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Church Dedication Homily - St. Bridget Parish
Pleasant Hill
December 4, 1999
Second Sunday of Advent

This is a wonder-filled day for the Catholic community of Pleasant Hill. With an expectation akin to the longing of Advent you have patiently waited for this day, gradually disengaging from your much-loved century-old brick church and in the words of Isaias, you have come up "onto a high mountain" where from this day forth you will "cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news." (First Reading, Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11) On the edge of this rolling hillside, on a beautiful grassy knoll, the gracious gift of a gracious lady, Mary Margaret Ledwidge, this new church will greet the new century and the new millennium as a symbol of Christ, whose incarnation tolls the bell of 2000 years, and all who pass by will know that a people of faith live and work and pray and worship in this town. And this structure, bricks and stone and wood, lovingly planned and meticulously crafted, will this evening receive the pulse of life not only from the rites of dedication setting it apart in consecration as God's place, God's house, but by you, the parishioners, who, led by your shepherd, your pastor, will provide this building with the beating heart which proclaims that God lives and that he lives here!

This is a long ceremony and it cannot be rushed. It is one of a kind, it has a simple but profound beauty and I hope you will absorb every gesture and ponder every prayer. Very few Catholics ever get to participate in the birth of a church and you are probably the luckiest Catholics in our diocese this evening. I am so pleased to see so many young people here as we endow them with memories which will enrich their lives and their children's children's lives as they span the coming century.

Your Dedication Program, one of the best I've ever encountered, is a goldmine of information. Treasure it and read it often and allow me to add that your pastor's letter, which introduces the booklet, is a perfect theological gem, in his own style, of what we are really doing here this evening.

Again and again, we invoke the Spirit of God this day to bless the work of our hands, to take this sanctuary into his loving care, to make it a source of inspiration especially when we are downcast or dispirited, to give substance to our prayers, the gift of repentance in our search for reconciliation and peace, conviction in our reception of the Eucharistic Christ and in his sacramental presence within these walls. Your new baptismal font, often aptly described as the womb of the church, will be the sacred flowing Jordan River into which Christ stepped to be baptized by John, John the Baptist of today's gospel reading (Mark 1:1-8), and it will be the life-giving pool through which children and adults will be pledged to leave that water as "new persons," that same Christ's people.

Before this impressive and beautifully carved walnut altar CANA will be reenacted and couples will enrich their love and their mutual vows by inviting Christ to be the permanent guest through all the joys and sorrows of marriage.

And here, too, when the fever of life is done, we will say our good-byes to this community, one last stopping place before entering that sheepfold presided over by the one we call our "good shepherd," because all of us, without exception, as Peter says in today's second reading, "await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:8-14).

But there are other spirits - lesser spirits, of course, than the Spirit of God but important, nonetheless. Shortly we will, in litany form, call upon all God's saints to envelope this church with their unseen presences as we emphatically endorse this holy place as Christ's manger of Bethlehem, his home of Nazareth, his garden of Gethsemane, his mount of Olives, his cross of Calvary.

And there are others, too, in God's providence sharing this happy occasion with us this evening. They have gone before us but, as believers, we know that death is just a change of clothes on the journey of eternal life. I see those Irish railroad workers of the Missouri-Pacific Company who built and named the first St. Bridget's and who watched it go up in flames nine years after its gift to God. Those fifty-five families who picked up the charred pieces and built the second church in 1885 must be present this evening and when the railroad roundhouse was moved to Nevada in 1916 and Pleasant Hill went into an almost fatal economic decline there were only 22 Catholic families left to keep the sanctuary light burning in St. Bridget's. Eighteen years later that number, devastated by the rigors of the Depression, was reduced to 10 families. It took another 50 years to add another 47 families, not what one would call spectacular growth! But they survived and the mission survived and tonight they are present and tonight their fidelity is vindicated and their faith is blessed. These good people were not rich by the world's standards. In the 1940s the average weekly collection amounted to about \$9.00 per Sunday! Mary Margaret Ledwidge personified their faith and love for St. Bridget's and in life and in death she, among a galaxy of most generous people, made possible so much of what you see around you, a temple of prayer, a sacred place of great beauty, a shrine worthy of a transcendent God and a grateful people.

I met Mary Margaret Ledwidge twice to look at the property where this church now stands and to discuss its donation to the diocese. I had hoped to have dinner with her one evening but her tragic and fatal accident destroyed that possibility. I planned to ask her if she came from the same Ledwidge family as the Irish soldier poet, Francis Ledwidge, who coincidentally, was killed in Flanders in the First World War at the tender age of 26. Ledwidge is not a common Irish name so I thought my surmise may be within the realms of possibility. Now I will never know. Francis grew up in County Meath not far from St. Bridget's monastic home. He loved nature and his native countryside. In his poem "June," he concludes with four lines forecasting the passing of the warmer season. They remind us of the frailty of life and they remind me of Mary Margaret and how she left us.

"Ay! Soon the swallows will be flying south,
The wind wheel north to gather in the snow,
Even the roses split on youth's red mouth
Will soon blow down the road all roses go."

Leading that great galaxy of saints, perhaps in a chariot legend tells us she used, would be your parish patron, Saint Bridget. And when all is quiet here at night and only the flickering flame of the sanctuary lamp dances round the walls, she will point out to all her sainted companions, "see, there is my mark, there is my special cross, on altar, on walls. These people love me." I can visualize her telling St. Patrick, "This evening, at least, forget your old sham-

rock and look at my cross!" Get to know Bridget. She is a wonderful lady and a saint for our times. The Irish called her "the Prophetess of Christ," "the Queen of the South," "the Mary of the Gael." She, too, built a church, and in art is often depicted holding a model of the building, at Kildare, in Gaelic "the church of the oak." When we peer beyond the garlands of legend which embrace her personality we discover a woman of great beauty, passionately in love with God, strong, charitable, zealous, culture-changing, missionary, single-minded in being Christlike and in inviting others to follow her example. There is a mountain in the Himalayas named after her and likewise an island off the coast of Japan. (*Saints of Ireland*, Mary Ryan D'Arcy - 1985) There is a noble contradiction between her lifestyle and her name. She herself took the vow of celibacy as a committed religious but all women who, at one time or another, in entering marriage are called "brides" should know that this is another form of Bridget's name. If there is dancing in heaven then can we dare assume that on this happy occasion Bridget is the one who is leading the hosts of God's everlasting friends. May her happiness and her sanctity spill over into our more mundane lives to inflame us with that sacred love which is a foretaste of our eternal destiny.

Went with the above homily Dedication of a Church

The people of a parish community *are* the Church. Unified by belief in God, and in the sharing of their joys and sorrows, the people are the temple God builds with living stones.

The word *church* also refers to buildings. Churches are the places where Christian communities gather to hear the word of God, to pray together and to celebrate the sacraments.

When churches are built, they are dedicated to God in a solemn rite. Because all parishes are entrusted to the care of the local bishop, the bishop celebrates the Mass of Dedication. Priests, who direct the daily activities of the parish, concelebrate with the bishop.

After processing into the church, the bishop blesses the water of the baptismal font. All gathered are blessed, as well as the walls and the altar.

After praying for God's assistance in the works of the church, the altar is anointed with chrism. This marks the altar as a primary symbol of Christ, the Anointed One. After anointing the walls, the space is consecrated for worship.

The use of incense symbolizes the prayers of the people ascending to God. With special care, the altar is cleaned and prepared with a white altar cloth.

Reflecting the rituals of Baptism—sprinkling, anointing, clothing in white garments, and lighting candles—the Church is now initiated for use by the people of God