



## **Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland**

### **Bishop Emeritus**

### **Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph**

#### **Homily for Mass of Thanksgiving**

Marking my Retirement  
as Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland  
June 23, 2005

The story is told about an exasperated bishop who vented his frustration by explaining, "I feel like a cemetery superintendent; I have hundreds of people under me and nobody is listening!" I can assure you that no bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph has ever voiced such an opinion, maybe, least of all, this particular one.

Twelve years ago yesterday I was appointed the fifth bishop of this diocese by Pope John Paul II. Over five years previously I had been named the second bishop of Birmingham in Alabama by the same Holy Father. During my thirty-one years as a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington I alternated pastorates and archdiocesan assignments so frequently that my friends became absolutely convinced that I couldn't keep a job! I had five wonderful teachers and mentors who, over the years, became my good friends. Two were pastors, Monsignor Joseph Kennedy and Monsignor Peter Paul Rakowski; both honored me by asking me to preach when they celebrated Mass for their golden jubilees of priesthood. The other three were my archbishops, all of whom were named Cardinals, Patrick O'Boyle, William Baum and James Hickey. From all five I, an immigrant from a far country whose speech still betrays his origins, received invaluable insights into what it means to be a priest in the United States and into the role of the bishop in a pluralistic society, where religion is sometimes ridiculed as much as it is revered. Four of the five are now deceased but I will never forget them and, as St. Monica counseled her son, St. Augustine, they are remembered often "at the altar of the Lord."

They encouraged this Irishman even though they probably knew that encouraging an Irishman was a dangerous venture. After all, Oscar Wilde maintained that the "Irish have an abiding sense of tragedy which sustains them through temporary periods of joy." In horse racing parlance, "they gave me my head." When things went well they were too, too generous in their praise. When I engineered a disaster they were too, too understanding in their consolation. I cannot blame them, any more than I can blame Freud or a defective gene pool, for my mistakes, my stubbornness, or my sins. Nor will I mention the latter here because this is meant to be a homily, not the sacrament of penance!

I will confess that they gave me far more than I ever returned to them in service. They taught me how to listen, (I learned more from listening than from reading books and I am an avid reader), the art of real delegation, the wisdom of allowing others share in their own decision-making, the enrichment of evangelization through the empowerment of the laity and the fact that there should always be more of "the Lord" and less of "the bishop" in every facet of diocesan life. Very quickly I also learned some other facts of episcopal existence, namely, that ordination does not confer infallibility nor does it allow bi-location and, as sure as the night follows the day, every few weeks some enlightened Catholic, fired up with all the burning zeal of a medieval crusader, will wing off a letter to the Holy Father, with a copy to the Nuncio, complaining about, take your pick, (a) the incompetence, (b) the orthodoxy or (c) the laxity of the local

bishop. In this regard I always had pity on our late Pope John Paul II; he couldn't say a whole lot and, of course, his judgment was also being questioned. It's much easier for Pope Benedict; he can always reply and say, "Don't blame me; I didn't appoint him!"

From my mentors and through arduous experience I learned that it is impossible for a bishop to please everyone. This should not have been surprising because even Christ himself was both acclaimed and rejected. The adulation of his entry into Jerusalem was replaced by calls for his blood within the same week. In the run up to the nationwide elections last fall many of the bishops addressed the issues and some people were not pleased. Within the same week letters accused us of making "an attempt to have people vote for Kerry/Edwards" and decrying "our obvious support for the Bush agenda." Saddest of all was the attitude of so many Catholics who maintained that as bishops we had no right to speak out on moral issues. When I became a citizen of the United States I was never told that I would have to surrender my right to express my opinions should I become a religious leader within a church dedicated to preserving the heritage of Christ's teachings.

Decades of reflection bolstered by never enough prayer but allied with the unmerited grace of God and the patient tolerance and compassion of friends have led to discoveries which, for me at least, have become convictions.

- I am convinced that God can bring good out of the worst of our efforts. We are his instruments and I would like to think that our wills would work in tandem but his kingdom is more important than my apparent success. That, I believe, was the lesson of Gethsemani.
- I am convinced that we must never stop seeking the truth and the truth does not always come in neatly ribboned packages. We may have to take risks to get it and even more risks to preach it. Jesus warned us that discipleship would not always be easy. That, I believe, was the lesson of his call to service and friendship.
- I am convinced that St. Augustine was right when he said, "for you I am a bishop, but with you I am a Christian. The first is a ministry accepted. The second is a grace received. One is a danger, the other is safety. If I am happier by far to be redeemed with you than to be placed over you, then I shall, as the Lord commanded, be more completely your servant." That, I believe, is what Jesus wanted when he warned, "anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all." (Matt. 20, 26-7)
- I am convinced that Mary, the mother of Christ, is the greatest friend a bishop, or any other Christian, can have when it comes to the tough times and the inevitable crises which, from time to time, rock the boat of Peter. God knows, there is no need to prove that we are an all-too-human institution! I have always believed that the lovely lady, who nudged her son to provide some extra wine at a Cana wedding, might have an interest in reassuring this bishop now and again. She has never failed me. They say that envy is a sin but I have always been envious of John the Evangelist who became her second son, her protector, the source of her consolation and the one who gently laid her to rest in Ephesus. I hope she is listening because I have a few more favors on my list including a little smuggling caper I would like to arrange as I come closer to Peter's gate!

This evening we celebrate the eve of a very ancient festival of our Church, the birthday of John the Baptist. He came from a priestly family but he was not, of course, a bishop. Nevertheless,

this close relative of Jesus, in many ways prefigured the role of the bishop – he devoted his entire adult life to preparing the people to accept Christ. He called all who would listen to penance for their sins, he exemplified a simple way of life and his condemnation of immorality in the royal house eventually cost him his life. Jesus honored him by becoming his subject for baptism and when he was informed of John's martyrdom he not only praised his witnessing but, using our modern word, canonized him. "I tell you, among those born of woman none is greater than John." And then Jesus added the words, "yet he who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he." For all of us these are among the most consoling promises of the Gospel narrative.

I must say something about the children. When I had colon cancer surgery in 1997, I was deluged with "praying for you" good wishes from the school children of the diocese. I stopped counting at 2000 and I've kept the best of them as they highlight the touching and loving concern of young hearts. A few years later, when the immediate danger had passed, I received the following letter from Andrew Rogers to mark my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday:

"I am so glad to hear that you turned 70 years old. My grandpa turned 70, just a couple (of) months ago. He had a stroke simultaneously... but anyway... happy birthday!" (I noticed he spelled the word "simultaneously" correctly; a testimony to the good education he was receiving.)

The third graders of St. Ann 's School in Independence cajoled me into giving them a class on the customs and traditions of ancient Ireland. Among the "thank you" notes I received was one from Zachery Jonas, who commented, with impeccable judgment, I might add, "you are a good teacher! You are a friend to all of us. You are a lucky man to be Bishop." Let me repeat his final statement once again--- "You are a lucky man to be Bishop." I can affirm that conclusion and commend Zachery for his perception. I am indeed a lucky man to be a bishop and a particularly lucky man to have been the bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph.

When one comes to retire or, as my San Diego classmate informed me--- when one enters "God's waiting room," one receives all kinds of accolades, many of which are downright embarrassing. I am happy to believe that I did my job to the best of my ability, no more, no less. I'll take responsibility for my blunders but I'm uncomfortable being lauded for the many good things which have happened during the past twelve years. They were the work, the hard work, of others, pastors, deacons, religious, diocesan and parish staffs and the world's most supportive parishioners diocesan-wide. It was merely my good fortune to be here at this moment in time and to have the good sense to stay out of the way in enabling God's work to be done. I am truly a disciple of the old adage that he who governs least, governs best. But I am also proud, immensely proud of the accomplishments of all of you during the tenure of my stewardship and my shepherding. "Lucky to be your bishop?" You said it all, Zachery.

As you might suspect I owe my family a great deal, parents who are gone to God and siblings who, with their extended families, have been both supportive and the source of much joy. Every bishop should have a bishop brother. The advantages are extraordinary not least of which is a ready consultancy without fees! As Kevin is here this evening I want to tell you a little story. Twelve years ago on the evening I was installed as bishop I asked Kevin to conclude the Mass and ceremony by expressing the thanks of the visiting Bolands for the hospitality of the diocese. His words and eloquence were so moving that one lady in leaving the auditorium was overheard saying in no uncertain terms, "I think we got the wrong one!"

St. Paul liked to use sports metaphors to describe the spiritual life. "Running the race", "finishing the course" and such like were some of the phrases he loved. I believe the transition of diocesan leadership from one bishop to another is akin to "passing the baton" in a relay race. My lap is run. I have passed the baton to Bishop Finn and his lap has begun. As he surges to the front, I must rest on the sidelines and maybe fill out my application for Medicare and join what one kibitzer titled "the mothball brigade." In a little project I've been working on since this Cathedral was renovated you will find the coats-of-arms of all the bishops of the St. Joseph diocese, the Kansas City Diocese and the combined diocese mounted in the foyer and this week the new coat-of-arms of Bishop Finn has been added to the display. This symbolic action along with the surrender of the crozier and the episcopal chair, not to mention the chan-cery parking spot, is truly representative of the passing of the baton. Bishop Finn, I wish you the richest of God's blessings in your relatively new and now exclusive pastoral responsibilities.

We all worry about the future. Mystified by the impact of myriad changes we wonder what future the next generation will inherit. What can we expect from our Church? Our new Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, while still Cardinal Ratzinger, commented that John Paul II "created an extremely dynamic experience of catholicity and the unity of the Church. The synthesis between catholicity and unity, he said, is a symphony, it is not uniformity. The Church Fathers said it. Babylon was uniformity and technology creates uniformity." In this regard, it is noticeable that Pope Benedict has already made at least three fervent calls for dialogue as we confront the challenges of our modern society.

I do not expect you to recall that at my Installation Mass twelve years ago I concluded my remarks with an invitation to go fishing. My theme was "*duc in altum*," "launch out into the deep." Seven years later the Holy Father used the same theme in his now famous Millennium message. Now, I am not accusing the Pope of plagiarism but I was flattered and I can confirm my conviction that the Holy Father's clarion call is the way to reintroduce Christ into the ways of the world.

One of the most perceptive leaders in the Catholic Church today is the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, a prelate named Cormac Murphy-O'Connor. I fully agree with one of the conclusions of his book, *At the Heart of the World*: "I believe there is nothing to fear, and that for those who believe in Christ the future is always full of hope, and open to new life."

I am grateful to all of you for a dozen wonder-filled years. As I said in my Retirement Statement, I would do it all over again... but maybe, the next time, a little better! Despite the onset of expected disabilities as the body wears out I do not regard aging as an enemy. It is an added opportunity, not given to all, to contemplate that final one-way trip to "touch the very face of God." The Sacred Writings tell us that we cannot comprehend or adequately describe the hereafter so we rely on our poets whose inspired use of language attempts to idealize the deepest longings of the human heart. A religious man, though not a Catholic, William Butler Yeats, smothered by the banality of his London existence, remembered in verse the peace and the beauty and the tranquility of Innisfree, in many ways a metaphor for those who expect God's house to be their final destiny. It could be an anthem for the retired, a hymn which re-echoes the sentiments of the psalms and the promises of a loving God. It goes like this:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,

And live alone in the bee-loud glade.  
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight 's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Good night. Good-bye. God bless you.