

**Homily of the Most Reverend Gregory John Hartmayer, OFM Conv.**

**Installation Vespers for the Seventh Archbishop of Atlanta**

**Cathedral of Christ the King**

**5 May 2020**

I began preparing this homily, as I have every homily lately, as if things were not “different”.

A homily delivered via live-stream is, after all, still a homily, an opportunity to teach, reflect and inspire.

These days, people of all ages find motivation and encouragement online via their favorite podcasts and YouTube channels, and even more we *pastors of a certain age* have done our best to adapt to this brave new world.

So as I said, I began preparing these remarks as if things were not different. With this one, though, I had to concede almost immediately that things are, in fact, very different.

You see, at this point in Vespers on the night before of installation of an archbishop, it is customary for the new shepherd to begin by acknowledging, with profound gratitude, those who have traveled across town or across the country to share in this solemn and symbolic evening prayer.

That humbling litany of appreciation typically begins with the new archbishop recognizing the deeply moving demonstration of fraternal care and concern shown to him.

Often citing the esteemed presence of the Apostolic Nuncio, perhaps a Cardinal or two, an assortment of brother bishops and a large representation of the presbyterate, some from his former diocese

bidding him fond farewell (or making sure he's really finally going) and many more from the new diocese, profoundly welcoming him in solidarity to the local Church in which they will serve together and support one another.

If he is a member of a religious community, as I am, he may graciously point out the attending leadership of his Order and his confreres to whom he owes so much, and then offer a reverent nod to the members of the ecumenical, interfaith, and civic communities with whom he will interact in the years to come.

The archbishop-designate will often call out the dedicated deacons and their wives, women and men religious, and the lay faithful there present, many of whom "just couldn't miss this" because of some special connection to the bishop that may have been forged during a single moment of immeasurable joy or insurmountable sorrow, or perhaps just as a result of regular and reliable pastoral care in a prior parish or former diocese.

From there he will point out a handful of VIP's – Fr. Leon who taught him World History in high school, his beloved Godmother who brought him into church for the first time shortly after his birth, the pastor Fr. Jim Vaughn, who mentored him when he was a deacon.

And finally, he may get a bit emotional as he acknowledges his dear family, without whom he would certainly not be here at all – whose love and support, sacrifice and unassailable faith in Jesus Christ planted in him the kernel of his priestly vocation **that today** he would not trade for the world.

Tonight, though, these "living stones" about whom Peter wrote – those colleagues and collaborators, treasured friends and family members – tonight.....are not here.

The unanticipated, unrelenting events of the past few months have definitely indefinitely altered every facet of our lives, ecclesial and otherwise.

I point out the stark emptiness of this beautiful edifice not to elicit your pity certainly, nor to, in any way, imply that the participation of the People of God in this evening prayer is diminished by being limited to viewing on the internet. There will be ample time for personal good wishes and sentiments of farewell and welcome in the months ahead. There is a time for everything, and one day soon there will be a time to celebrate. And celebrate.... we will.

I mention the barren pews, the missing choir and instrumental ensemble, the lack of resounding responses and enthusiastic voices raised in song because empty churches are, frankly, every bishop's worst nightmare. They almost always indicate contraction or crisis, lost communities or lost opportunities.

Granted, this current situation is temporary and merely coincidental with my installation as Archbishop of Atlanta. We know that just as soon as it is safe to do so, physical access to our Lord Jesus Christ in the sacraments will return to their rightful places in the local community of believers, eager to join the other living stones being built into that spiritual house.

Over time we will resume our normal activities – choirs will practice, faith formation will pick where it left off, beaming couples will announce and plan their weddings, families will find themselves scrambling to make it to Mass on time, and the meetings – those preeminent indicators of the sheer busyness of parish and diocesan life – will start again.

But what lessons will we take from these weeks of physical separation and the stirring images of vacant worship spaces? We know there are parts of our world – indeed, there are parts of our own country – where the phenomenon of empty or nearly empty Catholic churches is not limited to times of global pandemic, places where our precious Catholic faith was once just as strong as it is in this remarkable local Church now, but where it has succumbed to culture and inertia and scandal and a host of external and internal negative forces. Could that fate be lurking in Atlanta if we do not take to heart this cautionary moment?

We all have heard the expression: “We don’t know how much we have until we lose it”. What if it not lost for good, but only for a while? What if, thanks be to God, we are only separated from the Eucharist and one another long enough to be jarred into a deeper spiritual appreciation of this great and fragile Gift with which we have been entrusted?

As we prepare to return gradually and deliberately to communal worship and normal ecclesial life, I implore each of us to consider how we might do that better.

My brother bishops, presbyters and confreres, may we lead our people with renewed vigor so that they are inspired **to be** the living stones Peter admonishes us all to allow ourselves to become.

May we live our vocations with the abundant joy of Jesus Christ front and center so that others are drawn by our examples to consider vocations to the priesthood or religious life for themselves.

Deacons, religious and lay ecclesial ministers, may you use this moment to develop innovative ways to teach and serve so that the faithful more clearly understand and enthusiastically embrace their role as missionary disciples in the workplace and in the world.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may I ask that you recommit to deepening your own precious faith in Jesus Christ so that your children and grandchildren cannot help but see every day that you have found comfort, contentment and boundless joy in worshiping the One who made us and that you and I are enriched and energized by our relationship with Him in ways that the unrelenting accumulations of material goods ....never could.

Become a beacon to all who are seeking, especially those under your own roof, and we will never have to worry about empty churches, unfilled pews or those heartbreaking vacancies in yours own family's row.

No bishop wants to believe that the importance of Eucharist has diminished in Catholic homes, and yet statistically it is difficult to argue against it. Too often, we see Sunday Mass attendance treated more as an obligation than an opportunity, and we bishops have to step up to ensure that parish liturgies are meaningful and reverent so the faithful are engaged and inspired by them.

My sincere prayer for the Church, once this pandemic is contained and we are able to congregate, again, without risk, is that in every home the People of God will arise on the first Sunday morning that public Masses resume **excited** about the prospect of reconvening with their faith community at the Lord's table and not think, "Do have to go to Mass today?", but rather, "Thank God we get to go to Mass today".

When you are finally able to return to your parish home for the first time in several weeks, I expect that you will look around and notice details about your church that perhaps you had forgotten or not noticed at all before. It may seem a little brighter and larger than you remember. I imagine the choir will work exceptionally hard to ensure

that everything sounds just perfect and the homily will be filled with gratitude and renewal.

It will be like the Easter that we wished we **could have** celebrated this year..

You may even find yourself lingering for a few extra minutes when Mass is ended just to thank God for the greatest gift of your Catholic faith when you realize it was the one thing on which you could always rely, regardless of what's going on in the world around you.

As your archbishop, what more could I ask?

So on this 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary of my priestly ordination. I humbly commence my service to this extraordinary local Church.

Preaching to an empty Cathedral may seem to some like a pretty disappointing way to begin this new ministry. I prefer to look at it differently, though – I see this empty Cathedral as a call to action, a stark and powerful reminder of what could happen if we let up, for even a moment, if we ever get complacent or begin to take all He has given us... for granted,

We have so much more to do. Let us continue to build the Kingdom of God that was shouldered by each of my six predecessors.

God, come to **our** assistance. Lord, make haste to help **us**.