

Homily of Archbishop Eamon
at the
Episcopal Ordination Mass
of
Bishop Michael Router
as
Auxiliary Bishop of Armagh

21 July 2019

Dear brothers and sisters, I remember six years ago sitting where Father Michael is right now, awaiting the central moment of my episcopal ordination – the laying on of hands by all the bishops present. Cardinal Brady was the principal consecrator that day, and also present was Bishop Edward Daly who had ordained me as a priest in Derry, back in 1987 – may God rest his soul. A bishop receives the sacrament of Holy Orders three times in his life: firstly, when he is ordained as a deacon; then, at his priestly ordination; and, finally, when he receives ‘the fullness of orders’ as a bishop.

In a few moments the bishops here present, by the laying on of hands and by praying together the prayer of consecration, will continue to pass on the line of episcopal succession that is unbroken since the time of the apostles. In that way, Bishop Michael will not only become a close co-worker with me here in the Archdiocese of Armagh, but he will also become a brother within the “college of bishops” and under the authority the successor of Peter. He will share with all the bishops here, and around the world, the task of maintaining the deposit of faith, and “witnessing to the truth of the Gospel”.

I’m fondly remembering today the late Bishop Gerry Clifford, the last auxiliary bishop of Armagh, who died two and half years ago. I know that, like Bishop Clifford, Michael has great personal and pastoral gifts to bring to our diocesan projects and initiatives. For this I am grateful to God; to Pope Francis; to you, his parents and family, and to his brother priests, religious and people from the diocese of Kilmore – thank you for nurturing and sustaining Michael’s vocation. Fr Michael I want to assure you of my own personal closeness and support. I am confident that you will receive a warm welcome and prayerful good wishes throughout Archdiocese of Armagh, and also when you visit the Diocese of Dromore in support of my assignment as Apostolic Administrator there.

Fr Michael you will find life as a bishop to be fulfilling and interesting – although not without its challenges! The role and ministry of a Bishop has changed immensely since the appointment of the first auxiliary bishop to Armagh, Bishop William Conway, who came to us from Down and Connor more than sixty years ago.

The burden of administration has grown much heavier since then, and the needs of our people, priests and society have become more complex. The Church’s teaching on many important social and moral issues, including marriage and the sacredness of all human life, has become increasingly countercultural. With the decline in religious practice and fewer vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, we are have once again entered “mission mode” here in Ireland, and sometimes it’s difficult to discern precisely where the Holy Spirit is leading us. However, despite all this change, the fundamental calling of the bishop remains as it has been handed down to us since the earliest days of the Church:

You are called to be a devoted father and a brother who loves all those whom God places in your care – especially the priests and deacons who share with you the ministry of Christ. You are asked to be a good shepherd, praying and caring for the whole flock, loving especially the poor and infirm, the stranger, and those who are isolated, lost or going astray,

Believe me, you will never have a dull moment! I have to admit, Fr Michael, that when I listen to today's Gospel story about Martha and Mary, my sympathies often lie with poor Martha – who ended up rushing around, fussing and fretting to make sure everything possible was being done for her guest, while her sister Mary sat quietly at the feet of Jesus, enraptured as he spoke to her. You will find, as a bishop, that it is very easy to get pulled this way and that, with so many demands, duties, meetings and administrative responsibilities, that it is not always easy to find time to be still in the presence of the Lord, and to listen to Him in prayer.

Forty years ago, when Pope St John Paul II came to Ireland, he spoke of the danger of becoming so immersed in the work of the Lord that we forget the Lord of the work – “Your first duty”, he advised us, “is to be with Christ” (Maynooth 1.10.1979).

Last August, when Pope Francis spoke to the bishops of Ireland at the end of the World Meeting of Families, he said something similar: “What is the first duty of the bishop?”, he asked. “I say it to everyone: it is prayer”.

Of course there is no contradiction between spending time in pastoral activity and giving time in prayer before the Lord. Indeed the opposite is the case. Listening prayerfully to God's Word gives meaning and purpose to all our daily actions and helps us avoid becoming overburdened, as Martha was, with “too much serving”. The grace of the Holy Spirit found in prayer, strengthens us with hope to face the anxieties and struggles of daily living.

Pope Francis said shortly after his election: “Prayer and action should never be separated, but lived in profound unity – They are essential – together” (Angelus 21.07.2013).

Spending time with God's Word in prayer offers inspiration for each day. Take, for example, today's First Reading: When young Jeremiah heard God calling him to be a prophet to the nations, he protested, “Ah Lord; look, I do not know how to speak: I am only a child!”

Michael, there will be times as a bishop when you, like Jeremiah, may feel overwhelmed by your own limitations and by what God is asking of you. On those occasions, take some time to be alone with God, and find comfort in God's reply to Jeremiah:

“Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to protect you –
it is the Lord who speaks!’ I am putting my words into your mouth”.

In a few moments, as you kneel in silence to receive the laying on of hands by all the bishops here present, I encourage you to be at peace with God's new call and plans for you. You will never be on your own.

“Attend to the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit appoints you an overseer of the Church of God — in the name of the Father, whose image you personify in the Church — and in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, whose role of Teacher, Priest, and Shepherd you undertake — and in the name of the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the Church of Christ and supports our weakness with his strength”.
Amen.