

HOMILY – MASS OF INSTALLATION
of Salvatore Joseph Cordileone as Fourth Bishop of Oakland
May 5, 2009
Cathedral of Christ the Light

“The fact that the Lord knows how to work and to act even with inadequate instruments comforts me, and above all I entrust myself to your prayers.” No, these are not my own words; rather – as many of you will recall – these were the first public words spoken by Pope Benedict XVI after his election four years ago, when he also referred to himself as “a simple and humble laborer in the vineyard of the Lord.” If the Holy Father says this about himself, how much more does it say about my need, and reliance, on the prayers of all of you, as I now assume my pastoral responsibilities here in Oakland with this Mass of Installation.

Actually, although in every day discourse we refer to this ceremony as “Mass of Installation,” that is not technically its name. In canonical jargon, it is called the Mass of “Taking Possession,” of the Diocese, that is. Now, I realize that can have something of a negative connotation in contemporary American English, and that sort of bothered me. So, I set out to look up the origin of the word “possession.” The first thing I found under the word “possess” was, “see sedentary”! While it is true that a good deal of my working hours are spent sitting down, somehow I didn’t think I was making any progress here. Nonetheless, I looked up the word under the entry of “sedentary,” and there found that the original sense of the word “*possidere*” in Latin is, “to remain near.” Ah, that sounded better. But, still not satisfied, I did a little more reading up on the original meanings of this word, and discovered that, in addition to meaning “occupy” in the sense of “to seize and hold onto,” it also means “occupy” in the sense of “to abide in” or “to have and to hold.”

Now, that definitely has a familiar ring to it: it is the language of love, and even of marriage. It is not surprising, then, that this is the commandment that Jesus gives us in the gospel for this Mass: “remain in my love,” which is really another way of saying, “abide in my love.” We may, though, face unprecedented difficulties in understanding such a commandment, since the meaning of the word “love” has become so corrupted in our contemporary society. But instead of leaving us clueless, Jesus indicates to us, right here in this same passage, what love in its greatness really looks like: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

He can command it, because he does it: Jesus practices what he preaches. When we were estranged from him, he took on our flesh in order to become our friend to the point of laying down his life for us – indeed, as a friend and as a bridegroom. Is this not what spouses are called to do, to lay down their lives for each other? Christ took the Church as his bride in that very moment when he died on the cross. He drew near to us and abided in our flesh, marrying his divinity with our humanity, and so he now commands us to draw near to him and abide in him, a relationship of mutual complementarity in which each offers a total gift of self to the other. Indeed, from Adam and Eve to Christ and the Church, all of creation and all of salvation history has the stamp of this nuptial mystery on it. Moreover, what is true of our corporate salvation history is also true of the individual salvation history of each one of us: not just marriage, but every vocation in the Church is a call to live out this nuptial meaning of life in Christ in some form or another, as the means by which we – as St. Paul would say – work out our salvation.

And so it is that a bishop’s “taking possession of his diocese” is not a seizure to occupy, nor a sedentary passivity, but a marriage: better yet, an icon of Christ’s marriage with his Church. So, please pray for me, that I may be a faithful minister of Christ who lays down his life

for his bride, the Church, as I now pledge my life to you, the priests, deacons religious and lay faithful of Oakland, and as I promise to pray for you. This is how we are now called to work out our salvation.

In God's inscrutable plan, for me this means that, in a sense, I return to where I began. It was close to one-hundred years ago that my grandparents came from Sicily and settled across the bay (before moving down to San Diego some years later), where my grandfather established his fishing trade. Like countless others, they labored under the hardship of immigrants – a new land, with a different language and different customs, struggling to be accepted and to fit in. Yet, somehow they found a welcome, and were able to make a better life for themselves.

Of course, much has changed since then. It seems our nation has become a much less welcoming place, even, sometimes, downright inhospitable: unwelcoming to the countless new strangers seeking to come to this land to make a better life for *themselves* and enrich the lives of us all; unwelcoming toward those who may place a burden on us because they are terminally ill or otherwise “unproductive”; unwelcoming toward those who could be given a chance to prove themselves capable of repentance and rehabilitation for their crimes, and instead eliminating them from society; worst of all, a land that shows itself all too often unwelcoming toward the most defenseless of our brothers and sisters who are not even given a chance *to be born*, and so are eliminated from society even before they see the light of day. This inhospitality, this hostility, creates a tsunami of moral and physical violence which leaves countless damaged and destroyed lives in its wake – moral and physical violence which, as recent events have tragically shown, hits very close to home here in Oakland.

This is *not* what God has created us for. Jesus makes that abundantly clear in the gospel for today's Mass: “that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete.” He created us for joy. That is why he gives us the commandment to love one another, and teaches and models what love really is; that is the only way to the joy he wills for us. In other words, love cannot be separated from the truth. As Pope Benedict teaches us in his Encyclical *God is Love*, Christ's death on the cross is “love its most radical form” (n. 12), and it is only through a life of fidelity to God that one can experience this radical love of God and thereby discover “joy in truth and in righteousness – a joy in God which becomes [the individual's] essential happiness” (n. 9). This, then, is why St. Paul exhorts us in his Letter to the Ephesians to *live the truth in love*. Let us not be tricked by the imposters, which reduce love to a commodity and relativize the truth out of existence. Yes, we are now reaping the very bad, very strange fruit of counterfeit love and the trashing of the truth of who we are and are called to be as human persons.

Christ is the answer. Let us draw near to him, and abide in him, so that we will not be tossed about by the waves of deception and swept along by the teachings of destructive imposters. This means that we must claim Jesus Christ as our only ruler; it means that we place ourselves completely under his dominion. Let there be no doubt: if, as his Church, we are to be his faithful bride, it means that Jesus Christ must have dominion over every aspect of our life. Nothing and no one may be exempt from his rule. Whether in public or in private, whether professional or personal, no matter how intimate, we must claim him as our Lord. If nothing else, the painful experience of our Church over these last several years should make clear to us more than ever the dire consequences of failure in this regard. To exclude the rule of Christ from any aspect of our lives, no matter how intimate or personal, at best makes us ourselves the impostors; more often, in some way or another we even become accomplices of the moral and physical violence we claim to abhor.

Christ is the answer: we are called to know him better and make him better known. And here in Oakland, we have a plan to do exactly that. I am very grateful to Archbishop Vigneron, the members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and all those involved in the drafting and

execution of the five-year pastoral plan for our Diocese. The five goals of Sacramental Renewal, Holistic Faith Formation and Catechesis, Pastoral Leadership, Youth and Young Adults, and Stewardship touch at the heart of the life and mission of the Church. The corresponding objectives and action plans provide the practical means by which we will achieve these goals. I *really* like the action plans, so thank you especially for that! I like action! It translates ideas into reality. I look forward to working with all of you, priests and priestly people of Oakland, to implement this plan for realizing the mission of the Church in this Diocese.

Continuing the theme of gratitude, I wish to express my sincere thanks to the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Sambi, as well as the two Metropolitans of our state, Cardinal Mahony and Archbishop Niederauer, for their wise counsel and support to me especially during these last very eventful several weeks of my life. A special thanks, too, to Bishop Brom for his friendship and guidance to me over these nearly seven years that I have served as Auxiliary of San Diego, and to all of my brother bishops here present, especially my fellow bishops here in California, for your fraternal support and faithful collaboration.

Many present here have come from the San Diego Diocese. Please know how honored and moved I am by your presence. To my brother priests, please know that I will always cherish our friendship and value your mentoring to me, and that you have a welcome here in Oakland. All of you, beginning with my mother here present and other family members of mine, and so many parishioners and other friends over the years, have taught me the true meaning of love and joy: the real thing, not their impostors.

I must express a word of thanks, too, to the diocesan administrator, Fr. Danielson, not only for keeping the diocese running smoothly during the vacancy of the See, but also and especially for all of your kindnesses to me during this time of transition. Dan, you have been very welcoming and helpful, even to the point of making sure that I was well taken care of for my meals – not only with good food, but with good company, as well. I am certain that the kindness and welcome that you and so many other priests in our Diocese have already shown me has a lot to do with why I felt right at home so soon after arriving here. It also, I'm sure, helped to move me from timid trepidation at the thought of being a diocesan bishop to eager expectation of our working together on the many challenges facing us, the first of which is animating others to respond to this unique call of the Priesthood. We need to create a culture of vocation, so that our young people can hear and discern the Lord's call in the midst of all of the noise in this world. Specifically in regard to our vocation as priests, I am confident that, if we strive to faithfully follow the example of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, clear in our priestly identity and deeply rooted in our priestly spirituality, that, in itself, will be an encouraging invitation to many young men to consider joining us in this extraordinary life.

Finally, I wish to express particular thanks to my esteemed predecessors, Bishop Cummins and Archbishop Vigneron, most especially for the bold vision and realization of this magnificent cathedral and cathedral complex: not just a church for religious services, but the center and heart of this local church – chancery, residence, conference center and more. John, it was a very daring move to initiate this project, and it is a physical sign of the great things we can accomplish if we step forward in faith, trusting in the Lord. And Allen, I don't know how you managed to see this project through in just a few years, but please know how appreciative I am of all your hard work: now that you have just finished building it, I get to enjoy it! Of course, I do realize that, as so often happens, it is a gift that comes with strings attached. Well, really, just one string – the one that has the hefty price tag at the other end. But, that's a discussion for another day.

For now, and what we must always keep in mind, is what these physical structures teach us. This cathedral church is dedicated to Christ our Light. It is no coincidence that Christ's title

as the Light of Nations are the opening words of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*: "Christ is the light of the nations, and it is, accordingly, the heart-felt desire of this sacred Council ... that, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature (cf. Mk 16:15), it may bring to all people that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church." This cathedral church, then, sitting as it does in the heart of our city, is a symbol to us of what we are called to be as the Church: to live in the midst of the world *for* the world, radiating the light of Christ. We are here in the heart of the city, not to accommodate but to engage, not to go along with but to invite in, to invite all into the beauty of this sacred space, for an encounter with him who is truth, love and beauty itself, and the only source of our true joy.

Let us, then, draw near to Christ and abide always in him. Or, in the words of Pope Benedict on that night of his election: "Let us move forward in the joy of the Risen Lord, confident of his unfailing help. The Lord will help us and Mary, his Most Holy Mother, will be on our side." Let us live the truth in love, so that we may know the joy Christ wills for us and radiate his healing light to all the world. To him, who lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, be honor, glory and praise, forever and ever. Amen.