

Homily: INSTALLATION as 6th BISHOP of STOCKTON St. Stanislaus Church, Modesto, CA

“May our hearts thirst for Christ, the fountain of living water.”

My brothers & sisters, today I stand before you with a grateful heart. A heart grateful to Almighty God for the gift of Faith, Family & Friends.

FAITH - the generous gift from God, Our Father.

For me, the gift of faith was primarily granted to my Grandparents who shared it with us. A faith they carried within themselves as they journeyed from the “old country” to America where they settled in this State of California. Not just to California, but to the great Central Valley, the “Big Valley” of California. Uprooting themselves from their island home of the Açores, they settled in the county of Merced located in the San Joaquin Valley & immersed themselves in the family business as dairy farmers which, eventually, became the environment that I was reared. There is something to say about growing up in the open spaces of “living in the country,” & experiencing the hard work & commitment that goes hand-in-hand in the life of agriculture. A livelihood where one is surrounded by the cycle of nature, the cycle of rising & dying.

It was wonderful to see that my Grandparents’ faith was integrated in all that they did. It was a “lived” faith. This lived faith, along with that of my extended family: my Godparents, uncles & aunts, had an impact on my life, & I believed has played a fundamental role in my priestly vocation.

Along with the gift of faith, the gift of family was, & continues to be fundamental in my life. Growing up with caring parents, along with my two sisters & brother, not to mention, my cousins, can never be taken for granted. Also, as a family, we were blessed with a great parish family in the parish of Sacred Heart Church in Dos Palos.

Years later, as an ordained priest for the Diocese of Fresno, I would continue to have the experience of serving several parish communities within the agricultural setting of the counties of Merced & Fresno. These parishes & Valley communities continued to reveal to me the experience of the life giving presence of true faith, family & good friends; the building blocks necessary to create strong & productive communities. It was within those parish communities, in which I was assigned, that I encountered the God-given gift of good friends & great relationships.

After 26yrs as a priest, serving the Diocese of Fresno, the “journey of the call” prompted me to move to the Diocese of Sacramento, to serve as Auxiliary Bishop. I soon found myself in the northern expanse of the Sacramento Valley &, again, experiencing the vitality of the people of faith of that region of the Central Valley.

Now, I find myself, responding to the call & appointment as the Bishop of the Diocese of Stockton; a diocese surrounded by its “sister dioceses” of Fresno & Sacramento. It is a comfort to know I am in good company as we, the clergy, religious & laity of the Diocese of Stockton begin to build upon the good work you have accomplished under the “good shepherd” leadership of 19yrs of Bishop Stephen Blaire. 19yrs of leading you to the “living waters” of the Gospel of Jesus & the teachings of the Church; forming you as missionary disciples - exercising the spiritual & corporal works of mercy.

We, as the people living in each of the Dioceses of the Central Valley are aware of the precious treasure of living water. This “liquid” gold has, & continues to have an essential impact on California. It is this

natural, God-given resource of water that has transformed a desert wasteland into the “breadbasket of the world.” These streams & rivers, fed by God’s gifts of snow & rain, are essentially life giving to all who live here. Just as we need the physical element of water to nourish this fertile agricultural region of the dioceses of the Central Valley, more importantly; we need the supernatural life-giving water that is Christ Jesus.

We are reminded of this in our reading from the Prophet Jeremiah: “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretch out its roots to the stream. In the year of drought it shows no distress, but still bears fruit.” It is God’s grace & mercy that sustains us as we share the fruits, gifts & talents, that the Holy Spirit has given us.

St. Paul mentions this in his letter to the Romans. “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us excise them: if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” As we move forward as the body of Christ let us share the gifts God has given us to build the kingdom of God in the Diocese of Stockton. As we do so, let us take to heart St. Paul’s words: “Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Let us rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality.” Now, brothers & sisters, that is what is needed in order for us, together, to move forward.

As your Bishop, I ask you for your prayers & your willingness to share & utilize your God given gifts as I begin to live out the call of the Holy Spirit & lead you as your shepherd. We find in today’s Gospel from John the clear proclamation of the role of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It is this model that I & my brother Bishops are challenged to live. But, to attempt this shepherding, without turning to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is foolish.

I cannot be the Bishop I am called to be without the Holy Spirit. He is the one who will grace us with the good times & will strengthen us to be steadfast in the challenging times. We are all anointed & sent as the baptized. As your Bishop, I am ready to journey with you as we embrace the present & move forward into the future as the Church of the Diocese of Stockton.

In his note of congratulations to me, Cardinal Mahoney reminded me of Pope Francis’ words spoken in Cartagena, Columbia on September 10, 2017: “The people of God have a good sense of smell. And sometimes our task as pastors is to be behind the people. A pastor has to take up all three positions: in the front to mark out the road, in the middle, to know it, & at the back to ensure nobody falls behind & to let the flock seek the road...& the sheep smell a good pasture. A pastor has to move continually between these three positions” always moving & leading the flock toward those “living waters,” The Living Water - Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

As I begin my ministry in the Diocese of Stockton, as your shepherd, here, in the “heart of the Valley,” I ask you to pray that I remain faithful to this call as your Bishop. Pray that I may have, as King Solomon desired from the Lord, a “understanding heart.” To have a “pondering heart,” as that of the Immaculate Heart of Our Lady of the Annunciation, a “reflective” heart. And it is her heart that will lead you & I to the Sacred Heart of the Good Shepherd, that we encounter at every celebration of the Eucharist. My brothers & sisters, as we begin our journey together, let us never forget, in the midst of it all, “It is He who leads us!”(Ps48)

Again, “May our hearts thirst for Christ, the fountain of living water;” & we pray that the Lord, will send his spirit to make us strong in faith & active in good works” as his missionary disciples.

Our Lady of the Annunciation, pray for us.