

AOH 175th Anniversary Mass

Homily by Rev. Thomas M. O'Donnell, AOH National Chaplain

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

These words from the sonnet "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus are uniquely identified with the Statue of Liberty and are inscribed on a plaque at the base of the statue. Since 1886 the lamp of Lady Liberty has been greeting thousands of immigrants who have come to the United States to seek freedom as part of their American Dream.

However, here in St. Patrick's Cathedral Basilica, the Sanctuary Lamp representing the Eucharistic presence of Christ among us, has been welcoming pilgrims and immigrants yearning to be free for some two hundred years and this magnificent church has been the refuge for the tired and the poor of every language, nation and culture. St. Patrick's Old Cathedral is a church of the people. This church nurtured the Irish, Germans, French, and Italian communities as they arrived in this new world. This magnificent church was the Cathedral of the Archdiocese of New York until 1879 when the new Cathedral on 50th St. and Fifth Avenue was dedicated. This Basilica was the first church in America named for our patron, St. Patrick.

On December 5th 2010 Old St. Patrick's Cathedral officially became a basilica of the Catholic Church by order of Pope Benedict. The basilica designation means that the Pope recognize it as a church of special spiritual, historical and architectural significance, and as his own parish church in New York.

Churches are built to remind us who we truly are. They stand across our landscape as pointers to the truth that life is best lived in the conscious presence of a loving God. They help us, in the business of our lives, to retain our focus on God and to learn that God never takes his loving focus away from us. We gather in church to be reminded and strengthened in our most profound identity. As St Paul tells us in 1 Cor. „You belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God“. This is the saving truth of who we really are and where our well-being is to be found. But we come to church not simply to pray, and to be heard, but also to be built into something new. Here we are in the words of St. Paul to the Ephesians „being built into a house where God lives, in the Spirit“. We are never visitors in a church. We are not even its owners. But we are part of what it is, what it stands for: its bricks and mortar in our flesh, its beauty and form in our virtue, its praise and liturgy in our lives.

We gather here today, after two hundred years of worship on this site to celebrate the 175th Anniversary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and we are here not just to give thanks for what we know God has done for us in the past, but also and especially to give thanks for the new life God gives us now in the present, and which we know God offers us from this moment, throughout our lives and in generations to come. The God

we worship through Jesus Christ is the timeless and eternal God whose one unchanging gift is the gift of constantly changing and growing new life as we move ever closer to God in lives of love and service to God and one another.

In his First Letter St. Peter tells us: "Come and let yourselves be built, as living stones, into a spiritual temple; become a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." All of us gathered here today are that new temple, the community of believers, and the house of prayer for all people. We are built up by faith, as living stones, into the new temple. We are the temple in which God dwells, and where God and humankind are to be reconciled. We are the living stones of the new temple and in the Eucharist we share in Christ's offering of himself to God on our behalf and through our lives in the world we are to share what we have received from him by living sacrificially among our neighbors.

The 175 year history of the Ancient Order of Hibernians is intimately connected to the history of Old St. Patrick's Basilica. If it were not for the Irish and the Ancient Order of Hibernians the other historical events of this church may not have been possible. In the 1830's there was a great deal of anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment. The need to defend the Cathedral against mob violence was not uncommon. The "Know Nothing Party" organized Protestants to march against the Cathedral. Mobs and vigilante groups shouting anti-Catholic epitaphs threatened the Cathedral and vowed to burn the Cathedral to the ground. At this point Archbishop Hughes enlisted the Irish and in particular the Ancient Order of Hibernians to surround the walls of the Cathedral and safeguard the church. At this time Archbishop Hughes wrote to the New York Mayor and told him: "Should one Catholic come to harm, or should one business be molested, we shall turn this city into a second Moscow." Although the AOH was able to save the Cathedral, they were not able to prevent the anti-papist mob who stoned the beautiful stained glass windows of both the church and the Bishop's residence. For 175 years the Ancient Order of Hibernians has continued to defend the church and its priests during times of both turbulence and peace.

Just as all of us who make up the Body of Christ give life to the bricks, stone, wood and steel of a church, likewise, the Order of Hibernians is more than just the AOH logo on a division building or the AOH emblem on the top of stationery. Just as we are the living and breathing members of the Church so we must give life to our Hibernian virtues of Unity, Fraternity and Christian Charity. As members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians when we perform the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy in our everyday lives, we are Christ to others.

We are Christ when we protect the dignity of human life from the first moment of conception until the time when our heavenly Father summons us to the Eternal Kingdom. We are Christ to the world when we provide clothing for the homeless, provide meals for the hungry, and work at food banks so that poor families may have some nourishing meals. We are Christ when we support the various Hibernian Charities not only by our material donations but the gift of ourselves. We are Christ when we fight for fair immigration laws not only for the Irish immigrants but for every immigrant who

legally wishes to pursue freedom and the American dream. We are Christ when we support seminarians and novices through project St. Patrick and enable these men and women to pursue their vocations. We are Christ when we provide scholarship funds for deserving students who wish to pursue their academic dreams. We are Christ when we continue to fight for a free and independent Ireland so that perhaps by the centennial of the Easter Rising in 2016 we will have a united free and independent Ireland.

So let us remember that what we come here today to celebrate is not some nostalgic snap shot of the past “good old days,” but to give thanks to God for the new life that Christ gives to us now here in the present.

As Hibernians we are alive, we are grateful for the glorious years of our past, but we must continue to be active in the present and be dynamically committed to the future because years from now we need future Hibernians to look back on us with the same awe with which we have looked back at 175 years of faithful and committed people. Thanks be to God for our parents, grandparents and great grandparents for preserving and bringing our Catholic faith from the Emerald Isle. Thanks be to God for the United States for making possible to practice our Catholic faith in freedom, and thanks be to all of you my Hibernian Brothers and Sisters for being part of this history.

During the next five years may all of us work and pray especially for the unification of Ireland by 2016. In the year 2036 the Ancient Order of Hibernians will gather once again to celebrate the 200 years of its founding, with God’s help may that bicentennial celebration also include the 20th Anniversary of a United Ireland where there is One Island, One Nation with Freedom and Justice for all.