

Homily for the Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the
Establishment of the Diocese of St. Petersburg
Cathedral of St. Jude the Apostle
Saturday, June 15, 2018
Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch, Bishop emeritus of St. Petersburg

The very first words spoken by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel were these four:

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” (JO 1:35-38)

What did those who gathered in this Cathedral Church that sweltering afternoon of June 17, 1968 seek. That moment was neither the best of times nor the worst of times for the Church or State. Soon-to-be Saint Paul VI, tasked with implementing the wisdom of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council was only weeks away from publishing his encyclical letter, **Humanae Vitae**, an incredibly beautiful and even prophetic testimony to marriage and marital love, save one section which would quickly test the unity of the post conciliar Church.

Archbishop Luigi Raimondi was the Apostolic Delegate representing Pope Paul in the United States as he consulted with two not always best-of-friends bishops in St. Augustine and Miami about the creation of two new dioceses in the rapidly growing state of Florida.

The United States was at war the likes of which it had never before seen in southeast Asia; a strong President was floundering; and the second member of a Catholic family and a militant but passive Christian minister were assassinated.

This was the backdrop for our beginning as a local Church and I will leave the myriad other details to the historians.

Bishop Parkes has chosen as the mantra for this moment these phrases: remember the past with **gratitude**, celebrate the present with **joy** and look to the future with **hope**. Reluctantly I accepted the bishop's gracious invitation to speak to this moment and I choose to do so by recalling three questions which Jesus asks in the Fourth Gospel, using each question as a prism for the gauging the past, present and future.

What and whom have we sought in the first fifty years of our diocesan existence? Like the disciples along the seashore, we have sought, still seek and will always seek Jesus, the Christ, God's Son. With the guidance and assistance of great priests from Saint Augustine and Miami, from Ireland and Spain and a few native sons in the early going to the present polyglot patchwork of priests today, searching for and finding Jesus has been our paramount task: in the Mass, in the other sacraments of the Church, in the migrant and the permanent, in the residents and in the snow-birds – making Jesus real, making Jesus present, making Jesus rule our hearts and our habits is what we have sought to do.

We inherited much on that June day in 1968. In addition to wonderful, generous priests, great religious women long here from St. Augustine, Adrian Michigan, Allegany, New York, Baltimore and Chardon and Canada via New York were already here, teaching, healing, comforting. What did they ask for that warm June day in 1968? Nothing more than to lead, accompany and decide as a local Church the best way to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ and make Jesus present.

Our first bishop quickly drew the name of our greatest climatological fear and disaster, "hurricane" but looking back on it, Bishop Charles B. McLaughlin was exactly what we needed, like Archbishops Carroll and Hurley were in their respective domains of

Miami and St. Augustine. My how we grew from that seminal moment.

We needed more parishes, more priests, more schools, more outreach and the hard work of many made it happen. Anyone who sought Jesus from Citrus Springs to Bonita Springs could find him. We were much larger geographically and territorially in those days and I pause here for a moment to pay tribute to our brothers and sisters, those SOB's (it stands for south of the Bridge, of course) who for sixteen years were a part of our history. If you are listening in heaven or the southwest coast, we thank you for your role in our early growth as a local church.

With the untimely and unexpected death of our first bishop, the end of "hurricane season", Saint John Paul II chose one of our own to shepherd us as our second bishop. It is my personal opinion that Bishop Larkin was never very comfortable with his new role but it he led the period of our greatest expansion with many new parishes built, most of which look like post offices, which is understandable because that was exactly what they were before the architect decided to use the footprint for a parish church.

And I can, for likely the last time, as I have done every other time he has joined us here during my tenure, thank my predecessor, Archbishop Favalora for leaving to me a wonderful church full of promise.

A diocese though is far more than its bishop – it is the People of God seeking Jesus and when finding Him, sharing Him with others. Today we thank God with hearts full of gratitude for those incredible women and men upon whose shoulders we stand who helped this Church search for, find and share Jesus.

II.

When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "What is this to me and to

you?” (JO 2:3-4). . . . Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, “How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (JO 6:5)

The work of the past continues unabated but the present also can give us joy. The Lord's response to Mary's comment that might save someone extreme embarrassment was to ask her “what business is this of ours?”

Seeing the suffering in our midst is always our business. The power of our potential as Church is enormous. I am just back from the nation of Nepal where two years ago an earthquake took just shy of 2000 lives and totally destroyed over 750,000 homes and residences. There is a grand total of 8,600 Catholics in the whole country which is largely Hindu – think of that, less Catholics than attend Christmas and Easter Mass at Nativity or St. Stephens. Yet their CARITAS, their version of Catholic Charities, saved thousands of lives in the weeks and months following the disaster and have distributed more than 65 million dollars US in rebuilding those homes and lives. It was our business as Catholics.

As a faith community in these five counties, within days of December 26, 2004 the people of this diocese contributed \$1.7 million to the tsunami relief in Sumatra, Sri Lanka, and southern India and followed that seven months later with an additional \$1.8 million dollars for our sisters and brothers in the Panhandle, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina. It was our business as Catholics.

When the St. Petersburg police mercifully took box cutters to the tents of the homeless on a cold January night in 2007 I hope we all took joy in the role we played in bringing security, peace and perhaps even joy through Pinellas Hope. It was our business.

Our present bishop, Bishop Parkes 'public support for those caught in the DACA dragnet is another joy as is our advocacy for low cost housing, better public education, etc. We have lived the

Gospel invitation to love one another, to care for each other precisely because as the Lord did for the wedding hosts and for the multitude along the lakeshore, we have consistently, generously and unselfishly made the misfortunes of others our business.

Our faith is mostly an interior reality. Our love which mirrors Christ's love in his life, ministry and death is truly a joy to behold and to share with the world in which we live. Our joy comes from living the Gospel, not just reading it. It is our business,

III.

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" (JO:14:8-10)

For the future, our hope is that the Lord will continue to **"show us"**. You may recall that Moses cried out and begged God in the Book of Exodus, **"Show me thy glory!"** If Philip the disciple of Jesus at the end of three years of "up close and personal" with the Lord still does not get it, then how much more do we need to guarantee that Christ can be found in our community called the Diocese of St. Petersburg?

Our God is to be found in embodiment and not in argument and only this can satisfy our hope. We must continue in the future to build the church as a community that extends the reality of Christ into our world. We must continue to be for others a place where the presence of God is obvious and definitional. We must continue to be where the members of our community are called to show the effects of that Spirit in the charity; in the love and fidelity, the forgiveness by which we live the Gospel. If Christian lives are not authentic, they will make God seem fake and we run the risk of loss of membership and relevance.

God is rapidly disappearing from our culture. As you know, I spent the entire fall semester in 2017 at Notre Dame University. I said Mass at 10 pm from Sunday night to Thursday night in the dormitories. I heard the students' confessions and I listened to their hearts and minds. They are already different in their religious outlook from many of their parents, from myself but they are still searching. They can smell "fake" from miles distant. They admire Pope Francis very much because to them he preaches a Gospel more of love and less of law. These bright and talented young women and men are willing to give a year or two to voluntary service, but from their Church they search for good preaching backed by good deeds as they chart the course of their future relationship with their God. The future is challenging, but so it was fifty years ago.

We have at our disposal, in our arsenal of grace everything we need to continue the work of the last fifty in the decades ahead, but the desire of the next generation is "**show us**". They need to know that God, Christ remains in us and in the Church we love. We must invite the future to swim in Christ's love and example or risk they might sink into the deep abyss of disbelief.

My prayer today is simple. It is one of hope. With Bishop Parkes as our shepherd, himself a gift from the Lord, may we in the future radiate the blessings of the past, the joy of the present, and may our future hope rest in the continuing reality that those who seek Jesus will find him always in our Church, our Church community and in ourselves. What a great beginning! What a glorious present! What a bright albeit challenging future! Thank you, Lord, for showing us the Father in the first fifty. Now, lead kindly light into the next fifty.

