

# Standing on Holy Ground

by Fr. Tim Church

The place where God's people gather is a holy place, made holy both by his command and by our prayers. When Moses was called to lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt, he heard God's voice in the mystical encounter that we know of as the "burning bush". Moses was attracted to a very strange sight, a bush burning, but not consumed. As he came close, he heard God's voice instructing him to remove his sandals *"for the place where you stand is holy ground."* (Exodus 3:5) It may seem as if the idea of holy places is foreign to our culture. And yet, we go to visit the birthplace of politicians and sports figures, and we enter the house with a hushed silence. Roadside crosses mark the place where someone lost their life. A friend of mine went to Normandy in June of 1994. He said he stood on the same ground where he saw most of his friends die fifty years earlier and, yet, he could still see their faces. It was as if their whole life was connected to that "holy ground".

It may seem that it is only by a chance occurrence that a place gains such a status, but we participate in our religion, indeed in our life, on the basis of a promise. God transforms the mundane of our life, and makes it holy. He does this by the sacrifice of his Son. Just as Jesus was preparing to depart from his brothers, he left them one certain promise: *"Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20) Certainly this is true as his disciples gather to work for the spread of peace, care for the sick and provide for the poor, as well as to praise him in worship. *"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."* (Matthew 18:20)

Of course, the most dramatic and encouraging promise is Jesus' statement to his disciples at the Last Supper: *"Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.'"* (Luke 22:19) As we re-present the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at the altar in the new church, suddenly that place is made holy.

At 8:30 on the Saturday morning of the dedication of our new church, we will offer the Mass in the current church for the last time. Twenty one years of sharing in the life of Jesus and his sharing in our life have gone by. Many beloved members of our families and our parish have gone to the Lord. We have buried children, parents, grandparents, husbands, wives. We have celebrated the new life of baptism and marriage, and received God's strengthening grace in confirmation and holy anointing of the sick. As we have sought God's blessing, we have been convinced of his love for us by sharing it with those standing next to us in this place. Our children have grown up and we have celebrated the events of their lives. We have felt ourselves inspired to do God's work, and received the strength to do it. We do not go from this place empty-handed. We will carry away these memories as we step into a new moment in our parish life.

As we have fallen in love with the old church, now we prepare to fall in love with the new. Just as the old has been a holy place for us, so now the new will as well. As bread and wine are placed on a stone altar, they will become for us the strength to love. And as we wipe a tear of sadness from our eyes, we will shed another of the joy that God gives us in a new holy place.