



Episcopal Ordination of Fr Michael Morrissey as Bishop of Geraldton Homily

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Nagle Catholic College Gymnasium, Geraldton
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As we gather this evening for this extraordinary moment in the life of the Diocese of Geraldton, I realise that it is both very obvious and something of an understatement to say that our hearts are filled with joy as we celebrate the ordination of Bishop-elect Michael Morrissey as the ninth bishop of this diocese and, I believe, the first locally-grown bishop, if I can put it that way. Obvious though it may be, I think it is still worth acknowledging. The joy we feel is a sure sign of the presence of God's Holy Spirit who, as Saint Paul reminds us, is the Comforter whose presence among us and in us brings such gifts as love, joy, peace, kindness and faithfulness (Gal 5:22). I hope that we are all able this evening to open our hearts to receive these precious gifts, fruits of the grace of this special and sacred moment.

It is of course through the powerful presence of God's Spirit, acting through this sacrament of Holy Orders, that our new bishop will be not just commissioned but enabled by God's grace to be all that the Lord and his Church requires of him as a bishop, a successor of the apostles, in this diocese and in the Church. It is important for us to remind ourselves that through this liturgy, so full of rich symbolism, we are all being drawn into a mysterious, powerful and certain work of God.

While so many people have a part to play in tonight's liturgy, it is God who is at work this evening, God who is the principal actor, God who will reach deeply into Bishop Michael's heart, mind and spirit, moulding and shaping him into the man, the Christian, and the priest and bishop whom God is calling him to be. Tonight we find ourselves on holy ground, filled with awe.

As part of tonight's ceremony the newly-ordained Bishop Michael will be presented with the crozier. He will carry it with him as he blesses us all at the end of tonight's Mass and it will accompany him whenever he celebrates the liturgy, both in his cathedral and in all the parishes and communities throughout this vast diocese.

In a sense it will almost become an extension of him, and will be a powerful reminder to him, and to all of us, of just what and who God is calling him to be. In the official homily provided for an episcopal ordination, the new bishop is addressed with these words: *Since you are chosen by the Father to rule over his family, be mindful always of the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep and is known by them, and who did not hesitate to lay down his life for them.* Every time you take the crozier in hand, Bishop Michael, may it be a reminder to you of the one whose disciple and minister you are.

For someone who grew up on a sheep station near Yalgoo, our new bishop hardly needs me to explain what sheep are like or what shepherds do. In ways that city people like me probably



cannot grasp, he will have a deep instinctive understanding of what it means to talk about the pastoral role of the Bishop and why Jesus himself understood his life and ministry in such terms. He will know about the need for patience, for steadfastness, for constancy and presence. He will certainly know about the need for hard work.

But tonight, Bishop Michael, through the grace of this sacrament of God's provident love, you will be remoulded, reshaped, into a living image of the presence of the one true Good Shepherd among his people. In this sense the words of Saint John the Baptist in reference to Jesus must hold good for you as well: *He, Jesus, must grow greater and I must grow smaller*. It will be your privilege, and your responsibility, to do all you can to ensure that in every encounter with you your people see the face, and hear the voice, and experience the compassion and love of the Good Shepherd whose image you are and must become more fully as each day goes by. For tonight the Lord says to you, as he once said to Simon Peter, *"Feed my lambs, look after my sheep, feed my sheep"*.

This great commission, given by the Lord to Peter and through him to all those called to be bishops in the Church, was and still is premised on the answer Peter gave to the question which must be at the heart of the life of every bishop and indeed of every Christian: *"Do you love me?"* This question was addressed three times to Peter who had, just days before, three times denied any knowledge of Jesus.

It is a powerful reminder to us that the Lord's call does not come to those who are perfect but to those who are willing to love, willing to weep for their sins and failures, and willing to entrust themselves to the mercy and compassion of the Lord. In our Church today we are painfully aware of the failures of so many of our leaders. Like Peter the fisherman, overcome by the miraculous catch of fish, we too might often feel the impulse to say, *"Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man"*. We must also be ready to hear the Lord's response, *"Do not be afraid, for from now on it is people you will catch"* (Luke 5:9-10).

Jesus' response to Peter's failure, sorrow and fear points to something which will be at the heart of the life and ministry of our new bishop. When Fr Michael Morrissey was ordained as a priest thirty-six years ago, he chose as one of his mottos the words *"Trust in the Lord"*. These are the words which will now adorn his episcopal crest as Bishop of Geraldton. When we put these words together with the words Jesus spoke to Peter when he first called him – *"do not be afraid"* – they take us to the heart of Peter's vocation, to the heart of every bishop's vocation, and to the heart of every Christian's vocation.

They echo the words spoken to Peter by Jesus when, in the midst of a raging storm, Jesus invited Peter to step out of the boat and come to him across the water: *"Take courage"* Jesus said, *"it is I. Do not be afraid"*. Peter stepped out of that boat and into the stormy winds and waves, much as our new bishop is being called to step out into what at times might well feel like an engulfing storm. As long as Peter kept his eyes fixed on Jesus he was safe, as our new bishop too will be as long as he keeps Jesus at the centre of his vision. It was when Peter allowed himself to be overcome with fear by the ferocity of the storm that he took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink. But even then he instinctively knew what to do: as he began to sink beneath the waves he cried out *"Lord, save me"* – and as the gospels tell us, *"Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?' And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down"* (Matt 14:30-32).



Bishop Michael, may Jesus always be at the heart of your life and of your ministry as a bishop. In times of struggle and fear may you hear him say to you, *“Take courage, I am with you. Do not be afraid”*. In moments of doubt and uncertainty, may your episcopal motto be a source of strength and direction for you – *“Trust in the Lord”*. And may your life be encircled and protected by your response to the question - *“Do you love me?”* – which the Lord puts to you tonight and every day: *“Lord you know everything. You know that I love you.”* And so, Bishop Michael, feed the Lord’s lambs – look after his sheep.