



Being a bishop calls for fidelity and prudence

Editor's note, the following is the text of Bishop Robert N. Lynch, Bishop of St. Petersburg, homilist at Bishop Etienne's ordination.

I wish to begin by expressing my thanks to soon-to-be Bishop Etienne for giving me one more opportunity, perhaps this time finally to get it right – having been accorded the privilege of preaching his first Mass as a priest 18 years ago, I also wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Archbishop Charles Chaput to whom this special moment would normally be given.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.” These words of the Evangelist Matthew in the Gospel just proclaimed are at one and the same time comforting and challenging. The office of bishop in Christ's church has undergone some major changes in both job description and perception in my lifetime. The expectations of the Catholic faithful of Wyoming this afternoon are great and if you will allow me to continue Dickensonian language, we are both in the “best of times and (at least according to TIME magazine) the worst of times.” They call for episcopal leadership which is positive, hopeful, inclusive, collegial, humble and faithful.

Scripture is not a great help in defining the expectations of a bishop. However St. Paul, whose name you and your father carry, in the pastoral epistles speaks of bishops in only two instances. In one he counsels the bishop to take no more than one wife [not particularly helpful advice this afternoon] but then continues that the bishop should also be of “even temper, self-controlled, modest and hospitable. He should be a good teacher. . . . He ought not to be contentious but rather gentle, a man of peace.” In his letter to Titus, Paul repeats his qualifications for the of-



Bishop Robert N. Lynch, bishop of Diocese St. Petersburg, gives the homily during the ordination Mass for Bishop Paul D. Etienne. He praised the new bishop for his family values. Photo by James Baca

office of bishop and adds this timely reminder: “The bishop as God's steward. . . [must] in his teaching hold fast to the authentic message so that he will be able both to encourage men to follow sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.” So there my dear friend Paul, and the Church of Wyoming is the core of the job description for a bishop, then and now.

So your name sake sets a high bar and defines the nature of the yoke soon to be placed on your shoulders. I know since we spoke about it that you were captured by Archbishop Sambis talk at last month's bishops' meeting in Baltimore that the bishop should have three requisite qualities: fidelity which allows for an appropriate application of creativity, prudence and a positive approach to Episcopal leadership which gives hope to a people often struggling.

Not only will the Lord lighten the burden of office, but your brothers in priestly ministry will be an

enormous help to you. Quite frankly, we can not administer the Church without our good priests and they will look at you from varying perspectives. To some you will be a “father” and to others “a brother” and perhaps to some, even a “bother.” But you must listen to them carefully, dismiss their advice cautiously, if ever, and consider them always your closest collaborators in ministry.

While the Church in Wyoming does not have a large number of deacons and religious women and men, they too are a part of the mosaic of ministry you will find here, Paul. And the Church which is not yours or mine, but belongs first to Christ and then to the baptized. Good people of the Church of Cheyenne be patient with your new bishop. Archbishop Buechlein and I can honestly attest to you that there was to be found no trace of ambition in Father Paul Etienne. Becoming a bishop was the farthest thing from his mind.

He has spent 18 years becoming a good pastor, spiritual director and servant leader. When he learned from Archbishop Sambis that the Holy Father wished to name him to be bishop of Cheyenne, he was floored. When it was safe to do so he called me one night and we talked about what was coming in his life. Just before he hung up, he said, “you know Bob I know nothing about what I will need as a bishop – what to wear. I don't even own a rabat vest. And someone said I needed a ‘coat of arms’ and I have no clue what should go on it.” Remembering a Monday several years ago when I called his cell phone, only to be answered by the ear splitting sound of a rifle being discharged and Paul saying, “got to hang up, Bernie and I just shot ourselves a deer” I could not help but tell the soon-to-be new bishop that perhaps in one corner of his coat of arms he should have a dead deer and choose as his motto, “like a deer that once longed for running streams.” The Etienne three brothers gave

each other hunting rifles for priesthood ordination light.

So soon-to-be Bishop Paul, the great expectations which everyone has here today and the challenge of the Pauline adjectives can be met if you just remain yourself, comfortable with who you are. There is no role to be played, but rather a ministry of loving service to be lived out. Be humble. Be what you have been which led so many to write in favor of your possible appointment as a bishop. Be the same pastor and brother that has led so many of your brother priests from Indianapolis to fly the long distance to hand you over to another Church. Be the pastor whom people in all the parishes which you have served who said farewell to you in tears these last few weeks will long remember. On the darkest of days which hopefully will be few, look at the crucified Lord and know that compared to His, your burden is indeed

I end with deeply personal reflection which perhaps is somewhat inappropriate for a moment like this. In August of this year I struggled to hold on to a slender thread of life. In the ensuing four weeks in intensive care I asked myself over and over again and asked the Lord, “why me? why didn't you take me to you Lord.” Today I feel I finally know a possible reason and I can in faith repeat the words of Simeon: “now Master you have kept your word, you may (if you wish) dismiss your servant in peace.” Church of Cheyenne, God's holy people, brother priests and deacons. It will not take you long to discover how lucky you are. With the Lord help this man, shoulder the yoke of office and help it be lightened for him so that the Gospel promise of today will also be your experience.

In all things, may Jesus Christ be praised. Amen