

# Archbishop Lori's Homily at the Mass Concluding our Parish's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration

## June 30, 2013

### Introduction

What a joy it is for me to pay an initial visit to St. Stephen's Parish and to join you for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. As a parish family, you share a wonderful history, a legacy, really, of faith, courage, and community.

I came today to join you in praying for those who have gone before us in faith, and in thanking God for what they have bequeathed to us. I am here to offer you my warm and wholehearted encouragement in the many ways St. Stephen's bears witness to Christ by professing the faith, worshipping in spirit and truth, educating the young, and generously serving those who are in need. I came today to join you in rededicating ourselves to the mission of St. Stephen Parish now and in the years that lie ahead.

Like many parishes, St. Stephen's began informally. It began in 1841 with a small number of local families that desired to have Holy Mass celebrated in their vicinity. Starting with Mass in the home of Mr. Stephen Raphel, this little community grew into a mission chapel and in 1866 became a parish. Here we need to pay tribute to the pioneering spirit of our first parishioners and for their love for the Lord and the Eucharist that prompted them to want to have a parish church in their community.

After that the parish seemed to make steady progress. What never ceases to amaze me, as I read parish histories, is how rapidly intricate and beautiful churches were constructed in those days. When Cardinal Gibbons came here in 1889 to dedicate the Church, he remarked that it was only one year prior he had laid the cornerstone for a church that would be nicknamed, "The Little Cathedral." If it were today, I guess we'd still be looking at drawings and getting approvals! And here we need to pay tribute to the generosity of these parishioners who worked so hard to build up a vibrant parish, and that includes opening an elementary school in the depths of the Depression and rebuilding after two devastating fires, in 1973 and 1986, and, may I say, rebuilding beautifully!

And like every vibrant community of faith, yours can boast of wonderful leaders –visionary pastors, like Fr. Sartori who built the Church, or Father Fitzgerald who opened the school, or the various pastors of this parish who went on to become bishops. I think of the Sisters of St. Francis of Glen Riddle who served in the school and the vocations to priesthood and consecrated life that came from this parish. And with you, I am most grateful for the dedicated leadership and loving service of your present pastor, Father Larry Kolson and Fr. Paul Breczinski! In giving thanks for the ordained, consecrated and lay leaders of this parish, we are reminded in today's Gospel that following Christ in whatever vocation has been marked out for us demands total and prompt dedication – it's described as putting one's hand to the plow and not looking back!

### The Present Day

When this parish celebrated its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Second Vatican Council was still a recent event and was part of almost everyone's experience and memory. Much was made of the changes that occurred since the Council took place, such as celebrating Holy Mass in the English language and establishing the parish council, and a variety of parish ministries – reforms that took an enormous amount of dedication and effort but which we almost take for granted today.

Twenty-five years later, we find ourselves in a new situation. We profess the same Catholic faith as did our forebears whose vision and generosity laid the foundation for St. Stephen's. Like those who went before us, we offer the same sacrifice of love – the Cross and Resurrection of Christ – and like them we rejoice to receive the Body and Blood of Christ and to have our sins forgiven in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. With them and with the whole Church we profess "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism" and with St. Paul we seek the freedom to profess and live our faith generously and joyfully in the midst of the world.

## Looking Ahead in Hope

But during these past twenty-five years, we have faced new challenges. Painful experience has taught us that the reform the Church needs is not mere external changes but a conversion of heart that gives rise to a way of life that witnesses to Christ, to his truth and to his love. As the secular culture around us has grown more resistant to faith, and especially to teachings that cut against the grain of our culture, we have seen more than a few people drift not only from the Church but indeed from the practice of any faith at all. Statistics can be mind-numbing so I'll spare you all but one statistic that gives some focus to the challenges we're facing. When I was growing up about 75% of Catholics attended Mass each Sunday. Twenty-five years ago, perhaps 40% attended Mass weekly and today about 27% of Catholics attend Mass frequently – more than once a month.

Numbers do not tell the whole story but they do underline the sense of urgency we find in today's Scripture readings. In the Gospel, in short order, we meet three sorts of people – the Samaritans who would have nothing to do with Jesus and his message; the enthusiast who was willing to follow Jesus but wasn't prepared to make the necessary sacrifices that discipleship demands; and the goodhearted, busy people who needed to other things, important things, before they got around to dropping everything and following Jesus. How necessary for us to lay aside everything that hinders the message of the Gospel, including interior attitudes and sins that stand in the way; how necessary that we be prepared to meet the demands of discipleship and that we make it our first priority to live and bear witness to Christ & his truth.

Successive Popes, including Pope Francis, have called us to the New Evangelization – to opening our hearts anew to Christ and to His love, so that we might embrace our faith and its teachings with fresh confidence and bear effective witness to our faith among our families, our friends, our co-workers, and even enemies and strangers – and to do so with new ardor and new urgency. It seems to me that this is the challenge which St. Stephen's and every parish is facing as we look ahead to the foreseeable future.

So celebrating anniversaries is not merely a trip down memory lane nor is it simply a time for the parish to get together – important as that is – rather, it's a time for this wonderful family of faith to come together as never before and to deepen its bonds of faith, hope and love – in Christ Jesus – to rededicate itself to welcoming all parishioners and actively seeking out those who have left the Church for whatever reason, and welcoming those who are searching for truth and love. I know that this is the vision you have brought to your anniversary celebration and I am happy simply to come among you this morning to offer my prayerful support.

## Conclusion

The Patron of your Parish is, of course, St. Stephen, the proto-martyr of the Church. With the help of the Holy Spirit, Stephen opened his mind and heart to Christ and knew the Risen Lord Jesus with a depth we can hardly imagine. He spoke with a wisdom and love no one could contend with and his witness to Christ brought many to the faith. In the end, St. Stephen died because of his faith and now shares a martyrs crown.

As we engage in the challenging work of spreading the Gospel – of bringing others back to Christ and home to the Church— let us ask St. Stephen to pray with us and for us – that we may have a share in his wisdom and love as this parish goes about its mission. Strengthened by Stephen's witness and by his prayers, may this parish continue to grow as a community of faith, worship and service, now and for many, many years to come!

May God bless us and keep us in His love!