Consecration of Most Rev. Robert E. Tracy, D.D.,
Bishop Auxiliary of Lafayette
May 19, 1959

Sermon by Most Rev. Joseph F. Rummel, S.T.D.,
Archbishop of New Orleans
St. Louis Cathedral - New Orleans

"It is the Duty of a Bishop to judge, interpret,
consecrate, ordain, offer, baptize and confirm."

(Introductory note to the Ceremony of Consecration
of a priest to the Episcopate.)

As the Ordinary of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, it is my duty and privilege to extend an expression of profound gratitude to His Excellency Most Reverend Archbishop Egidio Vagnozzi, newly appointed Apostolic Delegate to the United States, who has so graciously consented to honor our Archdiocese as well as one of our outstanding priests by officiating as principal Consecrator at the latter's episcopal consecration. To these sentiments of appreciation, expressed in the name of the clergy, the religious and the laity of the Archdiocese, we add our warmest felicitations upon His Excellency's appointment to the exalted office of representative of the Holy See in the United States, giving him the pledge of our sincerest reverence and cooperation, supported by our fervent prayers for a happy and propitious sojourn amongst us.
May we also extend a cordial greeting to the Most Reverend members of the hierarchy, the Right Reverend Abbots and the Right Reverend, Very Reverend and Reverend members of the Clergy who are gracing this auspicious occasion by their presence. To the representatives of our civil authorities of our State and of our City we also extend a hearty greeting and genuine welcome. Felicitations as well as sincere greetings are offered to the relatives of Bishop Tracy, especially Sister Mary Roberta of the Sisters of Mercy, and to his many personal friends. We pray that all here present may experience great joy as well as edification in the solemn function of Consecration and that our united prayers may bring to His Excellency the fullest abundance of divine grace for a long and fruitful life in the apostolic ministry.

Based upon the relationship between Christ and the Apostles, as outlined in the writings of the Evangelists and other inspired authors of the New Testament, the doctrine of the Church regarding the episcopal office presents a tradition which is ancient, constant and profoundly impressive. The dignity and responsibility of this office are manifold and of such vital importance that they affect the very existence, vitality and progress of the Church. With that remarkable
wisdom, which is characteristic of her liturgy, the Church has woven into the ceremony of Episcopal Consecration a mosaic composition of the dignity, functions and responsibilities which make this ceremony eminently beautiful, spiritually sublime and extremely rich in doctrinal significance.

In an introductory ceremony the Church manifests her solicitude about the personal character of the candidate and his qualifications for his responsibility as spiritual leader and teacher of religious and moral truth. Herein Holy Church emphasizes not only the fact that teaching the flock of Christ is an integral part of the apostolic ministry with which the Bishop is entrusted, but she also gives evidence of her solicitude concerning the firmness of the Bishop's faith, his ability to teach and demonstrate it by his example, with emphasis upon his loyalty to the successor of the Vicar of Christ in the person of the reigning Pontiff and his successors in office.

Integrated with the solemnity of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the liturgy of Episcopal Consecration reveals and develops the sublime dignity and the awe-inspiring responsibility which constitute the Bishop a living custodian and exponent of the sacred ministry which Christ had bestowed upon His Apostles.
Before the chanting of the Gospel of the Mass the choir invites the presence of the heavenly court and invokes the intercession of the angels and saints of God for divine assistance which the Consecrating Prelate concludes with the plea that God may vouchsafe to "bless, and sanctify and consecrate this elect here present" as thrice he makes over him in benediction the sign of the Cross.

Immediately after the chanting of the Litany, the Consecrating Prelate, with the assistance of the Co-Consecrators, places the open Book of the Gospels upon the neck and shoulders of the Bishop-Elect, so that the text touches his body; then the three Prelates beginning with the Consecrator impose their hands successively upon the head of the Bishop-Elect, reciting individually the solemn form: "Receive the Holy Spirit". This vital ceremony, combined with the Preface of Consecration which the Co-Consecrators recite while the Consecrator chants it solemnly, constitutes the essential matter and form of Episcopal Consecration.

As in her liturgy the Church is ever mindful of the need and value of the intercessory power of the heavenly courts, so she never fails in her greatest functions to implore the light, guidance and strength
of the Holy Spirit. Thus, before continuing the series of ceremonies, the Consecrator intones the Hymn of the Holy Spirit. While this beautiful chant rings out from the sanctuary to heaven's high throne, the Consecrating Prelate solemnly anoints with Holy Chrism the head of the Bishop fervently praying that the sacred ointment may flow down upon his countenance and sanctify his entire body, so that he may be inwardly fortified and outwardly clothed by the Holy Spirit: "May constant faith, peace, love and sincere piety abound in him".

After the Preface he anoints the palms of the hands of the Bishop and prays once more: "Whatsoever thou shalt bless, may it be blessed; and whatsoever thou shalt sanctify, may it be sanctified; and may the imposition of this consecrated hand or thumb be profitable in all things unto salvation."

Then in close succession are blessed and bestowed the Pastoral staff as the symbol of authority and judgment to be exercised with moderation and tranquility without neglecting discipline; and the episcopal ring as the symbol of the spiritual fidelity which must exist between the Church, the Spouse of Christ, and the Bishop; finally, the Book of Gospels is transferred from the neck and shoulders to the crown
of the head of the Bishop as the symbol of his authority and duty to teach with fidelity the divine truth to the people committed to his care.

Two more symbolic blessings take place just before the end of the Mass of Consecration. The mitre is blessed and imposed upon the newly consecrated Bishop as a helmet and symbol of defense and salvation "so that he may prove himself a formidable adversary to the opponents of truth". The gloves are blessed and placed on his hands, so that the newly consecrated prelate may see in them the pledge of paternal benediction that stems from the merits of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Impressive indeed are these external ceremonies of Consecration, but even more deserving of our admiration and reverence is the spiritual transformation which they effect in the soul of him whom Holy Mother Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has chosen for the episcopal office. Through these beautiful symbolisms, directed by the prayers of the liturgy and the intentions of the Consecrating Prelates, the very being of the Bishop is elevated to the full stature of the apostolic dignity, including the power to rule, the authority to teach and the exercise of the ministry of sanctification.
In the terms of the liturgy "It is the duty of a Bishop to judge and interpret". This clearly indicates the jurisdiction which Christ conferred when He addressed to the Apostles these solemn words: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth, shall be bound also in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed also in heaven." (Matt, xviii, 18)

This power to govern applies to all things that concern the spiritual, the moral and the social welfare of the members of the Mystical Body of Christ; it is a power derived directly from God, involving the responsibility of accounting directly to God, both through the mediation of the Church alone. - Wisdom, prudence and justice must shine forth in its administration, tempered by charity and tranquility.

From his Consecration the Bishop comes forth entrusted with the mandate and duty to teach all nations, all truth and for all time: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world." (Matt, xxviii, 18-20)

Christ's vision of the apostolic ministry recognizes no geographic limitations, recognizes no racial or national discriminations, implies only one restriction to the matter that may be taught, namely it must
truth - the truth that shall make men free - "If you abide in my word, you shall be my disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

(John viii, 31-32)

This interpretation of the ministry of teaching, the Church has vindicated for herself down through the ages. It is of vital importance in these our times, when there prevails throughout the world so much confusion in philosophic thinking as applied to the very existence of God, the character and mission of Christ, the origin, nature and destiny of man and a multitude of moral responsibilities. Firmly, consistently and constantly has the Church through the vigilance of the successive Vicars of Christ, inspired her Bishops with the cooperation of a zealous clergy to carry on this ministry of teaching, often under the stress of sacrifice.

Broad and varied is the ministry of sanctification, which the ceremony of Consecration confers upon the Bishop. His consecrated hands and his power of Consecration and Ordination serve to perpetuate the apostolic succession and the sacerdotal ministry in the Church of God to the end of time; his participation with Christ in the sacrificial oblation guarantees the continuity of the Eucharistic
Presence and its efficacy in the remotest corners of the world; his solicitude for making available the grace-giving Sacraments is a pledge of sanctification to all men of good will; the hallowing touch of his blessing or consecration creates the atmosphere of holiness for churches and shrines, convents and schools, for everything that is set apart for the honor and glory of God and for the sanctification of human souls.

Such, then, is the threefold ministry which the liturgy of Episcopal Consecration epitomizes in its introductory text: "It is the duty of a Bishop to judge, interpret, consecrate, ordain, offer, baptize and confirm". Such are the dignity and the powers, the rights and the duties, the works and the opportunities which today have been conferred and entrusted to you, venerable and beloved Bishop Tracy. Your election to this high office by Holy Mother Church is in itself the pledge that God's grace will not be wanting to you, the grace that will enable Your Excellency to carry the dignity with honor, to discharge every phase of your ministry with holy zeal and generosity of soul and to labor for the establishment of Christ's kingdom in the hearts of men with meritorious success. May your years of service be many, may they be abundantly
fruitful; may they be increasingly happy! May the angelic choirs one day greet you with the beautiful hymn: "Sacerdos et Pontifex et virtutum opifex, Pastor bone in populo sic placuisti Domino" - "Priest and Bishop, Pursuer of virtues, good shepherd among the people, thus didst thou please the Lord."
"THE LORD MADE TO HIM A COVENANT OF PEACE, AND MADE HIM A PRINCE; THAT THE DIGNITY OF PRIESTHOOD SHOULD BE TO HIM FOREVER." (Ecclus. 45, 30)

Your Excellency, Most Reverend Bishop Gerow, our beloved Jubilarian, Your Excellency, Most Reverend Archbishop Vagnozzi, Apostolic Delegate of His Holiness Pope John XXIII to the U. S. A., Most Reverend Archbishops and Bishops, Right Reverend Fathers Abbot, Right Reverend and Very Reverend Monsignori, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Reverend Religious Brothers and Sisters, distinguished guests and beloved members of the laity, Catholic and non-Catholic friends.

By the grace and favor of God, it is our privilege and honor to participate today in an event which has all the characteristics of historic significance. Fifty years in the life of a consecrated servant of God, upon whose soul has been imprinted the character of the sacred
priesthood, transcends the realm of personal importance and elevates him into the sphere of historic influence and efficacy.

The priest of God is vested in a dignity which constitutes him a leader of men, a sharer in the mission and powers entrusted by Christ, the Eternal Son of God to His apostles, a participant in the eternal priesthood of the same Jesus Christ, the High Priest Eternal. His is the privilege of standing at the baptismal fount to infuse the saving water and utter the powerful words that cleanse the soul from the taint of sin and incorporate it into the family of God: "...baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It is the priest's awe-inspiring prerogative to exercise the ministry of divine mercy in the tribunal of penance: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." Who will count the miracles of grace that are wrought in the souls of men within the enclosure of the confessional!

In the pulpit, on the rostrum, on the classroom platform it is the priest's responsibility to promulgate the truth and make known to all the world the way of life, that is the key to human dignity, peace and happiness in time and in eternity. Speaking as he does under the mandate of Christ, Who proclaimed Himself "the Way, the Truth and the Life", there can be
sensed resounding over the priest's voice like an echo the reassuring words: "He who hears you, hears me; and he who rejects you, rejects me; and he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me."

(Luke x, 16)

But where the priestly character reaches the full stature of supernatural pre-eminence, dignity and power is at the altar. There in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass he is intimately associated with Christ Jesus Himself, the High Priest Eternal, in the exercise of the stupendous power of changing bread and wine into the Body and Blood, the Soul and the Divinity of the Eternal Son of God. In this Holy Sacrifice the human priest is one with Christ, becomes in the words of St. Paul "another Christ", as he renews in a mystical manner Christ's own sacrifice on the Cross for the salvation of mankind; in this sacred function the priest becomes the dispenser to devout souls of the Sacred Body and Blood which are meat and drink indeed, the eating and drinking of which offer the pledge of life everlasting and the promise of resurrection on the last day.

Truly, then, may it be said that it is an event of historic significance when a priest of God has enjoyed and exercised these prerogatives and powers for a period of fifty years, when a consecrated servant of God has for half a century been a source of spiritual influence and strength to myriads of souls; when a man of justice and holiness has consistently
dedicated for five long decades of years all his talents, energies and resources, natural and supernatural, to the spiritual, moral and social welfare of his fellowmen, for no earthly recompense but solely for the honor and glory of the Lord! Truly, he has become a historic link in the chain of doctrine, tradition and supernatural power that unites the human souls of today with the Christ Who over 1900 years ago established the life of grace through the Mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption.

The glorious event upon which today's festivities converge draws added lustre from the fact that thirty-five of the fifty years of our Jubilarian's life in the priesthood have been hallowed by the unction, the dignity and the power of the full apostolic ministry of the episcopal office. Even in his earliest priestly years Reverend Richard Oliver Gerow, the central figure of our affectionate attentions, was charged progressively with the responsibilities of Curate at the Cathedral, Diocesan Chancellor and Rector of the Cathedral of his native diocese of Mobile. Such were his zeal, his efficiency and his success that in the fifteenth year of his priesthood Pope Pius XI was prompted in June, 1924, to appoint him Seventh Bishop of Natchez in succession to the late Bishop John E. Gunn, S. M.,

Although history records traces of Catholicity in Mississippi as
early as 1528, diocesan organization was not definitely effected until 1841, when Most Reverend Bishop Joseph Chanche became the first functioning Bishop of Natchez. To minister to a few communities of Catholics concentrated in Natchez, Vicksburg and some points on the Gulf Coast plus a number of Catholic families scattered here and there, the Bishop had at his disposal two priests and not a single church in an area of 46,000 square miles and a total population estimated at 400,000. The missionary character which these figures indicate still hovered over the Diocese when Bishop Gerow took over its administration in 1924, notwithstanding the fact that the Catholic population then totaled 31,264, the number of diocesan and religious priests 63, the number of churches and mission chapels 108, the number of children in Catholic schools 6,407 - This represented the growth of Catholicity under six zealous Bishops over a period of 83 years. Many were the difficulties and hardships under which they labored, including epidemics of yellow fever, the poverty of the people, the problems associated with slavery, the War Between the States, the Reconstruction Period and not a little bigotry and prejudice in certain areas. And yet Catholicity had moved forward steadily and propitiously.

This progress has become even more notable during the thirty-five years of our jubilarian's administration when all the statistical figures
just cited have been practically doubled. According to the 1959 Catholic Directory the Catholic population of Mississippi stands at over 62,000, the number of diocesan and religious priests at 179, the number of churches and mission chapels at 170, the number of children in Catholic schools at 13,838. (Jackson was added to the title of Natchez in 1956).

Many and varied circumstances have undoubtedly contributed to these marvelous advances of Catholicity in the Diocese of Natchez-Jackson; much credit is due to the dedicated zeal of the clergy, the religious Brothers and Sisters and the generously responsive laity, but of prime importance were the leadership and spiritual energy of the apostolic Bishop who thirty-five years ago today, in loyal obedience to the Vicar of Christ, ascended the throne of Natchez with confidence in the word of God: "The Lord made to him a covenant of peace, and made him a prince; that the dignity of priesthood should be to him forever."

(Ecclus. 45, 30)

Throughout these three and one-half decades of years our Jubilarian has indeed exercised his episcopal responsibilities with consistency, firmness and perseverance. How manifold are the duties of a Bishop is outlined in a brief but impressive statement which appears in the introductory admonition which the consecrating prelate addresses to a Bishop-elect in the ceremony of Consecration: "A Bishop is charged with the duty to judge, teach, consecrate, ordain, offer, baptize and confirm."

The exercise of these duties and the responsibilities which
they entail would indeed be beyond the limitation of mere human power.

It is for this reason that Holy Mother Church invokes upon her Bishops the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the intercession of the ever Blessed Mother of God, the angelic choirs and the Saints of God, that the consecrating prelate anoints the head and hands of the new Bishop with holy chrism, praying that the Sacred unction may flow down upon his countenance and permeate his body. As symbols of his authority and jurisdiction the Church blesses and crowns his brow with the sacred mitre, places in his hand the crozier and adorns his finger with the blessed ring, the token of enduring loyalty to Christ and the Church.

Bishop Gerow's administration has been characterized not only by his zeal and efficiency, but also by the wisdom, prudence, justice and charity which Holy Mother Church exhorts her Bishops to exercise. His paternal affection endears him to the children and youthful members of his flock; his kindness and solicitude for the welfare of the family make his name a cherished by-word in every home; his sympathetic understanding of their problems makes him the trusted counsellor and guide of his clergy; his courtesy and geniality win for him the respect and confidence of non-Catholics and Catholics alike; his keen interest in problems of civic welfare prompts public officials to welcome him to their deliberations and counsels. These and many other qualities, natural and supernatural,
have contributed to the extraordinary success of Bishop Gerow's administration, to expand his spiritual, cultural and social influence to the confines of his vast jurisdiction and to win for him the esteem, admiration and affection of his venerable brothers in the Hierarchy. To those unhappy souls who sometimes delight in directing their venomous prejudices against the Church by charging her hierarchy with being ambitious for power, dictatorial in their exactions and devoid of humane consideration, Bishop Gerow certainly stands out as a prelate who tempers justice with mercy, exercises power with prudence, displays wisdom with humility and enobles every thought, word and action with the charity of Christ.

Many, then, are the reasons for rejoicing with our Most Reverend Jubilarian on this day of happy memories, many the reasons for rendering thanks to Almighty God for having blessed so abundantly the Diocese of Natchez-Jackson through the untiring zeal of this noble prelate, whose very character and personal qualities have been sources of edification and inspiration to all who have come within the radius of his beneficent influence. In him the Lord hath indeed fulfilled His covenant of peace and made him a prince among men, radiant with princely attributes and endowed with all the supernatural powers of the priesthood, yet gifted with the gentleness of the true shepherd of souls and the meekness and humility of the Savior Himself... "Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart."

(Matt. xi, 29)
May we, then, congratulate you, dear Bishop Gerow, upon the blessings that have attended the fifty years of your priestly life and felicitate you upon the many achievements of your thirty-five years of zealous labor in the episcopal office. The Holy Father has expressed eloquently in a personal message the appreciation of the Universal Church; the presence of His Excellency, the Most Reverend Apostolic Delegate, and of so many other members of the hierarchy attest their reverence and fraternal affection for you; the many prayers and other acts of piety offered for Your Excellency by the Clergy, the Religious and the laity of the Diocese attest their devotion and gratitude to you and for you; ever so many messages of felicitation from non-Catholic friends and admirers attest the prestige which you enjoy universally throughout this great State of Mississippi - may all these tributes be woven into wreaths of prayer, whose beauty and fragrance may find acceptance in the Heart of Jesus Christ, the Priest Eternal, prompting Him to spare you in our midst for many years as a prince of peace in whom the dignity and rewards of priesthood should abide forever.