

Installation Homily for the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings
January 16, 2008

11 years ago and a few weeks, I was a happy and content pastor in a parish in Anchorage, Alaska. Though I had grown up in Indiana, once I had discovered Alaska, I came to understand my call to be a priest as somehow connected with Alaska. So, I ended up being ordained by AB Francis Hurley as a deacon and then as a priest for the Archdiocese of Anchorage. And I loved being a priest and serving in the Archdiocese.

One day, I received an early morning phone call - at 5:40 AM to be precise. The call was from AB Hurley. After an initial greeting (and me being very puzzled as to why he was calling at such an early hour) he told me that the Nuncio wanted to speak with me. He handed the phone over to a man who spoke with an Italian accent. As he began speaking I recall thinking, "What's a Nuncio?" (It was, after all, quite early and I'd only been awake for a minute). Well, after assuring himself of my identity, he said quickly, "The Holy Father has appointed you as Bishop of Juneau and, of course, you will accept, won't you?!" Realizing now what the call was about, quickly becoming awake and pausing about a 5 seconds, I said "yes". Though I had intended to be in the Archdiocese of Anchorage all my life as a priest, it appeared that God had others plans.

The reading from John's Gospel informs us, "It was not you who chose me but I who chose you to bear fruit that will endure." It hadn't dawned on me that this call I had heard from God years early might have little to do with the location of my choosing. 4 weeks after that early morning phone call, I was ordained a bishop by Archbishop Francis Hurley and was installed as the 4th Bishop of Juneau.

11 weeks ago and a few days, I was a happy and content bishop in Juneau, Alaska. I had come to love life in Southeast, Alaska and its people. Because of the smallness (there are only 6000 Catholics) I actually came to know many parishioners personally. Being bishop in a small diocese like Juneau is like being a parish priest, only over an expansive geographical area. During those 11 years, I grew in my understanding of the bishop's role. I loved the people of the Diocese. Life in Southeast, Alaska was a dream. Then, early in November a couple of months ago, I received an early morning phone call from the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi. Not only did I know what a Nuncio was, I recognized his voice almost immediately. And fortunately, Archbishop Sambi seemed to know that Alaska was 4 times zones distant from Washington since his call came at 7 AM instead of 5 AM.

After a brief greeting he asked if I would accept being the Bishop of Great Falls-Billings. I said with out much pause, "Of course, I accept." I have learned that an important element in a call from God is to serve wherever one may be asked to serve. I am now delighted to be here in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings and I look forward to the challenges that will come and the opportunity to lead this diocese.

11 days ago plus a couple, I left Juneau and began an annual retreat with the bishops from the Pacific Northwest. On the first day, the retreat director, Bishop Bob Carlson of Sagniaw, handed us a sheet with some questions. One asked what particular grace each of us sought for the retreat. The grace I sought was this: to be a strong, loving and wise leader as well as a pastor who would be present among his people and available to them. I prayed for this grace because I realize all too well that I will at times be weak and may feel uncaring; that some of my decisions may be inconsiderate or even seem foolish. I know too that I may not be as available as I would hope to be. So, this is the grace that I sought and yet seek. I ask you to pray for me to receive this grace so that you will receive the strong, loving and wise shepherd you expect and deserve. I want to be with you at times of celebration and joy but also when you know hardship, struggle and suffering.

What actually do I plan to do as Bishop of Great Falls-Billings now that I am installed? The first thing is to spend a lot of time getting around the diocese, listening and observing. It will take some time for me to know your concerns and begin developing relationships. At the same time, I will simply continue doing what I have done as Bishop of Juneau and before that, as a parish priest in Anchorage – do the mission of the Church.

We say in the Creed that we are "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church". It is an expression of identity and conviction. It speaks of our connection with the Church of apostolic times. Sometimes we forget, however, that an apostle is one who is sent forth with the mission to proclaim salvation in Christ. I understand my role as bishop as helping you to embody this apostolic mission of the Church. No bishop can or should expect to assume full responsibility for carrying out the Church's mission. The bishop and the clergy may have particular roles of service for the mission. And religious and lay ministers may have specific responsibilities as well as particular talents and education for it. Yet, it belongs to all the baptized! And we are most effective in accomplishing this mission when we work collaboratively, when there is full, conscious and active participation for doing the mission. When Jesus said, "It was not you who chose me but I who chose you..." he was speaking to the "12" apostles. The "you" is plural! As one, holy, Catholic and apostolic church, we have

been chosen to bear fruit that will endure. We have been chosen to carry out the mission. It is our shared responsibility!

What does it mean to do the Church's mission? In broad strokes, I would like to suggest a number of elements that should be included. Doing the mission of the Church means providing support and encouragement to the active membership of the Church, that the people may grow in faith and flourish in the way they live it. In a day and age in which we are so greatly influenced by relativism, individualism and materialism, it is vital for the faithful to have sound teaching and solid preaching. In order to make reasoned choices consistent with church teaching, people need to be informed. At the same time, the faithful should be inspired to live their faith. It is important that opportunities for Christian formation and experiences of worship not only inform the mind but touch the heart as well.

Doing the mission of the Church means reaching out to those Catholics who, for whatever reason, are alienated from or feel disenfranchised from the Church. People stop active participation in the life of the Church for numerous reasons. It has been pointed out that the second largest denomination in the U.S. is inactive Catholics! We are at our best when we are seeking to reconcile them with the Church. It was, after all, the one lost sheep out of the 100 that the shepherd went after. It was for the one prodigal son who returned that the father threw a banquet. To be a reconciler requires humility. It always demonstrates God's love. Jesus' commandment of love was one that embodied the cross.

Doing the mission of the Church means concrete inter-action with other Christian bodies such as participation in opportunities like Christian Unity Week later this week. There are some 2 billion people in our world, like ourselves, who identify themselves as Christian. We hardly present a unified image. Yet, the priestly prayer of Jesus was "that all may be one." So we must pray for unity and make the effort actually to achieve it. And yet, our dialogue must be frank and honest, never being satisfied with a lowest common denominator approach to unity. There are moral and doctrinal issues that simply do not allow compromise. True unity is one that brings us to full confession of faith in the teaching of the Church as well as fully living out these teachings.

Doing the mission of the Church means seeking out and inviting those without a demonstrable faith to look to Christ. People want their lives to be filled with meaning and purpose. Too often, because they feel a void, people will attempt to fill the void with short lived and short sighted

remedies, some of these being quite destructive: a pursuit of excess material goods, over consumption of alcohol, addiction to drugs, too much work, too many recreational activities, dishonest sexual behavior. We know that God alone can fill the deepest longings of the human heart. It is our belief that every person is created for God and that life with God is the meaning and purpose of human existence. Any one of us, through the words we speak and by the witness we keep can help lead someone to faith.

Doing the mission of the Church means responding to the poor and vulnerable as well as addressing the causes of poverty and injustice. In some ways, our attention must be directed toward suffering and injustice in the world at large. Mostly, our efforts will be directed toward our local situation, to those in need in our local community and parish surroundings. It is to embody the adage, "Think globally but act locally." Obviously, no one can do everything, but everyone can do something. Luke's Gospel warns us to be aware of the Lazarus' figures who sit at our doors. He reminds us that it was the Samaritan who stopped for the man wounded by robbers who was the good neighbor. Matthew's Gospel reminds us that it was only those who responded to the needs of the least (and saw Christ in them) who received a welcome judgment.

As Catholics, we gather at Eucharist to celebrate and express our faith. As the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine are broken and poured before us and then received and consumed by us, a pattern is established for Christian life. We now are to be the Body of Christ to be broken and shared. We now are to be the Precious Blood of Christ to be poured out for others. We now are sent forth to be a Eucharistic Body in our day to day world. May we always remember that together, as a Eucharistic people, we are charged with the mission of sharing salvation in Christ!