

Homily at the Mass of Episcopal Ordination for Most Reverend Alfred A. Schlert
Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
Cathedral of Saint Catharine of Siena
August 31, 2017

Readings:

Jeremiah 1:4-9

1 Peter 5:1-4

John 21: 15-17

Before I start, I'd like to acknowledge the apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre. As the delegate of Pope Francis, his presence reminds us that the Church in Allentown belongs to a single, much larger, universal family of faith guided by the Successor of Peter. So Your Excellency, we're very privileged to welcome you here today.

Earlier this week we celebrated the feast of St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine is one of the great sinners and saints in history. As a young man, before his conversion from paganism, he led a very loose life, with a very brilliant mind. Augustine trained in grammar and rhetoric, and in fourth century Rome, this was a fast track to social prestige. Augustine loved words. In fact, one of the reasons he rejected Christianity as a young scholar was because he found the language of Scripture too simple and inelegant. Compared to an author like Cicero, the Gospels seemed vulgar.

It was only later, as the emptiness of his life became more and more painful, that Augustine saw what Scripture really is. The beauty of God's Word doesn't come from the lips, but from the heart; it's not how the words sound, but what they mean. Scripture is a love story, and the Lover who speaks it is God.

So let's turn our hearts now to what Scripture tells us today.

I said a moment ago that the Church is a family of faith. And the father in every family has the duty and the privilege to love, serve, provide for, protect, and lead the persons in his care. The life of a bishop is a particular kind of fatherhood. And the readings today describe what that fatherhood entails.

Jeremiah was one of Israel's great prophets. But he had the unhappy job of speaking the truth to a nation committed to self-interest and sin. So his message was, to put it mildly, not well received. He was resented – and even hated and attacked -- not just by many of Israel's leaders, but also by many of its ordinary people. Yet, as our first reading says, God formed him in the womb, appointed him to his mission, and promised him the strength to carry it out. When God says to Jeremiah, "before you were born I *consecrated* you," he makes the mission of the prophet, and by extension the mission of the bishop, something unique, personal and sacred. This is why every bishop has a special need for the virtues of faith and courage, and for the prayers of his people in remaining strong in his ministry.

The reading from the First Letter of Peter tells us how the bishop should carry out his work. *First*, with fidelity to Jesus Christ and to the people in his care. *Second*, with generosity and self-sacrifice, instead of grumbling and shifting the burdens of leadership to others. *Third*, with humility, instead of a hunger

for personal advancement and “shameful gain.” *And fourth*, with gentleness and patience and a personal witness of integrity.

But in the end, it’s today’s Gospel reading that names the fundamental vocation of the bishop. Jesus says to Peter “*feed my sheep.*” He says that three times, just as Peter denied him three times. What it means is this. There’s no true Christian service or piety that’s purely vertical – in other words, a relationship of just me and God. As Christians, and especially as priests and bishops, we can’t love God without loving and serving the people he created and entrusted to our care.

Love can be complicated work. In a world of conflict and confusion, a bishop must sometimes correct and admonish. As Augustine once said, “If you believe what you like in the Gospels and reject what you don’t like, it’s not the Gospel you believe, but yourself.” So when a bishop speaks uncomfortable truths, he’s doing a very real act of mercy. But the heart of a bishop’s ministry – the joy of it -- is nourishing, teaching, guiding and encouraging his people. Having chosen an episcopal motto like *Feed my Sheep*, Bishop-elect Schlert already clearly knows this.

I started my reflections by mentioning St. Augustine for a reason. Augustine was one of human history’s greatest minds. But he became one of the greatest *bishops* in Christian history because he lived first and foremost as a father, moved by a father's love.

He often said that people in his time misunderstood what it meant to be a bishop. Some saw it as a desired honor. Others saw it as simply an administrative task. Others saw it as a step in a successful career. But for Augustine it was a *sarcina episcopalis* – the burden of being a bishop. He saw himself as a “prisoner in the Lord” because day after day he faced the concerns and problems of others, and never had time to spare for himself.

And isn’t that exactly the experience of a father in a large family?

When Augustine was baptized in A.D. 387, his son Adeodatus – the name means “gift of God” in Latin – was baptized with him. This father and his son were inseparable friends. When Adeodatus died as a teenager, Augustine never lost his trust in God, but he still wept bitterly for months.

Later in life, in his ministry as a bishop, Augustine never forgot the lessons of a father's love. He never forgot that his first task was not to be a brilliant intellect, or a marvelous preacher, or a great administrator, or a good fund-raiser – although each of these things has a proper place in the life of a bishop. His *first task* was to love God as a son, and to love the people of God in his care as a father, with a father's heart. That kind of love is tireless. It's all-consuming. And without the grace of God in a man's life, it's overwhelming. Only when a man puts himself entirely in the arms of God; only when he abandons himself and his pride completely to God – *only* then, but *truly* then, the ministry of bishop is a joy and a liberation.

Augustine once wrote to his people these words: “Believe me, brothers and sisters, that if what I am *for* you frightens me, what I am *with* you reassures me. *For* you I am the bishop; *with* you I am a Christian.” The purpose of a bishop is to be a father to his people, a brother to his priests and deacons, and a witness of Jesus Christ to world. Augustine once said that any bishop unwilling to preach Jesus Christ zealously and without embarrassment; to defend the Catholic Church with his life; and to suffer for his people without counting the cost, is “a scarecrow standing in a vineyard.” In words that sum up

his whole life as a bishop and teacher, he said “it seems to me that one must bring men back . . . to the hope of finding the truth.”

That’s the vocation of a bishop in the Catholic Church. That’s the mandate of every man called to be a successor of the Apostles.

To the family of Bishop-elect Schlert, thank you for the gift of this good man. To Bishop-elect Schlert as a brother in the ministry: Have confidence in the God who calls you to this altar, because he will give you the serenity and strength to do his will. And to all of us in this gathering: Pray for and support your bishop. There’s no greater joy in the life of any bishop than to love as a father, and to be loved by God's sons and daughters as a father as well.