

**Homily for the Dedication of the New Sanctuary of
Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church
Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida
by Bishop Felipe J. Estevez
February 14, 2021**

Today, we make our own the words of the psalmist: This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it (Ps 118:24). Our joy is because Christ is alive! For us Christians, Sunday recalls Christ's resurrection, Easter returns Sunday after Sunday. For the last 48 years, the Catholic families of Ponte Vedra have gathered here to honor the day of the Lord and do like the first Christians who "devoted themselves to the teachings of the Apostles and to communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to prayers".

Today, we are here celebrating this holy place, this sacred building destined for the praise/worship of the Blessed Trinity - One God - and the unity of the people of God residing in Ponte Vedra. As your pastor wrote: Here you gather again and again "to strengthen your life of faith in your families, your neighborhoods, and places of work renewing your commitment to build up the Body of Christ and be strengthened for service, fostering justice, peace ... building fraternity with all people."

The existence of this parish is so relevant because the presence of a church gives people a sense that God cares for them and they are being cared for. As we have realized during the pandemic, in those states where the church has been shuttered, the community loses some of its hopefulness and sense of worth.

The rejuvenation of this building with its beautiful works of art, the upgrading of the stained-glass windows, the statuary, the entire thing is admirable. The work of evangelization is enhanced by the pull of the beauty of this house of the Lord.

We are called to keep Sunday holy especially by the celebration of the Mass, the supreme act of adoration for every catholic. Sunday is a day of rest in the spirit of Christian joy and fraternity, especially with our family members. Blessed is the family whose priority during the weekend is the parish Mass joining all other faithful families, all together and letting the Spirit of God "bring you to God's holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is. 56, 7).

Today, it is an opportunity for us to deepen our understanding of the parish church as a house not simply for gathering but for prayer. Here the priestly people get into action as people who belong to God and "grow into a temple sacred in the Lord: Built together in Christ and made into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" as St. Paul teaches to the Ephesians. What St. Paul writes about is the dignity of the liturgical assembly, its deepest identity.

Our children may ask you why does the ceremony of the dedication begin with the Litany of the Saints and the insertion of the relic of St. Augustine in the new altar?

For us Catholic Christians, faith in the divinity of Jesus is so well stated by St. Peter: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” but our contagion is inseparable from our insertion into the body of Christ, the Church. That is why Jesus validates Peter’s confession of faith in Him, recognizing Jesus as true God and true man (humanity and divinity uniquely embraced in the person of the Lord Jesus) and, in turn, validates Peter in his new mission: “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.”

St. Augustine loved so much the expression, the “totus Christus”- the full Christ: The Lord, and the faithful of Christ. Sunday is the day of the Lord and the day of the Church. As the catechism teaches us, in each Mass, the visible assembly gathered in prayer is linked with Our Lady, St. Joseph, the apostles, and all the saints in heaven which the Litany of the Saints evokes, helping the souls of purgatory being purified and by us all here on a journey and quest for holiness of life; all together in an awareness of a greater whole and a greater inclusiveness. That is as Pope Benedict once said, “A Mass may be celebrated in a tiny place but is always a Mass over the whole universe, embracing the whole cosmos.”

The relic kept at the altar is another connection with the communion of the saints as St. Augustine once wrote: “The victim of sacrifice is on the altar and underneath there is a sign of a member of his body because they are one.” I commend you for choosing a first-class relic of the patron of the diocese, taken from St. Augustine’s arm, which symbolizes the union of the parish with the entire diocese.

What an honor and privilege today for all of us to be participants for the dedication of the new altar. Every altar represents Jesus Christ. The altar reminds us that as it is stated in Preface 5 of Easter: Jesus Christ is “the high priest, altar, and lamb of sacrifice” and our beloved Lord is eternally making intercession for us. In each Mass’ altar, the Lord invites us, the members of his Mystical Body, to share in his self-giving love. He calls us as the priestly people of the new and eternal covenant to offer in union with Him, our own daily sacrifices for the salvation of the world.

As this altar is washed, anointed with holy chrism, honored, incensed, vested in white robes, and appareled in light, we the baptized, all of this reminds us that we the faithful people of God, we have been consecrated, set apart, for the service of God and the building up of his kingdom of truth and life, peace, justice, and love. Why have we been set apart? It is to be light to the world and salt to the earth. We are light when we witness the Gospel of life and truth. We are salt when we care for the needy, when we relate to all without bias or prejudice, when we are sensitive to the cry of our planet. When our witness is true, we can proclaim the mystery of faith from this altar at every celebration of the Eucharist. With the Word incarnate we recognize the dignity of

the unborn and our elder and the sublime destiny which awaits us being saved with the Lord of glory for all eternity.

You and I know how challenging our baptismal consecration is, yet we are confident because the Holy Spirit comes to our aid to make our lives fruitful, overcoming the current fear and keeping us together as a parish family. This demands continuous conversion to the Word and the teachings of the Church.

Stella Maris, Star of the Sea, two parishes honor her under this title, has been such an ancient invocation even in the times of St. Jerome. Also, for the seamen as the crossing of the oceans faced multiple dangers and high risks, they often invoked the Blessed Virgin Mary, the guiding star as the way to Christ. As we face the Atlantic Ocean, this parish and school honors Our Lady I invite you to call on her and following the advice of St. Bernard de Clairvaux who often said: "Look at the star, call on Mary".