

Homily by the Most Reverend Patrick Christopher Pinder, STD, CMG
At the Mass Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Erection of the Diocese
of Nassau
St Francis Xavier Cathedral
Nassau, The Bahamas
July 5, 2010

READINGS

First Reading: Hosea 2:16, 17c-18, 21-22.

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:19-22

Gospel: Luke 4:16-21

Beloved,

It was exactly fifty years ago, on July 5th, 1960, that the Vicariate of Bahama Islands was raised to the dignity of a Diocese. Paul Leonard Hagarty, a Benedictine priest of St John's Abbey, Minnesota was installed as first Bishop of the Diocese of Nassau. This elevation in status was a confirmation that the Holy See recognized us as a Catholic community, which was increasing in size and grace-a community of faith, which was growing and maturing in the Catholic tradition.

In the half century that has passed since the issuing of that glorious stamp of approval, several very important developments have occurred. In 1981, Lawrence Aloysius Burke, a Jesuit priest native to Jamaica, was appointed Bishop. Eighteen years later, in 1999, Bishop Burke was appointed the first Archbishop of Nassau when our little Diocese was raised to the dignity of a Metropolitan see.

Then, in 2003, the first Bahamian was ordained Bishop, serving first as Auxiliary Bishop and, in the very next year, installed as Archbishop of Nassau. I hasten to assure you, my friends, the granting of this dignity was not at all about me as an individual, but more about the stature of the Bahamian Catholic community as a faith community. It indicated that we were responsible stewards of the Church's missions in the spiritual and temporal realms. We intend to continue so to be. It is, in fact, our solemn ambition and commitment so to be.

As if to emphasize this point, Divine Providence recently smiled upon us in an extraordinary way. Father Glenn Nixon and Father Noel Clarke, made a remarkable discovery in one of the buildings at the Hermitage. Among some material left behind by Bishop Hagarty, they found a crosier, which time and tide had left in a state of disrepair. The decision was made immediately to restore it. We sent this treasure to a firm of specialists, who told us that the crosier was of rare and magnificent workmanship, seldom seen in this age. They restored it to the brilliance an unknown master craftsman had built into it.

Now, here is the most inspiring element of this story. The crosier in question was used by Bishop Bernard Kevenhoerster, O.S.B. at his ordination as bishop at St Patrick's Cathedral in New York in 1934, seventy-six years ago. As some of you may recall, Bishop Bernard was the first leader of our Catholic community to bear the title Bishop, well before the establishment of a diocese here. Even more remarkable, the same crosier was presented to Paul Leonard Hagarty, O.S.B. at his ordination as bishop at Our Lady of the Holy Souls in 1950. It is this crosier that I carry tonight.

Through the many decades that the crosier lay unnoticed, it could have been lost to us. I believe that this artifact was divinely preserved to become a symbol of our unity and continuity in the faith. I believe that this relic represents a binding together of the bishops of this diocese in an unbroken chain of faith. I believe, too, that it unites the mature faith community of today with our earlier, mission period, which began formally in 1837, when the Holy See placed the "Lucayan or Bahama Islands" under the authority of the newly established Vicariate Apostolic of Jamaica. At the same time, the crosier can also symbolize the very confidence of which I spoke earlier and emphasize that, for all the confidence the Church has reposed in us, this fiftieth anniversary is indeed one to be cherished.

The question is-what is the most fitting way to mark so important a moment? How do we do justice and give real meaning to this fiftieth anniversary? Looking forward to this day, we formed an archdiocesan committee to plan and direct the anniversary celebrations. It is most appropriate at this time to thank all who have worked so hard to make the events of this anniversary so memorable.

In our jubilation, we have paid tribute. We have held joyous openings and marked sad closings. We have renovated and we have built anew. We have innovated in creating facilities like the new Aquinas. We have made unforgettable pilgrimages throughout our Family Islands. These journeys have given participants the opportunity to share and to worship with other Catholics, whom we do not often have the privilege to meet. I commend each one of the communities visited for the superb welcome extended to us in true Christian charity and hospitality, each according to their means.

This is all to the good but there is more that needs to be done. As shepherd and leader of the Catholic community of The Bahamas, I propose the following for your consideration.

I believe that this special anniversary is, above all, a time to pour out our thanks to the Lord unsparingly and with hearts full of praise. Whatever we have achieved, whatever we possess as a community is the fruit of the Lord's goodness to us. It is he who planted the seed of faith in our islands. It is he who watered and tended it by sending dedicated missionaries, both men and women, religious and lay. It is he who raised up a faithful body of local stewards to continue the work with the same spirit and dedication as the early pioneers had. It is the Lord who caused us to increase in number, so that today, we Catholics have grown from just a few to about fifty thousand.

It is a matter of joy to know that the Archdiocese of Nassau now encompasses 30 Catholic parishes spread across Abaco, Andros, Bimini, Cat Island, Eleuthera/Harbour Island, Exuma, Grand Bahama, Long Island, New Providence and San Salvador. Our Archdiocese is also the Metropolitan See, whose province includes the Diocese of Hamilton, Bermuda and the Mission of the Turks and Caicos Islands, and is a part of the Antilles Episcopal Conference.

It is the Lord who has kept us together as one body for 173 years since that first official recognition by Rome. It is the Lord who will give further increase if we are faithful to his word and true to his way.

This year of favour from the Lord is an excellent time to recall and celebrate the heritage of the Catholic Church in The Bahamas. It is good to remember and give thanks for the lives of those who sacrificed so much to bring us to this day. In this regard, we are called to give thanks for the 19th century priests who made brief visits. These men undertook challenging, even life-threatening journeys by sea to minister to those early Catholics, who endured long periods without the sacraments.

I give thanks for the long-ago priests of the Diocese of Charleston and the Archdiocese of New York who spent months of the year here to make up for the lack of a resident clergy. During the American Civil War, vessels running between the United States and our islands were forced to run a blockade imposed by the North to strangle the economic life of the South. Rev. Leon Fillion described the fear passengers and crew experienced when the *Stonewall*, the ship on which they voyaged, was fired upon repeatedly.

Let's remember and give thanks for the first permanent Catholic mission established in our islands by the Sisters of Charity and the Benedictine fathers. In great numbers, members of these religious communities served our community with commitment and faithfulness for 114 and 117 years, respectively. Plaques bearing all the names of those who served are affixed to the façade of this Cathedral. Most appropriately, they give testimony to this wonderful contribution.

We must be no less grateful for the contributions of the men and women of other religious orders and congregations who joined them-the 56 years of the Scarboros, the 50 years given by the Grey Sisters of Pembroke, Ontario, Canada and the 42 years with which the Religious Sisters of Mercy of Portland, Maine have blessed us. Nor can we fail to be grateful for the priests of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the Jesuits, the Passionists, Dominican sisters of Adrian, Michigan, and Caldwell, New Jersey, the Sisters of St Joseph of Canada and the Franciscan Sisters of Mount St. Clare, Iowa and all the others who came in numbers or singly to bring their gifts spiritual and temporal to build the Church in our islands.

I invite you to join me in profound thankfulness for our own Benedictine Sisters of St Martin. They were the first and are, to this day, the only local sisters founded to serve the Church. Their order established in 1937, these Sisters have celebrated a remarkable 73 years of faithful service in education and other ministries.

Those of us who have studied the history of the Church in The Bahamas have discovered with awe the sacrifices the Bahamian laity has made to grow the faith. Let us not forget those earliest Catholics like the Spanish Counsel Don Juan Maura, the Vice-Counsel Don Cipriano Palacios and Surgeon-Major F. G. Ayde-Curran, who allowed masses to be celebrated in their homes. It was the Anglo-Irish Ayde-Currans who successfully lobbied Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York to send to The Bahamas Father Charles George O'Keefe, oversaw the building of St Francis Church, forerunner of this Cathedral and the first Catholic Church to be established in our islands. It was Lady Georgiana Ayde-Curran who laid the cornerstone on August 25, 1885. It is a rare privilege to have two of her great-granddaughter along with their husbands and her great great-grandsons celebrating with us today. We welcome them all and we assure them that this church is as much a part of their heritage as it is of ours.

There are those Bahamians from north to south, from east to west who have nurtured vocations and given land, talents, skills, labour, money and much love in furtherance of the evangelization of our islands. The names number in the hundreds, but I take pleasure and great risk in mentioning just a few as examples: Marian Johnson and Hattie Thompson of Harbour Island, Sir Henry Milton Taylor, Holly Cartwright, the Pratts and Burrows of Long Island, the Rahmings of Fox Hill, Levaritys of Bimini, Armalys, Coakleys, Finleys and Greenes of Andros, the Dupuches, the Pyfroms, the Davises, architects such as Henry Hepburn and Bruce Lafleur and builders such as Thomas Dean, Ulysses Davis and Chris Mortimer. And let us never forget the givers of the widow's mite. Let us give thanks as well for the many winter residents and visitors who have recognized needs and have given generously.

In the same spirit, we give thanks for those who were not of our faith but were kindred spirits, who opened doors and pockets for our assistance, especially in the early days of the Family Island missions.

All of these willing sacrifices have yielded many blessings over the years.

This generosity of spirit has also benefited the whole Bahamian community and the work of nation-building in the form of clinics, schools and social programmes such as YEAST, the Samaritan Ministry, the Nazareth Centre and programmes for the elderly like St Joseph Day Care, the ministry to the neediest provided by the St Vincent de Paul Society, as well as the little-known work of great value carried out by the Legion of Mary.

We cannot forget such organizations as the Knights of Columbus and the Archdiocesan Women's Auxiliary and the Archdiocesan Men's Associations. In addition there are those who for their service and devotion have been granted papal honours such as Chaplains of His Holiness and Medals Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice and Benemerenti. Then too there are those who have been honored as papal knights and dames of St. Gregory and St. Sylvester.

There is little more important to the growth of a people than education. We can be proud today that quality education is a part of the Catholic heritage we have had the privilege of sharing with fellow Bahamians. It is a mark of the Lord's favour that he has blessed us thus. The Catholic education system began in 1889 with the establishment of St. Francis School. The system now comprises seven primary schools and four high schools.

It is therefore fitting to recall with gladness the contributions of such giants of the field of Catholic education as Father Frederick Frey, OSB, who founded St Augustine's College and the Sisters of Charity who pioneered the majority of the primary schools. We remember with deep gratitude Father John Darby who forged an enduring Catholic education system out of the raw metal of disparate parish schools.

Let us give thanks also for the work of the first Bahamian Superintendent of Catholic Education Sister Maedene Russell and those who followed her- Sister Mary Benedict Pratt and our first lay director Mrs. Claudette Rolle. Let us pray and give thanks continually for the school boards and all the administrators, teachers and support staff who have served and continue to serve the cause of education in our schools, particularly as we look ahead to challenging times.

It is time to remember and give thanks for all the many who now serve the

Church across the archipelago-priests, deacons, administrators, Eucharistic ministers, musicians, parish councils and finance committees, those who maintain Church properties and, most certainly, those Catholics who show the light of Christ in every aspect of their lives. You provide not only for fellow Catholics but also for the wider community without consideration of colour, gender, creed or economic circumstances. Many of you were honoured for your service in the liturgy of yesterday evening. I pay tribute equally to those who have contributed as much, but whose efforts are known fully only to the Lord.

There is no better time than this 50th anniversary to pray for more and lasting vocations to the priesthood, to the permanent diaconate and to religious life. The fields are ripe for the harvest and more workers are sorely needed for this ministry. I give thanks for all who have embraced these vocation, especially those who minister to several parishes at once and are called to endure frequent journeys from home, family and friends.

Let us not forget in our anniversary year to pray for the souls of the faithful departed. Let us pray especially for those who were called to their reward in this anniversary year. Let us recall and honour the contributions of the late Archbishop Lawrence Burke, who gave so fully of himself to the lifting up of the Archdiocese of Nassau and its people. We laud all the lives of service, such as those of Andrew Curry, Vincent Ferguson and Craig Rolle. Each lent special talents to the welfare of the Church and the community. Even though we cannot call all the names, they remain close to our hearts and they rest in the peace of our Lord.

There is still more we must do as a community of faithful Catholics. We would do well to become fully alive to the times in which we live and to seek to imbue our culture with our values as Catholics. It is a blessed time of great leaps forward in knowledge, in the arts and in science and technology. Humankind has not only broken the code of DNA, but we are now manipulating it for good and, sadly, for ill. Unfortunately, it is no less a time of conflict worldwide, a time of disaster, malice and senseless violence in divers places. What does it say about the state of our own homeland that the murder rate grows higher every year? It is indicative of a seriously damaged society that we recently recorded six homicides in less than a week.

We human beings blindly and at an ever increasing pace do violence not only

to each other but also to the planet that sustains us-our once perfect gift from the Lord. In greed, we despoil woodlands, wetlands and oceans. We are destroying species of animals without thought or hope of renewal. Without decent and appropriate measure, we rend the breast of the earth to extract her mineral wealth. Why then should we be surprised that the planet is crying out to us in earthquakes and cataclysmic weather phenomena?

Above all, this 21st century is a time of a great falling away from the truth. Philosophies that enthrone the self alone are springing up all over the globe and the end thereof cannot be peace. It is, in fact, this self-interest and the spurning of the common good that must bear much responsibility for the present state of our own society and economy. I speak of mothers and fathers who are parents in the biological sense only, lacking the ability to lead or nurture their children as true parenting demands. I speak of the perverted sense of values that allows many Bahamians to believe that they are entitled to flaunt the country's laws. I speak of an overweening sense of entitlement that treads on the rights of others and the use the "small man" argument to justify much wrongdoing. All too many of us are being seduced into following the many idols of this world, rather than the path of wholeness in Christ.

It is high time to rediscover our true Catholic heritage. It's time to recommit to our faith, to recommit to following the way of Christ more nearly. This is the only true path of safety in these or in any troubled times.

If time and trouble have dimmed the view of our magnificent heritage, these words from the Letter to the Ephesians give us a very clear picture, when it says,

...you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Can there be any greater comfort, any greater reward than to be part of a building of which Christ is the capstone?

It is time, my friends, to reacquaint ourselves with our rich Catholic heritage, to the teachings spiritual and temporal of that heritage. We must hearken to the voice and the promptings of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us from our Baptism and with whose gifts we are sealed at Confirmation. To return to the foundations of our faith, however, we must know what they are. We must know that the mission of the Church cannot be fulfilled merely by our attendance at Sunday Mass, essential though that may be. Neither can the work of the Church be carried out by priests, deacons and religious alone as necessary and essential as these orders and ministries may be.

In this regard, there is no more important thought I can share with you today than words His Holiness Pope Paul VI wrote about the apostolate of the laity as long ago as 1965:

Our own times require of the laity no less zeal... Their role and apostolate becomes more imperative in view of the fact that many areas of human life have become increasingly autonomous. This is as it should be, but it sometimes involves a degree of departure from the ethical and religious order and a serious danger to Christian life. Besides, in many places where priests are very few or, in some instances, deprived of due freedom for priestly work, the Church could scarcely exist and function without the activity of the laity. (Apostolicam Actuositatem)

Pope Paul continues:

They [lay people] exercise the apostolate in fact by their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification of men and women and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, their temporal activity openly bears witness to Christ and promotes the salvation of all. Since the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ. (Apostolicam Actuositatem)

As Christians, we each have a vocation. We are each called to bear witness to the Word and the Way of the Lord-not half heartedly but in all its fullness.

Equally as important, tell every generation to love Christ and his Church. Guide their footsteps to the path of light from their earliest days. To inform your efforts, rely on Sacred Scriptures. But then do not neglect the tradition of social thought of our Church that is so deeply rooted in Scripture. Permit me to share with you a few principles born of the wisdom of our tradition of reflection on social realities.

1. We are called to recognize and protect the dignity of the human person. Every human being, of whatever colour, creed, gender or economic status is made in the image of God. All human life is therefore sacred, and the preservation of the dignity of the human person is the foundation stone for a peaceful and sustainable society. This principle is the capstone of Catholic social teaching.

2. As Christians, we must work for the common good. Human dignity can only be realized and protected in the context of an ordered society. How we organize our society -- in economics and politics, in law and policy -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals and communities to grow. The obligation to "love our neighbor" has an individual dimension, but it also requires a broader social commitment. Everyone has a responsibility to contribute to the good of the whole society, to the common good.

3. We must provide for the poor and the most vulnerable
The quality and success of a society can be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. We are called, as individuals, to contribute to their uplift and to promote public policy for the rescue of the poor and otherwise needy.

4. We each have rights and responsibilities
Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency - including food, shelter and clothing, employment, health care, and education. But at the same time, rights are not sustainable unless we accept and perform duties and responsibilities -- to our families, to others, to the wider community and all we encounter.

5. Government with the equitable participation of the people is essential for the creation of good communities
All countries need good government to promote human dignity, protect human

rights, and build the common good. On the other hand, government should not be so big that it drowns out the voice of the people, making it difficult for them to participate in decision-making.

6. We must promote economic justice

The Church promotes economic justice. According to Sacred Scripture, the oxen that tread out the corn should not be muzzled. How much more, surely, should human beings enjoy the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to safe working conditions, to organize and join unions. People have a right to economic initiative and private property, but the pursuit of the same must not prevent others from obtaining the basic necessities of life.

7. We are called to be stewards of God's creation

There is a "social mortgage" that guides our use of the world's goods, and we have a responsibility to care for these goods as stewards and trustees, not as mere consumers and users. How we treat the environment is a measure of our stewardship, a sign of our respect for the Creator.

8. We have a responsibility to promote peace actively.

Pope John Paul II once said, "Peace is not just the absence of war." He was referring specifically to relations among the nations of the world. Given the rate of crimes against persons in many countries, including ours, and an intensifying gun culture, you will agree that disarmament is as essential at the level of community and as it is among nations. Peace is ultimately the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in our lives and directing our actions.

9. We are called to participate in the essential aspects of our community.

We must believe and guide our actions by the notion that all people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society.

10. As Christians we most pursue global solidarity and development. We are one human family. Our responsibilities do not end when our personal needs and those of our loved ones are covered. If we are followers of Christ, we must follow his concept of "neighbour" and love our neighbours as ourselves. This means that our responsibilities in striving for justice, for development and for peace must extend beyond national, racial, economic and ideological differences.

The path to peace was offered to us by Christ in his words preserved for us in the Gospel of Luke:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, 9 because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."(Luke 4:18-19 [Isaiah 61:1-2])

Count it a joy to be bear witness to Christ, because it is the greatest privilege that can be accorded us while we still live on earth. It is a work that bears great fruit because it is of the Lord. The prophet Hosea bears witness to that rich reward that is the portion of the faithful Church:

I will make a covenant for them on that day, with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, and with the things that crawl on the ground. Bow and sword and war I will destroy from the land, and I will let them take their rest in security. I will espouse you to me forever: I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the LORD. (Hosea 2: 20-22)

The faith we share is one that reaches back to the apostles and, more recently, to the pioneering missionaries who came among us and inspired us by word and example. Let us strive to do for our time what they did for theirs-seeking not only to proclaim the Gospel but also seeking to secure the common good by addressing basic human needs such as education, healthy family life and the wholesome formation of youth. To do so is to announce both by word and action a year of favour from the Lord...not just this year but always.