

Mass celebrating the 150th Anniversary of St. Clare Parish

**January 28, 2024, A.D.
4th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
St. Clare Catholic Church
Altamont, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear Father Lorilla, [brother priests, consecrated religious], and lay faithful of St. Clare Parish here in Altamont. There are at least five towns named after “mounts” in our diocese: Mount Auburn, Mount Olive, Mount Sterling, Mount Zion, and Altamont, all of them reminding me of St. Peter’s words when he was with Jesus on Mount Tabor: “It is good for us to be here.” Truly, for us today as well, “It is good for us to be here,” for we are united with Jesus here as well as we celebrate this Mass for the 150th anniversary of your parish.

In preparing for our Mass today, I did some research on the history of Catholics here in Altamont. Of course, when one does this, at first you simply come across names and dates and other somewhat mundane historical details: the first Mass was celebrated in this area in 1839, and by 1843 the Catholic community had built its first log church.

Around the same time, the Diocese of Chicago was erected, taking over this territory that had previously been right between the Dioceses of St. Louis, Missouri, and Vincennes, Indiana, but by 1853, with the Catholic population continuing to grow throughout our State, the diocese of Quincy was established and just a few years later moved to Alton. By then, of course, the log church had burned down and been replaced by St. Bonaventure, which itself burned on Christmas of 1873. After that tragedy, the decision was made in 1874 to build a new Church in the growing town of Altamont, naming it St. Clare, with the church being completed in 1875.

It was on the Feast of the Ascension, May 6th, 1875, when the first Mass was celebrated in the new parish, and it seems that three baptisms - Wilhelm Kamschroder, Joseph Schwartz, and Augustae Muller - also marked the occasion. Just a month later, Bishop Baltes of Alton visited the parish, confirming three of their young people. The congregation was growing quickly. Land for the cemetery was purchased in 1876, Bishop Baltes returned in 1877 to confirm 24 more, a bell was installed in 1878, and a school erected in 1882, with 56 children enrolled by the end of that year.

Of course, these are the historical details surrounding the founding of St. Clare's parish, the anniversary that we commemorate and celebrate today, though I want to mention a few more highlights from the 150 years since. Of note are the 26 men from the parish who served our country during World War I, and it appears that 26 also served in World War II, with one parishioner losing his life in each of those conflicts. It was between those years that the parish societies established a church fund to build the current Church, with its ground broken in 1922 and this Church then dedicated on June 10th, 1923. I find it extraordinary that the history books record some 80 people in the choir for that Mass, though we can only imagine the hundreds that donated time and money to build this beautiful house of God.

All of these anecdotes move us to gratitude. Consider how many priests served here year after year over all those decade. There are far too many to mention by name, but dozens of Franciscan and diocesan priests faithfully gave their service to Christ's flock here, celebrating well over 50,000 Masses right here in Altamont. I want to specifically name the three men who grew up in this parish and followed God's call to become His priests: Fathers W. L. Quatman, J. E. Drackert, and Edgar Smothers S.J.

I also know that more than a dozen young ladies who were baptized here and were formed in their faith in this parish consecrated their lives to God as religious sisters in different congregations. All this does not even mention the countless lay faithful who received their sacraments here, vowed themselves to each other in marriage, raised their children in this parish, and at the end of their days received their final sacraments, and were given a Christian funeral within these walls.

I think all of this not only moves us to be grateful to the thousands of faithful Catholics who gave of themselves to build and maintain this parish, but I hope we also realize that God's work here in Altamont is *not* primarily delineated by dates, and bricks, and sacraments, but is actually incarnated in those different members of Christ's Church *who allowed God to work and act in their lives.*

Recall with me our Gospel for this Sunday: We are just beginning our journey through St. Mark's Gospel, and today we hear of the first time Jesus, dramatically, begins preaching at the Synagogue at Capernaum. Consider the parallels between Capernaum of Jesus' day, and Altamont in ours. Archeological work indicates that the town of Capernaum had been originally populated about 200 years before Christ, with a first synagogue

probably constructed during those decades. The synagogue that Jesus entered in today's Gospel, we discover later, had been built or rebuilt more recently by the Roman Centurion whose daughter Our Lord would later raise from the dead. Capernaum, like Altamont, was a small town, not far from a busy highway, and composed of a mixture of different congregations with people from different socioeconomic classes. When Jesus stepped up to preach that day, He would have been looking out over a congregation not too different from this one here today.

But notice what Jesus focuses on when He steps up to the pulpit. He does not mention the important characters from Capernaum's past, nor the beautiful synagogue that had been built by that centurion, and He does not give thanks for the leaders of that congregation that had made it what it was ... as admirable, important, memorable, or essential as all of that was. No, He opens the scroll and preaches, not like the scribes, but as if He was the original author of the Sacred Texts. He proclaims the Kingdom of God as if it were *there* among them. Then, to top all this off, He rebukes and drives from their midst the power of Satan who had possessed one of the members of that congregation, commanding the Evil One, "*Quiet! Come out of Him!*"

and Satan does! Jesus proposes to make the same proclamation, to do the same work, *here* as well!

His Kingdom – contrary to every other authority, political or spiritual – is just as real now as it was then. His presence – wholehearted, intimate, available – is just as much with us as He was with them. His intent – to utterly vanquish every stronghold of Satan, to drive from every one of our hearts anything that separates us from God – is no different than when He stepped up to that man then. *And*, the question He posed to all of them – *Will you follow Me?* – is the exact same question that He asks of us. Our Lord very concretely offered that invitation Peter and Andrew, James and John, ... but He also spoke those words to Wilhelm, Joseph, and Augustae when they were baptized ... and the Fathers Quatman, Drackert, and Smothers when they were ordained ... and Jesus asks us today the same: *Will you follow Me?*

Our Lord knows everything that led up to the moment before each of those individuals said “yes”, and He knows the history that led up to this moment for each of us too. But the question He asks is not about what came before. He does not ask about others: what they did, or did not do. He asks us: what will you do, or not do? *Will you follow Me?*

The reason this church, this parish, this part of God's world has been a place where Our Lord has been present for the past 150 years and more is because thousands of different individuals - hundreds of priests, and religious, and families - said "yes" to Jesus' invitation to them. The reason this church, this parish, this part of God's world will continue to be a place where Our Lord will be present for the next 150 years and more will be if we - priests, religious, and families - also say "yes" to Jesus' invitation to us.

Across our whole diocese, we have church buildings approaching the century mark and many other parishes also right around their sesquicentennial. In part, our Diocesan Eucharistic Congress last October was to celebrate 100 years of the diocese being in Springfield, and in 2028 we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of our Cathedral being dedicated. Many of you may remember our diocesan celebration at the fairground in 2003 when the diocese had its 150th anniversary since being founded in 1853 in Quincy.

Considering all these historic moments, as well as the one we celebrate here today, I keep recalling one anecdote from my recent trip to Nigeria. Visiting some of the dioceses in the south of that country, though there were few Catholics there at all until 150 or 200 years ago, now 90% of the

population is Catholic, *and 90% of them come to Mass every Sunday*. What if Altamont was like that in 150 years? What if our diocese was like that in 150 years? When Jesus walked up to Peter and Andrew, this was the project He had in mind – inviting every person in the world to become His disciple – and that was the same project that Our Lord entrusted to the first members of this parish, and it is the same mission that Jesus entrusts to His Church, *to every one of us*, today. Perhaps on your mind, like mine, is the question “how do I do that, concretely?” I think, providentially, our Psalm (Psalm 95) today gives us the essential points:

*Come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord;
let us acclaim the rock of our salvation.*

...

*let us kneel before the Lord who made us.
For he is our God,
and we are the people he shepherds, the flock
he guides.*

...

*“Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert,
where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen my works.”*

First, *we praise God* for being our rock, for giving us salvation. This we must do on Sundays, but we should do every day of our lives. Then, secondly, *we let Him guide and shepherd us*. We ask Jesus to direct our decisions, to guide our choices, to change how we speak and act. Finally, even when we are tested, even when we are in the desert, *we choose to trust*, to surrender, to love the Lord because we, here in Altamont, Illinois, have seen His works, and we choose to say our own “yes” to His call.

May God give us this grace. Amen.