



Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

Bishop Emeritus
Catholic Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Homily Vespers Service ~ Eve of Episcopal Ordination St. Paul's Cathedral March 24, 1988

Birmingham, Alabama

I find it very difficult to comprehend the fact that all of us are making history this evening. It may not be earth-shaking history. I don't think it will be mentioned in the *New York Times* or the *London Times* tomorrow morning. Nevertheless it is history because it is the unique repetition of something which began 20 centuries ago when Christ directed his disciples to take to the highways and byways of the world so that his message might be shared with all peoples.

Christ's Vicars, Peter and his successors have been doing the same thing down the centuries. First, there was Barnabas chosen by lot to take the place of Judas Iscariot; there was Patrick sent by Celestine "*ad Scotos credentes in Christo*" – the Irish believing in Christ: Gregory the Great sent Augustine, not once but twice, to Canterbury: Pius VI in 1789 appointed John Carroll to be the first bishop of Baltimore responsible for the spiritual care of Catholics in the original thirteen colonies, now the infant United States: some years later Leo XII sent Michael Portier to the newly-established Vicariate of Alabama and the Floridas in 1825. I mention well-known names but these are only a few of the thousands who, over the centuries, have been named by successive Popes to be their representatives in every nation under the sun.

It is, as you might well suspect, somewhat unnerving to be at the center of this time-honored, though somewhat mysterious, process. I can assure you it is far easier to exult in the selection of a colleague than to ponder, for oneself, the challenging and, no doubt at times somewhat painful, responsibilities of a bishop in today's Church. The task would be impossible were it not for our trust in the Lord's abiding presence, and our belief that there is a creative sacramental grace within Holy Orders which vivifies the spirit when human abilities falter and one is united to a community of priests, religious and laity who seek the Lord in good times and in bad, in joy and in sorrow, in living and in dying.

No bishop stands alone. We are carried on the shoulders of others. We inherit the fruits of their work, the spirit nurtured by their prayers and sacrifices. I am deeply conscious that the Lord's vineyard here in Northern Alabama was tended lovingly (one might even say with the same care and devotion which he lavished upon his beloved garden!) by my predecessor, Bishop Joseph Vath, whose voice is stilled in death but whose memory remains fresh in the minds of all those who knew him.

It was not my good fortune to know Bishop Vath personally... but day by day since I was named to succeed him I have heard little anecdotes which have sharpened my perception of his gracious personality. Nothing, however, gave me a greater insight into his faith-filled life than the first and third paragraphs of his Last Will and Testament.

In the first paragraph he wrote as follows: *I profess my faith in one God and Three Divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in all the truths which he has revealed and which are taught by His Holy Roman Catholic Church. I wish to die a devoted son of the Church and a faithful servant of His*

holy people. Into His hands I commend my soul knowing my many failings & shortcomings yet relying in great hope upon His mercy & loving-kindness.

This moving profession of faith was followed by some directions for his funeral and then in the third paragraph he continued as follows: *To the Beloved Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama, I express my deep love and devotion and humbly beg of them devoted prayers and a loving remembrance before God's altar.*

These words say it all. I cannot hope to recapture the spirit of the first bishop of Birmingham in Alabama by any other means than by allowing this sacred document to speak for him. Indeed, I can only hope that the second bishop of Birmingham in Alabama, and those he is called to serve, will be worthy of his noble soul which now resides with God while his body awaits the resurrection beneath the shadows of this cathedral church of Saint Paul.

Two highly symbolic ceremonies constitute the heart of our liturgy this evening.

The first one is so illustrative of the universal nature of the faith which binds us to Jesus Christ. I come to you as a stranger from a far diocese, indeed even from a far land, but notwithstanding all this, you have in so many ways, priests and people, opened your hearts to me. I know it is not because of any merits which may be mine and of which you would have no knowledge, but because it is our common Father in the faith, Pope John Paul II, who sent me. And I, for my part, despite my fears and apprehension, come to you because my confidence is encapsulated in the rare but brief ceremony where I present my letter of appointment to the Consultors of the Diocese and they, one by one, signify in writing that they, on their own behalf and that of the Catholics of Northern Alabama, are willing to accept it. (Frankly, I haven't the slightest idea what I should do if they were to say "no!")

If the first ceremony is indicative of the universality of our Church and the reverence with which we honor our Holy Father the second speaks to us of the linkages of tradition which bind and fortify us as bishop to bishop and believers to believers. Bishop Joseph Durick, a native son, who, 33 years ago today, was consecrated a bishop in this church, will bless four symbols of the episcopal office which, God willing, will be presented to me tomorrow by our Metropolitan Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of Mobile.

He will bless a pectoral cross which carries within its heart five relics of five saints of our holy faith. This cross formerly belonged to Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle who adopted me for service as a priest in the Archdiocese of Washington and who was my bishop for sixteen years and a valued friend for a further fourteen years until God called him home in August of this past year.

Bishop Durick will bless an episcopal ring, the gift of Archbishop James Hickey, the current Archbishop of Washington. At his direction it bears the coat of arms of both the Archdiocese of Washington and the Diocese of Birmingham, a constant reminder of my roots in the priesthood.

Then the Bishop will bless a Mitre. It, along with the vestments I will wear tomorrow, is the gift of the people with whom I have worked in recent years in our nation's capital. It will remind me that they have promised to remember me in prayers and I should do likewise.

Finally the Bishop will bless the crozier or bishop's staff. If it looks familiar to you, it should. For many years it was handled gently and patiently by Bishop Vath and this will be my link with my new family in the Lord.

I mention these things not because I want to supply you with answers for a game of supernatural trivia but because it is only through the medium of symbols that the finite, imperfect, ever-searching pilgrim of faith can express the inexpressible and give some meaning to the intangible. We are indeed a sacramental people.

On the eve of my episcopal ordination there are two living realities which I would ask you to ponder and to pass on to your children long after this night and my name is forgotten. One is Christ in the Eucharist, his gift of Himself, offered at the Last Supper, immolated on the cross of suffering, triumphant over sin and death in his resurrection. Recall in prayer the oft-heard words of the Third Eucharistic Prayer, "Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ."

The second is Mary, the Mother of Christ. Tomorrow marks the feast of the Annunciation when she said "yes" to God and God became incarnate, trapping Himself, as it were, in our mortality so that we may gain immortality.

May all of us imitate Mary in saying "yes" to Christ, each in his or her own way, each in keeping with his or her special calling from God – and each of us has a divine task not given to another – so that together we may, within his grace, sanctify each other in unity and harmony, in justice and in peace.

AMEN

