

## Vespers/Vigil of Ordination and Installation

Homily: 2 Peter 1:1-21

Theme: Through common witness and called leadership, we know fullness of life in the “tent” of God’s glory.

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I am so grateful to Bishop Pates, to St. Ambrose Cathedral pastor Fr. John Bertogli, to Des Moines Diocese priests, deacons and spouses, to our guest bishops and archbishops, and to all who come to keep vigil with us this evening as we await a fresh dousing of Spirit upon the Church of Des Moines tomorrow. Thanks for opening the door when I knocked! But that’s no surprise, for it’s what you’ve consistently done for longstanding parishioners, for fresh faces who come from various places and countries, and for those who maybe are simply looking for a place to sit down and gather themselves for a few moments when they’ve got no place to call home.

I beg your understanding as my homily is geared primarily to priests of the Des Moines Diocese, with a slight nod to leaders of other faith traditions and elected and appointed officials who join us. The rest of you will have, God willing, plenty of opportunities to hear me target the Scriptural message to you; as you listen in, maybe tonight you’ll get some sense of how I approach the call to be the tenth shepherd of this wonderful Diocese.

Estoy muy agradecido con el Obispo Pates, con el párroco de la Catedral de San Ambrosio el Padre John Bertogli, con los sacerdotes de la Diócesis de Des Moines, los diáconos y sus esposas, con los obispos y arzobispos visitantes, y todos aquellos que vinieron a estar en vigilia con nosotros en nuestra espera de un fresco rócío del Espíritu sobre la Iglesia de Des Moines mañana. ¡Gracias por abrir la puerta cuando toqué!

Pero no es una sorpresa ya que es lo que han hecho consistentemente por muchos años con los miembros de su parroquia, con los nuevos rostros que vienen de varios lugares y países, y con aquellos que están buscando simplemente un lugar para sentarse y recuperarse por unos momentos cuando no tienen un lugar al que pueden llamar su hogar.

Les ruego que entiendan que mi homilía estaba dirigida principalmente a los sacerdotes de la Diócesis de Des Moines, con una pequeña señal a los líderes de otras tradiciones de fe y a oficiales electos y nombrados de gobierno que están con nosotros. El resto de ustedes tendrán, Dios mediante, muchas oportunidades para escucharme predicándoles el mensaje de las Escrituras; al escucharme, tal vez esta noche puedan tener una idea de cómo respondo al llamado a ser el décimo pastor de esta maravillosa Diócesis.

“Symeon Peter, a slave and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of equal value” through Jesus Christ. Peter may have received a name change to match his special charge from Jesus to strengthen and guide the brethren as they form the Church on the bedrock of apostolic faith. But he doesn’t cast off his original identity as Symeon, a son and steward of the covenant of Israel. He is a regular guy given to impressive displays of fortitude and faith that attest to God’s working through him—but who also gets himself in over his head at times, and succumbs to the fickleness familiar to us all, where self-reliance carries us only so far until we sputter and sink from the gravitational pull of our own ego. While Symeon may self-identify as “slave,” he is no longer bound by fear and memories of past failures; he is “yoked to Christ” by mutual love, which is a force stronger than courage, consistency of character, or any of the other natural virtues which might be part of the profile we present to the world. By his redeeming

love, Jesus has given Symeon Peter back to himself—and this is the solid rock basis freeing him to give himself to others and lead them to the Lord.

Faith, hope, and love are Spirit-given assets—classically referred to as the supernatural virtues. They “level the playing field” of differences among natural gifts and qualities that we know are unequally distributed by genetics and the relative health or dysfunction of our families of origin. By the mysterious grace of baptism, all of us have been richly endowed with all we need to take our proper part in the community of God’s holy ones, for we have broken through the glass ceiling of diminished expectations and are together called to become saints. Peter speaks in his letter to those who have received an “equal faith”—faith that affirms the saving love the Father has revealed to us in the person of his only Son.

And here is where I’d like to highlight a distinction drawn so lucidly by the late Yves R. Simon—a distinction that speaks not only to the role of a bishop among his brother priests and larger flock, but one that might be instructive for civil leaders in their self-understanding and exercise of their authority: the distinction between a leader and a witness. Bear with me for a bit as this is the “deep water” I’ll tread this evening! Simon observes: “When an issue is one of action, the person in authority has the character of a leader; but when the issue is one of truth, not of action, the person in authority has the character of a witness. . . . Witnesses do not enjoy, in human relations, a position superior to ours” (Simon, *A General Theory of Authority*, p. 84).

Now I know that my brother Tom and others members of the bar dutifully enlist their respective “expert witnesses” that they call forward against each other, leaving it to the members of a jury to weigh whether some witnesses are telling the truth more than others. But in the realm of faith, bearing the truth of who Jesus is and how he calls us no longer slaves, but friends, we are all equally converted, re-created, and called to offer bold witness with the medium of our

lives. In the communion of faith, and ideally, in the community of civic friendship, where neighbors do more than enforce the “not in my backyard” codes of zoning laws and legislation, all are called to cooperate and contribute, however diversely, to the common good that we human beings naturally intuit and toward which we incline. No one has greater authority over another when it comes this joint natural and divine invitation, for as even Aristotle recognized, “friendship is said to be equality” (*Ethics* 8.7.1157b36, cited in Simon, op. cit., p. 135).

The “common good exists when we know and feel that we are one in adhering to a certain truth and in dedicating our lives to what we hold to be right and good.” For politicians and civic officials, their focus is upon the recognition of human rights and the relative purposes of civil society (public peace, education, adequate material resources, health and welfare when we find ourselves at risk, and so forth). For members of the household of faith, our gaze is directed explicitly toward our relation with God, and how relation this shapes our communion with one another (Simon, pp. 126-27). Again, a certain individual freedom/autonomy correlating with the distinctive witness offered by each and every child of God is both necessary and is cause for celebration. Our common baptismal priesthood bestows this birthright of freedom upon each of us in equal measure.

Still, equality among all members is not enough for communities of any sort to flourish. Authority, hierarchy, are vital for the health of our civil society, AND for the holiness of those called to take their place in the Kingdom of Christ. Authority in this light is not viewed as a source of restraint or limit imposed by someone more powerful than ourselves who calls us to task. This form of authority is the wise way that our Loving Creator has appointed to unlock the respective gifts and charisms that are diversely bestowed. We have, as some of our African American brothers and sisters sing, an “EXCELLENT GOD,” who wants to communicate his

excellence, to unlock diverse gifts, and to lead us to the unity that is a signature feature of the life of God in God's own self--a communion of persons where perfection is not a competition.

So, even though Symeon Peter speaks affectionately to brothers and sisters of equal faith, the very fact of his composing this letter reflects an implicit sense of authority that attends his being yoked to Christ as his slave. Peter the former fisherman is not Paul, the tentmaker who supplies for his own basic needs by the sweat of his brow. Nor is he the evangelist John, who speaks of the Word "tenting among us," dwelling in the flesh. But Peter refers to "being in the tent" with those who have received the prophetic message, who are charged to proclaim the word.

Now I don't know about you, but mention of "tent" and "tenting" stirs up some less-than-pleasant memories from my childhood, to which my Mom and at least some of my older siblings (Dave, Mark—help me out here!) might attest. For when we made our annual family camping trips, which included a small trailer not big enough for all of us, my Dad, the kid from the Bronx and engineer who never properly learned the art of putting up a tent, especially when we arrived late at night at a campground while the Midwestern skies threatened a storm and we hurriedly set up camp, inevitably that tent leaked water that pooled around our sleeping bags and made for more than a few soggy, restless nights. Of course, it didn't help matters that despite Dad's admonition, "DO NOT TOUCH THE ROOF OF THE TENT!", original sin being what it is, I—I won't speak for my brothers or sister—could not resist, and so just might have been responsible for some of those leaks.

Symeon Peter's witness to Christ stems from a Spirit-sourced opening in the skies, on the Mount of Transfiguration, when the voice of the Father pierced the clouds of glory, declaring his pleasure with his beloved Son. Peter, James, and John were privileged to behold Jesus as his

most true self, beautiful beyond belief. This encounter irrigates their prophetic message; it is the basis not only for their witness, but their apostolic calling and authority to lead others among the flock of Christ. The Spirit of God cannot be controlled, but it is to be channeled by wise discernment, deliberation, and decision-making. This is what pastors do within the “tent” of their own parishes; they recognize where people are weary, hurting, parched, from the lack of Spirit life, as well as where familiar and novel instances of the in-breaking Spirit are bringing new possibilities into play. They must decide which forms of encounter and attempts to make contact with the Incarnate Christ are to be nurtured, and where other touches and pokes of the tent must be left aside. In an way analogous to the authority that pastors and parish priests exercise on the local level, the bishop exercises for the entire diocese in his stewardship and service of the mysteries of Christ.

Not every interpretation of Scripture is to be regarded equally; some capture the profile of Jesus more truly than others. We know that Pope Francis has vividly charged priests and pastors to be so intimately connected with the lives of their people that they come to adopt the “smell of the sheep.” But if bishops, priests, and ministers of Christ are to fulfill their roles faithfully, they must first ensure that they have come to appropriate the “smell of the Shepherd,” to instinctively echo the compassionate rhythm of his heart. They are to recognize the contour and curve of Jesus’ face manifest in the persons present before them. And for this to happen, only by enduring personal prayer, fearless entry into aloneness with God that willingly sets aside distractions and demands that too easily saturate our day, and the refreshment of a devoted Eucharistic spirituality that allows gratitude to seep into suffering, will we come to realize our divine call to shepherd our people.

Peter has beheld Jesus Christ face to face, and his whole mission and purpose is to free others to seek and find the face of Jesus tenting among them. To seek and find the face of Jesus is itself salvation. It is the mandate and duty of Christ's ministers, including in an eminent way the successors of Peter and the other apostles, to draw others into the privileged space where the water of Spirit will moisten their lives, and the mystery of God's love will enfold them.

The yoke of authority is intended to be a gift unlocking and fostering other gifts; with this gift also comes the responsibility to identify occasions and instances where others have not only touched the tent, but are at risk of poking holes in it, or worse, tearing the very fabric where unity should prevail among diversity, where concord should transcend conflict. St. Gregory the Great, in his *Pastoral Care* counsel to prospective bishops and pastors, cautions those whose virtues and knowledge forsake one key element: the desire for unity. "The quarrelsome are to be admonished to know for certain that however great the virtues they have, they cannot become spiritual at all, if they disregard union in concord with their neighbours" [sic]. With our splendid choir here present in our minds, Gregory recalls Psalm 150:4 ("*Praise Him with timbrel and choir*"), and observes: "In the timbrel, the dried skin, when struck, resounds, but in the choir, voices are joined together in concord. A man, therefore, who afflicts the body but forsakes concord, praises God, indeed, on the timbrel, but not in choral harmony."

Here is Gregory's punch line: "When superior knowledge exalts certain people, it separates them from the society of others, and the greater the knowledge, the less wise they are in the virtue of concord" (St. Gregory the Great, *Regula Pastoralis*, pp. 162-63). The wise bishop who fosters the ability of those under his care to seek the face of Christ, knows that any knowledge of Christ that has been communicated to him does not set him above others. For insofar as he is genuine witness to what he has seen and heard and touched, he is among equals

who themselves possess the Spirit of truth. At the same time, the bishop is alert to those who in their own estimation possess knowledge and understanding that, rather than enriching all the members of the body, lead them to forsake unity—or worse—turn their backs on their neighbor, and similarly, turn their backs on God. Gnosticism, which we might define as the belief that one possesses knowledge conferring privileged status apart from the contemptible many, remains a temptation to clergy and to persons in our culture whose claim to truth is partial (such as reliance solely on science or on the senses produces). They pit themselves against the uncreated common good who is God. When this happens the true pastor of souls must courageously call out others, exercising authority in a remedial, therapeutic way, mingling the call to conversion and communion with the compassion of Jesus and the mercy his Spirit affords.

Thankfully, that is not the case here in this St. Ambrose Cathedral this evening as we keep vigil, praying for the fresh anointing of Spirit that will form the 10<sup>th</sup> Catholic Bishop of Des Moines. I sense your united cooperation not only in the splendid voices of our choir, but in the good will of the priests who compose our presbyterate, and in the people who long for another shepherd after the heart of Christ. Your hope ultimately rests not in humans, but in the God who calls, who confers the capacity to give witness to the prophetic word of scripture, and who joins witness with authority in select individuals so that all might take their place in the tent which is Christ present in the flesh and in Spirit among us. May the Spirit continue to move freely and may God influence all of us; may God make me a shepherd worthy of this Des Moines Diocese. For this is our evening prayer: that through common witness and called leadership, we know fullness of life in the “tent” of God’s glory.