

Homily for Vesper Service
On the Occasion of the Reception of Bishop Blase Cupich
Our Lady of Lourdes Cathedral
Spokane, Washington
September 2, 2010

I am so grateful for the warm reception offered by so many over the past few months, and again this evening. The first one to welcome me was Bishop Skylstad. Since the day he learned of my appointment, he has repeatedly said to me: "I am so excited about your coming here." It was only after spending some days with him, travelling around the diocese, that I came to understand what he meant. He wasn't excited for you or the diocese. He was excited for me, as he knew what a great blessing it is to be your bishop. Thank you, Bishop Skylstad, for spending those days with me and for being a brother in this time of transition. You have done everything imaginable to make me feel welcome.

I consider it a unique privilege to have this opportunity to publicly recognize your dedicated service to this diocese and the Church, first as a native son ordained to the priesthood and then for more than 20 years as our Bishop. You have distinguished yourself on the national and international level of the Church, as our Conference President and through your work in ecumenism, justice and peace, Marriage Encounter, and in countless other ways. No one could have asked more of you, but the record shows that whatever task you have been given, you responded with a generosity which both motivates and inspires. On behalf of all those whose faith lives have been enriched by your ministry, I say thank you, Bishop Skylstad.

I am also heartened by the welcome from representatives from the Jewish and various Christian communities. Please convey my respect to those you serve, assuring them that I treasure all which binds us together as people of faith. I acknowledge with thanks the greetings from our civic and educational leaders. You have my admiration for the way you are called upon to marshal limited resources for the common good and the safety of our streets. Know of my readiness always to return the hand of friendship and cooperation you extend to me tonight.

I very much appreciate the welcome from my closest collaborators, my brothers in the ordained ministry, our presbyterate, and all the leaders who work with our youth and through our various charitable groups.

The presence of tribal leaders is a fond reminder of how much I have learned from the Indian people. I am proud to carry the name *wakiya ska* (White Thunder) and say to you what the Lakota people have taught me: *Mitakuye Oyasin*, "We are all relatives."

Estoy muy agradecido y honrado por la calurosa bienvenida de nuestros hermanos y hermanas en la comunidad hispana. Su fe y su cultura enriquecen este país y nuestra Iglesia. Quiero que sepan que su nuevo obispo es un antiguo amigo, ya que mis abuelos fueron también inmigrantes,

hablaron un idioma diferente y buscaban solamente una oportunidad para mejorar la vida de sus familias. Es por eso que los llamo hermanos y hermanas y espero con placer estar con ustedes.

I appreciate the welcome from representatives of our diocesan commissions and committees, and the administrators and teachers who educate nearly 4,000 students in our 17 Catholic schools.

The presence of so many of our consecrated women and men religious is particularly fitting, as the greeting from your representatives reminds me of the historical founding role your communities have played in this diocese. You continue to enhance every aspect of the Church's life and work. You teach in our schools, minister in our parishes and hospitals, serve the poor, and build us up by your prayers and your unique witness to the Gospel.

Thank you all for your greetings, good wishes and welcome

You make me feel at home.

In fact, I am so much at home here, that I have no hesitation in welcoming those who have travelled to Spokane. Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, is present in the person of our Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi. Welcome, Archbishop, and thank you for making the long trip to the other Washington. I can only imagine the sacrifice involved. He is joined by our metropolitan, Archbishop Alex Brunett, my former metropolitan Archbishop Harry Flynn, who ordained me a bishop and other brother bishops from across this country and Canada. All of your schedules are terribly demanding, especially at this time of the year, and my welcome to you comes with a sincere thanks for the heartwarming gift of support your presence means to all of us.

There are many friends and colleagues to welcome as well, some of whom I have known for decades. They are here from parishes and communities I once pastored and led, and from our Bishops' Conference.

And of course, present too are priests, religious, and lay men and women from my former diocese in western South Dakota. As I told you back in Rapid City, you will get over my departure a lot sooner than I ever will, but your being here consoles me with the hope that our friendships will endure in the years ahead.

Finally, I welcome my family, my eight brothers and sisters and spouses, nephews and nieces, aunts and cousins. And I save my last greeting and welcome for the one who literally made our gathering in these days possible: my mother, Mary. Mom's first reaction to my appointment to Spokane was simple and to the point: "Well, I guess that means you can't drive home anymore." Her matter-of-fact remark reminded me how my parents always taught us to be ever practical, but even more, always accepting of whatever comes in life. Thanks, Mom, for that timeless lesson, and so many more

We gather for Vespers. It is a pause at the end of a day to give thanks for blessings received, and to pray that God will see us through the darkness as night falls upon us. This Vespers Service also serves as a vigil, in anticipation of the new chapter the Catholic community in eastern Washington begins tomorrow. And so, let us be attentive and vigilant to what the living God has to say to us this night.

He speaks to us through the words of Paul, originally addressed to the Colossians as they faced severe trials, persecution and internal division. Those words now reach across the ages and have something to say to us:

We have heard of your faith and love... and from that day we have not ceased praying for you that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding to live in a manner worthy of the Lord.

We need to hear Paul's encouraging voice tonight, for there are other voices, sometimes even within ourselves, which reduce our mission and identity to the very public challenges and criticisms we face: the menacing financial and legal strains that continue to beset us, the loss of trust with those we serve, and the public shame inflicted on us all by the irresponsible behavior of a few who betrayed their calling and harmed children. But God tells us through Paul that we are more than a diocese that has suffered bankruptcy, we are more than the failures of nearly 30 years ago, and we surely are more than the sins of the very few.

He knows of your faith and love... and so do I. From the brief visits I have already made in eastern Washington State, I have seen and heard of your faith and love at the St. Vincent de Paul store in Dayton; at the houses for battered women and the homeless sponsored by Catholic Charities; in the sacrifices you make to educate children in our schools; in the refreshing and generous faith of our young seminarians; in the tireless dedication of our priests, religious and lay parish leaders, whose presence lets parishioners know that God's love is everlasting; and in the care of the sick and dying by the Sisters of Providence.

I too have seen your faith and love in people I have met: a family as they care with devotion and joy for a severely impaired adult daughter; parents, though grieving a child lost in a tragedy, who have become even more generous; and a young man, confined to a wheelchair, who prepared a beautiful wood carving just to make me feel at home here.

I am convinced that just as our commitment to healing of the past must be resolute, ongoing and firm, so too must be our sense of mission for the future, a mission, as Paul puts it, "to share in the inheritance of the holy ones, by bearing fruit in every good work and by growing in the knowledge of God." In the long run, it will be our commitment to the mission of Christ that will sustain us as we continue the work of healing the past.

That is why we need to be attentive and ever vigilant to God's words of encouragement whenever they come. They will keep our focus and mission fresh. They will balance and steady

us in otherwise uncertain times and unchartered waters. And, above all, they will keep us from falling into that most diabolical of temptations, discouraging self-pity.

I learned this one early morning in the dark winter days of 2002. I was scheduled to make a one-day round-trip from Rapid City to St. Paul for a seminary board meeting. As I stood in the long line waiting to go through the security check, a TV monitor overhead was broadcasting a morning talk show. The host and his sidekick were recounting the interview they had the day before with Father Andrew Greeley of Chicago. "He was an okay guy," the host said, "not like all the other Catholic priests who abuse and harm kids." My heart sank. My head bowed in shame. I could only imagine the stares of everyone fixed on me at that moment, as though a bulls-eye had been painted on my back. That made for a heavy day, a painful day. As others have said, I did not sign up for this.

Sitting on the plane for the return trip that evening, a flight attendant, an African American woman, approached me and asked: "Are you a Catholic priest?"

Oh, I thought, *she must have seen that bulls-eye on my back*. "Yes," I responded, "I am."

"Well," she continued, "I am not a Catholic, but my brothers and I grew up in New Orleans and the priests and the sisters were so good to us. If we couldn't pay, we were still welcome. If we didn't have the proper clothes, they gave them to us. If we didn't have lunch, they fed us. So we all decided a long time ago that whenever we come across a sister or a priest, we would say thanks. So thanks, Father, for what you do."

You could have knocked me over with a shaft of Washington winter wheat!

Surely she was testifying to the enormous reservoir of good will and social capital which our priests and religious have built up over the years. But even more so, her message was the same as St. Paul's: *We have heard of your faith and love ... and from that day we have not ceased praying for you to bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God*. On this vigil night, we should attend to this Word of God and let it encourage us.

It is a Word that calls us to be attentive to the many ways God is gracing us in this time to bring healing to the past and to steady us to take up again the mission of Christ. You can count on me joining you in doing just that. For you see, I share Bishop Skylstad's excitement and now know, it is a blessing to be your bishop.

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