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**Dedication of the Restored and Renovated  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**  
Kansas City, Missouri  
Saturday, February 22, 2003 - Feast of the Chair of Peter

Readings:

Nehemiah 8: 1-4a, 5-6, 8-10  
Ephesians 2:19-22  
Matthew 16:13-19

It all began with a pile of bricks. Father Bernard Donnelly, who knew well the fertile and fruitful clay of his native Cavan, discovered something unique about the reddish-brown earth on the great bend of the Missouri River. It was ideal for making bricks. And bricks he made - thousands, maybe even a million, of them. An entrepreneur long before the word became fashionable, he established a Brick Factory next to the parish cemetery and built a relatively small church in honor of the Immaculate Conception, a title of great popularity in those years after the proclamation of the dogma in 1854.

Bernard Donnelly was a visionary. He foresaw the extraordinary growth of Kansas City and knew that the day was not far off when it would surpass the city of St. Joseph in population and prestige. The great surge began in the mid 1860's when Kansas Town - then known by some as Chouteau's Place, Westport Landing and even Possum Trot - had an eight fold increase in its population. The surge became an avalanche with the opening of the Hannibal Bridge across the Missouri. It attracted multiple railroads all anxious to open up the west in those directions where the river did not flow. In due time the town would call itself a city.

Bernard Donnelly was the "John the Baptist" of this diocese. He heralded a new age, the coming of another and his own demise. He was the preparer of the way. He lived just long enough to be buried by the founding bishop of the new diocese, Bishop John Hogan, recently arrived from the see of St. Joseph, which he had also established 12 years previously. The bishop not only inherited Father Donnelly's little church but also enough bricks to build this cathedral and so, on May 11, 1882, in the presence of an estimated 10,000 people, an open-air ceremony was held to lay the cornerstone. The ritual began at 10:30 in the morning and did not conclude until 3:00 in the afternoon. A sermon in English was delivered by Archbishop Feehan of Chicago and he was matched by another sermon in German by the Benedictine Abbot Frowin Conrad of the recently established Conception Abbey. The basic structure of this building was finished rather quickly but for many years it remained an empty shell. In December of 1884, Bishop Hogan ordained his first priest for his new diocese. As there was no heating system in the new building he ordained John Glennon in the sacristy which boasted a pot-bellied stove. Four years later the same John Glennon, the future Cardinal Archbishop of St. Louis, was given the task of turning the interior into a genuine place of worship. He added the high altar, the bishop's throne, an organ, some bells and that badly needed heating plant. It was well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the stained glass windows were added. Indeed, it was not until 1975 that Bishop Helmsing decided the time had come to dedicate this cathedral, in that year cele-

brating its 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday. History records that John Glennon, far from being deterred by the difficulties of finishing a cathedral, made the building of a far larger one a major priority shortly after he crossed the state to St. Louis in 1902.

This cathedral is no Notre Dame of Paris. It cannot rival the great basilicas of Rome. It is puny when compared to the spired gothic of Saint Patrick's in New York City and, let it be reluctantly admitted, the truly magnificent Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis, our Metropolitan See. But it is our own and it has its own unique charm, never claiming to be a replica or a miniature of any of its more famous cousins. It is truly home grown, a creature of the red earth of western Missouri, brick by brick by brick. And it stands here, close to the bend in the river, its gold dome proclaiming the transcendancy of eternity amid the secular towers of trade and commerce. It is the mother church, and, like its pioneering predecessor, it too is dedicated to the mother of Christ under her unique title of the Immaculate Conception, the same named patroness of the United States.

But a cathedral is far more than a building of bricks and mortar, capitals and arches, mosaics and murals. The world is full of great churches which are now museums; architectural masterpieces which have lost their soul. They no longer give pulsating life to all the promises of the Prayer of Dedication which you will listen to in a few minutes. A church building fails if it does not reecho the response of Peter when Jesus cleverly inveigled a personal profession of faith from his perplexed disciple. The very stones around us should proclaim that Jesus is truly "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." For over a century the Eucharistic presence of Christ has found a home within these sacred walls and, through word and sacrament, faith has been nourished and human hearts have learned to beat in pulse with God. We have so much to be grateful for, not least the loving support of Catholics from every parish and mission of the diocese whose "Gift of Faith" revealed their willingness to give their beloved cathedral the structural durability and simple beauty needed to inspire people of faith for another century or more. We must constantly recall the sage advice of Clement of Alexandria who warned his listeners way back in the second century not to be too interested in architecture. "A temple is not a building but a gathering of the faithful," he wrote, and we have both here present on this happy occasion - the people and the Cathedral. As Paul reminded the Ephesians whose successors we are, Jesus Christ is our capstone and we are the living stones of a human edifice, "a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:22)

For many decades thousands have prayed on this sacred soil before they crossed the river and headed into the great unknown. The Santa Fe and the Oregon Trails passed this place and the way west is littered with the weather-beaten relics of those who didn't make it, silent memorials to man's burning quest for another opportunity, a better life and, maybe, dreams of gold.

But this house of prayer, this hallowed place, has also been a welcome oasis in an even greater journey as countless souls have pondered the real meaning of life in their search for God. Perhaps life's greatest tragedy is to dismiss the evidence that faith is a reality which shepherds us to a destiny beyond our comprehension.

The Lord instructed Moses, "build me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among my people." (Exodus 25:8) This place is our response to that divine request.

As Jesus did so often, here may we find a place for prayerful meditation away from the crowds and the affairs of men. Here may we come to know that "not on bread alone does man live but

in every word which comes from the mouth of God." (Deuteronomy, 8:3 and Matthew, 4:4). Here, both today and for years to come, may this holy place be a catalyst for grace enabling us to understand what is good and what is evil as we ponder our choices between heroism and cowardice, beauty and ugliness, selflessness and selfishness, reverence and abuse. The howling winds and the raging seas of Galilee's Lake terrified the disciples in Peter's boat until the Lord spoke. In this place may the Lord speak to us as we grapple with the issues of our time - the morality of war, the dignity of humankind, the ethics of the marketplace and the multiple injustices within our society. And then, conscious that all church doors permit two-way traffic, may we return by the way we have come in to share God's wisdom with the crowds and those involved in the affairs of men. Ezra was not satisfied with the mere restoration of the temple area, beautiful as it was. He wanted more. He wanted his people to experience the transcendence of God's word as he "blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people, their hands raised high, answered, 'Amen, amen.'" (Nehemiah 8:6)

In 1882, when it all began, we were still mourning the assassination of President Garfield. In successive months the nation lost two notable poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson and, in between, just a few miles from here, the famous, or should it be infamous, Jesse James was shot dead by his cousin for the \$10,000 reward. Also in that year the United States signed a treaty recognizing the independence of Korea.

It is now 2003 but some things never change. Korea is in the news again. Our national consciousness has been seared by the tragedy of the Twin Towers and we are still mourning the loss of the space capsule Columbia.

In 1882 there was a killer abroad. It was called tuberculosis. Today it is AIDS.

In 1882 it was Muhammad Ahmed, the self-proclaimed Messiah of the Sudan and the Colonial powers were gathering their forces to attack Khartoum. Today it is Saddam Hussein and we may be privy to another chapter in the history of Iraq and Baghdad before this year runs its course. Despite the gathering clouds of darkness and the ominous echoes of rattling arms we pray for peace with honor and memories of statesmanship rather than demagoguery. Our Holy Father recently asked us to redouble our efforts for peace, "War," he said, "is never unavoidable." Will we ever learn or, to put it another way, let us recall the words which George Bernard Shaw placed upon the lips of St. Joan of Arc as she faced her fiery execution, "Must Christ be crucified in every age?"

And so, in the name of all those who passed this way - but especially in the name of all those who stayed - we dedicate today this restored Cathedral and we give it back to God and our people and our city. They came in different generations - the French, the Belgians, the Irish, the Germans, the Italians, the African Americans, the Eastern Europeans, the Hispanics and the Vietnamese - and conscious of this rich and abiding heritage, may we always have the generosity to find another place at the table.

Maybe Paul said it best when he reminded his protegee, the younger Timothy, that we can only do our best until there is revealed to all of us,

"The King of Kings and Lord of Lords  
who alone is immortal,  
whose home is in inaccessible light,  
whom no man has seen and no man is able to see:  
to him be honor and everlasting power." (1 Timothy 6: 15-16)

Amen

## **Side Column along with the above homily**

In 1833, a French missionary, Father Benedict Roux, arrived with instructions to form a permanent parish. At 11th and Broadway, the community built a log cabin church in 1835, and named it St. John Francis Regis.

Father Bernard Donnelly was a circuit-riding priest. From 1845 until his death in 1880, Donnelly tirelessly served the local Catholic people. He initiated the building of a permanent brick church on the site in 1857. Donnelly recruited 300 Irish day laborers to cut away the bluffs, level the ground and establish a brick works. The brick yard produced building material for the church that Donnelly consecrated Immaculate Conception.

As the population grew, dioceses formed in St. Joseph in 1868 and in Kansas City in 1880. When Bishop John Joseph Hogan arrived in 1880, he selected Donnelly's church to become the Cathedral. Some 10,000 people witnessed the laying of the cornerstone in 1882.

Ready for services on Trinity Sunday, 1883, the walls were not yet plastered, and temporary windows hurriedly were set into place. Newspapers reported that over 3,000 people attended the services that began at 10:30 a.m. and continued uninterrupted until 3:00 p.m. Because the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception was built on the highest ground in the city, at 250 feet above street level -- the cupola quickly became a civic landmark.

In 1895, the growing community added a carillon of eleven bells. Crafted in 1912 by local artisans, the Cathedral's stained glass windows depict scenes from the life of Christ and other biblical themes.

Bishop Edwin V. O'Hara authorized a renovation in 1955. The interior remodeling simplified the Cathedral's interior. After 74 years of weathering the elements, the Cathedral's copper dome began to deteriorate. Bishop John P. Cody created a Kansas City landmark when he finished the dome, cross and cupola with gold leaf in 1960.

The diocesan capital campaign, *Gift of Faith*, provided funds to improve the Cathedral at the close of the century. With thanksgiving to Our Lord and the people of God of our diocese, we dedicated the restored and renovated Cathedral on Saturday, February 22, 2003.