

Bishop Brennan pledges to be ‘good shepherd’ for West Virginia

WHEELING, W.Va. – Noting that he is an “earthen vessel” who sometimes make mistakes, Bishop Mark E. Brennan said he wants to be a “good shepherd” for the people of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

“I want to be one who serves, rather than be served,” he said.

In a homily at solemn vespers at St. Joseph Cathedral in Wheeling Aug. 21, the day before his installation as ninth bishop of the diocese, which encompasses the state of West Virginia, the bishop said his method is to do nothing underhanded. He wants to consult with the people and listen to them.

Commenting about various leaders and the qualities that make them good, Bishop Brennan referred to Abraham Lincoln and St. John Paul II. However, he said that Jesus is the best example of a good leader, telling his disciples, “If you want to be first, be the servant of all.”

That did not stop Jesus from addressing hard truths.

“He did not dominate a people. He did not browbeat them,” Bishop Brennan said. “The Lord was not seeking worldly advantage.”

The bishop, who most recently served as auxiliary bishop of Baltimore since January 2017, gave the example of the rich young man in Scripture who asked Jesus what it would take to earn eternal life. When Jesus told the man to give up everything he had and follow him, the man went away dejected. The Lord challenged him and invited him to become a follower.

The liturgy was preceded by the sounds of a string quartet and by a bell choir. A choir chanted and led the congregation in singing the solemn vespers for the feast of St. Pius X.

Acknowledging the challenges ahead for the diocese, Bishop Brennan noted that it

was the task of the faithful to proclaim the Lord for the good of the people, encouraging Catholics to evangelize and bring others to Christ.

He noted how the opioid crisis has hit hard in West Virginia and how poverty is rampant. If people are addicted and hungry, “we have to give them what they need,” he said. “We want to serve others as (the Lord) served us.”

In remarks before the final blessing, Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori, who has served as apostolic administrator of Wheeling-Charleston since last September, noted that the diocese has “prayed long and hard for a new leader and a good shepherd, one who would have noble goals.”

“I think the Holy Spirit has answered our prayers in sending us Bishop Mark Brennan,” the archbishop said.

He thanked the people of the diocese and especially the diocesan staff who worked with dedication in the difficult transition between bishops.

“Much has happened in the interregnum to provide a good foundation on which to build,” Archbishop Lori said.

Neither the archbishop nor Bishop Brennan mentioned by name the diocese’s last leader, Bishop Michael J. Bransfield, who resigned Sept. 18, 2018 amid allegations of sexual harassment and financial mismanagement. During his time as apostolic administrator, Archbishop Lori revamped the diocesan finance council and other consultative bodies and arranged to sell the former bishop’s residence. At the specific request of the Vatican, he also completed a preliminary investigation into the allegations against Bishop Bransfield.

As a result of that investigation, the apostolic nunciature to the United States sent a communique to the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston that was posted July 19 on the diocese’s website noting that based on the findings of the investigation into Bishop Bransfield, Pope Francis decided disciplinary actions for the bishop.

Bishop Bransfield will be prohibited from living in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and prohibited from presiding or participating anywhere in any public celebration of the liturgy.

Before the vespers, Father John Chapin Engler Jr., pastor of three parishes in a rural part of the state northwest of Charleston, said, "It's a new day. I'm just thrilled" with the appointment of Bishop Brennan. He said the people of the diocese had been praying a prayer provided by Archbishop Lori for a new leader: a humble and noble pastor full of zeal and a love for Jesus and the poor. "It's almost like he knew when he wrote it" the kind of man the pope would appoint.

He praised Bishop Brennan for showing up in his own Ford Taurus, carrying his own bag and serving breakfast at Wheeling's Catholic Charities Aug. 21.

Father Engler's country parishes in Bancroft, Nitro and Dunbar are small - 30, 50 and 70 parishioners. He said their needs are the same as many others in the diocese, "to continue to try to be a light for people in darkness."

Noting that the state is about 4 percent Catholic, "that means 96 percent are not. He seems to have a knack for reaching out, with a pastoral zeal for the poor," Father Engler said of the new bishop.

He said the diocese needs a shepherd who is humble, focused on what's important - that is, Jesus - and not caught up in worldly attachments.

"From what I've seen so far," Father Engler said, "he fits the bill."

He said the bishop had already agreed to visit his three parishes for their combined Labor Day picnic. That sends a good message to his people that they won't be forgotten, he said.

Sister of St. Joseph Ruthann Scherer also attended the vespers. She said Bishop Brennan "gave a good sense in his homily that he is going to be a servant bishop."

Joyce V. Garcia of Princeton, W.Va., said she and her friends are very happy to have a permanent bishop.

"I think it's good for West Virginia," she said. "Our faith has been restored."

Bryan Minor, director of human resources for the diocese, has also been Archbishop Lori's delegate for administrative affairs since last fall. He thanked the archbishop

for his almost year of service and said he looks forward to the leadership of Bishop Brennan.

“Archbishop Lori has built a strong foundation over the last year and we’re confident that Bishop Brennan is the right bishop at the right time to help build on that foundation.

Minor’s wife, Maria, said the bishop plans to visit St. Vincent de Paul School Sept. 4, greeting the students as they arrive. He also plans to visit soon all the Catholic schools in Wheeling.

Bryan Minor said the diocese and its new bishop need to be mindful of the past concerns, “but as a Christian and prayerful people, we look forward to brighter days ahead.”

He said Bishop Brennan “wants to meet the people, listen to their cares and concerns and pray with them.”