

**“Elected by God for the Service of the Salvation of Souls”**

**Homily – Ordination to the Episcopacy of the Most Reverend Robert Christian, O.P.**

**June 5, 2018; St. Mary’s Cathedral**

**Introduction**

Everyone in San Francisco knows what today is: today is Election Day. Yes, it is Election Day all throughout California, but since here in San Francisco we are also electing a mayor on top of everything else, there is even greater attention to the fact that today is Election Day. Here in St. Mary’s Cathedral in San Francisco, it is also an election day, in a certain sense. Not, though, in the political sense, in which elections are all about campaign strategy, fundraising, and advertising in order to win. Rather, it is election in the Biblical sense, which is something quite different.

**Election in God’s Plan**

In the Bible, election is the action of God. Indeed, it is the gratuitous, deliberate and sovereign initiative of God. This election by God always involves a certain separation. We can think, for example, of the great prophets in God’s plan of salvation: Moses, Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah. They were all whisked away from their ordinary lives, from everyday society, and compelled by God to proclaim His message and thereby set themselves against their people. To be God’s elect, then, entails a form of existence different from that of the rest of the people. But this is not for the purpose of making oneself out to be better than others.

The separation *from* is also a separation *for*, as is clear from the very beginning of God's plan of salvation. It all began with the call and election of Abraham: God promised Abraham that he and his descendants would be a blessing for *all* nations. And so it is that through Abraham and his descendants, God called and elected His people and their leaders, through whom He worked His plan of salvation.

Election by God, then, is a call to service. Which brings us to what we are about today. The Church has taken over this language of election from the Bible. The whole people of God is set apart – in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “anointed” “to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, ... to comfort all who mourn.” But within this people are those set apart for the purpose of service and sanctification of God's people. And so the Church speaks of the “election” of those constituted within the ranks of Holy Orders, as the Rite itself makes clear. In accordance with its instruction, by the pronouncement “Thanks be to God” and by applause, we gave our assent “to the *election* of the Bishop.”

### **The Good Shepherd**

That this is an election to service is something the Rite of Ordination of a Bishop also makes quite clear. In his homily for the Ordination of Bishops two years ago, Pope Francis picked up on what the Rite suggests for the bishop's homily on this occasion when he said:

As for you, dearest brothers, chosen by the Lord, consider that ... you have been appointed to the things pertaining to God. Indeed, ‘episcopacy’ is the name of a service, not of an honor, therefore a bishop must strive to serve rather than to rule, according to the Master’s commandment: ‘whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all’. Be servants. Of all: of the greatest and of the least. Of all. But always be servants, serving.<sup>1</sup>

“The name of a service, not of an honor.” These words, straight from the Rite of Ordination, indicate the sign of the good shepherd. This is the pastor of souls who cares about his people, not himself. That is why he does not run at the first sign of danger, or difficulty, or even just inconvenience. The one whom Jesus refers to as the “hired man” is the one who doesn’t care, because the sheep are not his own. People generally do not exercise diligence in caring for what belongs to someone else; thus, like the “hired man,” they tend to be – because they can get away with it – cowardly and lazy. As St. Gregory the Great puts it:

The only reason that the hireling flees is that he is a hireling. As though it were said directly: he who loves not the sheep, but worldly

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<sup>1</sup> Homily for Mass of Conferral of Episcopal Ordination on Msgr. Peter Brian Wells and on Msgr. Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, Vatican Basilica, Saturday, 19 March 2016.

gain, cannot stand firm when the sheep are in danger. For while he is aiming at honor, and rejoicing in worldly gain, he is afraid of exposing himself to danger, lest he should lose that which he loves.<sup>2</sup>

“I know mine and mine know me.” The pastor who is the good shepherd is the one who so identifies with Christ that he sees the people entrusted to his pastoral care *not* as belonging exclusively to Christ and so only tangentially connected to himself, but rather as his very own. He knows them and *is known by them*, or better yet, *makes himself known* by them. He makes sacrifices for them, serving them with courage, generosity and humility. He is their servant.

### **Servant of Unity**

Above all, he is the servant of unity. The service rendered to the Church by those elected to the office of bishop is first and foremost a service of teaching the faith handed down from the Apostles so as to build up the unity of the Body which is the Church. Notice what St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “we, though many, are one Body in Christ.” Better yet, notice what he does not say: he does not *identify* us *with* the Body of Christ, but explains that we are one Body *in* Christ, that is to say, under Christ the head of the Body. God elects the people so that they might serve His purposes, and so work out His plan of salvation. If we do not place ourselves under the head, then we bring about a

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *The Great Commentary of Cornelius a Lapide, the Holy Gospel According to Saint John* (Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire: Loreto Publications, 2008), p. 406.

curious reversal: instead of willingly allowing ourselves to be known by God so that God might choose us to be instruments through which He will work His saving action, we instead elect what kind of God we want to have for ourselves. That allows us to be comfortable and complacent. Such is the hired hand.

In a few moments Father Robert will make his promises of episcopal ordination. The flow of these promises illustrates that it is teaching the faith of the Apostles – no matter the sacrifice, even to the point of laying down one’s life (figuratively if not literally) – that the unity of the Body of Christ is built up and obedience to the successor of St. Peter preserved. Only then can the bishop be a devoted father, guiding his people on the way to salvation, leading them in service to the poor and marginalized, and seeking out those who have gone astray and gathering them back into the Lord’s fold.

## **Conclusion**

It is a great joy for all of us that this apostolic ministry will now be enhanced by the ordination of Father Robert Christian as the eighteenth Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. Father Robert, your diligence in teaching the faith of the Apostles through instruction and formation of future Church leaders will serve you well in your new episcopal ministry among us. We give thanks to God and to Pope Francis for electing you to this office which you will exercise as a good shepherd, seeking the good of your people and not worldly gain or honor – which is demonstrated not only by your track record but also by the fact that you are, after all, a mendicant.

On that note, I would also like to take this occasion, on behalf of the entire Archdiocese, to express my profound gratitude to the Order of Preachers for your exemplary leadership and the tireless pastoral care that you provide for the people of the Archdiocese of San Francisco and beyond. As we know, this goes back to our very first Archbishop, the Dominican Joseph Sadoc Alemany (whose chalice we use for this Mass today), and it continues up to the present time. Archbishop Alemany set the example for all bishops in our area who would follow after him of one who fought against seemingly insurmountable challenges to establish the Church here with all of her organizational infrastructure for the effective work of the Gospel.

After the manner of the Good Shepherd himself, he gave himself completely, and at great personal cost, to initiating what has evolved into a legacy of the Church's institutional and pastoral presence in care for the poor and the sick, quality education for all, welcome to the newcomer, spiritual accompaniment of God's people on their path to life with Him, and all of the other corporal and spiritual works of mercy. May God now grant to Father Robert, and to all of us, to make our own contribution to this legacy, so that the One who began this good work in our predecessors will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.