

Foundation Festival, Church of the Transfiguration, New York City, October 4 2015.
Fr. Andrew McGowan

A Foundation Festival sounds rather architectural, even monumental. Buildings have foundations, and on these stand solid walls and roofs and towers, the things that are most visible and concrete about churches. The proper readings for a dedication festival reflect on these things and their significance. But this day commemorates things about the Church of the Transfiguration that are mostly dynamic, personal, and spiritual.

The first service of this parish took place in one room of a house not far from here, when on October 2nd 1848 Fr Houghton, the first Rector, gathered with a faithful and hopeful few for divine service. The attendees entered off a vacant lot on 24th Street.

Almost forty years later, on the first Sunday of October in 1893, Fr Houghton - still Rector - proclaimed this Sunday to be a commemoration not only of that first service, but of a whole set of liturgical practices, each of which he had seen introduced on a first Sunday of October in the period between. In 1855 it had been the use of the offertory as a part of the Eucharist; in 1880 the daily celebration of the Eucharist; and in 1881 the establishment of a surpliced choir. All these now seem unremarkable, but they were almost revolutionary then, and speak to the leading place this Church had in the catholic revival within Anglicanism. Why so, it is worth asking.

Back in 1848 in that room on 24th St Fr Houghton had done what was then the usual thing and taken a verse, a piece of scripture not necessarily related to the lections of the day, as the theme or starting point for a sermon. He took in fact a very little verse, just a phrase, the last few words of the second verse of the single chapter that is the Letter of Paul to Philemon: "The Church in thy house." The choice was suggested, he later reported, by the venue for the meeting.

That congregation did not hear the whole sentence from Philemon which read "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house; Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Christians like Philemon probably did meet mostly in houses - actual houses, still functioning as homes - in the first century or so. These were not always grand places, and Fr Houghton's much more recent room on 24th street, with its bare floorboards, a few benches, a lectern - along with what he described as an "asthmatic organ" - might well give us a sense of the connection.

But what was laid on that foundation? What was "the Church in thy house" going to be? Looking around, we get part of the answer - this unique and beautiful place contrasts greatly with Houghton's borrowed room, but it has some things in common too. It - and you - are known to many as the "Little Church," because of a famous anecdote about an actor who was refused the rites of burial elsewhere. This diminutive description presumably referred to the physical plant of the Church, which still offers an unusually

intimate impression; there is still a sense of being in a "Church in thy house" here, of being a community gathered in a room.

As obvious as the curious and appealing sense of scale is the beauty of the decoration. This however is not arbitrary. There are many Churches in this city which have equally beautiful decor, but few whose decor speaks so vividly of a particular understanding of worship. The beauty of this place is not about beauty itself, but about the beauty of God, and in particular the beauty of the God who is made known in Christ and who comes to us in the celebration of the Eucharist. All of those early October commemorations that Fr Houghton recalled in the Fall of 1893 were in some way about recovering and proclaiming the truth of sacramental, and particularly eucharistic, worship.

It is worth recalling what those founders like Fr Houghton helped the Church rediscover in the second half of the nineteenth century, and why things like an offertory, a surpliced choir, a daily Eucharist, might matter.

First, the Eucharist is the sacrament of Christ's saving death and resurrection, in which we encounter him truly and personally. Our individual participation in it is a unique means of grace, through which God feeds and leads us to the fullness of the new life we have been born into through baptism. Hence the great Catholic tradition of prayer and devotion, which offer to the Church and world of a deeper spiritual life. In the Eucharist, Christ calls us to receive and worship him.

Second, the Eucharist is the reminder and enabler of our together being members of the mystical body that Christ has constituted through his life, death and resurrection; we are united in the Eucharist not only with him but with one another in this body the Church, curious as it may be in history, but glorious as it is known to God and as it will be revealed in God's good time. Hence the great Catholic tradition of building up not merely individual converts but a "Church in thy house," united in worship and mission. In the Eucharist Christ calls us to be that Church together.

Third and not least, the Eucharist proclaims a wider reality about God's love for and presence in the world; the God once incarnate in Galilee can be present here with us in our communion with him in bread and wine, but is also present still in that world God loves so much. Hence the great tradition of heroic social service and advocacy that Fr Houghton and parishioners here manifested in their opposition to racism, participation in the underground railroad, and in the simple willingness to be that "Little Church" where George Holland received Christian burial. In the Eucharist Christ calls us to serve him in the world.

Catholic Anglicanism stands ultimately on these affirmations, not on ceremonial. Our worship and its beauty serve that belief that in simple everyday substances, as in everyday people, and everyday places, Christ is really found and can be known. The possibility of "the Church in thy house" exists because God's presence is not restricted to the grand and the glorious; and indeed, as those who have worshipped here over many years have attested, it may still be in a "little Church" where the glory of God is known in

Christ. It is this foundation - him, not it - we celebrate, we who are ourselves living stones built on him. Let us be that spiritual house, that holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.