



## BISHOP PETER'S HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF EPISCOPAL ORDINATION

We are gathered today because of the kindness and the thoughtfulness of Bishop Paul, which is typical of his ministry as the Chief Shepherd, the eighth Bishop of the Diocese of Ballarat.

When Bishop Paul reminded me a few months ago, that I was approaching the thirtieth anniversary of my Ordination as a Bishop, I told him that I was aware of my approaching 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. I had overlooked the anniversary that we are commemorating today. He and his Liturgical Commission have very kindly arranged this Mass and I thank them most sincerely, particularly Julie Boyd who attended to all the details.

Or perhaps, Bishop Paul knew that it was most unlikely that I would eventually celebrate the Golden Jubilee of my Episcopal Ordination. Even if my father and grandfather reached the age of 91, I hesitate to imagine that I shall celebrate my hundredth birthday.

You will allow me to share some precious memories with you this morning. It was on 25 March 1987 that a letter from the Apostolic Nuncio arrived on my desk as Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Melbourne. That provided some foreboding, but even more so when I found another envelope inside which stated that it was to be opened only by me.

The Nuncio informed me that it was the wish of Pope, now Saint, John Paul II, to appoint me an Assistant Bishop in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, and the Titular Bishop of Temuniana, which is somewhere in North Africa hidden under the desert sands.

I was given the freedom to discuss the matter with my confessor or my spiritual director and inform the Nuncio of my decision to accept the invitation as soon as possible.

It happened to be the feast of the Annunciation. Mary, a young woman in Nazareth was invited by a messenger from God to be the mother of the Savior. She did ask a few questions as clarification before saying the immortal words "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word".

After some reflection and knowing that I would lose any argument with the Nuncio, I echoed the words of Mary.

You may recall that a few weeks after the birth of Jesus, Mary's son, she took him to present him to the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem. A wise old man took the infant in his arms and then foretold the destiny of the infant before telling Mary that a sword would pierce her soul.

A few days after my Ordination, I went to visit Bishop John Kelly, a retired Assistant Bishop in the Archdiocese and who was very ill. He told me that he had had a wonderful life as a priest for over fifty years. But then he went on to say that he had been a bishop for 14 years and had been dreadfully lonely.

Today I trust that you are thinking of my fellow Ordinand, of thirty years ago, Cardinal George Pell. I expect that he would be resonating the sentiments of Bishop Kelly, with the clouds of suspicion floating over his head. Let us remember Cardinal George in our prayers today.

Some of you would have attended the Ordination of George Pell as a Bishop in Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, on this day thirty years ago. Little did you know that ten years later, I, on the left side with my family and friends, would become the seventh Bishop of Ballarat. I am wearing the chasuble that I wore on that occasion together with the ring given to me by my family.

My ten years as an Assistant Bishop in the western region of the Archdiocese was something of a honeymoon, all care and no responsibility. I visited primary schools every year in all the parishes of the region and met up with the candidates for the Sacrament of Confirmation. Then there would be two or three Masses over the weekend when the Sacrament was celebrated. At the end of most school terms, I would accept debutantes at the annual secondary schools' Balls. Someone once suggested to me that I would find my photograph on the mantelpiece in almost every home in the western region of the Archdiocese. Because of the events of last Wednesday, I was reminded of a significant event in my ministry during those years. I officiated at the Funeral Service of another Legend of the AFL, Ted Whitten, in Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, where Ted's parents had been married. It was one of the more happy occasions when I was on national television.

The next letter that I received from the Nuncio came in 1997 to tell me that it was the wish of Pope Saint John Paul to appoint me Bishop of Ballarat. Before I had time to open the ominous envelope, the Nuncio was on the phone asking me for my decision. This time there was no opportunity to discuss it with any other person. He wanted me to say "Yes" straightaway.

So it was that I chose the anniversary of my Priestly Ordination, 23 July 1997 to commence my ministry as successor to Bishop Ron Mulkearns who had decided to retire a few months earlier. I recall that it was a typical winter's evening in Ballarat. The frost on my car was as thick as snow at midnight when I went home.

Forgive me when I say that the first five years in Ballarat were the worst years in my life. For various reasons, including the deaths of three priests, the Diocese lost the services of eleven priests in the first eight months of my ministry. It must surely be a record that no one would wish to emulate. I don't think that I was entirely to blame.

I had some idea that there was a significant challenge awaiting me when I settled in to my office. Suffice to say on this occasion that I met with more than fifty survivors of sexual assault by priests of the diocese. I quickly learnt to put away my clerical collar which was rather like a red rag to a bull, and to listen attentively to the account of their suffering even if I had read it prior to the meeting. I observed the devastating effect of the abuse on their lives, and the pain and suffering inflicted on them, on their partners, their parents and their circle of friends. My words of apology were sincere, but I had to agree that the meeting was but one stage of their journey towards some form of healing. I have had much to learn about this tragic saga in the history of the Diocese. The Royal Commission has done much to assist me.

As for myself, I am most grateful for the support that I received from those who were closest to me over my fifteen years as Bishop of the Diocese. There are many who encouraged me with their understanding and their advice. Allow me to mention in particular, my two Vicars General, Father Bill van de Camp, Father Barry Ryan, my Secretary, Bernadette O'Loughlin, Sister Anne McMillan, who gave me much valuable guidance particularly during those early years, my Assistant over the final years of my term, Vin Dillon and the recently retired Business Manager, Mark Bromley.

As I gaze once again around this beautiful Cathedral which will always be my spiritual home, I wish to express my gratitude for the dedication, the expertise and the perseverance of Father Adrian McInerney who as Administrator of the Cathedral saw to the successful renovation of the building that was completed in 2000. Adrian then went over to Ballarat East and did the same with Saint Alipius' Church. Recently he accepted the challenge of building a beautiful church at Buninyong. But as you all know, Adrian was much more than a restorer of Churches. He has been an outstanding educator and proclaimer of the Word. We wish him well in his retirement.

However, I hasten to say that I have wonderful memories of those fifteen years. In our Gospel for this sixth Sunday of the Easter season, John makes it clear that we, as disciples of Jesus, are also invited to radiate God's love to everyone whom we encounter. We are to live acutely aware of the fact that God's love is ever present in our midst and is reflected to in the beauty of the diocese that as we so often say stretches from the river to the sea, and in the goodness, the compassion, and the decency of people all around us. It has been a privilege for me to be allowed into their lives on many occasions over the past twenty years.

If I were to make a statue to record my thirty years as a bishop, it would be of an elderly couple sitting together next to the heating panel in the passage of the aged care facility in which they were spending their final years. I imagine that they had for most of their married life got out of bed early every morning to milk their cows, and supporting one

another in raising what would have probably been a large family. They were not speaking to one another. There was no need to do so. But they were the personification of true love, of one heart speaking to the other.

That is the kind of love that characterizes the communities of our Catholic Schools and Colleges, Saint John of God Hospitals and Nazareth House. Nor do I forget the tremendous growth and the influence of Centacare of the Diocese while I was the Bishop but David Beaver was its gifted Director. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is another organization that ensures that love touches the lives of those who are homeless, marginalized and hungry.

My brother priests who for obvious reasons cannot be with us today have accepted me with my limitations and inspired me with their love of their people. The Religious have been wonderful friends and supporters over the years, a continuation of what has been a great blessing for me from my earliest years.

I had to choose a motto when I came to the Diocese. "That we may be one" is what I desired for the Diocese and is my daily prayer. And if my journey as a Bishop commenced on the day of the Mary's Annunciation, then I can but echo her prayer of gratitude to God, which will be sung a little later: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior".