

Ordination of Bishop McGrattan, January 12th, 2010

The Bishop: Apostle of Jesus for the Hope of the World

One of the most dramatic moments in the ordination of a bishop occurs when the Book of the Gospels is held over his head as the prayer of consecration is proclaimed. As Cardinal Re noted at the Synod on the Word, the bishop begins his episcopal ministry under the Gospel of Christ, who sends him out from there in his mission as a successor of the apostles. As we hear in the second reading today, God has “saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.”

The bishop is a herald, an apostle, and a teacher: He is to proclaim the presence of the Lord as a herald of the kingdom of God, and he is faithfully to teach the message of the Good News of Christ. He is a successor of the apostles: his home is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, and like the apostles he is sent out from that home to represent Jesus to the world. That is what “apostle” means: one who is sent.

The Pope is the Vicar of Christ for the whole world, but each bishop is a Vicar of Christ for that portion of the vineyard of the Lord which the successor of the Apostle Peter has entrusted to his care. He represents Jesus to the people to whom he is sent to preach the Gospel.

Always the bishop must keep his eyes on Jesus, who sends him. Always he must return under the roof of the Book of the Gospels for personal renewal in his mission, as he comes back home again and again to encounter the Lord who has sent him, and to be nourished by that

Lord in the Eucharist, and healed of sin in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

A great book on the priesthood by a great bishop is entitled The Priest is not his Own . What Bishop Sheen wrote applies especially to those who have been entrusted with the fullness of the priesthood as successors of the apostles of Our Lord. We belong to the Master, and are sent out from him to serve his people. Our life is not our own.

I am afraid that I do not remember many retreats that I have made, but I have never forgotten my first retreat as a seminarian at St Peter's in 1969. It was given by Father Durand at a time of great turmoil in the priesthood. He said something that I have puzzled over for years, and I think I have finally more or less figured out what he meant. He said: "A priest cannot have an identity crisis, because a priest does not have an identity." In one sense that is obviously false: each priest has his own natural identity, his own particular personality, and diverse gifts and weaknesses. But it is profoundly true: a priest, and especially one who is consecrated in the fullness of the priesthood of Jesus Christ as a bishop, receives his deepest identity from his mission as an apostle of the Lord. He is a man for others, but he is ultimately a man for the other who is His Lord, Our Great High Priest, who sends him to serve the disciples and to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom to the World. We are called to be lost in the love of the one who sends us.

As Pope John Paul states in *Pastores Gregis*, his letter on the mission of bishops: "Jesus Christ is the icon to which we look as we carry out our ministry as heralds of hope." (*Pastores Gregis* 74)

One whose identity comes from being sent by the Lord Jesus is called to repentance, to holiness, and to joyful trust.

II: Implications of being sent to serve as a successor of the Apostles of Jesus

1. Humble Repentance

Before Ordination, the candidate for the office of Bishop lies prostrate before the Lord as we all pray for him, and ask the angels and saints to join in. He is the “unworthy servant” of Jesus, but he has been chosen and sent. Each of us who called to apostolic ministry needs to reflect on the frailty of the first Apostles: they were far from perfect; all but the beloved disciple failed the Lord, and one betrayed him.

The example of St Peter is instructive for all bishops, and not only for the Pope: he often let his human imperfections get the best of him, but he enthusiastically loved Jesus. It was by grace and not by nature that he became the rock upon whom Jesus built his Church.

In the Gospel today we see Peter’s enthusiasm, but also his human frailty: “when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ ”

So the Bishop, sent from Jesus as apostle, always needs to recognize his own frailties. There is a delightful passage in the Directory for the Pastoral Life of Bishops which was issued by the Holy See in which it notes that because bishops are called to make many decisions, they have many opportunities to make mistakes. They have plenty of occasions to grow in humility.

The authority of the bishop does not come from within, from any personal competence. It comes from the Lord who sends him, and so each of us bishops must live daily in a spirit of humble repentance,

asking the Lord to forgive our sins and to help us deal with our human inadequacies. As Bishop Sherlock said while preaching at my Episcopal ordination, children regularly ask a bishop, “How did you become a bishop?” Their parents more wisely ask, “How did you become a bishop?”

2. Episcopal Holiness: Union with the Lord who sends him

If a bishop is to represent faithfully the one who sends him, and from whom he derives his identity, his life must be marked by episcopal holiness: he must personally know the Lord whom he represents. His real fruitful authority is not canonical, but derives from the degree to which the people whom he serves acknowledge that in fact their bishop loves Jesus and loves them.

This means that a bishop needs daily to spend time with his Lord whom he encounters in sacred scripture, in prayer, and in the Holy Eucharist.

As Peter begins to sink, he finally gets beyond his human fears and cries out “Lord, save me!” Later on, after the resurrection, Jesus speaks to this prince of apostles, but one who had denied him through cowardice, and asks him the questions that matter. At an Episcopal ordination we have a series of excellent questions that outline the mission of a bishop, and meditating on them is a salutary experience for every bishop. But before entrusting Peter with the care of the flock Jesus asked the only questions that really count: “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” Those are the questions as well that are at the foundation of the mission for each successor of the apostles. All the rest is commentary.

There is another reason why the bishop must live with integrity: to be faithful to his mission he must speak boldly against the evils of this

world. Granted the reality of his daily need for repentance, a bishop must be at peace with his conscience, for as Gregory the Great says, the Gospel loses credibility if conscience tethers the tongue of the preacher.

Pope John Paul, in his letter on the mission of the bishop, writes: “As pastor of the flock and servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in hope, the Bishop must become as it were a transparent reflection of the very person of Christ, the Supreme Pastor. In the Roman Pontifical this requirement is specifically mentioned: “Receive the mitre, and may the splendour of holiness shine forth in you, so that when the Chief Shepherd appears, you may deserve to receive from him an unfading crown of glory.”” (Pastores Gregis 13)

3. Serene and Joyful Trust

In the life of a bishop, as in the life of any Christian living in this vale of tears, things can get rough at times, and one can be overcome by a sense of peril. As in the days when Peter came to the Lord over the stormy sea, all of us in the Church face problems that can unnerve us, whether they come from outside the Church or from within. But we are in the hands of the man who stills the waters and calms the sea: if we call out “Lord, save me!”, as Peter did, aware that our own efforts to calm the sea are utterly insufficient, then we will experience the serenity that we find in today’s Gospel: “When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’”

We need not be overly distracted by the wind and the waves. We Christians trust in the Lord who comes walking towards us serenely in the midst of the storms of life: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” A disciple of Jesus, and certainly a successor of the apostles, always finds reason for joyful serenity, not in the illusion of optimism, for the storms are real, but rather in the vision of faith which reveals to us the ultimate reality of the providence of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ who sends us into this world.

In the book of Sirach, in the first reading today, we hear:

“You who fear the Lord, trust in him, and your reward will not be lost. You who fear the Lord, hope for good things, for lasting joy and mercy.”

A bishop is called to serve the Lord with gladness, singing for joy, for he is a successor of the apostles of the Lord of the universe, who sends him on his apostolic mission. As Pope John Paul says in his letter on the mission of bishops,

“The Bishop is called in a particular way to be a prophet, witness, and servant of hope. ... Especially in times of growing unbelief and indifference, hope is a stalwart support for faith and an effective incentive for love. ... Relying on the Word of God and holding firmly to hope, which like a sure and steadfast anchor reaches to the heavens (Heb 6:18-20), the Bishop stands in the midst of the Church as a vigilant sentinel, a courageous prophet, a credible witness and a faithful servant of Christ, “our hope and glory” (cf Col 1:27) ...” (Pastores Gregis 3.)