

## Remarks for the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration

Sehr geehrter Erzbischof Tobin, geehrter Dekan Rick Ginther, geehrter Stellvertreter des Abts der Erzabtei Sankt Meinrad, Pater Mark O'Keefe, liebe Vorläufer im Amt des Pfarrers, Pater Joel Burget und Pater Edmund Goldbach, liebe Mitbrüder der Minoriten Provinz Consolatrix Afflictorum, liebe Mitarbeiterinnen im Pastoralamt des Dekanats von Terre Haute, liebe Gäste, liebste Mitglieder der Pfarrie Sankt Benedict...

Should I go over that again? I know my accent can be a little off.

One hundred and fifty years ago, a parish celebration of this magnitude may well have begun with just such a greeting. My how things have changed! What once was common parlance among the parishioners of St. Ben's has given way to Standard English, or at least the Terre Hautean version of it!

When a parish arrives at the occasion of celebrating 150 years of existence, it has to acknowledge that a lot of change has occurred. What we have been taking pains to recall this year, with varying degrees of success, is the enduring charism of St. Benedict Parish that has brought it through to our own day and age.

I say varying degrees of success because, when it come to a parish, and when it comes to the 150 year mark, the anniversary celebration takes on a different quality than when a couple celebrates 50 years of marriage, for example, or when a parish still enjoys the presence of its founding members.

We've gotten too far down the road to recall everything, and so, we are dependent, much more so than a couple celebrating 50 years of marriage, to a selective reading of the events of the past in an effort to draw some instruction from them.

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It seems that most accounts of the history of St. Ben's will mention the church fire of 1930, for example, and the resolve of the parish at that time to reconstruct our beautiful and rightly noteworthy house of worship.

We are grateful for the sacrifice of that generation in handing on to us such a fitting place of worship, and for the generations in between who have striven to maintain it.

We feel good about taking our turn in seeing to it that the church building gets handed on to a new generation in the best shape we can keep it.

But we can be a bit selective in giving that episode pride of place in the accounts of the parish's history. There are other moments, perhaps equally important, which may not have gotten much consideration.

We could think for a moment about the fact that a parish originally founded for German speaking Catholics, at some point found it impossible to continue the tradition of celebrating the parish's life in that language.

In 1917, when the U.S. entered the First World War on the side of the English and the French, the last thing an American wanted to be caught doing was speaking German. Did the parishioners of St. Ben's feel a loss at that moment? Did they have to grieve, while at the same time move forward into a new age?

We don't think about that much—maybe because we don't know what to make of it today. What light would it cast on a Church that's becoming increasingly intercultural, but still struggles to accommodate people of other cultures and language backgrounds? What challenge does it present to us in our homogeneity and sameness today?

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More generally, how does overlooking certain aspects of our own history lend itself to perhaps overlooking the task at hand for us today?

Of course, I don't think adding a Mass in German is really the way forward. One of the most freeing aspects of being members of such a long-standing tradition as the Catholic Church is the acknowledgment that we don't have to keep all our traditions alive.

Some have served their purpose and can safely be laid to rest.

But on the occasion of celebrating a 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary we do have a responsibility, I think, to ask ourselves quite earnestly "What is the tradition that we want to hand on?"

In responding we can make the distinction between traditions with a little "t" and the Tradition with a capital "T." Devotions in German could be considered a little "t" tradition whose time has come and gone, but celebrating the Mass each Sunday with energy and really pouring our hearts into it—that could very well be a capital "T" Tradition that we want the next generation to receive from us.

Another tradition with a capital "T" would be the impulse to address a pastoral need. Back in 1865 German-speaking Catholics needed to feel at home in the Church, to feel like their heritage was being recognized and taken seriously.

That was a pastoral need the founders of the parish felt called to address.

As we move forward, a Tradition with a capital "T" that we could commit ourselves to honor would be to attend to the pastoral needs emerging in our own day and age and to respond to them as best we can.

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We live in a time when we are confronted with a rising number of Catholic Christians who find it difficult to feel at home in Church. We have to take that into account and ask ourselves what can be done about that, and then be about the task of doing it, even if we have to leave our comfort zones to do so.

There are other capital “T” Traditions that we share with all vibrant communities of the Catholic faith:

- giving witness to our faith by taking it out into the world rather than relegating it to the private sphere of home and family;
- being service oriented and willing to reach out to others regardless of their religion, race, economic situation, level of personal hygiene, sexual orientation, or political tendencies;
- building a community of faith to which others will feel drawn because of the welcome they receive here, the opportunities that exist here for them to find their true selves, the hope that can be fostered here because we believe that God is present among us.

These are the Traditions with a capital “T” that will have to continue to be our hallmarks for as long as we exist, on into a future where the parish’s origins fade even further from memory, where even the fire of 1930 has to make way for other events of greater magnitude that have not even occurred yet.

We dare to celebrate this occasion because we have cause for hope, that just as those who have gone before us found the wherewithal and the reason to keep moving forward, so will we.

We only ask God to go with us and to be a light for our path, so that the journey ends at its proper destination: fullness of life in the Kingdom of God.