

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THE OCCASION THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ERECTION OF
THE DIOCESE OF BIRMINGHAM IN ALABAMA
SOLEMNITY OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL, JUNE 29, 2019
BIRMINGHAM-JEFFERSON COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

I greet you on this Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Successor of Saint Peter, I express Pope Francis' paternal affection for you, assuring you of his spiritual closeness, as you celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of this Diocese, whose patron is Saint Paul. I thank Bishop Baker for his kind invitation and for his leadership of this local church since 2007. To him and to all of you, I offer you my heartfelt congratulations on this momentous occasion.

Bishop Massimo Camisasca has written:

“God gives every man only one vocation, and every man is called to discover the one purpose and direction of his life. Vocations are not added, one on top of another: in the course of this life, a person does not get called to this, now to that: there is only one vocation for each person. ... When God conceives of our face, he conceives of it in its complete form, even though each of us has to achieve it in time as a progressive discovery. And each one of us experiences his own freedom as the possibility of corresponding to the Father's will, to God's will.”

Bishop Baker has written a wonderful pastoral letter *Called, Formed, and Sent*. This evening, I want to reflect with you upon this idea of the “call”, beginning with the words of Pope Benedict XVI, which are quoted by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* and which I cannot cease repeating:

“Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

What a difference the encounter with Christ makes! Let us then consider the vocation or call of Simon Peter. Simon was a fisherman, along with his brother Andrew. Simon probably only conceived of himself as a fisherman, but God had conceived of him as a “fisher of men”, as the “Rock” on whom His Church would be built. It would take Simon time to discover and live his call. Yet, Jesus, casting His first gaze upon Him, saw his potential. He had not called him to mediocrity but to greatness.

When Andrew said to his brother, in St. John's Gospel, “*We have found the Messiah,*” Peter followed. Andrew had spent just one day with Jesus and heard His voice; it was enough to convince him that He had found the Messiah. What would our life be like, what would this Diocese be like, if we truly met the Lord in prayer, in Adoration, in the Sacraments? If we heard His voice and responded to His call? Would we reach the same conclusion as Andrew and make new disciples?

Andrew was so utterly changed that he immediately told his brother. There must have been conviction in his voice, because Simon immediately followed. In Saint Luke's account of the call of the fishermen, Peter was astounded at the miraculous catch of fish, and he said, “*Lord, depart from me, for I*

am a sinful man.” But this was the one thing the Lord would not do. He called him to follow Him. The encounter with Christ changed Simon’s life.

Of course, Simon would have many difficulties in accepting the call. He did not want to accept the suffering and ignominy of the cross. In a time of trial, he denied the Lord three times, but the Lord’s gaze never left him. When Jesus looked on him, His eyes of mercy pierced the heart of Simon Peter, and Peter wept. It is this Mercy of God of which Pope Francis never ceases to speak. God is relentless in seeking out the lost.

Certainly, that was true in Saint Peter’s life. After the Resurrection, Jesus saw Simon and asked him three times, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” The merciful gaze of Jesus provoked from Simon a response of love. Jesus told him, “*When you were young, you used to about where you wanted, but when you are old, another will bind you and lead you where you do not wish to go.*” This was to signify the death by which he would glorify God.

Here we come to another dimension of vocation – being bound and led. If Peter examined his life, or, if we examine our lives, we can see in the steps we have taken, in the events, circumstances, and conditions we have experienced, a decisive direction. We think that we are choosing our own path, but in reality, we are being led. We cannot live our vocations on our own terms. In recognizing we are being led by the Lord, we are not being deprived of our freedom, but are freely surrendering it to him, thereby experiencing the great peace He offers.

The steps of Peter’s vocation included this evening’s Gospel: his confession of faith! Boldly Simon proclaims, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*” Jesus responds, “*Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter and on this Rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.*”

Jesus gave him the keys of the Kingdom, for the binding and loosing of sins. He gave him an authority to offer forgiveness. He entrusted him with authority to teach and shepherd the flock. Elsewhere, he asked him to strengthen the brethren in unity. The successor of Saint Peter continues this ministry of strengthening and uniting the brethren. It is no easy task. The culture, within and outside of the Church, has made the task more challenging for Pope Francis. Msgr. Ronald Knox reportedly said, “Perhaps it would be a good thing if every Christian, certainly if every priest, could dream once in his life that he were pope, and wake from that nightmare in a sweat of agony.”

The responsibilities of vocation of the Pope are enormous. I ask each of you to pray for Pope Francis and to renew your commitment to communion with the See of Peter. Can we really conceive of Christ without the Church or the Church without a Pope? God has called Pope Francis to this special vocation – to be an instrument of unity and fraternity in shepherding the People of God; to offer them a credible and authoritative witness to God’s love and mercy; and, to feed the sheep.

On this Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul, we can also ask: What does it mean that God called a Pope from Latin America to shepherd the universal Church at this moment in history? What is the Spirit saying to us about the mission of the Church and the need to engage the world with the joy of the Gospel? The Holy Father gives priority to the encounter with Christ. It is there that the whole missionary endeavor begins. The exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* begins with these words:

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is born anew.”

Yes, the joy of the Gospel must fill the whole world. The Lord revealed to Peter at Joppa that the Gentiles too were called to salvation in Christ, but it would be Saint Paul, who would encounter the Lord on the Road to Damascus and be transformed into the Apostle of the Gentiles.

The Preface for today’s Liturgy speaks to their two-fold role: *For by your providence the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul bring us joy: Peter, the foremost in confessing the faith, Paul its outstanding preacher, Peter, who established the early Church from the remnant of Israel, Paul, master and teacher of the Gentiles that you call. And so, each in a different way gathered together the one family of Christ...*

Each person, like Peter and Paul, is called by God to holiness, but each vocation is unique in the service of the one family of Christ. While every call is personal, just as Paul’s was on the Road to Damascus, God has not called us merely individuals but as a Body, the Church. He calls you to use your freedom to discover both your dignity and your mission. Mission is the expansion of the communion that we live together; it implies expanding our fraternal friendships to those whom we meet, in an awareness that communion with and in Christ is given to us forever. He has called you to communion.

Paul was tireless in building up this communion and undaunted by hardships. Viewed with suspicion as the one who persecuted the Church, he suffered throughout his missionary journeys – beatings, stoning, imprisonment, shipwreck, poverty, and rejection, but he never gave up. *The Lord stood by him and gave him strength, so that the proclamation might be completed, and all the Gentiles might hear it.*

In the second reading today, writing to Timothy, Paul says: *I, Paul, am being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me.*

How many of us could say this? How have we used the talents, the gifts, and the graces that God has given us? Do we live lives of integrity, consistent with the Eucharistic Lord, whom we receive? Let us look to the example of Saint Paul to receive inspiration and beseech his powerful intercession to carry out what our mission demands.

As we celebrate this fiftieth anniversary of the Diocese and consider the rich history of faith, it is easy to be overwhelmed by rapid secularization, by the challenges that we face, and the amount of work that must be done in the Lord’s Vineyard. Do not be afraid! The Lord stands by you too! Still, looking to the future, there is much work to be done. The Lord sends us to work in His Vineyard.

The Lord calls us. He forms us in the school of prayer, and only then does He send us. Before being sent on mission, we are called together to be with Him – to encounter Him anew in His Word, and especially in the Eucharist. Remaining in Him and in friendship with Him is the key to the fruitfulness of our mission. Each day, in prayer and at work, we try to educate the heart and mind to abiding in this communion. Communion becomes the form of life, a way of living that becomes impossible to live without sacrifice, without conversion, without being impacted by the encounter with an Original Presence.

Christ has called this local Church of Birmingham to be together. At the Last Supper, He prayed: *“That all may be one Father, as you and I are One, so that the world may believe.”* Christ has called us to witness to the communion of love that is the Blessed Trinity. Look around; see how many different people, from all walks of life, from all over the world are gathered in this cathedral or think about how many are joining us by television, radio, and online. It is a miracle that Christ has willed us to be together. Christ has placed us together, not only because it is meaningful for us, but because it is meaningful for everyone – for our whole world. Through the Church – through you – salvation comes to the world in Christ Jesus. This is the purpose of our mission: salvation and eternal life.

Christ calls us. He forms us in His love. He sends us to offer salvation and life in His Name. May the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, who share the one Martyr’s crown, intercede for the Church of Birmingham and to those being “commissioned” as missionary disciples, so that they too may pour themselves out as a libation for Christ and His Church.