

225th Anniversary Homily - USCCB Fall Assembly Opening Mass

Introduction

Suspended above the Basilica portico is an American flag with fifteen stars. It is there to commemorate the bicentennial of the Star Spangled Banner celebrated with much fanfare last summer here in Baltimore, the birthplace of the National Anthem. When the Diocese of Baltimore was established on November 6th, 1789, that flag would have had only thirteen stars. This new diocese encompassed the thirteen original colonies and more, stretching North to Canada, West to the Mississippi River, and South to Louisiana and Florida, a vast area that today comprises 37 states.

The foundation of the Diocese of Baltimore closely coincided with the birth of the United States of America, itself an enduring experiment in democracy and freedom. In 1789, the Constitution was new and the Bill of Rights had not been ratified. Our first bishop, John Carroll, recognized that the foundations of the Church had to be sunk deep into a new kind of soil – the soil of democracy and freedom. Although Catholics and other religious minorities would face an uphill climb in winning acceptance in this new society, John Carroll accurately sensed that the faith was being planted in fertile soil where it could grow and flourish.

From the Ground Up

Although the territory of his new diocese was vast, Bishop John Carroll's resources were small. It has been estimated there were only about 25,000 Catholics in his territory, few churches, most in disrepair & scarcely supported, & a small number of priests. But John Carroll was "a gritty pragmatist" and "an innate organizer." Within a year, he had summoned his priests, some 22 of them, for the First Synod of Baltimore and sought to form them into something of a team. Together they began to create a structure for the Church in our country. After the Synod, Bishop Carroll issued what is known simply as "The Pastoral Letter" in which he maps out the first leg of the Church's journey in our nation, a journey for which we have responsibility in our day.

Come to think of it, the Letter of St. Paul to Titus is one of the Church's original pastoral letters. In today's reading St. Paul maps out how the Church is to grow. He instructs Titus to appoint presbyters in every town, and then lists their qualifications, a proto-*Program of Priestly Formation*, if you will. Friends, we can only imagine how heavily the duty to appoint presbyters in every town weighed on the heart of the newly consecrated John Carroll, but opportunity soon came knocking. While in France, he encountered the Superior General of the Society of St. Sulpice who, in the wake of the French Revolution, offered to establish a seminary in Baltimore, St. Mary's Seminary, our nation's first. Only a few years later, the nation's second seminary, Mt. St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, would also open its doors, even as today with God's help we seek to write new chapters of priestly formation and new chapters of support and renewal for our priests who serve so generously.

In today's reading, St. Paul also speaks about the qualifications of bishops, a sort of proto-*Decree on the Life and Ministry of Bishops*. He reminds us that we are not the owners but the stewards of God's mysteries. As such we're called to be humble, virtuous, faithful, and loving, or as St. Paul said in another place, "strong, loving, and wise". His words stir something deep within each of us bishops as we ponder our ministry; they awaken an inner voice that says, "Yes, that's how I want to live and serve!" Those same qualifications must also have resonated in John Carroll's mind and heart when he asked the Propaganda Fidei to divide his vast diocese & to appoint bishops in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Bardstown. Thus did Carroll set in motion the expansion of the hierarchy in the United States. Today let us humbly ask for the grace to continue building on the foundations he set in place.

And, yes, this is a task we must do together; for as Pope Francis puts it: "We are all in the same boat, headed to the same port!" (EG, no. 101)

Where Brethren Dwell Together in Unity

Even before his nomination as bishop, John Carroll held four meetings with his fellow Jesuits (or not) in nearby White Marsh, Maryland to discuss matters such as property, education, priestly formation, and the like. As I mentioned earlier, Bishop Carroll, soon after he was consecrated, convened a diocesan synod to discuss, among other things, mixed marriages, parish finances, religious education, priestly vocations. In 1810, when Archbishop Carroll consecrated three of his four new

suffragan bishops, he held what has been described as “an unofficial provincial council” – There would follow the seven Provincial Councils of Baltimore and three Plenary Councils, the decrees of which were ratified in this very Basilica. Thereafter the nation’s archbishops met annually here in Baltimore, a pattern that continued until the eve of the First World War.

Understandably, those early councils and meetings were mostly concerned with building up the Church in a growing immigrant nation. Gradually, however, as the 19th century gave way to the 20th, the bishops began to address societal issues more openly, such as child labor and healthcare, especially with the creation of organizations that are the direct predecessors of our United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Friends, I offer this thumbnail sketch of American conciliarism simply as a reminder of the heritage from which our Conference emerged.

Those gatherings well served the Church in the United States. They created among the bishops a greater sense of identity, unity, and purpose, and helped them respond to the opportunities and challenges of the day, while strengthening the relationship of the Church in America with Rome. The bishops who took part in those meetings did not always agree with one another, yet, more than anything else, they bore common witness to a confident faith, a faith, albeit the size of a mustard seed, that produced amazing works of faith, worship, & witness.

Conclusion

Together with the lay women and men of our local churches, with religious women and men, priests, deacons, and seminarians, we are heirs to this precious legacy. Whenever we bishops gather in plenary assembly, we discuss joys and sorrows, problems and best practices not dissimilar to those that preoccupied our predecessor bishops and the communities they served. Like them we seek to bring the Gospel to the margins, to educate the young, to raise up vocations, to strengthen family life, to welcome and serve the newly arrived and the poor, by both word and deed, and to create a society that respects life and is open to the promise of life eternal. And yes, we seek to protect the God-given gift of freedom so that we may always have the freedom to bear witness and to serve.

If we have faith the size of a mustard seed, then we too will continue to animate the

works of faith, worship, and witness – and God will do in our midst ‘immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine.’ May He bless us and keep us in his love.