



DIOCESE OF BELLEVILLE
Office of the Bishop

“The Transforming Power of Fire”

Homily
Commemoration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of
The Cathedral Fire
Sunday, January 8, 2012
Feast of the Epiphany
The Cathedral of St. Peter

By
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Dear People of God:

Fire! Fire! **FIRE!**

Fire evokes terror in all of our hearts.

At the same time, it evokes wonder and awe in all our hearts!

It evokes terror because of its unspeakable destructive power. A discarded match can turn thousands of acres of forest into a blazing inferno in a few hours. A volcanic eruption can send burning lava down a mountainside, swallowing up whole villages and swiftly reducing everything in its path to ashes. In the middle of the night, a spark from unattended embers in a fireplace can end the lives of entire families, consume their home, destroy all of their possessions, and silence their dreams forever. Few images of human suffering evoke greater dread, fear, and compassion than those of disfigured human beings in a hospital with burns covering three-fourths of their bodies. Who among us shall ever forget the horrific scene of dozens of terrified people leaping to certain death from the windows of the World Trade Center to escape the leaping flames that pursued them?

Fire! Fire! Fire!

Yet, fire also fills our hearts with wonderment and awe. It can even evoke contemplation and prayer. A family gathered around the warmth of a fireplace is captivated by its crackling sounds, wonderful fragrance, and mysteriously beautiful and timeless flames. We are all transfixed at dawn and dusk by the splendor of the sunrise and the sunset, or a riot of stars on a cloudless night. The magnificence of these flaming stars of heaven strikes the core of our being with silent rapture. For centuries poets have compared human love to an unquenchable fire, the fire of desire. Human life itself is often spoken of as fire: “The flickering flame of my life, which has burned brightly, will soon be extinguished.”

Fire! Fire! Fire!

In religious faith, fire is a powerful, ever present symbol of the tremendous mystery of the hidden presence of God revealed, yet concealed. God reveals the Divine Being to Moses in a bush that burns – it is on fire – but it is not consumed. The Children of Israel are guided from slavery to freedom by a “pillar of fire.” The Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and gave birth to the Church appearing in “tongues as of fire.” The overflowing love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is often rendered by artists as smoldering with fire. Jesus compared the eternal suffering of those who freely turn away from God’s love to being burned up in the fires of Gehenna. Paradoxically, during the Easter Vigil we symbolize the New Creation in Christ by blessing the “new fire.” We enter the darkened church carrying the Paschal Candle aloft, singing “Christ our Light!” as the eternal flame is shared with the entire community of faith.

Fire! Fire! Fire!

On this great feast of the Epiphany, the adoration of the magi, the showing forth of the glory of God and the manifestation of his love for us in Jesus Christ, the Sacred Scriptures are filled with images of light and fire:

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah (60:1-6) declares:

*Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come,
the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth,
and thick clouds cover the peoples;
but upon you the LORD shines,
and over you appears His glory.
Nations shall walk by your light,
and kings by your shining radiance.*

In the Gospel, St. Matthew (2: 1-12) announces:

*Behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,
"Where is the newborn king of the Jews?"*

*We saw His star at its rising
and have come to do Him homage."*

*And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them,
until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.
They were overjoyed at seeing the star,
and on entering the house
they saw the child with Mary His mother.
They prostrated themselves and did Him homage.
Then they opened their treasures
and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

What is a star? An enormous mass of fire, burning gases light years away from earth. But, for St. Matthew, the star has become epiphanic, a manifestation of God's love not only for the Jewish people of Jesus' time, but also for all people, everywhere, in all times! The fiery star brings down the curtain on Christmastide, which ends tomorrow with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. This baptism, inaugurating the public life of Christ is a bold reminder to each of us that it is time to get Jesus out of the manger and into the world of our daily lives.

Today we are commemorating fire, the terrifying, awesome, beautiful fire of nature, and, more importantly, the transforming spiritual fire of God's love.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago yesterday, on January 7, 1887, His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII erected the Diocese of Belleville and appointed the Most Reverend John Janssen as the first Bishop. The Diocese will formally celebrate that milestone here in the Cathedral on Sunday afternoon, April 29, 2012. One hundred years ago, on Thursday, January 4, 1912, as the young Diocese was about to observe its twenty-fifth anniversary, this Cathedral of St. Peter caught fire and was almost completely destroyed.

The Cathedral Rector, Father Schlarman (later Bishop of Peoria) described the event eloquently.

It was Thursday evening, January 4th, the day before first Friday. We had been in the confessional all afternoon ... Leaving, I glanced up at the main chandelier ... Passing through the sacristy I cast another glance at the extensive nave of the beautiful gothic structure. The sanctuary lamp flickered before the Blessed Sacrament. Little I thought that in less than an hour all this splendor and all the labor and planning of nearly fifty years would be little more than a mass of ruin and burning timber. Father Tecklenburg, Father Eppmann, Father Kuhls and I said the Angelus and sat down for supper. We had scarcely been seated at the table when the telephone and the door bell rang terrifically at the same time.

Someone opened the door and shouted: "Fire in the Cathedral!" In the same moment the housekeeper, who had answered the doorbell and the telephone called out: "Father

Schlarman, I believe the Cathedral is on fire!” We literally flew up from our chairs and ran to the burning edifice. On that harsh wintery night during which the Cathedral church, which had been built as a parish church in 1863, burned first from an area between the ceiling and the roof, causing burning timbers to fall, later igniting the entire interior.

George and Bertha Kohl, students at the Cathedral School, were the first to notice the fire. At first they thought the fire was the beauty of an evening sunset. Fire fighters from the city of Belleville were quick to the scene, but both the cold and the height of the structure prevented the growing fire from being extinguished.

One glance at the situation told me that I had diagnosed the case correctly. Red flames, five to six feet long, struck out on all sides of the central ventilator on the Cathedral’s roof. I told Father Kuhls: “Go to the altar and take the Blessed Sacrament away.” I ran out through the steeple and as I reached the landing in front of the church I noticed that the fire department had just arrived. I ran into Third Street, where I met Chief Dinges. I said: “Bring your hose up through the tower and go up the ladder behind the organ, there is an opening through which you can get above the ceiling and get right at the fire.”

The chief said he would try to reach it from below and I accompanied him into the church. He turned the nozzle up, but alas, the water did not have a pressure of thirty feet; it did not even reach the arches in the clerestory. Then, with his men carrying hoses after him, they went up to the organ gallery and were led up to the ladder above ceiling. There stood the firemen and the chief with the nozzle pointing right at the fire a few feet ahead of them – but no water!

Father Schlarman concluded,

When I returned an hour later, the bare walls pointed heavenward, the stars and the silvery moon cast a soft light on a mass of ruins. The fire raged under the floor. The firemen were cutting holes through it to reach the flames below. I went to the Bishop’s house to see His Excellency, Bishop Janssen. I found the venerable Prelate very resigned to the will of God.”

Perhaps the Bishop was thinking of the terrible convent fire in which so many perished twenty-five years earlier when he responded stoically: “The Lord hath given it, the Lord hath taken it, the will of the Lord be done.” Many beautiful treasures and recent improvements to the Cathedral had been destroyed on that terrible day. But not a single human life was lost.

Today we turn over in our hearts the events of that terrifying night a century ago. We give thanks to God for all of those who labored to rebuild the Cathedral, the Mother Church of the Diocese and for Bishop Albert R. Zuroweste, who renovated and expanded the Cathedral after the Second Vatican Council. As we bless the great crucifix repositioned over the altar of sacrifice, in fidelity to the liturgical renewal directed by the Vatican Council; bless the pulpit, fashioned, in part, from wood that survived the fire, (adorned with images of the four Gospel

writers Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and raised up to give appropriate prominence to the Word of God); and bless the wood behind the Bishop's cathedra (also salvaged, in part, from the fire), we are well reminded that ultimately the Church is made of living stones, the whole People of God, built upon Christ, the imperishable cornerstone. We are also reminded that the great Vatican Council was a council of renewal and reform, and at the same time it was a council of continuity. The Bishops assembled with the Holy Father in the Basilica of St. Peter did not decree the rejection of history, tradition, and artistic patrimony. The council was not iconoclastic. As Pope Leo XIII has written earlier, the Church must always preserve the best of the old and integrate it with the best of the new for the good of the Church.

The Word of God, proclaimed for the first time today from this restored pulpit, is spoken to this Cathedral Parish and to our entire Diocese as we mark our one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary.

Isaiah's words are spoken to us, the Church in southern Illinois:

*Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come,
the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth,
and thick clouds cover the peoples;
but upon you the LORD shines,
and over you appears his glory.
Nations shall walk by your light,
and kings by your shining radiance*

Though the future holds challenges and uncertainties, the shining radiance of our faith in action must announce to all that Christ, our Light has come!

The question Matthew placed on the tongues of the magi is now our own:

*"Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw His star at its rising
and have come to do Him homage."*

And, as with the magi, behold, Christ Jesus is the star that we saw at His rising when we were baptized, confirmed, received our First Communion, made our First Confession, celebrated the Sacrament of Christian Marriage or Ordination, received the Anointing of the Sick, and participated in the Holy Eucharist faithfully, so as to live the Gospel each day. He continues to go before us, each hour of each day. His fiery star stops over the place where Jesus is, wherever that may be – in our homes, our families, our places of work, our neighborhoods, our parishes, our schools, our cities, our country, and our strife-torn world. Wherever the star leads us we follow, “fanning the flame of faith!”

Today we are overjoyed at seeing the star of Christ,
we recommit ourselves to entering the house
where Jesus is confident that Mary and Joseph are there as well.

Through our lives of love and service, we prostrate ourselves and do Christ homage.
We open the treasures of our lives and hearts
and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, acknowledging him as king, Lord, and
suffering servant messiah.

“Come, Holy Spirit fill the hearts of Your faithful. Enkindle in us the Fire of Your Divine
Love. Send forth Your Spirit and we shall be recreated. And, through us, You shall renew the
face of the earth!”

Praise be Jesus Christ! Both now and forever! Amen.