

Episcopal Ordination of Rt. Revd. Peter Brignall

3rd Bishop of Wrexham

Cathedral of Our Lady of Sorrows

12th September 2012

Archbishop George Stack

During the retreat which precedes Episcopal ordination, the candidate becomes painfully aware of his unworthiness for the office to which he is called. He reads the scriptures, reflects on the teaching of the Church, and embraces the tradition. He realises that humanly speaking, this ministry does not depend on his gifts alone, but on the power and the grace of the Holy Spirit which breathes through the Body of Christ which is the Church.

During his retreat, Bishop - Elect Peter may even have found himself in agreement with the words of Blessed Humbert of Roman (circa 1190-1277). Humbert was the 5th Master of the Dominican order elected in 1254. He remonstrated with his teacher St. Albert the Great who had been appointed a Bishop:

“I would rather you were dead than a Bishop.....Why ruin your reputation and that of the Order by letting yourself be taken away from poverty and preaching? However troublesome you find the brethren, do not imagine that things will be better when you have the clergy and the secular powers to deal with...Better to lie in a coffin than sit in a Bishop’s chair!”

Peter's missionary spirit took him away, not from the Dominicans but from the Diocese of Westminster to Wrexham in 1977.

Cardinal Hume allowed him to leave on condition "that he didn't take anyone else with him". He didn't take me with him from Westminster at that time, but thirty five years later I too followed the call of St. David, and am now privileged with him and Bishop Tom Burns to serve God's people here in Wales. Peter's distinguished ministry as a parish priest, hospital chaplain, chaplain to the deaf, university chaplain, Dean of the Cathedral and Vicar General are just some examples of his willingness and capacity to be of service wherever he is needed. "Watch over the flock God has entrusted to you, not simply as a duty but gladly,...because you are eager to do it". (1 Peter 5:2)

Before his ordination, the new Bishop is asked publicly and personally if he is willing to undertake this service for the glory of God and the salvation of God's people. "Are you resolved to maintain the deposit of faith? Are you resolved to build up the Church? Are you resolved to be unite to the successor of Peter? To be compassionate? To be a good shepherd and above all to pray with and for the People of God? He accepts the mandate given to every bishop to sanctify, to teach and to govern when he answers: "I am with the help of God".

The Sacrament of Orders is conferred through the laying on of hands and prayer. The imposition of hands by all the bishops happens in silence. The human word is inarticulate. The soul opens in silence to God whose hand stretches from eternity into the world of time and embraces this man, directs and orders him for service of the whole Body which is the Church. And then the prayer of consecration. Pope Benedict reminds us “No man can make another man a priest or a bishop. It is the Lord himself who, through these sacramental signs and prayer, draws a man into His own priesthood”. Through his ministry as Bishop, Peter will make the priesthood of Christ visible in this place, at this time and for these people in the changing circumstances of the world in which we live.

The symbols of Episcopal office speak in a silent language of the presence of Christ in his Church particularly when it is gathered around the Bishop in worship. The anointing of his head with the Oil of Chrism, sealing the bond between Christ and his new apostle. “The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me” said the prophet Isaiah (61:1) The mitre represents a crown of holiness in life and in ministry. It is also a reminder that holiness cannot by-pass the crown of thorns, the crown of suffering in each person’s life. And the Bishops staff – a sign of direction and hope. Reaching out to those in any need whatsoever and a reminder that he himself has to be supported and upheld by the Prayer of the Church.

The Cathedra gives its name to this Cathedral. It is not just any old chair. It is the seat of teaching, listening and learning. In his role as teacher the Bishop is called to speak God's word. The Word is not his own. No matter what their background, outlook, point of view, people are gathered around their Bishop in unity, identity and communion with God and with each other. The Cathedra is a holy place.

Bearing all that in mind, Bishop Peter's Retreat may well have led him to reflect on the words of the 5th century Bishop, St. Augustine of Hippo. On the anniversary of his ordination Augustine preached:

When I am fearful of what I am for you
I draw strength from what I am with you.
For you, I am a Bishop.
With you, I am a Christian.
The former is an office received.
The latter is the foundation of salvation.
Help me by your prayers and obedience
To carry out these serious and varied duties.
Then I shall have the joy
Not so much of ruling you
As of being useful to your salvation.