



Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

**Bishop Emeritus
Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph**

**St. Munchin Parish
Cameron, Missouri**

Dedication of a New Altar—May 27, 2008

Readings:

- 1. Genesis 28:11-18**
- 2. 1 Corinthians 10:16-21**
- 3. John 4:19-24**

When the first Irish Catholics trickled into this area in the mid 1850s they were influenced by two overriding memories.

- After centuries of persecution a certain modicum of religious freedom had returned to Ireland and the Church was gradually re-exerting itself – for the first time there was hope. (Catholic Emancipation had come in 1829 led by Daniel O’Connell: new churches were replacing the old Mass houses, etc.)
- The hope was dashed by the reality of the Great Irish Famine (An Gorta Mór, the worst year was 1848); a natural disaster by which 30% of the Irish population either died or, to save their lives, were forced to emigrate.

Those who came to Cameron were probably from the latter group and they tended to travel together for security and mutual support. They came from County Limerick and were most likely joined by some of the hundreds of Irish railroad pioneers who became unemployed when the regional railroads had their westward progress halted by the Missouri River. The pause allowed spur lines to link cities and towns north and south of those running east and west.

The Hannibal-St. Joseph line was finished in 1859 but a line, passing through Cameron, was constructed to link up with Kansas City. Cameron became a junction and began to grow as a town.

The Limerick people had a great affection for their patron saint Munchin which was fortified by the resentment generated by the fact that their ancient St. Munchin’s Cathedral had been appropriated by the Church of Ireland, the official branch of the Anglican Communion, which they had been forced to support for generations. I can assure you that as far as the Catholics of Limerick were concerned Munchin was a “good Catholic” who founded an Abbey a few miles to the west of the future city about 620 A.D., many years before the Reformation Churches became a historical reality. As the Catholics of the city by the Shannon rallied to reclaim their saint by building a new St. Munchin’s Church, those who came here decided to do the same. (Selecting the name “Munchin” was probably also influenced by the fact that there were, up and down the Missouri, already no less than 11 small churches dedicated to St. Patrick and four named after St. Brigid.)

The official historian of the Diocese of Limerick calls Munchin “a shadowy figure” precisely because we know very little about him. His establishment at Mungret was not a small abbey; at one time it numbered 1500 monks and students. When Munchin retired he moved to a tiny cell which became known as “CILL-MUNCHIN” and it, in turn, became the nucleus of the city of Limerick. We believe he had two

sisters, both of whom became religious, Rose of Kilrush and the better-known Lelia of Killely, also honored as a saint in the Irish calendar on August 11. All three built churches so, we might say, "it was in their blood" and it is worth while recollecting that Bishop Hogan, the founder of the now hyphenated diocese of St. Joseph and Kansas City, was also from Limerick.

I have, at some length, deliberately given you some insight into your roots as a parish community. These were your parochial ancestors who built your first local Catholic church in 1868 (the year the Diocese of St. Joseph was established), enlarged it in 1871 and replaced it with the current brick church which was dedicated 23 years later in 1894.

My deliberation was determined by the fact that this secular history of church building here in Cameron is paralleled in the sacred liturgy of dedication which also looks for roots in tracing the many interventions of our God in his inspiration of his faithful followers to set aside human sanctuaries. These serve, as far as is humanly possible, as places where we can get to know our God, all in anticipation of the face to face encounter we expect to have with him on the other side of the grave. All the limitations of our humanity impel us to select these sacred places where expressive buildings fashioned by our hands serve to articulate the inexpressible; where our human voices can seek the consolation of divine comfort and where we can discover a many-dimensional meaning for our earthly existence. Our nature cries out for God and through the life and sacrifice of his Incarnate Son, so intimately linked to the altar, we are introduced to a friend whose interest in our welfare is totally beyond our comprehension.

In our first reading we share in the experience of Jacob who, at God's bidding, anoints his stone pillow to be his altar. God asks and he responds. His gratitude and amazement knows no bounds – 'how awesome is this shrine!' he cries out, "it is now an abode of God and the gateway to heaven."

Sometimes I wonder why a homily is required at a Mass of Dedication because, if you follow the rite closely, you will soon realize it is a homily in itself.

Following on our sharing in the experience of Jacob you will find mention of three great community builders or restorers in the Old Testament – Noah, Abraham and Moses. They led God's people back to him and each of them knew suffering in their own lives, in many ways, a foretelling of the great sacrifice of Christ to be liturgically repeated again and again on your new altar, the marriage of the meal of institution sealed in the blood of the cross. By reciting the Litany of the Saints we beseech all of these "Church-builders" to be witnesses to the pledge you are making to God to enliven and refresh your devotion to his saving sacrifice.

The Preface announces that this altar is truly a "sacred place" and it enumerates all the blessings which flow from the altar the sacrifice of Christ which guarantees redemption, the table of nourishment for all of us and our children and the power of the Spirit which enables us to live lives of courage worthy of Christ.

The altar is blessed and then anointed. It is thus consecrated and set aside from secular use to be a fitting place for the Eucharistic Christ to visit and feed his people. He comes to you that you may find it easier to find him wrapped, not in the swaddling clothes of Bethlehem's infant, but in the mundane simplicity of bread and wine. This new altar achieves its beauty and its sacredness because of its association with the promise and the legacy of Christ. We can truly say – "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ 'has' come again."

Let us ponder the message of our gospel narrative. Christ met a woman at the well in Samaria and they discussed where best to meet God – the local mountain sanctuary or within the temple precincts of Jerusalem, the Holy City? If Christ were to stop in Cameron this evening he would surely repeat, "the hour is coming, and is now here, when you will worship the Father in Spirit and truth" and you will do so every time you repeat my sacrifice upon this altar and within these walls.

AMEN