

Ordination of Bishop Nguyen, January 13, 2010

The Bishop: Servant of God, Servant of the Servants of God

I: Introduction: Servant of the Servants of God

Whenever a formal letter from the Pope is read, as in the reading of the apostolic mandate at the ordination of a bishop, it is always an awesome experience to hear those famous opening words “Benedict, bishop, servant of the servants of God.” From the time of Gregory the Great the successors of Peter have thus articulated their most noble title: servant of the servants of God.

This title is proper to the Pope, for his mission is to serve all of the servants of God in the whole Church as successor of St Peter, and as Vicar of Christ on earth. It is in that capacity that he serves us all as a visible instrument of unity, given to us by Our Lord Jesus himself, and in that capacity he leads the College of Bishops, which continues the mission of the band of Apostles chosen by the Lord. Each bishop is ordained primarily as a bishop of the universal Church, a member of the College of Bishops, and Peter’s successor assigns to him a particular mission of service within the Church.

It might be considered a trifle presumptuous if our newest bishop began his letters with the words “Vincent, bishop, servant of the servants of God”, but nonetheless those words that are the primary title of the Pope indicate a fundamental dimension of the mission of each successor of the Apostles. Bishops are ordained to serve God by serving the servants of God. They are called to oversee the community of faith, and their episcopal authority is rooted in humble service. *Christus Dominus*, the Vatican II document on the mission of bishops, states that “in exercising the office of father and pastor, bishops should stand in the midst of their people as those who serve. Let them be good shepherds

who know their sheep and whose sheep know them. ... Let them so gather and mold the whole family of their flock that everyone, conscious of his own duties, may live and work in the communion of love.”
(Christus Dominus,16)

In the Liturgy of Holy Thursday the bishop, or the pastor in the parish, imitates the action of Our Lord, who at the Last Supper washed the feet of the apostles. He said to them: “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his Master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”
(John 13:12-17).

It took Peter some time to understand these words of Our Lord, so full was he of his own vision of his mission – it is a danger we all face - and so he resisted, but eventually through failure and repentance, and the power of God’s merciful love, he came to understand the primacy of humble service. In the second reading today we hear his words exhorting those who hold office in the Church: “Now as an elder myself and a witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it - not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.” (I Peter 5: 1-4) The mitre of the Bishop represents that crown of glory that is the sign of humble service. It is placed on the head of the new bishop with these words that refer to

today's second reading: "Receive this mitre. May the light of holiness shine forth in you, so that when the chief shepherd appears you may deserve to receive from him an imperishable crown of glory."

The bishop is called to watch over the flock of Christ, the Good Shepherd, with a loving concern modelled on that of the one he represents, and whose people are entrusted to his care. His pastoral service is one of love, searching for the lost and nourishing those whom he serves with the divine gifts of word and sacrament.

The two other symbols of the episcopal office speak to the nature of this pastoral ministry of service.

The crozier, the Shepherd's staff, is a sign of the responsibility of the bishop for those entrusted to his pastoral care. He must put the needs of those whom he serves ahead of his own desires and convenience. The crozier is given to the new bishop with these words: "Take this staff as a sign of your pastoral office: keep watch over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has appointed you to shepherd the Church of God." It is the privileged vocation of the bishop to devote his life to keeping watch over the community of the disciples of Jesus, in the imitation of the Good Shepherd. We can think of the great bishops of history, such as St. Gregory the Great, St. Francis de Sales, and St. Charles Borromeo, who witnessed to selfless service of their people. Today, on this feast of Saint Hilary, we think of that great bishop who wrote a bishop's duty to preach the Good News: "I am well aware, almighty God and Father, that in my life I owe you a most particular duty. It is to make my every thought and word speak of you. In fact, you have conferred on me this gift of speech, and it can yield no greater return than to be at your service."

As Vincent is ordained a bishop over the tomb of Michael Power, first bishop of Toronto, we recall the ultimate gift of episcopal service: that martyr of charity and true Shepherd of his people sacrificed his very life in caring for the suffering immigrants who came to this city in the terrible summer of 1847. He indeed was a servant of the servants of God.

The bishop is called to serve his people with total dedication, to protect them from all harm. His service is not to be fleeting and superficial. He is to be a shepherd, not a hireling. He is called to faithful service, no matter what troubles are encountered, year after year, all the days of his life. He is wedded to the Church whose people he serves. When he receives the episcopal ring, he hears these words: “Take this ring, the seal of your fidelity. With faith and love protect the Bride of God, his holy Church.”

II: To be a Servant of the Servants of God as a Bishop

If the bishop is to be a faithful servant of the Lord and of his people, then he must listen humbly, and witness boldly.

I: Listen humbly to the Master: Speak, Lord, your servant is listening

The bishop represents the Master who sends him, and so he must humbly listen to the voice of his Master if he is to be able faithfully to serve his fellow servants who are entrusted to his pastoral care. A bishop spends his days studying the needs of the people, attending endless meetings, listening to countless people who seek his help, and consulting widely concerning the best path forward for the community of faith. All of these activities are essential elements of a life of episcopal service. But they are insufficient.

It is the Lord who guides his Church, and we who for a brief moment occupy episcopal office as stewards of his mysteries must always be attentive above all to his voice. Spiritual leadership must be rooted in that attentiveness. Those who exercise authority in the Church must look to the example of Samuel, whose experience in the temple we hear in the first reading today. Samuel would go on in later years to be the spiritual leader and servant of his people, guiding them in dangerous times. But first he needed to listen to the voice of the Lord who called him by name. The old priest “Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” ”

Every day the one who serves the people in the name of the Lord must say “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” The bishop begins his ministry with the Book of the Gospels held over his head as the prayer of consecration is proclaimed. Each day a bishop listens to the voice of the Lord above all in prayerful meditation upon the inspired Word. He listens to that same voice in the living tradition of the Church, in the writings of the Fathers and Doctors, in the documents of the Magisterium, and in the Gospel wisdom that is written in the lives of the saints. In all of these ways the Spirit speaks to the Church. He hears that voice in prayer before Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Only then will he also be able to discern faithfully the echoes of that voice that are found in the circumstances of the present age, “the signs of the times” he discerns in the daily activities of his episcopal service.

To serve faithfully, a bishop must first listen humbly to the voice of the Master. He will then be able to witness boldly.

II: Witness boldly to the Gospel of the Master

Today we have heard the account at the end of the Gospel of Matthew of the commissioning of the eleven disciples to set out boldly to evangelize the whole world: “Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you; and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.””

All Christians are commissioned through Baptism and Confirmation to continue this work of evangelization. We are to share the Good News through our words and above all through the example of our lives. But bishops, successors of the Apostles, have a special responsibility to evangelize boldly. Their greatest service is not through the words that they speak, but through the witness of their lives.

In this they are inspired by the great Christian witness of the priests, religious, and laity whom they serve. There are some burdens in the life of a bishop, but really they are few. Anything a bishop gives in service is nothing compared to what he receives in the prayers and example of the holy servants of God entrusted to his care.

We are all called to witness boldly, with a courage that comes from Our Lord Jesus, for he is with us always, to the end of the age.

I spent many years studying the Apocalypse, which comes from the days of the first Christians, who sought to proclaim the Good News in a world of violence and injustice, not much different from our own except in superficial things. Some of them witnessed to Jesus by giving their lives for him as martyrs: when faced with violent persecution they were faithful even unto death. Martyr means “witness”. Most of the

early Christians, however, were not martyrs in that sense, but were called to witness to Christ by living with integrity amid the temptations of a godless society.

In Canada the danger of persecution is minimal, but the danger of temptation is great. We who have never suffered for Christ can hold our faith cheaply, and not treasure the gift for which the martyrs have shed their blood. Yet in our community of faith are many who have experienced persecution. All around the world our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering as they boldly witness to their faith. As Archbishop of Toronto I frequently meet people who have suffered greatly for Christ, and who tell of the modern martyrs.

The Vietnamese martyrs are an inspiration to us all, and Bishop Vincent is a descendant of a holy martyr. The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church, and our Canadian community of faith, so tempted to compromise in the midst of a society caught in the snare of relativism, individualism, and materialism, is invigorated by the example of the martyrs of the past and the martyrs of the present, and of all of those who have suffered greatly and sacrificed much for Our Lord Jesus.

We all need to listen attentively to the voice of the Master, and to witness boldly to his Gospel. If not called to die for Christ, we are all called to live for Christ.

It is the particular mission of each bishop, inspired by those whom he serves, to serve them in turn through the witness of humble life of faithful pastoral care in the imitation of Christ the Good Shepherd. He is to listen attentively to the voice of the Master, and to witness boldly to the Gospel. At the end of his life of episcopal service of God's servants, may he hear from his Lord: "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master." (Matthew 25:21)

