



## **Silver and Golden and Silver Jubilees + One Celebrations**

**Homily  
Mass of Thanksgiving  
Friday, September 10, 2021  
The Cathedral of St. Peter**

***“WHAT IS THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH TO COME?”***

**Dear Sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ:**

**What is the shape of the Church to come?**

**When I was very young, I never wanted to be a Priest. I always thought I would become a physician, an attorney, or even, an actor, and marry Beverly Anne Ponton, with whom I thought I was in love in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It is by a strange fate and a stranger fortune that I am Priest today. When my Mother Dear, Evelyn and my beloved father, Cullen, devout Baptists, expressed an interest in sending their children to Catholic schools, because of their reputation for excellence, they were warned that, because of the racial divide in the Church, they should never consider becoming Catholics. Nevertheless, they sent us to Catholic schools and later became Catholics. In spite of painful experiences of rejection, my parents persevered, and lived deeply committed Catholic lives.**

**When I was eleven years old, I told my parents that I would not live very long. Since I was in very good health, they asked me why I would say such a thing. I told them, “I said it because it is true. NO ONE lives very long. Even if I live to be 100, my life will be short. Every human life goes by in a flash!” My father said, “Son, you are a very old eleven-year-old, wise before your time.” At that early age, I knew the sum of our journeys around the sun races by in a flash!**

**There was never any pressure from my family to consider the priesthood. Studying at Chicago’s Quigley Seminary never crossed my mind. It was my BVM teachers, Sr. Mary Antoine, Sr. Mary Mildred, and my pastor, Msgr. O’Brien who encouraged me to think about the priesthood, because I was a sacristan and I served Mass almost every day. Looking back, I think of my eleven-year-old self-musings on the unbearable lightness of being. These were the embers that, enflamed by my prayers, listening to the scripture**

readings, and receiving the eucharist at daily Mass, triggered my first thoughts of the priesthood.

When I was at Quigley Seminary, the Second Vatican Council was unfolding in Rome under the sagacious leadership of St. John XXIII. I was struck by *Gaudium et Spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

It begins with these words: “*Gaudium et Spes*. The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ.” This document played a central role in my persevering in the seminary and, many years later, “*Gaudium et Spes*” became my original episcopal motto. On that rainy Saturday morning, May 13, 1970, when I was ordained a Priest forever, I was expressing the hope that, as a minister of Word and Sacrament, I would play some part in the shape of the Church to come.

Looking back over the moving viewpoint of my life as a Priest and Bishop that has taken me across the country and around the world, I can say that, while I have experienced days when I was profoundly unhappy, there has never been a day when I was unhappy that I was a priest. By a strange fate, a stranger fortune, and a mysterious providence, this is what I was meant to be!

What is the shape of the Church to come?

I have a friend, a wonderful, precocious, Spirit-filled little girl, whose name is Riley. 50 years from now, she will be 57 years old. As we gather this afternoon to celebrate this Mass of Thanksgiving for 50 + 1 years in the priesthood and 25 +1 years in the episcopacy, it is fitting to ask: What will the Catholic Church in the United States look like 50 years from now in the summer of 2071?

What is the shape of the Church to come?

Some say the shape of the Church to come will be very different from the Church of today. The number of priests will continue to decline forcing unforeseen changes in ecclesial life and Catholic worship. There will be far fewer parishes and even fewer Catholic schools. The ministry of priests will necessarily evolve and adapt as deacons and members of the Christian Faithful assume more and more positions in ministry and leadership. The tension between the hierarchical structure of the Church and consensus building, community-wide decision making will spill over into the daily life of Catholics. Women will assume new positions of responsibility. The number of practicing Catholics will be smaller and interest in ecumenism and Christian unity will decline. The debate about challenging issues, concerning the dignity of human life, social justice, human sexuality, the nature of marriage and the family will create opposing camps of so-called “Old Catholics” and “New Catholics.” Some future Pope may try to address all of this by convoking the Third Vatican Council. But, by then, the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome will be exercised in a very different way.

And for many reasons, the number of African American Catholics will almost certainly decline.

**What is the shape of the Church to come?**

Others say the Future Church will not be like this at all. A renewal of Christ centered spirituality will empower the Church to challenge what Charles Taylor calls this “Secular Age” and the number of priests, and religious sisters will dramatically increase. More and more young people will become deeply involved in the life of the Church leading to a rebirth of parish life and a greater love for traditional Catholic worship. The number of practicing Catholics will grow larger and larger. New models for Catholic education will emerge and flourish. The spirituality of the Christian faithful will be stronger, and the laity will be anxious to give more of their time, talent, and treasure to the work of renewing the Body of Christ. Catholics in larger numbers will embrace the Church’s traditional moral teachings. The Pope will emerge with strength and even greater authority and a more centralized Petrine ministry. Most of those who hoped for radical changes in the Church will have found another spiritual home. Grass roots ecumenism will flourish. But, the Petrine ministry will remain a stumbling block to structural unity of the diverse Christian traditions.

This group also thinks that for many reasons, the number of African American Catholics will almost certainly decline.

**What is the shape of the Church to come?**

Ultimately, the shape of the church to come will be determined not by any of us, but by the Provident inscrutable Holy Spirit.

The prophet Isaiah tells us this afternoon that the spirit of the Lord God is upon us and has anointed us. Each of us must pray that the Holy Spirit will help us discern the part we must play in determining the shape of the Church to come. How can we bring the good news of Jesus to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, and bind up the brokenhearted? In deep prayer the Holy Spirit will guide us in fashioning the future Church.

St. Paul’s letter to the Christians in Phillipi could have been written to each of us, to every parish in the diocese, and to all Protestant and Catholic Christian communities as a guide for the confident spirit we must bring to the task of shaping the future Church. Paul instructs us, “Do not be anxious about anything. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. And the God of peace will be with you.” Because of the human condition, we will move by trial and error, as we discern the shape of the Church to come. Paul insists that our discernment must be filled with joy and an incomparable spirit of Christian hope.

Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ, the Son of the living God, knows well the shape of the Church to come. In the gospel of John, Jesus instructs us that no matter how many wrong paths we take as redeemed sinners, His living presence in the Eucharist is the

blessed assurance that the shape of the Church to come will be as He wills it. Jesus teaches each of us that, no matter what position we hold in the Church, the leadership that will determine the shape of the Church to come must necessarily be Servant Leadership. He tells us, "Know that I am in your midst as one who serves." Jesus' example taught us that servant leaders help those with whom they minister grow as persons and become healthier, wiser, happier, freer, holier, and more other-centered. Servant leaders realize that they serve because they are the leaders, and BECAUSE they are the leaders, they serve. By word and deed Jesus taught us the shape of the church to come will be bleak without servant leadership.

What is the shape of the Church to come?

Let these words guide us down the unknown grace-filled path:

God has given us Jesus Christ, His Son, as our Lord and Redeemer.  
Jesus always showed compassion for children and for the poor, for the sick and for sinners, and He became a neighbor to the oppressed and the afflicted.  
By word and deeds, He announced to the world that God is our Father and that He cares for all His sons and daughters.

Open our eyes, O Lord, to the needs of our sisters and brothers.  
Inspire in us words and deeds to comfort those who labor and are burdened.  
Make us serve them truly, after the example of Christ Himself and at his command.  
And may your Church stand as a living witness  
to truth and freedom,  
to peace and justice.  
So that all people may be raised up to a new hope!

*So that all people may be raised up to a new hope!*

Praise be Jesus Christ. Both Now and Forever. AMEN!