks God for all of their gifts, do you know the one gift he never mentions? Charity. He hits them real hard in chapter 12 about this. He was, in a manner of speaking, waiting for the wind-up of the pitch and threw it right across the plate. "If I should speak with the tongues of angels and lack charity, I am a noisy gong."

For the Corinthian community, so talented and so divided, St. Paul keeps offering up the importance of *agape*, God's love in our hearts. In Second Corinthians, where he is practically fighting for his life in certain chapters because of the actions of some, notice what he says: "but we carry this treasure" - which is the light shining in the face of darkness - "we carry this treasure in vessels of clay". He is obviously referring to himself, but guess what people, he is also referring to you and me. We are vessels of clay. There are times when we think, because we have been fired by God's grace and multiple gifts, that we escape being vessels of clay, but that is not true. Always in vessels of clay, these great gifts, that we recognize that all of our abundance is from God and not from us.

What an unusual set of lines follows next, that you can just hear Athanasius echoing: "We suffer tribulation, but are not distressed; we are sore pressed, but we are not destitute; we endure persecution, but we are not forsaken." You can see why this passage is chosen on the feast of St. Athanasius in the Extraordinary Form of the Latin, because it helps us see him in relationship to Paul's reflection of Jesus Christ in this moment.

St. Paul believed and spoke out. So too, St. Athanasius. In this, St. Athanasius and St. Paul, still speak to us. We should never be afraid to publicly defend our faith, but to do it with all courtesy and kindness because we are clay vessels.

Now we get to the Gospel of St. Matthew. This is the chapter of Matthew where Jesus is sending out what I call field trip experience reminders to the Apostles. "You are going out on your field trip", but note what he says, "when they persecute you for God's will, it is nothing". That's what happened to Athanasius, right? I tell you, Athanasius was like a travel log. They exiled way up in the north beyond. They exiled him to Germany. He was exiled to the desert of Egypt. He got around. And everywhere he was exiled, he ended up writing. He ended up teaching. He ended up consoling and being consoled. He was a great, great figure for keeping one's sense of serenity in the midst of much difficulty. What was whispered in the deserts to the monks, he proclaimed out loud and eventually, his last eight years were peaceful right in the heart of the city of Alexandria.

So, sisters and brothers and especially to the young people, who I am very pleased to see here, I say: Keep alive your Catholic faith and learn it! Many in our age say they love Jesus, but when you ask them, they don't know a thing about Him. After a while, the Lord Jesus will say, "Do you know me?" My young people, learn the faith! Make sure that the faith in your head gets into your heart. I think that here in this parish, with all of God's grace, the regular devotional celebration of the sacraments, and the ample teaching, that will happen to you.

I pray for the priests. I thank all of the leadership of the Fraternity of St. Peter for being here today and all the priests who came and have supported your parish. Fr. Reynolds is here, pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton after Fr. Paul Lockey. Do you remember Fr. Lockey? He was the one who first let you in *[laughter]*, and Fr. Reynolds said, "Yeah, you can stay here." Now you can tell them both, "Well thank you very much, but we got our own place now!" *[More laughter]* Wonderful!

As an Extraordinary Form Parish in this diocese, you will always be known for your teaching and love of the beauty of the liturgy and sacraments in the Latin language, but once you get established, dear friends, I want this parish to be just as well-known, as any other parish, for outreach. Pope Benedict XVI once said a parish church is defined by the teaching of the Apostles, the breaking of the Bread (which is the liturgy), the prayers, and the outreach and care for the destitute and the poor. This is what makes a parish.

So, I leave you with that challenge. I leave with my congratulations and gratitude. May the Lord bless you and keep you. Amen.

Audio provided by Jason Centanni
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