

The Setting

This homily was given at St. Joseph's Church on Capitol Hill at the 12:00 Noon Mass on Sunday, October 14, 1990 by Monsignor William J. Awalt. It was based on the readings of the day: the 28th Sunday after Pentecost, Cycle A. To understand the references, it must be read in conjunction with these Scripture readings:

- Isaiah 25:6-10
- Phil. 4:12-14, 19—20
- Matt. 22:1-14

The occasion was the 100th Anniversary Celebration of St. Joseph's Church, commemorating the contribution of the German people to parish life.

It was noted by the homilist that any positive effect from his words would rightly be attributed to three elements: (1) the grace of the occasion, (2) the inspiring remembrance of contributions from German immigrants, and (3) the inherent efficacy of the Word of God proclaimed at Mass.

The Homily

As one comes up the River Rhine in Germany, toward the City of Cologne, a mammoth and beautiful church dominates the skyline. In admiring what is the Cathedral Church of Cologne, one might entertain the question, "Haven't I seen something like this before?" Smaller, but inspired by that cathedral, is St. Joseph's on Capitol Hill. This church was a gift of the German people who settled this area around the time of the Civil War, a very small replica of the cathedral that many left behind.

St. Joseph's Parish was started to accommodate the German-speaking Catholics who thought it was too far to go to the German National Parish, St. Mary's, at Fifth and G Streets, NW. They dreamed of making this parish a national church for German Catholics of the United States. St. Joseph's then became the second national church for Germans under the Jesuit, Father Wiget, who was Swiss, but like so many others, spoke German. The first three pastors were German. To find additional German-speaking priests, St. Joseph's parish was staffed from the nearest source in Buffalo, New York. Cardinal Gibbons, whom a few might still remember, laid the cornerstone in 1868. The foundations are 7 feet thick, perhaps the reason they ran out of money for the superstructure in the way they envisioned it. The Cathedral of Cologne was 600 years being built. St. Joseph's, a very small replica of the cathedral, was finished in two years. The total cost of the second structure on the old foundation was \$68,854.52. One estimate is that 20,000 people from nearby and from Baltimore attended the dedication ceremonies. The

parish was staffed by German-speaking priests from the Jesuit mission out of Buffalo, with the assistants more or less coming from the Maryland/New York Province.

In 1886, eighteen years after the cornerstone was laid, Father Valentine Schmitt, from the Archdiocese of Baltimore-Washington, a German-speaking priest, was to become pastor. At his request, St. Joseph's ceased to be a national German parish— one of the conditions of his coming here as pastor. The present church was built between 1890 and 1891, hence our celebration today and throughout this year.

The German people and their priests built this church on a hill, nothing compared to the Bavarian Alps, but a hill nonetheless, especially if taken in perspective with the other sections of DC like Swampoodle and Foggy Bottom. This hill today is known as Capitol Hill. From the point of view of our faith, this building is the more important building on the Hill. The mountain, mentioned in the first reading, Isaiah 25:26-10, was not so much a topographical detail as a place where the Lord dwells: hence, Mt. Sinai, Mount of the Transfiguration, and Mount Calvary. The mountains are the places where God dwells and where God works. This use of the mountain was our human language trying to express the divine presence, transcendence and dwelling. Again, we speak of God “coming down” to earth and Jesus as “going up” to heaven; poor language attempts to express the Incarnation and the Ascension. The mountain and the hill are viewed as God's dwellings. Ours is the great God who is not just one of us, except when Christ takes upon himself a human nature from Joseph's spouse, Mary. Here on the Hill, God has dwelt in a special way these many years; among his assembly, the parishioners, in the Eucharist, and in the proclamation of His Word. St. Joseph's Parish (the Church on Capitol Hill) is still a sign of God's continued dwelling with His people.

I cannot point to anything extraordinary among the German people of those years other than that which is outstanding in itself, their fidelity, their obedience, and their observance of the law, both civil and religious. In that, they were like their patron, St. Joseph. They lived their lives as the yeast, the salt, and the leaven of the Gospel here at St. Joseph's. St. Joseph, himself, seems to come across in the Gospel, as we say today, “as laid back.” But do not mistake that for indifference, weakness, or unfaithfulness. From the obscurity of the hidden life of Nazareth, St. Joseph under Leo the XIII becomes the patron of the universal Church. That makes sense. He, who is the protector of Mary, his wife, and the child, Jesus, is the protector of what we have called the family recently, the domestic Church. Now he is the protector of the Church Universal which is Christ extended into time. As Mary is patroness of the sister German parish and is Mother to us all; so too is Joseph charged with being Protector of the Holy Family and with us.

Scripture called Joseph the Just Man. That did not mean that he simply paid his bills. The word “just” in this context meant he was an observer of the law. What a happy coincidence that a

just man should be patron here on the Hill where our legislators are called upon to be men who enact just laws. Joseph knew the law; e.g. that Jewish marriages take place in two stages: first, the betrothal and then the marriage. In prayer he was given an answer to his dilemma. He presumed that Mary was to be subject to the law because she was pregnant with the Christ Child before they came together. This also made her subject to the penalty that came with breaking the law. Joseph's answer was not to evade the law; rather he discovered in prayer that the law did not apply to the Blessed Virgin Mary— his wife that he had yet to take into his home. He observed the law even when it was inconvenient. Rome spoke: that everyone must go to the place of their origin to register for the census. The civil law was inconvenient for his wife was pregnant and near her time of delivery. Yet, he obeyed the law. For this just man knew that all authority came from God. Because he complied, we have the Christmas hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

Joseph knew the law. He fled the jurisdiction of Herod to go to Egypt when Herod wanted to kill the child. Then from Egypt he took his family to another jurisdiction in the north, Nazareth. In this he was not unlike the early parishioners of this parish. They came to a strange land, not knowing the language, and not having security. Joseph, in all this, was a good patron for the German immigrants. Joseph taught Christ as the child grew in wisdom and age. He worked with his hands. He was a skilled laborer, probably something like a skilled cabinetmaker. He was much in demand, for Herod had taken 1,500 carpenters to Jerusalem to work on the temple. Joseph took Jesus to the temple on the Hill of Jerusalem to teach the child to pray. In this relationship of Joseph to Jesus, this wonderful experience of father and son, perhaps the seed of the prayer, "Our Father," was planted. Jesus saw a reflection of the heavenly Father in his protector, Joseph. Jesus taught us to call God our Father by the affectionate name, "Abba." The German immigrants, like Joseph, kept the law, said their prayers, did their work, went to church, raised their families, and were good husbands and wives. What better patron could there be for these hard-working faithful people from Germany to choose than Joseph, protector of the Church?

Joseph died (as all of us will) before Christ entered into His public life of teaching, dying and rising from the dead. We do not know much about Joseph during that private, hidden family life of thirty years. If Joseph were a German, I am sure, among his last words would have been that phrase that is so often on the lips of the German people, "auf wieder sehen" (till we meet and see each other again. This is more than a perfunctory goodbye. As Christians we believe we have here no lasting city in this world, but that "auf wieder sehen" in German is an expressed belief in eternal life and reunion. The Germans have a saying, "Those who live in Christ have not seen each other for the last time." Joseph, had he been German, could well have said this to his Holy Family. Those who preceded us in this parish could easily say that to us today, meaning, "I will see you again," anticipating reunion, resurrection, family joy, and

happiness. Joseph was a humane, compassionate, obedient, respectful, hard-working, powerful, and patient man. He was one who found his place and his holiness in a simple or ordinary way of life. What a patron for the Germans— indeed, for all of us!

One of my favorite insights into Joseph as a father, as a family man, a husband, and as the protector of Mary and Jesus, is a short literary piece dealing with the time between Jesus' death and His resurrection, as the souls of the just throughout the ages wait patiently with Joseph for the news of their redemption. The piece is called "Limbo." It brings out the humanity of Joseph, patron of this parish and this Church. It is very characteristic of so many cultures and nationalities but also of the German parishioners who preceded us.

LIMBO by *Sister Mary Ada*

The ancient greyness shifted
Suddenly and thinned
Like mist upon the moors
Before a wind.
An old, old prophet lifted
A shining face and said:
"He will be coming soon.
The Son of God is dead;
He died this afternoon."

A murmurous excitement
stirred
All souls.
They wondered if they
dreamed—
Save one old man who seemed
Not even to have heard.

And Moses standing,
Hushed them all to ask
If any had a welcome song
prepared.
If not, would David take the
task?
And if they cared
Could not the three young
children sing
The Benedicite, the canticle of
praise
They made when God kept
them from perishing
In the fiery blaze?

A breath of spring surprised
them,
Stilling Moses' words.
No one could speak,

remembering
The first fresh flowers,
The little singing birds.
Still others thought of fields new
ploughed
Or apple trees
All blossom-boughed.
Or some, the way a dried bed
fills
With water
Laughing down green hills.
The fisherfolk dreamed of the
foam
On bright blue seas.
The one old man who had not
stirred
Remembered home.

And there He was
Splendid as the morning sun
and fair
As only God is fair.
And they, confused with joy,
Knelt to adore
Seeing that he wore
Five crimson stars
He never had before.

No canticle at all was sung.
None toned a psalm, or raised a greeting song.
A silent man alone
Of all that throng
Found tongue—
Not any other.
Close to His heart
When the embrace was done,
Old Joseph said,
"How is Your Mother,
How is Your Mother, Son?"

You heard in the Gospel today, God's invitation not just to the chosen race, but to all mankind to come to the feast. The words used at the Mass before Holy Communion, "Happy are those who are called to His banquet" refer to the eternal banquet in heaven. Our communion is our food for the journey to that eternal banquet. With the invitation goes the clothing to be worn, freely given so that all are dressed alike at the feast, as was the custom. All are clothed with the same gift, God's grace, freely given. During this year you heard about the Spanish, the Italians, the Afro-Americans, and now the Germans, all God's children building up a living parish for these last 100 years. We are put on earth to be one family and yet look how we get along sometimes. But God is optimistic. God keeps issuing the invitation and expects us to come and be together forever.

God invites us to his celebration. Don't be too busy. Find time whether you are enacting laws, raising a household, earning a living, and making time for the kids. Spend time with the Lord in prayer. Accept one another regardless of culture, race, or economic condition. Christ sends out his invitation to all. Put on the clothing of His grace. Freer accept one another. You'll be surprised who is sitting next to you at the eternal banquet in heaven as you both turn to each other simultaneously and say, "I'm surprised to see you here."

This is the mountain where God meets His people under the guidance and the example of St. Joseph. Accept one another. Invite others to come to the banquet. Be a living invitation to one another, calling them by your lives to come to the banquet. Remember you may be the only Gospel which that person may hear or encounter.

You cannot invite or come to the celebration if your heart is heavy. God promises to wipe away the tears from all faces when the celebration begins. But the celebration has already begun. This Eucharist today is a foretaste of the final banquet. We don't have to wait for God to come with the Kleenex. God is here with us, waiting for us to start drying the tears of the grieving, the sick, the poor, the alienated, the lonely; and we do not have to look far to find them. All of us: Italian, German, Spanish, Black, Asian, all are invited as we have been for the last 100 years to God's mountain on Capitol Hill on our way to the holy mountain where God will provide for all people. Let us go to the feast together.

"AUF WEIDER SEHEN"

Monsignor William J. Awalt

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Washington, D. C.