
Homily by Bishop Paul Bird CSsR
Final Mass in St John the Baptist Church, Rupanyup, April 21, 2013

During this past week our television screens showed images of explosions near the finish line of the Boston marathon. A bomb went off in the crowd. Then there was another explosion. Three people were killed. Many were injured. A beautiful sunny day was turned into a day of tragedy.

That was on Monday. On Thursday, there was an interfaith service in Boston's Cathedral of the Holy Cross. Around 2000 people packed the cathedral to remember the victims of the bombings and to pray for strength for the whole community that had been stunned by the attack.

President Obama was one of those who spoke at the service. He began by quoting a verse of Scripture, from the letter to the Hebrews: "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

His words were words of encouragement to people who had been shocked by the violence that had struck on that day of the race. He recalled that one of the runners had been knocked off his feet by the force of the bombs but that he had got up and kept on running. President Obama encouraged everyone to have that same spirit of resilience in the face of adversity.

He said: "We may be momentarily knocked off our feet but we will pick ourselves up. We will keep going. We will finish the race."

There is something of the same message in the Scriptures for our Mass this afternoon.

We have a reading from the Book of Revelation. This is a book that was written to encourage the early Christians to persevere in their faith. Many were suffering persecution because of their faith in Christ. Some had been driven from their homes. Some had been put in prison. Some had been killed. They had many reasons to be downhearted but the writer of the Book of Revelation offered them a message of encouragement in the trials they were going through. He said that if they persevered in their faith they would win the palm of victory. God would wipe away all tears from their eyes. Christ would be their shepherd and would lead them to springs of living water.

We can reflect on these messages for our own lives. Each one of us has some times of struggle. We might be burdened with sickness. We might suffer a loss that brings great sadness. Today's closing of the church here in Rupanyup might be one of those losses. When we experience such burdens or losses, we might tend to feel disheartened. Then especially it is good to remember the encouraging message of Scripture. "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

In our Mass this afternoon we remember all those who have persevered in living their faith in this part of the world. We remember especially all those who have gathered in this Church of St John the Baptist over more than a hundred years and we give thanks for the blessings of these years.

We give thanks for those who have been baptised in the font here. We give thanks for those who were confirmed or made their first communion here. We give thanks for those who were married here. We give thanks for those who were buried from here. We give thanks for those who gathered for Sunday Mass here, week by week, for so many years. We give thanks for the priests who have served here. In the centenary book "The Living Faith" I counted 77 priests who have served in Rupanyup from the very early days. I also noticed the list of six priests and religious who came from Rupanyup and as a Redemptorist myself I was delighted to see that three of those were Redemptorists.

This church has seen so much of the life of the Catholic community of Rupanyup. It has stood here through rain and shine, through every season. In its own way, this church is a sign of the perseverance of the Catholic community of Rupanyup in their faith through all those years.

The final part of our ceremony this afternoon will be closing the doors of this church and there is surely sadness in this. In a sense we are marking the end of a very long chapter in the life of this Catholic community of Rupanyup. Yet the Catholic Church in Rupanyup is more than this church building. The Church is fundamentally the people who make up the Catholic Community. In this sense the Church was in Rupanyup quite a few years before this church building. This is recorded in the history "The Living Faith". There we read that Rupanyup was surveyed in 1873. Then we read: "The Catholic Church at Rupanyup began with the arrival of the Murphy family in the same year."

In this sense, the Catholic Church has been in Rupanyup since 1873. For much of that time, this church of St John the Baptist has been the place where the Catholic community has gathered and this afternoon we give thanks for all the blessings that have come through those gatherings in this place. Yet the Catholic community will continue even after the church building is closed and this afternoon we pray for continued blessings as we continue to live out our Catholic lives.

When we come to the final part of our ceremony this afternoon and close the doors of the church, we have this prayer:

*Christ, yesterday and today, the beginning and the end,
in every age, you have been our help.
In your holy name, we close these doors.*

But then we will add this prayer:

*We beg you to keep the doors of our hearts wide open
that we may be your dwelling place
wherever two or three are gathered in your name.*

May Christ who has been with us as we have gathered here over the years continue to be with us wherever we are as we gather in his name. May he give each one of us the grace to persevere in living our faith. As we look now to the future, may we run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

+ Bishop Paul Bird