



Mass Homily
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
March 8, 2012
Thursday in the Second Week of Lent
Cathedral of St. John Lateran
Rome, Italy

Offered during the Ad Limina visit made by the bishops of Region VIII

Having had the privilege of being received in audience by the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, Bishop of Rome, earlier today, it is appropriate that we bishops from Region VIII (Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota) come here to the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Cathedral of the Diocese of Rome to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The cathedrals in our dioceses are in a way an extension of this cathedral as we bishops are in a way an extension of the mission of the Holy Father. Being here and reflecting on this historic and sacred space can offer us perspective and hope.

This morning, this afternoon and really all these last few days I have asked why am I here. Presiders were assigned to be the main celebrant at Masses based on seniority. When Bishop Kinney (Bishop of St. Cloud) at the Mass at the Altar of Blessed John Paul II detailed his many years as a bishop under four popes; it occurred to me that I was not a Catholic when he was ordained a bishop. I don't feel very senior.

In the Bishops House in Sioux Falls hang the portraits of the eight bishops of the diocese. Each of them was a leader in his day, persons of note. Inevitably when people look at the portraits they ask who is that. Someday someone will ask that before my portrait. There have been many more bishops of Rome than bishops of Sioux Falls or any of our dioceses, most of them unknown.

My point is that the question of why am I or any one of us is here personally is irrelevant. We are here as ordained bishops, as instruments of Christ and His Church. We come here to pray for those we have been called to shepherd despite our human frailties and limitedness and to pray for the fidelity to exercise with integrity the office we have been given. It is not about us as individuals; it about us as called by our Lord through his Church for a unique mission.

The hopeful perspective this offers is that while we must attend to our roles as teachers, sanctifiers and governors as best we can and with humility, it is not on our shoulders alone. Our task is to be as faithful as those who went before who sought not worldly recognition or personal contentment but the glory of God.

This historic building also offers us hopeful perspective especially as we face the many challenges, morally, politically and pastorally, that our role as bishops requires in this day. Reportedly given to the church by the then government, Constantine and his mother Helena, it is a symbol of the faith lived under all kinds of conditions and of the enduring presence of the church of Christ over time. We know that our faith is not dependent on a location or structure but on the person of Jesus Christ. Yet buildings like this point us beyond the moment and to the higher things, to Him.

This cathedral has withstood all forms of aggression and destruction: barbarian assaults, political tyranny, devastating disease, multiple fires, economic collapse, ecclesial corruption, natural deterioration, war, neglect, to name a few. Yet it stands today after hundreds of years having been rebuilt and restored again and again. Through it all the numbers of baptisms, confessions, Masses and other sacraments through which the love and mercy of Christ has touched and healed are too many to count.

It reminds us that the challenges we face in our day, be it antagonists to religion, the abuse of government power seeking to restrict religious liberty, the acceptance of sin as normative, the lure of the evil one, and more, are not new and ought not dishearten us. In fact they ought to mobilize us to rise to the standard of faith those who went before witnessed often at great sacrifice.

There may be temporary worldly loss but Christ's Church can never be vanquished. This Cathedral reminds us that our hope is in the name of the Lord who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Let us then thank God for our calling as bishops and priests. Let us willingly accept the challenges of our day to preserve, protect and defend the faith because Christ through his vicar has called us to do so, and because we care about the salvation of souls, all souls including our own.

It is not about us; it is about Christ and His Church and our fidelity to Him and to Her, which is really the same. That is the hopeful perspective we can carry with us as from this historic and sacred space and from the celebration of Holy Mass.

May Mary, mother of the Church and mother of hope, protect and watch over us all.